The Increasing Viability of Progressive Candidates in Modern

Democratic Elections

Mark Mack

Keuka College

ENG-112-01

Professor Reed

11 May 2020

The Increasing Viability of Progressive Candidates in Modern Democratic Elections

The political climate of the United States of America is an ever-changing entity that contrasts from the America of old. The pursuit of war and conquest, the rise of television and social media, and countless other factors have contributed toward the evolution of American politics since the founding of the United States following the American Revolution. While the political climate of the United States has been changing rapidly over the past few decades, countless voters and establishment members alike within the Democratic Party have been using a recurring tactic in an attempt to win presidential elections: running moderate candidates to have the broadest appeal possible. However, with the growing polarization of the United States, more voters supporting progressive policies, the increasing unreliability of electability statistics, and the ever-shifting middle of the political compass, the possibility for more progressive candidates to win the presidential election has grown significantly.

Background

The history of the Democratic Party running moderates to be safe began in the 1990s when the pursuit of picking up swing voters to win elections became a big priority for both Democrats and Republicans (Bai, 2004). This paradigm shift in how parties approach elections is what made the Democratic party shift from the progressive party it was during the times

of Franklin Roosevelt, Lyndon Johnson, and other progressive candidates, to the more moderate party it is today with William Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joseph Biden. However, this shift toward a more moderate approach was not based on opinion; countless classic political science studies showed that moderates used to be the most electable candidates (Utych, 2020). Despite these numerous studies, however, more recent studies and trends show that the advantages of moderates may be declining, and the viability of extreme candidates, or progressive candidates in the case of the left, is growing. This is due to factors such as those stated previously as well as the growing public appeal of progressives and the success that progressive candidates have had in recent elections.

Polarization

Traditional political science studies showed that moderate candidates had the best chance at winning presidential elections (Utych, 2020). This may have been the case during the earlier stages of America's political life cycle, as more extreme candidates would have discomforted swing voters and centrists. However, researcher Stephen Utych (2020) stated in his journal article "Man Bites Blue Dog: Are Moderates Really More Electable than Idealogues?" that recent trends in United States politics contradict these classic studies due to the increasing political polarization that the country is experiencing. This polarization exists not only within the opinions of voters, but in politicians as well. While older political science studies and

models claim that politicians tend to align themselves with the average voter, these politicians end up becoming more polarized in practice (Asako, 2012). A result of this is that contrary to what studies claim, progressive candidates have been doing better in primaries in recent years (Utych, 2020).

The 2020 Democratic Primary showed how progressive candidates have been faring better in the past few decades. An example of this was the performance of candidate Bernard Sanders in the Iowa and New Hampshire 2020 caucuses (Briz, 2020a; Briz, 2020b). This is a testament to the growing viability of progressive candidates, since an increasing number of citizens are voting for them each election cycle. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that this growing polarization has been occurring for many elections. In the *New York Times Magazine* article "Turnout Wins Elections," written by Matt Bai in 2003, the author discussed the futility of appealing to swing voters. He quoted Republican strategist Rick Davis, who claimed "The way you get your base up is to be more and more partisan and more and more vitriolic on wedge issues" (para. 7). This may show that the push to pick up swing voters was becoming futile as far back as the election of 2004. This unwillingness to cooperate with the other side did not happen in the 20th Century, when progressive president Franklin Roosevelt had two Republicans in his cabinet (Baum & Kernell, 2001).

The increase in polarization is not only giving progressives more advantages, it is also taking away the advantages of moderates. One reason for this is the increase in strategic redistricting by both parties (Utych, 2020). This increase in strategic redistricting takes away one key advantage of running moderate candidates: the possibility of picking up swing voters. Since redistricting is meant to ensure victory for a specific party in each district, the Democratic Party's goal of persuading swing voters to vote Democrat cannot be accomplished. Furthermore, even if a moderate candidate were to be elected president, there is a chance that the legislative branch would not agree with them on issues. In recent years, the number of moderate Democrats in the House of Representatives has been shrinking, from 54 in 2008 to 14 as of 2014 (Utych, 2020). This could make it hard for a moderate to pass legislation, as their ideology would not agree with the Democrats nor the Republicans in the House.

Policy & Electability

When considering the viability of progressive candidates in modern elections, a common argument against these candidates cites past political science studies; these studies showed that moderates tended to beat extreme candidates in elections (Asako, 2012). The assumption that arose as a result of this is that moderates are more electable than progressives. Electability, or "a candidate's prospects for winning the general election" (Simas, 2017), plays a crucial role in the outcome of primary elections

(Simas, 2017). The effect of electability on the outcome of elections has been tested by numerous political scientists, such as Elizabeth Simas of the University of Houston, who tested the effects of electability through the use of simulated House elections with volunteer student voters in 2017, publishing her findings in the *Journal of Elections*. These findings showed that when a candidate was said to be the most electable, they performed 12% better in elections than they did for other test groups who were convinced that the same candidate was unremarkable (Simas, 2017).

While the studies conducted by Elizabeth Simas showed that the effect of electability on elections is significant, the effect of policy tends to be much smaller. In a recent poll conducted by *CNN* in 2019, 56% of registered Democrats thought that moderate Joseph Biden was the most electable, while only 23% thought that he had the best policy (Sparks, 2019). The approval ratings of Biden's policies were much lower than that of Elizabeth Warren and Bernard Sanders, who had policy approval ratings of 30% and 28% respectively. (Sparks, 2019). In addition, 92% of registered Democrats thought that beating Trump was an important goal in the 2020 presidential election, while having a good policy was only considered to be important by 66% of Democrats (Sparks, 2019). This shows that while many voters care about electability, they do not care about policy as much. This leads voters to vote for who they think will win, rather than who, in their opinion, will perform the best as president. This idea has been argued by many members

of the United States government, such as New York State representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who said one of the primary reasons that Biden won a majority of states in the 2020 Democratic primary was that his perceived electability was prominent in voters' thoughts and the media, making it difficult for other candidates to win (Herndon, 2020). Even if voters wanted to vote for their favorite policies, voters will commonly sacrifice their ideals in order to vote for a more "electable" candidate in order to win (Simas, 2017).

However, electability may not play as much of a role in the outcome of elections as commonly believed; progressive candidates may have a level of electability that is as high as, if not higher than, moderates. According to more recent studies, extreme candidates can have a higher electability than moderate ones. The reason for this is that people tend to vote for candidates that are as different from the other parties, or incumbents, as possible (Asako 2012). The more extreme a candidate is, the more different they will inherently be from candidates of the other side, which means that their appeal to this type of voter will be much higher. Furthermore, some studies suggest that moderates can never have a higher probability of winning elections than extreme candidates. The reason for this is that in dire electoral situations, an extreme candidate will have more policy decisions to potentially give up if they need to become more electable (Asako, 2012). An analogy for this concept is that if politics were a hot-air balloon race, an

extreme candidate would have more sandbags to shed than a moderate, giving them more control over their performance.

Historically, progressive candidates have been shown to put the sandbag theory into practice. During his four terms, progressive President Franklin Roosevelt focused on the New Deal as he originally campaigned on, but as World War II broke out, he sacrificed some of his ideals in order to take actions that both parties approved of (Baum & Kernell, 2001). Also, the perception that voters have about who is the most electable does not always translate to a victory. For example, Donald Trump's viability was heavily doubted by many in 2016, but he won the presidency regardless of this fact (Brownstein, 2019).

Extreme candidates having a higher electability in practice as well as having higher approval ratings in policy for the 2020 Primary than moderate candidates shows that traditional studies and beliefs about electability do not translate perfectly to elections. Theories about the electability of each candidate type have been shown to be outdated in the modern polarized America. Due to this, voters do not need to sacrifice their ideologies when choosing which candidate to support. Whether a voter wishes to cast their vote for a moderate or for a progressive, their decision is statistically valid. However, extreme candidates, or progressive candidates in the case of Democratic elections, have significant advantages in the modern political climate of the United States.

Momentum

As one of the primary influencers of electability once the primary voting process begins, momentum plays a key role in the election process (Abramowitz, 2011). Specifically, victories in the first caucuses in the primary cycle, Iowa and New Hampshire, can help give candidates a snowball effect that leads them to victory (Abramowitz, 2011). This snowball effect can even overpower other factors such as previous electability polls, despite the fact that electability normally plays a significant role in primary elections (Simas, 2017).

Historically, momentum from early caucuses has propelled many unlikely candidates to victory. An example of this paradigm shift taking effect was in 1988, where George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis gained enough momentum from their victories in New Hampshire to win Super Tuesday and become the respective Republican and Democratic nominees despite not being named the most electable beforehand (Abramowitz, 2011). This shows that electability can shift once the primary cycle begins. However, this trend did not occur in the 2020 election cycle. While two candidates, Peter Buttegeig and Bernard Sanders, who were not considered highly electable before Iowa and New Hampshire won those states (Briz, 2020a; Briz, 2020b), that momentum did not lead them to victory in Super Tuesday, which was won by Joseph Biden (Briz, 2020c).

The differences between the 1988 Primary and the 2020 Primary may be due to voters trusting in pre-election electability polls, rather than re-adjusting views once the election process began. Since pre-election polls showed that a majority of Democrats thought that Biden was the most electable (Sparks, 2019; Brownstein, 2019), voters may have thought that these perceptions would persist throughout the election, rather than changing organically as the election process progressed like in 1988.

The Median and Who Gets the Vote

While most candidates fit nicely onto the political compass as extremes or moderates, the public perception of candidates is based heavily around who the incumbent is at the time. In our current political climate, many voters may think that moderate Democrats are farther left than they actually are. Voters may claim that these candidates are progressive in nature, but these opinions mostly emerge from comparisons to Donald Trump. Voters believed that due to where President Trump stands politically, running a centrist or moderate Democrat will be the key to defeating him in the 2020 election (Brownstein, 2019).

The Democratic preference toward moderates in the case of an incumbent Republican is not a new concept. This shift in perception has happened before in 2004 when the Democratic party ran a moderate candidate against former president George W. Bush due to Bush being seen as "radical" by the public (Mirhosseini, 2015). Bush's place on the political

compass pulled the median slightly to the right, which changed the average voter's perception on the platforms of both parties (Mirhosseini, 2015). However, Bush's unpopularity shifted the median again in 2008, this time to the left. This allowed the Democrats to run a candidate that leaned slightly progressive, Barack Obama, and win the election (Mirhosseini, 2015).

The median and voters' perception of it has palpable effects on election results. While the Democratic party has been trying to appeal to the average voter since the 1990s (Bai, 2003), in recent years it has been more favorable to appeal to the median of the party itself, rather than the median overall (Utych, 2020). Many voters may believe that since the median has shifted right since 2016, running a moderate candidate will be the Democratic party's best chance at winning the 2020 election. However, this may alienate many voters within the party itself, leading to a lower voter turnout overall. When considering recent trends in how the median affects voters, the electability of progressives, the desire to have a candidate that differs from the incumbent, and the favorability of "preaching to the choir", running a candidate that leans progressive may be the Democratic party's best option for winning the 2020 election.

Public Support for Progressives

Logically, progressive candidates do not seem like they would garner much support from the public. As leftists, it does not seem feasible that they could gain support from the center nor the right. However, progressive

politicians and ideas have been able to receive abundant support from the public in the past and present. One example of a progressive president that was able to gain overwhelming public support was Franklin Roosevelt.

During Roosevelt's presidency, various national issues of the time period allowed him to gain support from both parties. The events that caused this were the Great Depression as well as the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which is what propelled the United States into World War II (Baum & Kernell, 2001). Due to the palpable patriotism that was present in the United States at this time, joining World War II allowed FDR to gain immense support. This action also reinforces an idea that was expressed earlier: that extremes are able to sacrifice their ideals if need be in order to aid the country or win elections, since wars at the time were traditionally not supported by the Democratic party, a belief that has since changed (Stossel, 2020). As for Roosevelt's progressive policies, the New Deal did not originally have support from his opponents. However, as the implementation of the New Deal helped the country recover from the Great Depression, approval of the New Deal increased across the entire political spectrum (Baum & Kernell, 2001). In addition, his approval ratings across various economic classes of America rose throughout his presidency. The New Deal gave him support from low-income Americans while World War II's economic gains gave him support from high-income Americans (Baum & Kernell,

2001). While the political parties of America have many class divisions, FDR was able to gain support despite these barriers.

In the present day, progressive ideas are slowly gaining an overwhelming amount of support from voters. While candidates such as Bernard Sanders, Elizabeth Warren, and Andrew Yang lost the 2020 primary, their ideas are gaining support from the masses. For example, in a poll conducted by AP VoteCast, 70% of voters in Florida support universal healthcare, specifically Medicare For All, which is one of the most common platforms for progressives today (Herndon, 2020). As stated earlier, while not being named the most electable, progressive candidates such as Elizabeth Warren and Bernard Sanders were said to have the best policies by around 30% and 28% of voters respectively according to polls conducted by CNN; the highest of any candidate (Sparks, 2019). Factors such as electability are preventing many supporters of progressive policies from voting for candidates who they align with. However, the history and current realities of support for progressive ideas show that the viability of these candidates has always existed. A vote for a more extreme candidate is not a vote wasted since while they may not be considered to be the most electable, these candidates and policies have the most support throughout the Democratic voter base. However, while the support of progressive candidates has increased throughout the voter base, the ideas of the party itself differ from that of voters.

The Party

While the voters of America and the candidates they vote for are the backbone of the election process, political party establishments also play an important role in voting. Just like voters and candidates, the members and donors of political parties are susceptible to bias which can influence campaigns. Political establishments will not usually make their endorsements and preferences public, as that has the potential to lead to conflict within and between parties (Hassell, 2018). However, various studies and interviews have shown which candidates party establishments support: moderate ones. Party establishments support moderate candidates because they are the preferred candidate type by top members of the party (Hassell, 2018). However, lower-level party members tend to favor extreme candidates (Hassell, 2018).

The disparity in candidate preferences shows the differences between the top members of political parties and the lower-level members. A conflict of interest arises from this, which may be why the advantages of moderate candidates have been decreasing over the past few decades. Top-level party officials prefer moderate candidates not because of their ideals but because they believe that moderates are the key to victory; many top party officials believe that victory is the most important aspect of an election (Hassell, 2018), rather than electing a candidate that aligns with the core values of the party. This disregard for ideals is shared by many top members of party

establishments, such as one major donor who claimed, "Winning is always part of the equation, except for the most radical activists on the left or the right, but you don't have to move too far off of that and winning becomes a bigger and bigger factor" (Hassell, 2018, p. 8). The more competitive an election is, the more a party's desire for victory will grow. This is why in competitive elections, moderates are prefered by political parties (Hassell, 2018).

The preference for moderates in competitive elections raises a question: why are moderates considered to be the most electable by political parties? One reason is that party leaders tend to view their own ideals as the most electable (Hassell, 2018), which lines up with the moderate views of these leaders. In fact, the Democratic National Committee has been shown to directly oppose progressive candidates in the past, such as when the Committee ran a campaign against then-incumbent Franklin Roosevelt during his second re-election campaign (Baum & Kernell, 2001). The Democratic Party's focus on winning elections and placing more value on the ideals of top officials rather than the majority of the party has created an issue for Democrats across the country. This issue is that there is a generational divide between the progressives of the younger generation and the moderates of the older generation (Kapur, 2020). The Democratic Party's decision to run moderate candidates disregards current studies and the ideals of the younger generation. With current trends, as more younger

Americans reach 18 years of age and gain the ability to vote, the advantages of running moderate candidates will decrease with each progressive voice added to the masses.

Conclusion

While moderates have been the candidate of choice for both voters and the Democratic party in the past few decades, the viability of progressives has increased significantly to where voting for one is not risky. In the present day United States, voters from all ends of the leftist spectrum have the freedom to vote for who they want and still have a chance to win the presidency. However, the increasing support for progressives among youth voters may foreshadow a future where progressives become the preferred candidate type for the Democratic party. As their public appeal increases and voters begin to trust their feelings more than electability statistics, a progressive future may be the path that the voters of this country will walk together.

References

Abramowitz, Alan I. (2011). Viability, electability, and candidate choice in a presidential primary election: A test of competing models. *Journal of Politics, 51*(4), pp. 977-991. https://doi.org/10.2307/2131544

Asako, Y. (2012). Campaign promises as an imperfect signal: How does an extreme candidate win against a moderate one? *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, *27*(4). https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2227206

Bai, M. (2003 Dec 14). Turnout wins elections. *The New York Times Magazine*, pp. 100-102. https://proxy.keuka.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&AN=11661883&site=ehost-live

Baum, M., & Kernell, S. (2001). Economic class and popular support for Franklin Roosevelt in war and peace. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 65*(2), pp. 198-227. http://proxy.keuka.edu:2136/10.1086/322197

Briz, A., et. al. (2020a, February 12). 2020 New Hampshire primary results*. Politico*. https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/new-hampshire/

Briz, A., et. al. (2020b, February 29). 2020 Iowa caucus results. *Politico*. https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/iowa/

Briz, A., et. al. (2020c, April 19). 2020 Super Tuesday primary results.

    Politico. https://www.politico.com/2020-election/results/super-

    tuesday/

Brownstein, R. (2019, September 12). How pundits may be getting

    electability all wrong. *The Atlantic.*

    https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2019/09/electabilit

    y-democrats-2020-joe-biden/597904/

Hassell, H. J. G. (2018). Principled moderation: Understanding parties'

    support of moderate candidates. *Legislative Studies Quarterly*,

    43(2), pp. 343-369. https://doi.org/10.1111/lsq.12197

Herndon, A. (2020, April 15). Progressive ideas remain popular.

    progressive presidential candidates are losing. Why? *The New*

    York Times.

    https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/18/us/politics/bernie-

    sanders-progressives-elizabeth-warren.html

Kapur, S. (202, April 12). No progressive tea party: Sanders' exit

    highlights asymmetry between the parties. *NBC News.*

    https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2020-election/no-

    progressive-tea-party-sanders-exit-highlights-asymmetry-

    between-parties-n1181571

Mirhosseini, M. (2015). Primaries with strategic voters: Trading off

    electability and ideology. *Social Choice and Welfare, 44*(3), pp.

    457-470. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00355-014-0845-4

Simas, E. (2017). The effects of electability on US primary voters.

    Journal of Elections, 27(3), pp. 274-286.

    http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17457289.2016.1270287

Sparks, G. (2019 May 5). Biden's run embodies the big question of

    Democratic primary: What's more important, policy or beating

    Trump? *CNN Wire*, pp. 1-2.

    https://www.cnn.com/2019/05/05/politics/biden-trump-poll-

    policies/index.html

Stossel, J. (2020, January). The anti-war candidate. *Reason*, pp. 44-

    50. https://reason.com/2019/12/16/the-anti-war-candidate/

Utych, S. (2020). Man bites blue dog: Are moderates really more

    electable than ideologues? *Journal of Politics, 82*(1), pp. 1-8.

    www.doi.org/10.1086/706054