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On Taking on the Mobilized Capitalist Class in Elections: an Interview With Noam Chomsky

In this interview at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Arizona, I sat down with Laureate Professor Noam Chomsky to discuss electoral politics, the prospects for progressives in upcoming primaries, and the difficulties candidates face with their internal party apparatus, the media and big money challengers, as well as navigating complicated foreign policies and positions. Chomsky weighs in on the continued aftershocks of the Sanders campaign as well as the problematic issue of BDS and how progressives and third parties can reorganize and repurpose forward thinking stances to refocus on future elections.

Daniel Falcone: The “[blue wave](#)” looked like an opportunity to take the [progressive wing](#) of the Democratic Party and to coalesce around socialists and Greens. Much to the corporate media’s delight, the progressives recently hit some setbacks and obstacles in [primaries](#), although I wanted to ask you about social democratic or New Deal styled candidates popping up in forthcoming elections, such as [Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez](#) and [Julia Salazar](#) in New York City, as well as a host of other progressives like [Jasmine Robinson](#) and [Zephyr Teachout](#) who also come to mind for me personally. Do you see a potential long term eclipse, of any sort, of donor class-oriented politics with these candidates especially if third parties join in endorsing the platforms or similar platforms and vice versa?

Noam Chomsky: That’s a real battle. I mean, we’re not dealing with a small question. This is practically all of American political history. This goes way back as you may recall to [Mark Hanna](#), who was the great campaign organizer for the late nineteenth century. In

1895 he was asked, “What are the most important things for a political campaign?” He said, “There are two things. The first one is money, and I’ve forgotten what the second was.” That was 1895. So, this is deeply entrenched. You’ve seen Tom Ferguson’s work on it. It’s not just the White House; it’s also Congress. In fact, I don’t know if you saw Tom’s study of the 2016 election, a very important study, which shows and details that in the last couple of weeks of the campaign the Republican establishment, who didn’t like Trump, realized that there could be a big Democratic wave — which they certainly didn’t want.

In the last couple weeks of the campaign, there was a huge flood of money both for President and Congress, and he said if you compared it with voting attitudes, as usual [they] changed along[side] the campaign funding of the negative ads. And, in fact, that’s what swung both the congressional and the White House election. It wasn’t just Trump, it was also Congress. So, it’s another triumph of campaign spending. This is 2016, and [not far off from 1895].

The amazing thing about 2016 was the Sanders campaign. It’s the first time in American history that a candidate probably could have won, if it hadn’t been for party managers who kept him out, with no funding from the corporate sector, and no funding from the wealthy, and no media support. So, it’s a real breakthrough, but to carry out [a potential eclipse of the donor class] moving forward is going to be really hard because there’s also going to be a mobilized effort on the part of the entire capitalist class, Republican and Democrat, to prevent that from happening. In fact, if Sanders had run I think he would have been slaughtered by the propaganda, and it would have been massive propaganda about this Jewish, atheist, communist that wants to bring immigrants in to kill everybody.

It’s kind of like what you see with Jeremy Corbyn. I mean, both the Tories and the Labour Party — the Labour Parliamentarians, the Blair guys, the media, like *The Guardian*— they’re all trying to destroy him. These latest attacks on him for anti-Semitism are just insane, but they’ll do anything to try to destroy his chances because he’s trying to create a political party in which people actually participate; not just the rich and powerful guys who tell you what to do, and that’s intolerable. So, I think maybe it’s going to be a real fight.

Daniel Falcone: I read your commentary regarding progressives and Israel and found it very interesting, where you point out the once absolute darling of progressive liberal America, Israel, is now shifting its support to right wing regimes, losing the Democratic Party. Does this create a possibility for social democrats and their superficial support of

something like BDS to move beyond a fashionable vanity project into a position of real [advocacy for Palestinians](#) in your view? And from that starting point, is it possible that even mainstream Democrats can move closer to embracing actual policies that show authentic concerns for Palestinian rights, as all groups seem to move further on the left on the issue?

Noam Chomsky: It's not just the left. Take the [Presbyterian Church](#); that's not on the left. They took a very strong stand on a boycott on the divestment – there are no sanctions. [It's really B.D., not BDS](#), but they did it the way it's effective. They concentrated on the occupied territories and on U.S. multinationals participating in the occupied territories. The BDS movement just can't think. They're acting in a way which undermines their own goals. They're insisting on focusing on Israel, you know — academic boycotts, cultural boycotts. You can make an argument for it, but it's not going to work.

That barely even happened in South Africa. Every time [BDS does these things] it leads to a backlash, which is stronger than the effort. And it just diverts attention away from the Palestinians to irrelevant issues, like academic freedom. You have to start debating about that. I mean, that's not the problem. But the Presbyterian Church had the right idea, and that's not the left after all. It's one of the biggest churches in the country. It is conservative. But if the BDS movement had any sense, they'd be following that policy and they'd be doing things that they're not doing.

So, for example, you could make a strong argument that all U.S. military aid to Israel is in violation of [U.S. law](#). Take a look at the [Leahy Amendment](#), which is U.S. law. It says you can't give any military aid to military units or organizations that are involved in systematic human rights' abuses, and in the case of the IDF it's been overwhelming. Actually, Leahy has been asked about this, and he says, "Well, you know, maybe." But Amnesty International is pushing it; Human Rights Watch is pushing it, but not the BDS movement. They're so intent on doing something that will make Israelis uncomfortable that they're just not thinking about how to use the opportunities.

But I think what you're suggesting is perfectly possible, and it won't just be [Democratic Socialists](#) [becoming more nuanced on the issue]. There are plenty of people in the country who don't see any point in giving military aid to other countries at all. Why should we give it to Israel? I mean a country who spies on the United States, like [Jonathon Pollard](#). US commanders have claimed that Israeli actions harm U.S. troops.

Play with that for a while, like here in Arizona, for example. So, there are plenty of possibilities.

It's [all] very interesting [regarding the hope for elected Democrats to merge with more progressive thought and action]. The guy who just left my office was an interesting guy. He was in U.S. Intelligence for about 20 years – all gung-ho for Iraq and Afghanistan, but he kind of turned—he happens to be Puerto Rican. He's very upset by the fact that the Puerto Ricans can't get Sanders or Ocasio-Cortez to even advocate something as simple as allowing [Puerto Ricans to vote](#). But that gets back to your first question about the donor-oriented politics.

Daniel Falcone: Interesting. But this is promising, these DSA-type candidates coming to the fore, would you agree?

Noam Chomsky: It's promising, but I'd like to see [Sanders come out more](#) and say that Trump is right on [certain] international policies. I think he'd be [crucified by the press.] Maybe it's better for him not to say it, but it would be nice to create public understanding to the extent that if he did say it, it would be welcome. Why leave it to [Rand Paul](#)— a real lunatic—to say, yeah, he's right to reduce tensions with Russia. Paul is in Moscow right now. He gave a talk with some Russian official in which he was perfectly sensible. And, of course, he's being lambasted for it—ridiculed. They don't even bother criticizing him, they just ridicule him.

Daniel Falcone: I know [Ocasio-Cortez](#) in her current run for office was giving pretty mainstream views on Mideast politics and the Democratic Party, some elements of it, especially the right portion, sadly didn't even like the moderate tone. I was hoping that this softening on Israel for the Democratic Party would be an opportunity to stretch that realm of foreign policy, and make it more progressive.

Noam Chomsky: Among the popular base, yes, but you've got to deal with the media. You've got to deal with the whole propaganda machine. I mean, if these candidates say anything, you've got to deal with the Democratic Party apparatus, and they won't tolerate any criticism. There is a real split in the Democratic Party, between the base and the leadership. They [[DSA](#)] are treading a difficult path. I hate to criticize them too much, but, of course, I'd like them to say it, but I can also understand why they might not want to [push hard left].

Noam Chomsky: I don't know how the Greens are handling this?

Daniel Falcone: The Greens are very consistent in opposition to the carceral state, war, and US acts of aggression. Greens also support BDS, and some support BDS with caveats,

like the ones you bring up. For example, I happen to share your views on BDS. It makes membership and affinity for individuals, groups and political organizations difficult for me in [Staten Island](#) in particular. But as far as “getting money out of politics” like in the [Bronx](#), for example, the Green Party – they’re all former Sanders supporters.

I mention the BDS question because I believe it’s been superficially advanced as a platform because it’s a safe position to take that is outside the mind of a lot of people. It’s being used as a vanity project by the Democratic Party and politicians who aspire to hold office realizing it comes at no cost — just a feel good check mark, but perhaps that will change with the shifts you mentioned recently on [Democracy Now!](#)

Noam Chomsky: It is, but I think you really ought to think [about helping people to see] it through perhaps. Again, there are things like the Presbyterian Church, who are much better than the BDS movement, because they’re really thinking. First of all, it is mainstream, a huge amount of the population. And they’re focusing on the things that really matter.

Take a look at South Africa. I mean, right at the peak of apartheid, [Howard Zinn](#) went to give talks in Cape Town, which was a very good thing because there he could give anti-apartheid talks. Same if an American went to give talks at Tel Aviv University, she or he would be attacked by the BDS movement, which is crazy. In fact, it happened. I was invited to give a talk at the Hebrew University, actually for a memorial for an old friend who was a real militant advocate for Palestinian rights, as his daughter is, who organized it. He had done more than any of the people in BDS ever did; [so how this all plays out within the framework of electoral politics will be quite interesting].

Daniel Falcone: Lastly, as you know, I’m running as a [Green Party Candidate](#) at the local level for New York’s 61st State Assembly District. Myself, [John Dennie](#), and a number of [Green candidates](#), most notably, [Howie Hawkins](#) and [Jia Lee](#), are also using this moment in history as a way for socialist oriented candidates to advance a sensible policy agenda outside of corporate influence. What do you think about the Green Party or the viability of progressive third parties and their prospects for electoral politics in the near future?

Noam Chomsky: In the highly regressive US political system, the odds are stacked against independent parties. Nevertheless, a party like the Greens has a chance at the local level and maybe someday even state levels, and with fusion voting, can succeed even beyond. And the very presence of Greens — not every four years, but steadily — can change the character of public understanding in ways that can have a very positive impact.