

# Young Democratic Socialists Statement on the 2006 Mid-Term Elections

While the 2006 mid-term elections were a historic moment in American politics, their outcome does not point toward a clear progressive mandate for change. The sweeping Democratic Party gains that ended the Republican 12-year majority in the House of Representatives and the Senate did, however, open up new political space for activists. Americans registered their opposition to the Bush administration by voting in large numbers against the war, GOP extremism, and corruption. The election of Bernie Sanders as the first open socialist to the U.S. Senate, the outcome of state ballot initiatives, and the nature of the incoming Democrats' legislative agenda, all present new challenges and organizing opportunities. The work of the Left must now center on building an independent, grassroots movement and pressuring the new Democratic majority to enact progressive reforms.

While many of the newly elected Democrats are not even liberal, their victory is still important. The defeat of the Republicans reflects growing public dissatisfaction with the Bush administration's disastrous policies. Democratic Socialists hold no illusions that the new Democratic majority will suddenly implement a comprehensive agenda of social justice and economic redistribution, much less a socialist platform. However, the Democratic majority will be more easily pressured by progressive social forces. Additionally, numerous Congressional Progressive Caucus members, including some who have worked with the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA - YDS' parent organization) will become committee and subcommittee chairs. These members of Congress will now have the power to hold the Bush administration accountable and block conservative legislation. Now is the time to hold their feet to the fire and make sure they understand who helped bring them to victory. Defeating the radical right pushes us one step closer to building the progressive majority that can bring about a more just America.

The election was also a decisive repudiation of the Bush administration's war in Iraq. The American public has clearly lost patience with Republican unwillingness to concede that Iraq is in a state of chaos. Many Democrats campaigned on a change of policy in Iraq, and voters responded. Exit polls showed that 58% favored partial or full withdrawal of American troops. The next steps for the Democrats are unclear. The party is divided on how to proceed, and full withdrawal is unlikely to happen in the

near future. But the new congress can be expected to investigate human rights abuses and war profiteering with greater diligence, and a Democratic majority will be more susceptible to pressure from the anti-war movement.

While the stunning recapture of the House and Senate by the Democrats gives the Left some much-needed hope for the future, America did not elect a progressive majority, nor did election results point toward a clear progressive mandate. Although many Democrats won their seats by campaigning largely on an anti-Iraq war, anti-Bush and economic populist platform, several conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats provided the decisive margin of victory for the Democratic majority in Congress. These more reactionary Democrats, for the most part, were able to defeat right-wing Republicans by opposing reproductive rights, same-sex marriage, and comprehensive immigration reform. Such Democrats, whether independent or allied with the pro-corporate Democratic Leadership Council, will get in our way on many issues and progressives must keep them in check.

For Democratic Socialists this was a historic moment because of the election of Bernie Sanders to the U.S. Senate. Sanders has been the congressional representative for the state of Vermont for 12 years and will now be the first open socialist in the U.S. Senate. Young Democratic Socialists (YDS) is proud of the effort our parent organization, Democratic Socialists of America, put into organizing a nation-wide effort of grassroots fundraising for Sanders. The election of Sanders, an independent who will caucus with the Democrats, indicates that when socialists and progressives build community coalitions and make good on promises of economic and social justice, we can win. There is space in the American political landscape for democratic socialists.

It is not only the defeat of Republican candidates that is notable about this election cycle. The outcomes on many key ballot measures provided victories for progressive forces, even as several deplorable measures passed. Voters approved minimum wage increases in six states, illustrating the strategic value of pro-active legislative fights at the state level. In defensive battles, progressive coalitions were able to defeat a draconian anti-choice measure in South Dakota, which would have effectively made abortion illegal. Voters also shot down right-wing tax revenue spending limits in Maine, Nebraska, and Oregon that would have gutted the

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respective states' public sectors. Several states passed anti-gay marriage measures, but Arizona became the first state to defeat such an initiative. Unsurprisingly, racism and xenophobic nativism also demonstrated their continuing effect on American politics. Arizona voters passed a law making English the official language as part of growing anti-immigrant sentiment, and Michigan voted to ban affirmative action for schools and state jobs. Race and racism are still central to political life in the U.S. and progressives must address this reality in our activism.

The outcome of the mid-term elections also illustrates changing patterns of voter turnout based on age, gender, race, geography and religion. As a youth and student organization, YDS is especially encouraged by the exceptionally high turnout of voters under 30 and our demographic's strong preference for non-GOP candidates. With a 30% shift to the Democrats among Latinos since the last election, and a failure to erode African-American support for Democrats through the use of black candidates, misleading ad blitzes and voter suppression, Republicans fared poorly. Republican support among evangelical Christians waned, partly due to their realization that the eradication of poverty and global climate change are moral imperatives. The significance of pro-choice, pro-gay rights, economic populists winning in rural "red" states like Missouri, Montana, and Virginia proves that Democrats mustn't write-off any part of the country and can score victories without outflanking Republican conservatism on social issues. Women also continue to vote disproportionately for Democratic candidates as do white, male union members. These constituent voting results show the base from which progressives can build majority coalitions and begin to move the center of American politics to the left.

In an effort to counter the anti-worker legislative climate, the labor movement mobilized in record numbers for a mid-term election, spending over \$100 million. Labor had a large presence in nearly all of the races where Democrats won, even in areas in which labor has traditionally been quite weak, such as in the decisive Senate race in Virginia, which gave Democrats the majority. In short, the Democrats cannot win without mobilizing their working class base, which is embodied by organized labor. Democrats should give labor more sway in policymaking and enact legislation which will help labor do its job: organize and represent working families. The Democrats must also move immediately to increase the federal minimum wage, which shamefully has not been increased since 1997. More important for the long-term vitality of the labor movement is labor law reform. Union density has hit a record post-New Deal era low of 12.5% in part because the Democrats have failed to do enough to help labor when it needs it most. To start, the Democrats could pass the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA), which would make it easier to form a union by recognizing card-check

agreements. This has been a priority of the labor movement for some time and passing this legislation is long overdue. The Democrats must also overturn the laws that put up unfair barriers to a union's right to strike.

The ultimate success of the work of the Left depends on holding elected officials accountable and pressuring the newly elected Democratic majority to enact a progressive legislative agenda. The incoming Democrats, under the leadership of Nancy Pelosi, have pledged to move to raise the minimum wage, tackle prescription drug prices, change direction in Iraq, and investigate certain abuses of power by the Bush administration. As socialists, we will continue to agitate for these and more far-reaching reforms that prioritize human needs and the environment over private profits. Raising the federal minimum wage is essential, but it is not the same as ensuring all workers are paid living wages and have full union organizing rights. We applaud the stated commitment to equip government with the power to negotiate prescription drug price discounts but will continue to push for universal, single-payer health care for every American. We support efforts to make college more affordable after a shocking five-year 40% average tuition increase, but still contend that higher education should be a right for all, and not simply a costly privilege. Talk of investing in renewable energy is welcome, but Democratic plans will fall short of the dramatic changes needed in our economy and nation's infrastructure to counter the catastrophic impact of global climate change. Democrats may provide oversight on Halliburton-style war profiteering and push for "phased redeployment" of U.S. troops, but America needs to withdraw from Iraq, cut military spending, and end its promotion of unfair corporate globalization throughout the world.

Young Democratic Socialists see hope in the future of progressive politics in this country. But with a lack of political will among the Democratic leadership and a razor-thin majority in the Senate, the much-needed reforms that socialists support will only come about when our movements are stronger. Through and between election cycles, the Left must work to strengthen the feminist, anti-racist, labor, student, anti-war, LGBT, environmental, immigrant rights, and global justice movements. There still needs to be a democratic socialist force willing to work both inside and outside electoral politics that ties an analysis of systems of oppression to a critique of capitalism. We in YDS want to be part of a broader movement and connect our vision with the struggles of others. With the end of Republican domination over all branches of government, we have taken a very important first step. Let us seize this moment to celebrate and be watchful for new organizing opportunities. The post-election political terrain we face is still largely unclear and in the making. Now is the time to strategize, to evaluate, and to reenergize the struggle for social and economic justice. It is time to create a truly progressive majority.