

Meet the Future of the Democratic Party

di Robert Reich

Last Thursday, populist Democratic candidate Graham Platner shook up the Democratic establishment when his primary competitor, Maine Governor Janet Mills, suspended her Senate campaign amid polls showing her badly trailing Platner, an oyster farmer who had come out of nowhere to win a national following.

Platner is the latest example of the rise of anti-establishment outsiders in the Democratic Party — a trend that also includes self-proclaimed democratic socialist Zohran Mamdani, who last year defeated former Gov. Andrew Cuomo for New York City mayor.

Yet the Democratic establishment — corporate Democrats, wealthy Democratic donors, entrenched Washington “centrists,” the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, the Democratic National Committee, and Hakeem Jeffries and Chuck Schumer — still don’t get it.

Hell, the Democratic establishment didn’t get it a decade ago when Hillary Clinton was the presumptive Democratic nominee (and, not incidentally, Jeb Bush was considered a shoe-in for the Republican nomination).

I remember interviewing voters about their political preferences in the late spring of 2015, in the Rust Belt, Midwest, and South, for a book I was then writing. When I asked them whom they wanted for president, they kept telling me Bernie Sanders or Donald Trump. Often the same individuals offered both names. They explained they wanted an “outsider,” someone who would “shake up” the system, ideally a person who wasn’t even a Democrat or a Republican.

The people I met were furious with their employers, with the federal government, and with Wall Street. They were irate that they hadn’t been able to save for their

retirements, indignant that their children weren't doing any better than they had at their children's age, and enraged at those at the top. Several had lost jobs, savings, or homes in the financial crisis or the Great Recession that followed it.

They kept reiterating that the system was “rigged” in favor of the powerful and against themselves. They didn't oppose government per se; most favored additional spending on Social Security, Medicare, education, and roads and bridges. But they hated “crony capitalism” — large corporations using their political clout to gain special favors and changes in laws that often hurt average people.

The following year, Sanders — then a 74-year-old Jew from Vermont who described himself as a democratic socialist and wasn't even a Democrat until the 2016 presidential primaries — came within a whisker of beating Clinton in the Iowa caucus and ended up with 46 percent of the pledged delegates to the Democratic National Convention from primaries and caucuses. Had the DNC not tipped the scales against him by deriding his campaign and rigging its financing in favor of Clinton, Sanders would probably have been the Democratic nominee in 2016.

Trump, then a 69-year-old egomaniacal billionaire reality TV star who had never held elected office or had anything to do with the Republican Party and who lied compulsively about almost everything, of course won the Republican primaries and went on to beat Clinton, one of the most experienced and well-connected politicians in modern America. Granted, he didn't win the popular vote, and he had some help from Vladimir Putin, but he won.

Something very big was happening in America: a full-scale rebellion against the political establishment.

That rebellion continues to this day. Yet much of Washington's Democratic elite is still in denial. They prefer to attribute the rise of Trump and, more broadly, Trumpism — its political paranoia, xenophobia, white Christian nationalism, misogyny, homophobia, and cultural populism — solely to racism. Well, racism is certainly a part of it. But hardly all.

In 2024, Democrats didn't even get to choose their nominee from the primary process, since Biden dropped out after a dreadful debate performance and was replaced by

Kamala Harris — leaving some Democrats feeling like higher powers were picking their nominee.

The anti-establishment groundswell has by now spread to independent voters — who are now a whopping [45 percent](#) of the electorate and have moved sharply against Trump. It's one of the most dramatic shifts in recent political history.

Trump's approval rating among independents now stands at [25 percent](#), while [68 percent](#) of independents disapprove of him. In 2024, independents were evenly divided, with 48 percent voting for Harris and 48 percent for Trump. In 2020, independents favored Biden by 9 percentage points.

The Democratic establishment still doesn't see the groundswell — or is actively fighting it.

In Iowa, whose primary is June 2, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee is quietly backing state Rep. Josh Turek against state Sen. Zach Wahls. That's probably a mistake. Turek is a good candidate, but Wahls is a young, dynamic progressive — similar to Platner in his ability to inspire and rally. (In Iowa, independents who want to vote in the Democratic primary need only declare themselves Democrats by June 2.)

In California, whose primary is also June 2, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee just rejected Randy Villegas as its preferred nominee for the 22nd Congressional District and instead endorsed doctor and assemblywoman Jasmeet Bains. Villegas, known as a strong progressive, has been endorsed by the congressional progressive caucus and the congressional Hispanic caucus's campaign arm. "This is about party leadership and D.C. elites putting their thumb on the scale for who they know will bend the knee to party leadership and corporate interests," Villegas [says](#).

In Arizona, whose primary is July 21, the DCCC has endorsed Marlene Galán-Woods in a Democratic primary to replace Representative David Schweikert, the Republican who is leaving Congress to run for governor. The DCCC rejected Amish Shah, a doctor and former state legislator who won the primary in 2024 and came within a few points of defeating Schweikert. (That year, Ms. Galán-Woods finished third in the primary.) Shah [has been leading Galán-Woods by a 3-to-1 margin in the only public poll of the race](#). Shah says Democrats should stop backing the party apparatus if they want to win the House majority.

In Michigan, whose primary is August 4, the DSCC is backing Rep. Haley Stevens, who's in a tight race against rival Abdul El-Sayed. Also probably a mistake. El-Sayed is another young progressive who's showing a remarkable ability to galvanize Democrats and independents. (Michigan has open primaries in which any voter can participate.)

I could go on, but you get the point.

If Democrats fail to connect with the frustrations of average hardworking Americans and decide instead to side with big corporations and Wall Street, they'll have given up the most crucial opportunity in a generation both to take back control of Congress and to lead the way on a new progressive agenda.

What does this anti-establishment surge — including the remarkable growth of independents and their sharp rejection of Trump — mean for the presidential race in 2028?

For one thing, it suggests that the current presumed Democratic frontrunners — Kamala Harris and Gavin Newsom — are frontrunners only because of their name recognition. As voters find out more about the alternatives, it's unlikely that either of them will make the cut.

For another, it suggests that anti-establishment candidates are the ones to watch.

Obama chief of staff and former Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel told a packed crowd at the Milken Institute Global Conference this week that the biggest challenge both parties have faced over the last quarter-century has been the battle between establishment forces and anti-establishment forces.

Emanuel was correct. But he then went on to suggest, absurdly, that *he's* anti-establishment. Emanuel's cozy ties to corporate America, his closeness to Citadel founder Ken Griffin (who praised Emanuel from Milken's main stage), and even Emanuel's presence at the Milken conference, belie his claim.

But the mere fact that Emanuel thinks it important to *claim* anti-establishment creds underscores that the biggest force in American politics today — and in the Democratic Party — is anti-establishment rage at political insiders.

Despite the Democratic establishment, a younger and more charismatic generation of populist and progressive Democrats is on the way to winning primaries and general election races across America. If Graham Platner beats Republican Senator Susan Collins in Maine, which seems likely, he's the kind of candidate who (in my humble opinion) will be the future of the Democratic Party.