

Young voters love old socialists

The attraction may have to do with long track records and political identity

BY ELIZABETH BRUENIG

One of the marvels of 2020's oversized slate of Democratic candidates is its relative youth. Boasting 37-year-old Pete Buttigieg and 46-year-old Beto O'Rourke, the lineup makes last cycle's hopefuls look positively ancient.

Yet another marvel is that young voters don't seem to care. Tracking with his support among young people, Sen. Bernie Sanders carried 41 percent of 18- to 29-year-old Democratic primary voters, according to an Emerson poll. Former Vice President Joe Biden got 11 percent. Meanwhile, two teenagers are running the presidential campaign of 89-year-old former Sen. Mike Gravel of Alaska. And young people are warming to socialism and socialist policies. No wonder it has been a hard primary for candidates such as O'Rourke, who hopped into the race banking on a boost from a punky flair that seemed to fizzle as fast as it flared.

How do we explain the affinity of young voters for old socialists — even with so many newer models on the market, and when so many strategists counsel against voting left or

gray (much less both)?

The answer has to do, I think, with track records, radical critiques of American politics, generational alienation and a sense of political identity.

Older politicians have more opportunities to build track records, and those might be more important to the young than to voters of other ideologies and age brackets. Why? Strong left-leaning track records offer two major benefits.

First, they bespeak a certain authenticity. When Sanders showed it was possible to rake in young votes with leftist policies, plenty of center-oriented Democrats showed interest in things such as Medicare for all. Roast young lefties for naiveté if you must, but they seem to realize that a fight such as universal health care is going to require somebody truly invested in the idea, who's willing to take enormous flak over it and suffer a few defeats without giving up. In short, endurance counts.

Aside from authentic commitment, candidates with long track records suggest they have developed a personal politics with a deeper historical scope — they don't think the problems in American life began when Don-



Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vermont) speaks at Central Piedmont Community College in Charlotte, N.C., on May 17.

AP / DAVID T. FOSTER III

ald Trump was elected. Nor do they believe that, before that moment, America was already great. If your belief is that what's rotten in American politics stems from capitalism, then those sudden explanations of what went wrong don't make sense. The explanations that ring true go back decades, and the people who have borne wit-

ness to them tend to be older.

It's also important to remember that the alienation between millennials and their parents' generation — baby boomers, largely — is laced with resentment. Among the young, there exists a real faith that boomers squandered opportunities to care for the environment, embraced austerity politics at the

expense of needier generations, and created a deregulated financial system that has left millennials saddled with debt and grim prospects. Facing the world we're left with, why would today's up-and-comers look for solutions among the scads of boomer and boomer-esque candidates cluttering the field?

Finally, youth is most attractive when you don't have it. For all the attention paid to Buttigieg and O'Rourke, younger candidates' pitches to their peers are destined to be met with a little well-earned skepticism.

If polls are any indication, young people have policy interests they hope to achieve with their 2020 votes, and the politicians making serious efforts to achieve them happen to be, likely for a variety of reasons, a little long in the tooth. As more committed, young politicians such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez enter the halls of power, there will be more opportunities for the socialist-leaning young to vote for their own — though I suspect the same characters who are unsatisfied with their voting habits now will be just as disappointed then.



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FROM THE POINT

Suffolk labor deal not a slam dunk for all



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Given a chance to ratify the new union contract that will raise base police pay for officers with at least 12 years of service to \$155,000 by 2025 and average total earnings for those officers to more than \$200,000, Suffolk County Police Benevolent Association members were glad to fall into line. By the time online voting ended at 5 p.m. Monday, 84 percent of the union's approximately 1,600 members had voted for ratification.

But the county's far larger Association of Municipal Employees, with approximately 6,000 members, appears to have a significant contingent that's balking. And unfortunately for them, the aspect of the new deals that seems to be causing the anger is not subject to ratification by members.

Several weeks ago, the county and the PBA and AME announced new contracts for the two unions and a new health care agreement for all of the county's 10 unions. The health care agreement was the most contentious point, as it forces all county employees to contribute to premiums for the first time (the previous

deal charged only those hired after 2013). While the contribution is set at 2 percent of salary, the proposal also sets a minimum contribution of \$1,500 a year and maximum of \$3,750. That maximum is a great deal for cops making \$200,000 a year, but the minimum is a huge percentage of pay for AME employees like crossing guards, who earn \$13,000.

However, union employees don't get a vote on the health care deal. Their voice on that issue is the Suffolk County Organization of Public Employees, a board of leaders from all the county's unions that already has approved the deal.

So the AME membership's unrest is bubbling up in the only place it can, with opponents of president Daniel Levler working to round up "no" votes on the union's individual labor contract, on which they can vote online until May 31.

Union officials are worried enough that they have worked up a "FACT VS. FICTION" flyer on the union website to explain why the proposed deal is a good one, and why leaders' opponents are wrong. It explains that members cannot vote against the health care deal, touts seven years of raises totaling 12 percent, and points out other advantages, like better

longevity pay and step increases. It also says individuals are "spreading false and negative information," and it takes on the accusation that the AME executive board was "bought off by the county" with \$150,000 annual salaries.

It won't be clear how the AME vote will go until next week. What is clear is that the issues making members the angriest are not up for a vote.

Lane Filler is a member of *Newsday's* editorial board. This originally appeared in *The Point*, the daily email newsletter of the editorial board. Sign up at newsday.com/ThePoint