

# “The bottom line is there is no reason to go to sleep”

Interview with Daraka Larimore-Hall<sup>1</sup>



↳ Daraka Larimore-Hall PhD, is vice chairman of the California Democratic Party.

Foto: personal

**spw:** Even before super Tuesday, it seemed that Bernie Sanders could win the Democratic primary. Could you recall the reasons that led to Joe Biden’s victory and what voter groups they represent?

**Daraka Larimore-Hall:** One of the most important demographics for Biden’s win was Black voters, particularly those in Southern States. “Super Tuesday” was designed to concentrate a lot of votes in more conservative States together in order to make it harder for “insurgent” candidates (for example Ted Kennedy and Jesse Jackson) to gain momentum. Southern Democratic voters of all races tend to be more moderate, and more focused on “traditional” ideas of electability. Even Obama had trouble in Southern states at first.

After he emerged as the “safe” candidate, other parts of the Democratic coalition consolidated around Biden. The main dynamic was that voters wanted a candidate who represented stability and the highest possible chance of defeating Trump. In that context, Sanders’ “Revolution” seemed like a big risk, even if his policies were popular and he scores quite high on personal ratings.

**spw:** Biden is also dependent on votes that the left wing of the party represents. In the meantime, politicians and advisors from Sanders and Biden’s environment are working together in working groups.

**Biden refers to parts from the election programs of Sanders and Elisabeth Warren. How far-reaching are his concessions and is it really a substantial programmatic opening to the left? (Please also explain by means of examples from the programs.)**

**D. L.-H.:** His concessions are not incredibly impressive, really. I think there is a good faith effort to bring the Party together, and both Warren and Sanders have had some success moving Biden’s rhetoric about Finance sector accountability and the kinds of stimulus programs to implement after COVID. But on all the highest profile wedge issues between Right and Left in the Party, from health care to higher education policy, the official Platform coming out of negotiations is more centrist than it needs to be.

In the US, though, our Party platforms are largely non-binding and symbolic. The center of gravity in the Party has still shifted overall to the Left over the past four years. We can see that in Primary battles for Congress and State level government in Democratic strongholds. So, the opening is still there. We need to get through this General election and get rid of Trump, but I am really confident the Left within and around the Party is ready to keep fighting for a broader agenda afterwards. That wasn’t true in 2008. Everyone went to sleep when Obama was elected. I think that lesson has been learned. We have to stay mobilized.

**spw:** How credible is he with left-wing voters? After all, he had supported the return to the policy of austerity after the measures taken against the global economic and financial crisis. (Please also refer to Biden’s election campaign strategy and his messages.)

**D. L.-H.:** Biden has very little credibility with left-wing voters. In the Primary, he was explicit and often quite patronizing and dismissive in his ridicule of progressive policy hopes. His record is problematic to say the least- consistently bad on controlling the Finan-

1 Interview conducted by: Kai Burmeister, Stefan Stache.

cial sector, much of which is based in his home state of Delaware. His behavior in the Anita Hill hearings, which are quite infamous, he seemed more interested in the opinions of his white Republican colleagues in the Senate than the dignity and rights of an African American woman. He's just a real mess.

As such, there's a kind of strange dilemma in the way that progressives and Democrats talk about him. Some approach it by highlighting the more progressive things in his platform and rhetoric, and encourage people to think about those as a set of commitments to build on. Others, and I mind myself on this side, try to be brutally honest about his limitations and poor record. I am just honest that Republicans are always worth beating with Democrats and that this is especially true as the GOP slips into a kind of fascism. I feel that being honest with voters, particularly young, progressive voters, is more effective in the long run. Of course, in a giant election like this one, there is no single message that is effective with every voter, so its good that there are multiple conversations happening.

**spw: In view of the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, Biden has announced his intention to invest massively in public infrastructure, climate protection, etc. According to some of his advisors, he sees himself in the traditional line of New Deal. Is he interested in a one-time crisis reaction or is he open for a long-term economic and welfare state paradigm shift and system changing reforms? (Please also point out any gaps in his program and any further necessary demands.)**

**D.L.-H.:** This is a good question, and I think that it is smart to watch where a Biden administration comes down on infrastructure spending. His plans so far are quite vague, other than a broad commitment to lay down considerable public funding to improve and expand infrastructure. But yes, one question will be whether he will favor programs that expand the public sector or expand the social wage or will see a more limited "shot in the arm" role for government. How the labor movement intervenes in that policy creation will be a big factor

in how it shakes out in the end. Just like with the original New Deal, there is likely to be debate within and around the Administration. Obama listened to the minimalists, for the most part, and this is part of why his stimulus program didn't produce a lasting electoral majority.

Biden keeps saying, for example, that he would veto any major overhaul of the health care system, a key aspect of the Left's hopes to expand the social wage. I wonder, however, if he would actually spend so much political capital if, in fact, a Democratic Congress handed him a real reform bill, and there was movement in the streets behind it.

Back to infrastructure, the other question is whether the assets built or upgraded will be public or private. Trump has tried to push an infrastructure bill that would subsidize massive private construction projects that would stay in corporate hands, including roads and bridges. Labor and progressive policy groups were able to keep Democrats in Congress united to sink any bill that wasn't majority public works oriented. That dynamic flips if the President is a Democrat. If Biden goes down that path to placate his Finance supporters, we will have to work hard to keep the Congressional Party on the right side.

The bottom line is there is no reason to go to sleep, or think that Biden will "deliver" a New Deal kind of reform agenda. But I do think it is possible for movement forces and progressives in Congress to help shape the outcome.

**spw: Has the pandemic changed the leading political discourses but also the attitudes or opinions of the population? How do the crisis reactions of Congress and Donald Trump affect the trust of Democratic and Republican voter groups?**

**D.L.-H.:** Historians and sociologists will be debating this question for decades. Ideology influences the public debate over how to respond to the pandemic everywhere, but in the US it has been an extremely partisan process. Almost without exception, you can predict what kind of response a State has used based on its partisan division. I hate making predictions, but it is safe to say

that at this particular moment, this has backfired on the Republicans. They are associated with denying and underplaying the severity of the crisis, and embarrassments like Trump rallies leading to deadly outbreaks are taking a toll.

Still, and this is why future scholars will find it so interesting, for Trump's core following, it doesn't seem to matter how many people die. They don't believe the numbers, or don't care. That's why Trump's rhetoric and behavior is so unpredictable. He is signaling to his core supporters that he agrees with them that wearing masks is for sissies and we should re-start the consumer economy now. At the same time, he needs big numbers of more sensible, but loyal Republicans who are watching what's happening in horror. At the same time, he is catering to white racist anxieties surrounding the Black Lives Matter uprisings. That's a more tried-and-true strategy for the suburban Republican base. This combination could work, but it's a lot to juggle for a guy who really isn't that bright.

**spw:** **To implement a Green New Deal, a new US administration under Biden also needed a majority in the Senate. How do you assess the chances for a Democratic majority in both houses of Congress?**

**D. L.-H.:** Again I plead against making any predictions in today's reality. I'm not sure what will happen in terms of Party control of the Senate, which is far more closely divided and volatile. More of a sure thing is that the Democratic delegation in the House will continue to grow, and to grow more Left-Wing. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has a bunch of new allies who won Primaries and are sure to get their seats in November. The activist base and local elected officials have shifted to the left on economic policy and now with Black Lives Matter, on race and criminal justice questions. We will see those changes reflected most clearly in the House, since it is the body that is the most representative of numbers of people.

The core question for the Senate is whether a future Democratic majority will have the will to abolish the so-called "administrative filibuster" that makes it necessary to have 60/100 votes to

get anything passed. Democrats won't have that kind of majority any time soon, and we will always have a handful of unreliable, conservative Senators in the caucus. We must change that rule and make it simpler for a small majority to govern. Otherwise, the Senate will continue to be the graveyard of good ideas.

**spw:** **The protests against racism and police violence have generated a high level of political pressure. Many people are demanding an end to institutional and structural racism at all levels. Trump continues to react in an authoritarian way. To what extent does he succeed in mobilizing for himself with his escalation and exclusion strategy? How do you assess the further dynamics of the protests, also in view of the presidential elections?**

**D. L.-H.:** As I noted above, this is a key question for the outcome of the election, and for the future of American politics. Black people have been fighting in cyclical but consistent ways for true liberation since before the founding of the Republic. We have hit a point in that cycle of high mobilization and political opportunity, focused on one of the most insidious institutional hold-overs from Slavery. The criminal justice system inherited a role of exploitation and control from the Slave system, and the current radicalism has convinced a much broader swath of liberal and even centrist thinkers that deep reform is needed.

Every upswing in the black freedom struggle provokes a white backlash. Nixon, famously positioned himself and the Republican Party to turn that backlash into workable political majorities. Trump is trying the same manoeuvre. My friend Rick Perlstein, a brilliant historian of the American Right recently published a piece about how this moment is very different from 1968. (Will send link) I agree with him. The bottom line is that there are just a lot more of us than there are of them this time.

Of course there are those among the Democratic elites and activist base who are terrified of a replay. They are worried that demands like "defund the police" give Trump ammunition.

First, I don't think you can impose a lot of message discipline on social movements. You have to tolerate some chaos. Second, there is a real need for a foundational shift in how we think about law enforcement, and you won't get there if you don't sloganize a foundational shift. Policing is highly decentralized in the US, and so there are going to be literally thousands of conversations about reform and improving existing police departments. The point of the movement is to change the frame from "how much more should we spend on policing", which has become the norm, to "why do we spend so much on it?" That's important.

**spw: Do foreign and trade policy play a role in public debates? What are Biden's positions in these political fields?**

**D. L.-H.:** Biden is a fairly standard Democratic centrist with a foreign policy that is likely to closely resemble Obama's. Generally an institutionalist, he will insist on a neoliberal trade and IMF policy, but work hard to repair relationships with allies. NATO will get more support. He is likely to support a peace plan for Israel/Palestine that isn't simply "Israel gets everything."

All that said, foreign policy is not rising up much in the mediated debate so far. We haven't had any head-to-head debates yet, so we shall see. With the pandemic and its resultant economic stresses, streets erupting in protest and the daily struggle of psychological existence, it isn't high on people's minds. ■