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What's Next for Bernie's Revolution?

By Christopher D. Cook

Political campaigns open and break hearts, then disappear. In the end, signs come down, campaign offices empty out, voter and volunteer lists coated with coffee and sweat are shredded. The moment and the movement dissolve.

But in this most unusual election year, Bernie Sanders and his passionate supporters aim to break that pattern. Sanders's call for a "political revolution" ignited a fierce urgency that had been percolating under the surface of America's stultifying politics—and

initiatives such as Our Revolution and Brand New Congress, and smaller "Berniecrat" clubs and networks sprouting from the grassroots, are carving new pathways for progressive reform.

The passion of the post-Bernie

movement is undeniable. Within days of Sanders's first public mention of Our Revolution in late June, 24,000 people expressed interest in joining. The group's August 24 launch inspired more than 2,600 house parties around the country, and more than 240,000

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viewers on Facebook Live alone. Brand New Congress, meanwhile, is touring the country to build support for running more than 400 reform candidates in 2018.

This revolution-in-progress confronts many challenges. Millions of people are fed up with politics as usual—but can this energy be harnessed into a lasting movement that produces electoral and legislative results? How will these efforts relate to a Democratic Party that, despite Sanders’s remarkable campaign, remains wedded to Wall Street, the military-industrial complex, and corporate America?

Most important, is there hope for a grand alliance (institutional or strategic) among progressive Democrats, labor, the Green Party, and independent nonpartisan movements, including Black Lives Matter? While

maintaining their independence, can these groups, along with Our Revolution and Brand New Congress, work together to produce concrete change?

With a king-sized assist from Sanders, Our Revolution is headed by the Senator’s former campaign manager Jeff Weaver, political director Larry Cohen (former president of the Communications Workers of America), and twenty-seven-year-old executive director Shannon Jackson, who rose from being Bernie’s driver to one of his top campaign aides. The group will draft and support candidates for everything from school boards and city councils to state legislatures and Congress, as well as ballot measures around the country. This electoral thrust will be buttressed by the Sanders Institute, a political education outfit.

But the project stumbled out of the gate. On the eve of its launch, eight of fifteen staffers walked out, protesting the leadership of Weaver, who they say

prioritizes raising money from big donors and using television advertising over ground-level organizing.

In an interview with *The Progressive*, former Our Revolution digital organizing director Claire Sandberg said the rift was “not a personal dispute” with Weaver, but about priorities and direction. “Jeff chose a legal structure for the organization [501(c)(4)] that prevents us from doing effective down-ballot coordinating with candidates,” Sandberg said. “He did that so he could accept large dollar donors.” In her view, “if the organization isn’t able to train and empower grassroots

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candidates through a people-powered ground game,” then much of its purpose is lost. In response, Jackson says, “I’ve been assured there are ways for us to successfully work with candidates” while abiding by IRS rules.

After the staff exodus, Sandberg says, the Our Revolution leadership board consisted of five white men. Jackson says the board is expanding, and “is going to be diverse.”

Our Revolution aims to “empower progressive leaders all around the country,” says Jackson, and is “working with our allies and former campaign surrogates to get quality recommendations” on endorsements. As of its launch, Our Revolution had endorsed more than sixty candidates for offices ranging from county commissioner to U.S. Senator.

Also on Our Revolution’s endorsement list: a prescription drug price reform measure in California; a single-payer healthcare initiative in

Colorado; an Alaska measure to ease and expand voter registration; a Washington state initiative challenging corporate personhood; and, potentially, ballot measures to end the death penalty and legalize marijuana.

While there is much enthusiasm, questions remain about politics and process. Many disaffected Bernie revolutionaries want to topple mainstream Democrats, or even the party itself. How far can these new groups push? Will they challenge military spending and American interventionism, which undermine progressive domestic priorities?

To achieve more than previous efforts that failed to make revolutionary change, including Jesse Jackson’s Rainbow Coalition, Howard Dean’s Democracy for America, and Barack Obama’s Organizing for America, these Bernie-ignited initiatives must build beyond their leader, and maintain deep ties with other like-minded movements. The relationship is bound to be complicated between a sitting U.S. Senator and a grassroots citizens campaign. Will Our Revolution be able to support—and push—Bernie when necessary?

The Sanders campaign pulled off a remarkable feat, espousing democratic socialism and empowering young movement people while running a professional political campaign. Now Sanders and the people who supported him are struggling to turn that accomplishment into a sustained independent movement to build real political power.

With a crisp Tennessee twang and passionate yet businesslike optimism, thirty-five-year-old Corbin Trent, one of six “core team” members of Brand New Congress, acknowledges the Herculean task of remaking a

largely corporate center-right body. To run 400-plus candidates in 2018 on a progressive platform, he says, will require “one of the largest grassroots campaigns in the history of American politics.”

Conceived last April during the primaries by a group of about twenty Sanders staffers and volunteers, Brand New Congress, says Trent, was sparked by “every news story about Bernie, which said, sure this is great but there is no political will to accomplish these goals. We were doing barnstorms, and everywhere we went people were saying, ‘How do we actually make this reality?’ ”

The political action committee plans to announce its initial fifty candidates in March 2017, and another fifty in May. Trent estimates the group will need to “about double” Bernie’s stunning \$227 million, raised by those famous average donations of \$27. “There are some real economies of scale in running 400 candidates at once,” says Trent. Brand New Congress has raised roughly \$150,000, says Trent, who adds, “the fundraising is going to really kick off once we start announcing our slate.”

Both the Our Revolution and Brand New Congress platforms are works in progress. Senator Sanders’s communications director, Michael Briggs, says Our Revolution is “thinking our way through” the process and criteria for its endorsements: “We don’t have a hard and fast rule about who has to support what in order to get an endorsement.” Jackson says the platform that emerged from the Democratic National Convention was “the most progressive so far . . . The candidates we endorse would have to support that.” But he sees this as a “stepping stone,” adding candidates backed by the group “should go farther.”

On its website, the Brand New Congress lays out some goals: “We want to end the poverty and suffering of tens of millions of Americans, reverse the effects of climate change so the world does not end by 2100, end our policies that keep ruining the lives of millions abroad by destabilizing their countries, and restore our democracy to go back to representing all of the people instead of just monied interests.”

The group’s core principles include government investment in a “massive rebuilding project in partnership with businesses in America”; creating “a

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100 percent renewable energy society in as short a time as possible”; reforming a criminal justice system that “unfairly targets people of color” into one that “spends its money on integrating offenders back into society”; repealing *Citizens United* and “getting rid of the revolving door between Wall Street and our government”; and advancing policies to “further the rights of people of color, women, and LGBTQ people.” When the group launched, there was no mention of war, intervention, or military spending.

Brand New Congress intends to run Republican candidates in gerrymandered GOP districts. But will it find elephants willing to embrace all its “nonnegotiable” core principles? And, particularly among Democrats, how will the group decide which incumbents merit a challenge?

According to Trent, nearly all of them: “It’s our belief that only a handful are vocally standing up

against this broken and corrupt political process.” He adds, “The concept here is to put policies and people over party. We are not huge proponents of either the Democratic or Republican party establishment; both parties are equally at odds with the American worker.”

At a recent San Francisco event during Brand New Congress’s 100-city national tour, core team member Alexandra Rojas said the initiative “transcends” partisan politics. The priority, she said, is “not about taxes, not about regulations, but about creating 100 million jobs,” and reviving American manufacturing. Fellow Brand New Congress organizer and core team leader Nasim Thompson stressed the group’s “open source” organizing, saying, “We’re going to be the most transparent campaign in history.”

But it remains unclear who Brand New Congress is consulting with to develop its platform and endorsements. In an email, Trent stated, “Most of the decision making regarding candidates and platform will be on the [five-member] Brand New Congress board. The board members will rotate like all of our leadership . . . We are working with a number of people to develop our strategies and platform but we are not at a stage to publicly release names.”

Norman Solomon, cofounder of RootsAction.org and a delegate to the Democratic convention who coordinated the Bernie Delegates Network, says the group must be willing to fight: “To have the power to force congressional action, progressives are going to need to effectively organize while showing some sharp teeth. The power to launch primary challenges—credibly threatening corporate Democrats with defeat—is crucial.”

In keeping with progressive tradition, there are multiple, overlapping efforts to reform today's political landscape. These include Our Revolution, Brand New Congress, Progressive Democrats of America, the Working Families Party, the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the Green Party, and others. Can these groups meld diversity and unity to deliver electoral and legislative change?

There are some promising signs of mutual support. A day after issuing its caveat-laced endorsement for Hillary Clinton, the Working Families Party promoted Our Revolution's launch in an email to supporters. Along with the Working Families Party, Our Revolution counts among its allies the Communications Workers of America and National Nurses United, which vigorously supported Bernie. But despite overlap in their origins and goals, Our Revolution and Brand New Congress are unaffiliated, with no relationship other than staffers who know each other.

Donna Smith, executive director of Progressive Democrats of America, says the group, which urged Sanders to run as a Democrat early on, is "thrilled and anxious to watch and participate in the launch and evolution" of these initiatives. "We will be working to seat new, fresh, and more progressive people in county and state party organizations as the best way to reform the Democratic Party in the long run."

While PDA espouses an "inside-outside" approach, some activists believe the emerging post-Bernie movements must be strenuously independent, and not focus on bringing progressives into the Democratic Party. "There needs to be political power building a coalition beyond the clutches of the Democratic Party," says longtime party activist Karen

Bernal, former chair of the California Democratic Party's progressive caucus, and a Bernie delegate. "Bernie did so well not only because he ran as a Democrat, but because he has so much support outside of the party."

Despite the Green Party's many overtures, surveys suggest roughly 80 percent of Bernie backers—motivated largely by fear and loathing of Trump—plan to support Clinton over Green Party candidate Jill Stein. Still, with 137 officeholders and an estimated 300,000 members nationwide, the Greens remain part of the electoral landscape—sufficient to

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inspire attacks from Clinton and the DNC leadership who fear losing liberal voters in swing states.

"There are a lot of very good Green Party people running in local elections that we will consider" for endorsements, says Jackson of Our Revolution. Trent, of Brand New Congress, sounds a bit less welcoming: "For thirty years, [Greens] have been fighting to build their party, and they don't have a single solitary seat in Congress. So we don't think that's a pragmatic choice. Hopefully Green voters will support this platform and then our slate."

Green Party leaders say they are committed to building up a strong alternative and, as media coordinator Scott McLarty puts it, "work with progressive Democrats and others to achieve specific goals, for example, living wages and single-payer universal health care."

Andrea Mérida Cuéllar, a Green Party co-chair based in Colorado,

says, "My hope for Sanders supporters is that they finally see that regarding the Democratic Party, the fix is in. It should be crystal clear by now that the way Senator Sanders was handled by the [Democratic National Committee] is par for the course, and the time to join with us Greens to build an autonomous opposition party is now."

As the Bernie spinoff groups join a constellation of movements and parties, the challenge becomes how to build coherent political unity and power. Last June, sandwiched between the final primaries and the

Democratic National Convention, a "People's Summit" in Chicago mobilized more than 3,000 Bernie supporters to seize this political moment of "tremendous turmoil and progressive opportunity." Financed largely by National Nurses

United, with partners ranging from Progressive Democrats of America to Democratic Socialists of America, the summit aimed to deepen movement alliances "rooted in principled anti-corporate politics, development of community leaders, direct action not based on partisan identification, and strategic organizing to build power."

With autonomous nonpartisan movements such as Black Lives Matter, the Fight for \$15, and numerous climate action and economic justice campaigns pushing the political envelope far beyond the voting booth, there is no shortage of radical energy.

It remains to be seen how much of that will be expressed at the ballot box, an inherently limited filter. But Bernie Sanders has helped kick open the door for the next generation of change agents, and his "political revolution" is passing the torch forward. As Bernie stated during the August 24 launch, "Election days come and go, but the struggle for justice continues." ♦