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# WHAT DEMOCRATIC VOTERS LEARNED IN THE PRIMARY

Biden's Next Steps Go Beyond Vice Presidential Choice. He Must Promise Meaningful Structural Reform to the Progressive Movement

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May 2020

The 2020 Democratic primary is over. Among the nearly thirty Democratic contenders for that office, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders and former Vice President Joe Biden arrived in Iowa on the eve of the first, colossally-hectic first caucus as the two “candidates to beat.” Senator Sanders won astounding victories among Democratic caucus-goers and primary voters, including large shares of non-white and older voters who were not previously thought to support him much, in the early states. Vice President Biden gained and never lost a commanding lead just a few days later.

From a historical perspective, Biden and Sanders each entered the race from a strong position. Both arrived at the first debate along with Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren as by far the most-recognized of the twenty-seven candidates then on the ballot. In subsequent polling, Data for Progress and YouGov Blue found both candidates consistently polled strongly against Donald Trump. Historically, “former Vice President” and “runner-up from last time” are excellent positions from which to campaign, with name recognition being a major factor for such.

Data for Progress and YouGov Blue followed Democratic caucus-goers and primary voters over the course of the primary. In a series of surveys,<sup>1</sup> we asked voters how they felt about each candidate in relation to the Democratic Party overall. Of each Democratic candidate, we asked,

*Where would you place each of the following Democratic candidates on this scale?*

*[Candidate]*

*<1> They are roughly in line with the average Democrat*

*<2> They are more conservative than the average Democrat*

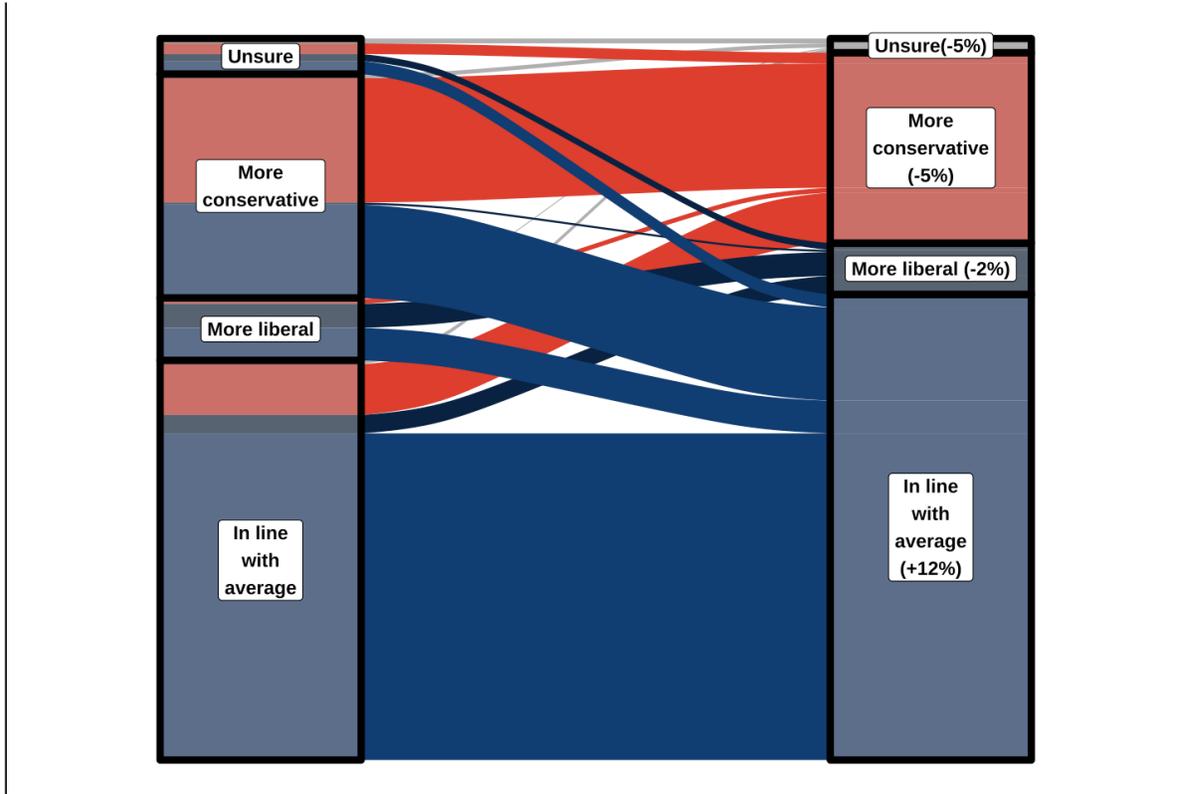
*<3> They are more liberal than the average Democrat*

*<4> Don't know enough about them to say*

In the first wave, fully 52 percent of likely Democratic primary voters and caucus-goers said they thought Joe Biden was in line with the average Democrat. About 10 percent said he was more liberal, and about 31 percent said he was more conservative than the average Democrat. In other words, Joe Biden went into the first debate with a not-inconsiderable share of Democrats expressing outright that he was to the right of the party.

Many of those same Democrats changed their minds by Iowa. By then, 64 percent of Democrats thought Biden was about in line with the typical Democrat, with 5 percent fewer saying he was more conservative and 2 percent fewer saying he was more liberal. Between the start of the primary and Iowa, fully 1 in 8 Democrats shifted their beliefs toward Biden as a representative choice for Democrats rather than one who would be too left or too right for the party, on top of the roughly half of voters who already said he was in line with Democrats. Each of these results come from the Democrats, i.e., voters who were surveyed both around the first debate and right before Iowa.

## Voters came to view Biden as more typical of Democrats, not as more conservative

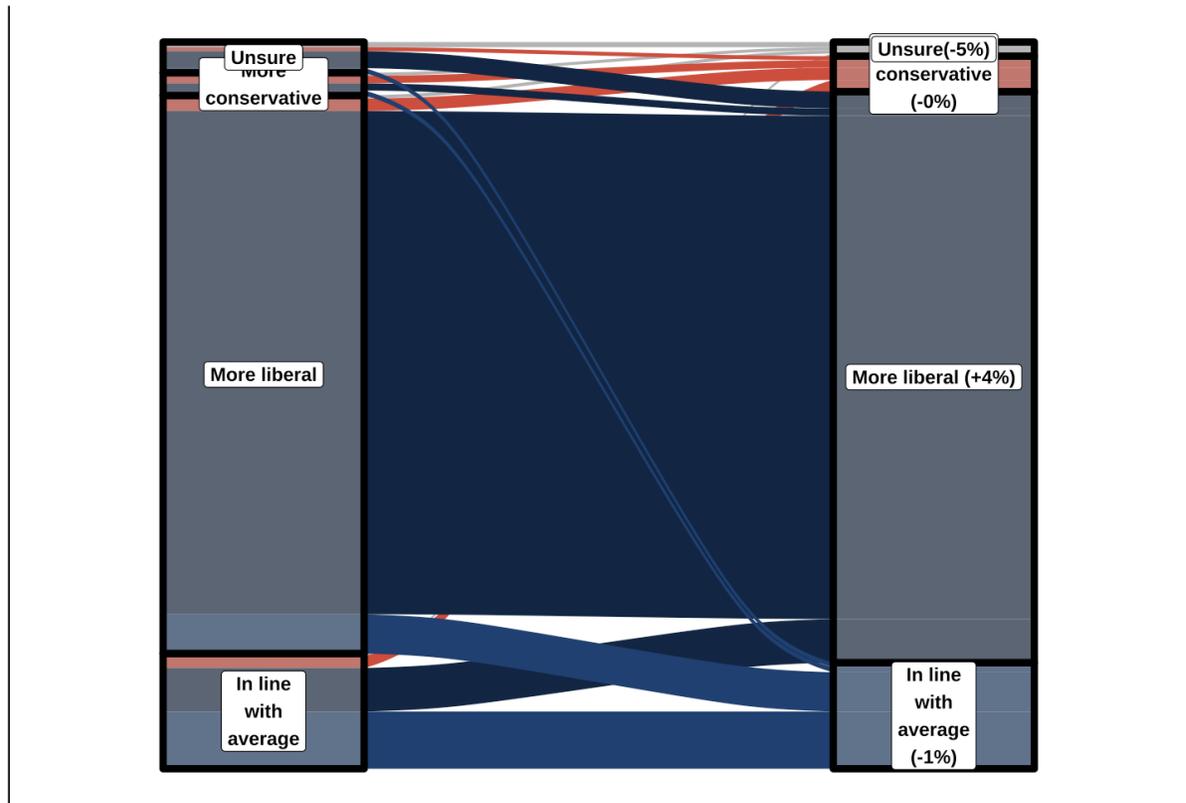


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In contrast, voters viewed Bernie Sanders as to the left of the party from the outset. Fully 73 percent of Democratic voters placed Bernie to the left of the party by the first debate. About 78 percent placed him to the left of the party by Iowa. The share of voters who thought of him as a typical Democrat was unchanged, with that movement coming from the small shares of voters who were unsure.

Over the course of the primary, Senator Sanders did not shake the image that he was to the left of the party. Among the small share who came to view him as more typical of the Democratic Party, they were more likely to come from the wing that viewed him as “too liberal” to begin with than from those who were unsure how they felt or who viewed him as too conservative. Whatever one chooses to make of it, likely Democratic voters did not arrive at the ballot box with the belief that Bernie Sanders was typical of Democrats.

## In Contrast, Voters Knew Sanders Was An Outsider From the first debate to Iowa



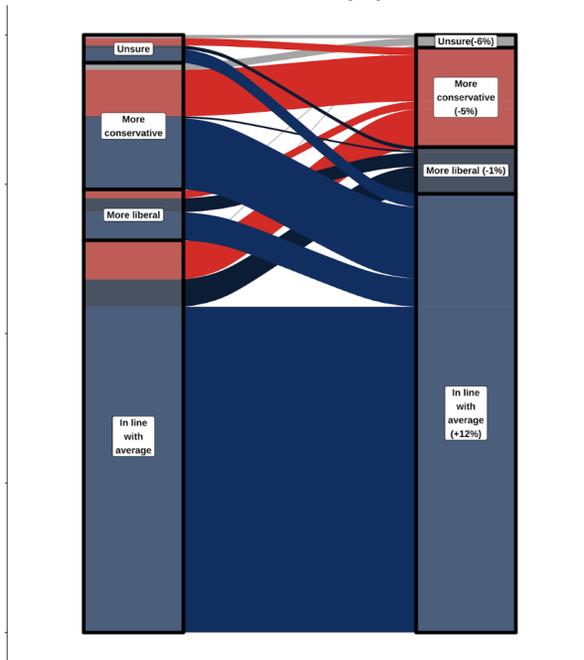
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Notably, movement in Biden’s favor was felt equally strongly among ideological liberals and moderates. Democratic voters who identified as “moderate” and as “very liberal” both moved in favor of the belief Biden was “in line with the average Democrat” by the same margin.

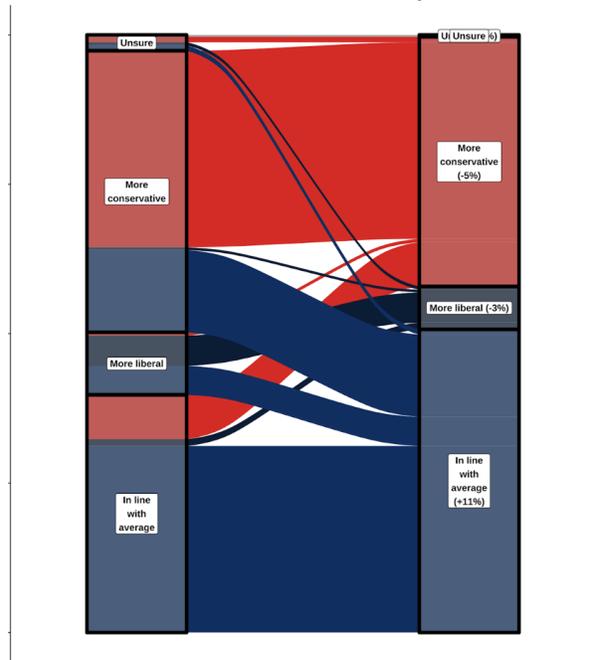
Even accounting for this, Democratic primary voters who identified as “very liberal” remained

skeptical of Biden. By the night of the Iowa caucus, fully 42 percent of “very liberal” Democratic voters remained concerned Joe Biden was too conservative for the party. This is down from the 47 percent of those same very liberal Democratic voters who thought he was too conservative at the beginning of the primary, but remained a significant hurdle for the presumptive nominee to clear.

**Voters who identified as ideologically moderate look similar to the population overall...**



**...Ideological 'Very liberals' moved too but remain skeptical**



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At the same time, voters’ self-reported ideological preferences did not change. In other words, while voters may have moved on whether or not certain candidates were to the left or right of the typical Democrat, they did not really change their own beliefs, as we might expect voters to when motivated by their preferred candidate. In addition to asking voters about their ideological preferences, we asked them about labels they might subscribe to. That item asked,

*Which of the following words apply to you?  
Check all that apply.*

- <1> Moderate
- <2> Liberal
- <3> Progressive
- <4> Socialist
- <5> None of these

Overall, by the second wave of the survey, about 25 percent identified as ideological moderates, 37 percent as liberals, 25 percent as progressives, 10 percent as socialists, and just 3 percent as none of these.

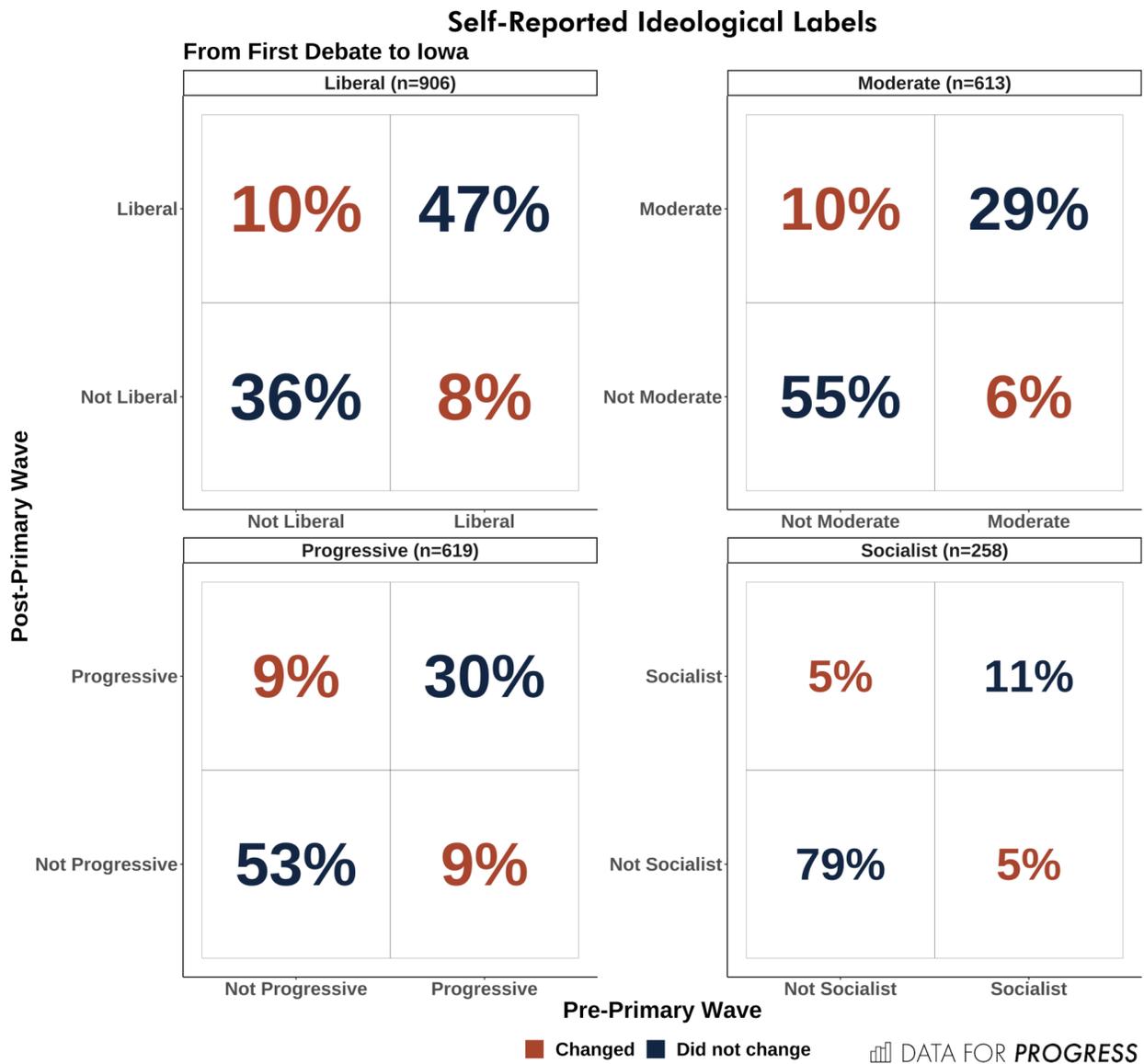
Those quantities were pretty stable over the course of the primary. From the first debate through Iowa, fewer than 20 percent of voters in any ideological category changed their ideological label.

In other words, while voters changed their opinion of Vice President Biden, this did not appear to be driven by updating their beliefs on a candidate’s behalf. While views of how appropriate Biden might be for the party overall clearly moved in his favor over the course of the primary, voters’ self-placement did not. Fewer than 1 in 5 voters changed their ideological label over the course of the primary, regardless of which label they started with, and no group clearly moved in favor of an ideological label that would “benefit” a more moderate candidate.

The following table shows how Democratic voters moved overall from the first debate through Iowa. Each table shows whether voters held the same ideological label between the first debate and Iowa. The text in each table is bigger or smaller depending on whether more or fewer voters reported holding that ideological label. Regardless of how many voters chose one label or the other, across the full sample, the share of voters who selected each ideological category was stable from the first debate through Iowa.

Similarly, voters who supported either of the eventual front-runners have similar views of how political change will proceed in America. We asked,

*Let's say a Democrat is elected as president in 2020. Even if it's not exactly right, which of these strategies do you think would be most effective for them to get things done as president?*



<1> Make it easier to pass Democratic policies without Republican support by requiring a simple majority vote in the Senate to pass legislation, instead of the current 60 vote threshold required for most legislation

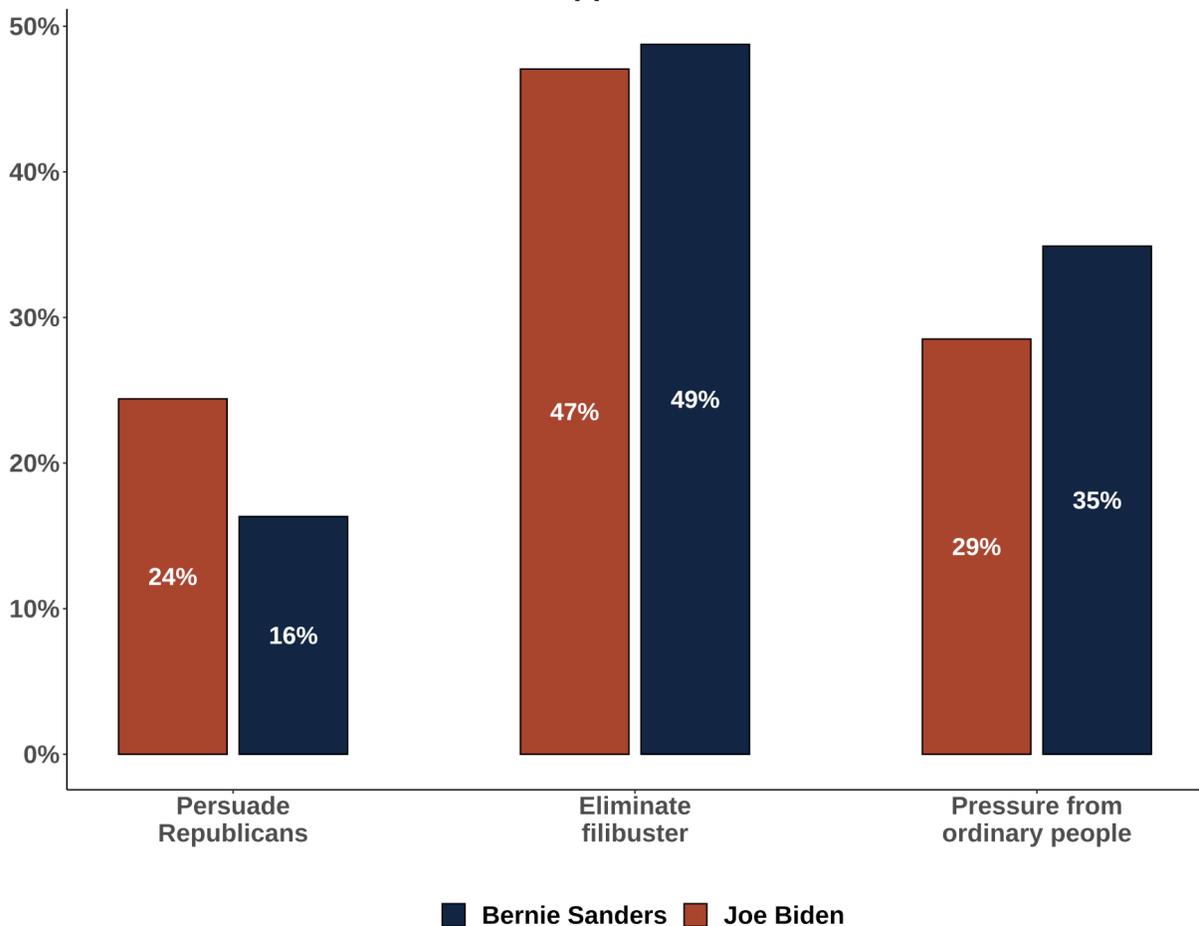
<2> Use pressure from ordinary people to convince Republicans to support Democratic policies

<3> Persuade Republicans that Trump's loss means that it is in their best interest to support Democratic policies

Perhaps surprisingly, supporters of Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden feel similarly about this question. Large pluralities among both candidates support eliminating the filibuster as the optimal strategy for policy change. Slightly more Sanders supporters advocate for the “pressure from ordinary people” strategy. Slightly more Biden supporters advocate for the “persuade Republicans” approach.

Among supporters of either candidate, persuading Republicans is the least preferred strategy. Both candidates’ supporters understand the need to eliminate the filibuster. Though there are clear

### Preferred Political Strategy Bernie Sanders and Joe Biden Supporters



Let's say a Democrat is elected as president in 2020. Even if it's not exactly right, which of these strategies do you think would be most effective for them to get things done as president?

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ideological differences in how supporters of each candidate view themselves, there is little disagreement that changes to existing institutions are necessary to advance the progressive agenda.

About 47 percent of Biden supporters and 49 percent of Sanders supporters prefer ending the filibuster as a means of advancing Democratic policies. About 29 percent of Biden voters and 35 percent of Sanders voters believe that protests against those in power will help bring policy change. Just 24 percent of Biden voters and 16 percent of Sanders voters believe that persuading Republicans to join their side is an effective path forward.

Voters from each wing of the party are ready to make serious structural reforms in order to pass the next President's agenda.

Now that Biden is the nominee, it is crucial to understand how to avoid defection among voters who supported another candidate. We asked voters to explain what they would do if their least preferred candidate won the nomination. Specifically, we asked,

*And if [your last choice] were the Democratic nominee, in the general election for President in November 2020, would you...*

*Vote for [your last choice]*

*Vote for Donald Trump*

*Vote for a minor party candidate*

*Not vote*

*Not sure*

Among the 21 percent of Democratic voters who supported Sanders on the eve of the Iowa Caucus (n=334), about 45 percent reported they might defect in the event of a Biden nomination, either

toward Trump, a third party, or toward staying home.

To better understand what motivates Sanders voters to defect against the likely nominee, we modeled Democratic defection against Biden by Sanders supporters as a function of demographic, political, and policy variables. Here, "defection" is measured as a zero for Sanders supporters who report they will vote for the Democratic nominee, and as a one for Sanders supporters who report they will stay home, vote for a third party, or vote for Trump in November.

We included variables representing whether the voter lived in an urban, suburban, or rural area; whether the voter supported Medicare for All; the voters' self-reported ideological placement; whether the voter held more left-leaning views on immigration or not; whether the voter held more left-leaning views on climate change or not; voters' ethnicity, household, income, sex, education, and their age.

Additionally, we asked voters several policy questions related to the central debates that took place over the course of the primary. These included items on climate change and on immigration. Each of these items included options that could broadly be defined as "centrist," "left," or "far left," options. For example, the immigration item asked voters if they would prefer a pathway to citizenship and allowing more refugees into the country, a pathway to citizenship but without allowing more refugees into the country, or if they would prefer not providing a pathway to citizenship.

Specifically, to determine their views on immigration, we asked voters in the second wave,

*Even if it's not exactly right, which of the following would you prefer to deal with the issue of immigration?*

<1> We should provide a pathway to citizenship for immigrants currently in the country without documentation and allow significantly more refugees and immigrants to enter the country and become a citizen through an easier process than now (44%)

<2> We should provide a pathway to citizenship for immigrants currently in the country without documentation but we shouldn't significantly increase the number of people coming into the country (39%)

<3> We should not provide a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people (9%)

<4> Not sure (8%)

And considered the “most left” position to be those who responded with the first choice.

To determine their views on climate, we asked voters in the second wave,

*Even if it's not exactly right, which of the following would you prefer to deal with the issue of climate change?*

<1> We should commit to a ten-year investment in a Green New Deal, providing new jobs creating clean infrastructure and investing in the technologies that will reduce our carbon output and reliance on coal and fossil fuels (62%)

<2> We should impose a tax on carbon and provide a limited number of carbon licenses, limiting new carbon output while gradually increasing its price until clean alternatives are more economical (15%)

<3> We should let the government take full responsibility for America's energy economy, granting it control of American energy facilities so that we can quickly steer the economy away from the coming climate catastrophe (9%)

<4> Not sure (14%)

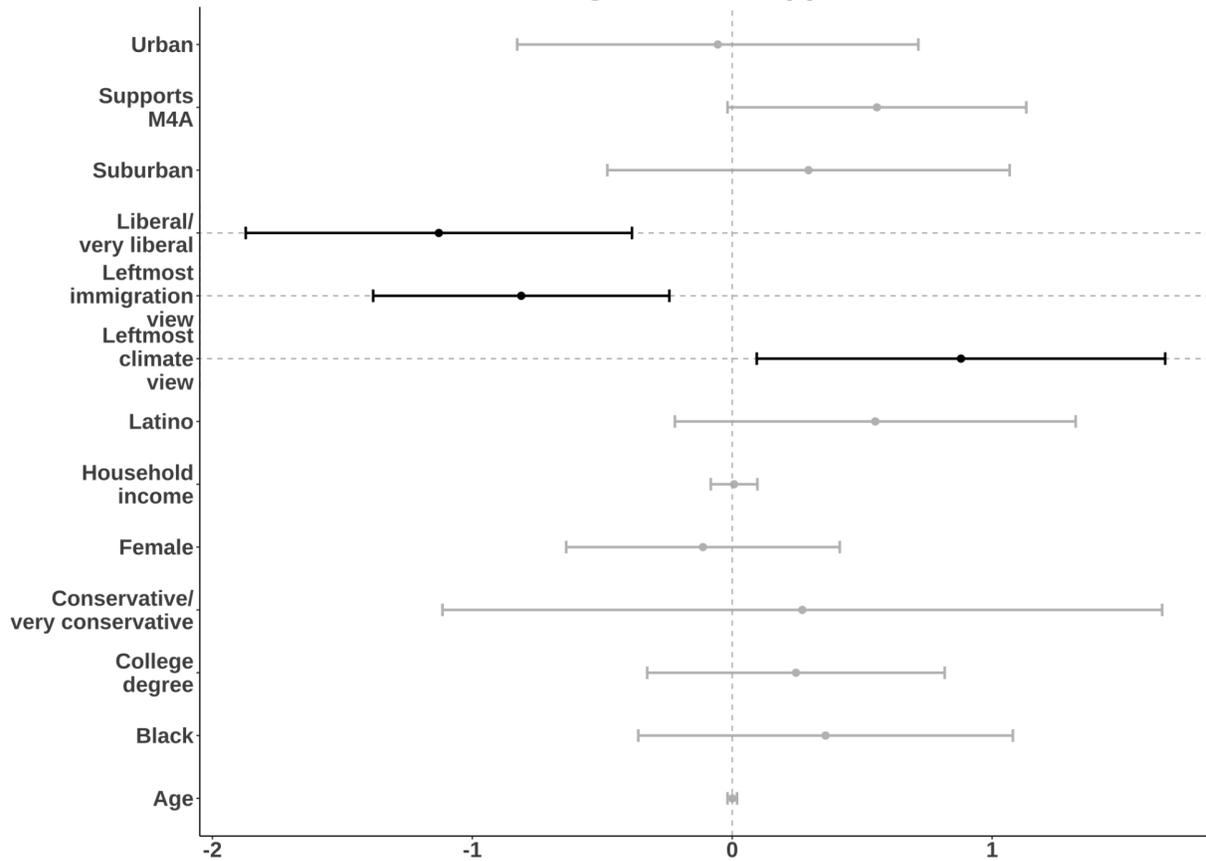
And the following chart shows the results of this model, with defection probability as the dependent variable. In this chart, each point represents standardized regression coefficients for each of these variables. The lines centered around each point represent two standard errors of the estimates, suggesting that estimates whose standard errors do not cross zero are indeed statistically significant predictors of defecting away from Biden in the event he is the nominee.

Notably, while demographic factors do not do much to predict whether a Sanders voter reported they would defect from the Democrats if Biden were the nominee, certain policy attitudes do. Sanders voters who hold the leftmost view on climate change, for example, are more likely to defect from the Democrats in the event of a Biden nomination to a statistically significant degree. In [an extensive policy analysis](#), Data for Progress found that Senator Sanders's climate plan was extraordinarily comprehensive, while Vice President Biden's at that time was not.

On the other hand, Sanders voters who held the leftmost view on immigration were significantly less likely to report they would defect from Democrats if Biden were the nominee. Regardless of their candidate preferences, voters who prioritize progressive immigration policy understand the uniquely dire status quo on this issue caused by the Republican Party. Trump is defined by his racist views towards immigrants, and has spent his entire adult life placing himself at the rightmost position on this issue. It is not surprising that voters who give immigration particularly high priority are less likely to support a Democrat in November.

While voters overall came to view Biden as more of a typical Democrat, these results suggest that voters who support Sanders are more likely to defect from Biden to someone else if those voters

### Predictors of defection against Dem nominee among Sanders supporters



Voters who support Sanders in horserace and report they will not vote Dem if their least preferred candidate is nominee

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hold strong left positions on climate and the environment. At the same time, holding strong left positions on immigration is a predictor of voting for the Democrat rather than defect in such a case. A mechanism behind this may include their self-perceived differences from Biden’s own preferences.

In other words, the voters most at risk of defecting from Sanders toward staying home, voting for a third party, or voting for Trump need to hear more about Biden’s views on *both* climate change and immigration. The reason for this is that the “most left” position on immigration is

clearly beneficial to Biden among potentially skeptical Democrats, while those who hold the “most left” position on the environment are the most skeptical of Biden among current Sanders supporters.

Vice President Biden successfully showed he was a typical Democrat over the course of this primary. Voters did not change their own views much in response, and clearly showed an increased affinity for a Biden candidacy on that basis. At the same time, Biden’s stance on the environment works to his deficit, while his immigration stance works to his benefit among these voters.

## ENDNOTE

1. In this series of surveys, the first included 2,953 interviews conducted from June 24th to July 2nd, 2019 by YouGov on the internet of registered voters likely to vote in the Democratic presidential primary in 2020. A sample of 2,953 interviews of self-identified registered voters was selected to be representative of registered voters and weighted according to gender, age, race, education, region, and past presidential vote based on registered voters in the November 2016 Current Population Survey, conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census. The sample was then subsetted to only look at respondents who reported they were likely to vote in their state's Democratic primary or caucus. The second wave included 1,619 interviews based on recontacting respondents participating in the first wave (a 55% recontact rate). Respondents participated in the second wave from January 18th to January 27th, 2020.

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