



# The Democrats: A Critical History

*Lance Selfa*

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"Worthy reading for anyone who is interested in social change."--*MediaMouse.org*

"The Democrats is at its best not just when analyzing Democratic foibles — and there are plenty — but when assessing how the party stifles dissent.... Lance Selfa has crafted a smart, readable history of the Democrats that reminds us of the party's allegiance to capital."

—Eleanor J. Bader, *The Independent*

"If you've ever wondered where the democracy is in the Democratic Party and why US elections rarely seem to change anything, this book will explain the where and the why. Providing readers with the history of the Democrats from its genesis as the party of the slaveholders to the neoliberal DLC, author Selfa describes the Democrats' role in diverting Americans' desire for change."

—Ron Jacobs

Offering a broad historical perspective, Selfa shows how the Democratic Party has time and again betrayed the aspirations of ordinary people while pursuing an agenda favorable to Wall Street and U.S. imperial ambitions.

He examines the relationship between party leaders and social movements, from the civil rights struggle to the movement to end the Iraq war; reveals the unhappy marriage between U.S. labor and the “party of the people;” and assesses the mixed record of attempts to build a third party alternative.

Further, Selfa argues that the Democrats' record of backing the rich and breaking promises to its voting base is not a recent departure from an otherwise laudable past, but results from its role as one of two parties serving the interests of the U.S. establishment.

## The Democrats: A Critical History Details

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## From Reader Review The Democrats: A Critical History for online ebook

### Ben Williams says

We often hear cries that we (progressives and leftists) need to "reclaim" the Democratic Party, this book DEMOLISHES that argument! In order to reclaim something you must first have possession of it, removing the illusion that the Democratic Party was the "party of the people" and has merely and temporarily lost its way, is the first task of this book. Selfa traces the development of the party from its not so humble origins as the party of the slave-owning elite, through the concessions Roosevelt made in the New Deal to unionists, to Vietnam, the Cold War consensus, Clinton and the New Democrats, all the up to the present administration of Obama. Each step of the way he clearly and concisely paints the Democratic Party in its true colors, a party of the ruling class. He analyzes failed attempts to "move the Dems left" and shows how in fact all that happened was the Democrats pulled progressives right. Above all else Mr. Selfa never loses sight of the purpose of his book, not to analyze the politics of the Dems in an academic or abstract form, but to propose and defend a strategy of revolutionary change, i.e. an independent movement of the working class to fight for a better world. With the Democratic Party certainly existing as the primary stopgap to that goal, anyone who has even an inkling of desire for social change owes it to themselves to read this book ASAP!

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### Randall Wallace says

"After 1824, the Democratic-Republican Party became simply known as the Democrats. Its core was the Southern slaveholding aristocracy that Jefferson and Madison embodied." "The ten-hour day for workers, extension of the vote to the proletariat, attacks upon the factory system and other such agitations of the Jacksonian period, represented no direct economic threat to the planters. During the Jacksonian period the planters put on their best democratic garb... in the North." So, the early Democratic Party a little bit about equality ...but for whites only. Democrats controlled the Supreme Court during the 1857 super racist Dred Scott verdict. If you liked slavery, you voted Democrat. "Until 1936 the party's 'two-thirds' majority rule for voting guaranteed that these reactionary Jim Crow forces held virtual veto power over the party's presidential nominee." The guarding of 'state's rights' was a euphemism for keeping Jim Crow and racism alive. We got out of the Depression because the US spent more between 1940 to 1945 than it did in the past 150 years combined. And for 10 American companies, WWII armament was a massive welfare project that made them all rich while making the killing industry as American as apple pie.

Democrat Truman brings us Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Defense Department, the CIA, the entire Cold War, and the "permanent arms economy". What a douchebag. Lance says Truman's 'Fair Deal' was deliberately calculated to steal thunder from Henry Wallace." Truman vetoes Taft-Hartley to steal more thunder from Wallace, knowing his own veto will be overridden. Labor's 'friend', Truman, then "invoked the Taft-Hartley Act to break strikes twelve times in the first year of his second term." So, Democrats say one thing (veto T-H) but do another (invoke T-H 12 times). If Henry Wallace had become President instead of Truman, many historians believe there would have been no Cold War. In the 50's, LBJ was hard at work soothing Southern racists, while Hubert Humphrey was proposing that America "round up American communists and place them in concentration camps." Wow? What role models those Democrats were/are!

In the 60's, Robert Kennedy denounced the Freedom Riders! He actually said they were "good propaganda for America's enemies." In '68, the Democrats were split over Vietnam. Republican Nixon wins and becomes what Noam Chomsky refers to as the "last liberal American President". Notice a Republican, not a democrat, gets that honor. Bruce Babbitt and Richard Gephardt, realizing they hadn't sold out enough yet,

and create the DLC in order to “promote more conservative Democratic candidates and policies.” Clinton becomes “the most business-friendly Democratic president since Grover Cleveland”. Clinton signs the 1996 welfare repeal bill, to broadcast clearly to the world what he really thinks of poor people, black people, as well as the New Deal. We worry Trump is decreasing government responsibility to meet human needs? Yeah, well that is exactly What Clinton/Gore did – and don’t forgot the signing of the 1994 Omnibus Crime Control Act – what a gift to Black America and the prison industry that was! “Abandoning the notion of government action to correct racial injustice was central to New Democrat politics from the start.” The Democratic leadership refused to change defining crack cocaine so as to discriminate overwhelmingly against blacks, and pushed the Congressional Black Caucus to drop from the 1994 Crime Bill a “Racial Justice Act”. In the end, the Republicans could never have ended welfare but Clinton, by selling out his base, could and did. Alan Greenspan said Clinton was “the best Republican president we’ve had in a while.”

Obama was big on lots of empty progressive rhetoric cloaking a diehard sold-out centrist. Who knew his foreign policy would be hawkish? Obama actually said, “I have enormous sympathy for the foreign policy of George H.W. Bush. I don’t have a lot of regrets about their handling of Desert Storm.” So, Obama has enormous sympathy for those who commit war crimes including the sadist Highway of Death massacre? Wow. Lance says, “Obama did virtually nothing for black America.” He increased punishment for drugs and decreased funding for drug treatment. To add further insult, Obama told the Congressional Black Caucus, “Stop complaining, stop grumbling, stop crying.” Obama deported more people than Bush did. Kevin Baker compares Obama not to FDR but Herbert Hoover because of Obama’s woody for “business liberalism”. Kevin brilliantly says Obama “espouses a ‘pragmatism’ that is not really pragmatism at all, just surrender to the usual corporate interests.”

The Democratic Party doesn’t try to represent the cool groups, it wants to “corral them and to ensure they don’t strike out on an independent political path.” The leaders of United for Peace and Justice were doing hip anti-war work but then sold out to the Democrats by endorsing 2008 candidates who clearly weren’t anti-war. The death of the anti-war movement during 2007 and 2009 is attributed by Lance to the selling out of the UNPJ to the Democrats. “The Democratic Party expects movement leaders to rein in their movements, thereby undercutting the potential for struggle from below.” “The party leaders do not want street demonstrations; the rabble are not to get involved.” The Democratic party’s top energies go to keeping “a genuine mass opposition from developing.” Sheldon Wolin said, “By ignoring dissent and by assuming that the dissenters have no alternative, the party serves an important, if ironical, stabilizing function and in effect marginalizes any possible threat to the corporate allies of the Republicans.” Pat Moynihan said, “It doesn’t matter so much who wins. The important thing is the legitimacy of the system.” To hell with the crazy Republican Party, let’s just look at wars started by Democrats! WWI, WWII, Korea, Vietnam - Democrats have a LONG history of believing the same crazy ‘let’s have another war based on manufactured fear’ crap that we THINK only Republicans do.

During the Gore/Bush campaign, both parties agreed to keep East Timor and Indonesia off the table – why expose to the people that BOTH parties enjoyed committing war crimes in secret?

Democrat and known racist Woodrow Wilson sends the Marines to Mexico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Panama, Honduras and Guatemala. And then, he forces the U.S. into WWI, which he promised not to do, and then because he hadn’t been a liberal asshole enough already imprisoned anyone who complained in private about it. Here’s a great quote by Democrat Woodrow Wilson, “Colonies must be obtained or planted, in order that no useful corner of the world may be overlooked or left unused.” This isn’t a Republican talking. This isn’t Trump talking. This is a Democratic President who (aside from Debs, Jane Addams, and Bourne) got a total free pass from the sold-out intelligentsia. Wilson wanted War when Republicans wanted isolationism. Republicans during Wilson’s time thought you should only fight for the “military defense of U.S. territory and should eschew overseas intervention.” In other words, back then they were to the freakin’ Left of the Democrats! Wow, and don’t forget, “Democratic administrations were the architects of the Cold War national security state and the policy of containment towards the USSR”. FDR drew Japan into firing

the first shot by cutting off “supplies of oil, iron, and aircraft fuel to Japan”. The Pacific War was only a matter of time. The Korean War started by Democrats solved nothing! It redrew a partition line, big deal.

The 1964 Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave Johnson a blank check to kill Vietnamese, but did you know Johnson wrote it well before and waited for the right time to spring it? In late 1963 LBJ told the Joint Chiefs of Staff: “Just get me elected and then you can have your war.” Clearly, LBJ had no moral qualms about defoliating jungles and crops with Agent Orange and Napalm and killing Asians for the crime of wanting to fight their own Civil War w/o foreign interference. In fact, many have noted that LBJ actually carried out Goldwater’s policy. Democrat Carter reinstated the draft in 1979; let’s thank him for that. Clinton “sent U.S. armed forces into combat situations forty-six times. This compared to only twenty-six times for Presidents Ford (4), Carter (1), Reagan (14) and H.W. Bush (7) combined.” Clinton was a Democrat and a war criminal but it’s all O.K. because he was charming (just like Democratic war criminal Obama). “The power of the U.S. Presidency is cumulative. Once one chief executive seizes power for himself, his predecessors will not give it up willingly. What liberals and Democrats considered to be heinous and extreme policies when Bush enacted them became, with Obama’s help, part of the bipartisan consensus of American Foreign Policy.” As Der Spiegel wrote, “Today, Obama’s CIA no longer carries out kidnappings – it carries out killings. This means that the CIA can assume a military role and wage a war unconstrained by international law or the laws of war. Obama’s CIA decides who lives and who dies.”

Dukakis’s running mate Lloyd Bentsen was a nasty supporter of the sadistic Contras, all things military, the death penalty, mandatory school prayer, denial of funds for abortion, and mandatory AIDS testing - by this point in Lance’s book, I’ve learned, quite a few of the most odious American people in politics in the past 75 years have been Democrats. Lance traces the death of the anti-war movement to 2004 when “most of its leaders buried themselves in Kerry’s election campaign.” Howard Zinn said it best, “The critical thing isn’t who is sitting in the White House, but who is sitting in the streets, in the cafeterias, in the halls of government, in the factories. Who is protesting, who is occupying offices and demonstrate – those are the things that determine what happens.” In conclusion, regarding the Democratic mantra for ‘voting for the lesser evil’, remember that Germans voted against Hitler and for Hindenburg, but then Hindenburg gave Hitler the chancellorship. Just so, giving power to the Democrats can (by their constant collusion with Republicans) end up only adding more power to the Republicans as the Race to the Right continues towards economic collapse, peak oil, resource depletion, climate change and, of course, extinction.

I agree with Robert W. McChesney, this book “debunks the notion that the Democratic Party is a progressive force.” Noam often says, if you stop focusing easily on the obviously bad Republicans, and look closely at the history what Democrats have done, it’s scary. This is one of the most empowering and important books every American could ever read. Wow...

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## Jessica says

Much of this book wasn't completely new or eye-opening to me, and even though I gained (or remembered) some interesting historical perspectives, it took me almost two months to read because I never felt drawn to work on it. (Definitely felt more like homework than I usually like to read in my free time.) The book firmly outlined the many flaws of the Democratic party, and also the especially-flawed two party system, such as just how many commonalities the Democrats and Republicans really share. Selfa discusses in depth how our choices between the "lesser of two evils" really doesn't help the progressive agenda, and he makes strong arguments for our country's need for a viable, third party option, discussing how many attempts in the past have failed. While this may all be true, he didn't particularly share any solutions to this problem that has existed for basically as long as the United States, so I finished the book feeling pretty pessimistic about

government in general.

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## Camille McCarthy says

This is a whole book of reasons why I will never vote for a Democratic candidate for president and I will certainly never waste time, energy or money campaigning for them. If I had read this book earlier I would have known the outcome of this year's disastrous election before any of it happened. Lance Selfa uses overwhelming historical evidence to show why the "party of the people" does not and will not act in the interests of the people, being as it is one of the two capitalist parties, whose funding comes from corporations which then control the candidates. The Democratic Party serves as a way of quelling any leftist opposition to the two-party system by co-opting populist ideas, absorbing activists and voters who promote populist ideas like an amoeba, and then shredding their voters' platforms in an effort to appeal to the conservative right. It's no wonder that the Democrats have been leaning further and further right, as they are so adept at destroying any left-leaning movements which might threaten them and therefore they are almost assured of any "progressive" votes. They use left-leaning organizations such as the Sierra Club to maintain a wide voter base and to get out the vote through volunteers but once they have been elected they serve only their corporate interests which are bankrolling them.

This book goes into depth about the strategy of "lesser-evilism," the pitfalls of "changing the Democratic party from within," and the notion that the Democrats are somehow the "party of the people" when in reality they have rarely acted as such. It will destroy many misconceptions you have about the party. I recommend it especially to those who would like to feel more resolve regarding their opposition to this party. It also gives a different historical perspective than one would learn in school or through mainstream sources. It is well laid out and very persuasive, though at times I felt like the barrage of facts was too intense to be effective. A great book to start off the year.

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## Nicky says

A decently extensive polemic on the history of the Democratic Party as the "world's second most enthusiastic party of capital." Selfa certainly builds a convincing case that, historically, the Democratic Party has been the graveyard of social movements and that it has never been a member- or base-serving political party, but rather something of a patronage network with policies largely directed by a somewhat fluid network of capitalists. (Selfa makes some interesting points about how the alliances of capitalists that support the Democrats vs the Republicans often shift over time dependent on the main methods of value extraction, whether they are more dependent on direct acquisition of the surplus value of workers or have more technical capital inputs or are instead mercantile/finance capital).

The part about the "graveyard of social movements" strikes me as unflinchingly true. For Selfa, it's not a simple "both sides are the same" characterization - one that is often assumed of critics of the two-party system in the U.S. - rather, he points out the structural constraints and ideological convictions that limit the Democrats from doing anything that violates the reproduction of the capitalist system to which they owe their survival. We see the failure of social movements to break free of the Democrats' grip, whether it's the Farmer-Labor Party or the Populists or the militant CIO unions or the Civil Rights movement or the Black Power movement or Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition or the anti-Iraq-War movement.

Written just before Obama ended up becoming president, there are some pretty prescient observations here re: the "lesser evil" common commitment to economic austerity, pandering to but not serving oppressed

groups, and ultimately the rightward drift of "lesser evil" politics. I'm not gonna say he predicted Trump and the rehabilitation of all those against him, like George W. Bush - but he certainly gestures toward it.

Aside from some unhelpfully assumed background knowledge, a need for a second edition covering 2008-2018, and a downright dubious/Serbian-apologist characterization of U.S. intervention in the Balkans in the 90s, it's recommended by me. An easy enough read, if nothing at all else.

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### **J.P. says**

Excellent book. Anyone on the left or anyone feeling themselves leaning to the left on the political spectrum, should read this. We all know conservatives are garbage & where they stand. Liberals seem to complicate things for everyone. It's a thorough examination of the institution that is the Democratic Party in the United States & why blindly tying ourselves to the other pro-capital party in the U.S. is an abdication of power & betrayal of the strength & results of actions that come from leftist mass movements & struggle.

My only gripe is from something said in an Article from Hal Draper which makes up the appendix of this book. He claims that he isn't saying the two parties are the same. I will say that actions matter more than words, so I would say that the difference between liberals or centrists posing as liberals & conservatives is the same as that of a distant god that doesn't act & no god at all, the effects are the same, which is to say, there is no difference.

Excellent read.

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### **C says**

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/drap...>

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### **Mark says**

Through an examination of the words and actions of the leaders of the Democratic Party going back to the Spanish-American War ("the birth of American imperialism") and with a lengthy discussion on the New Deal ("salvaging the capitalist system...by ensuring that the system would not be forced to concede more than was absolutely necessary to contain the class struggle"), Selfa generates a tension for anyone who believes the party is concerned with the ability for the working class to build strength and advocate for their interests, whether at home or abroad.

On foreign policy, Kissinger said in 1970 that "I don't see why we need to stand by and watch a country go communist due to the irresponsibility of its people. The issues are much too important for the Chilean voters to be left to decide for themselves."

But Woodrow Wilson wrote in 1907 as a Princeton economist that "Since trade ignores national boundaries, and the manufacturer insists on having the world as a market, the flag of his nation must follow him, and the doors of the nations which are closed against him must be battered down. Concessions obtained by financiers must be safeguarded by ministers of state, even if the sovereignty of unwilling nations be outraged in the process." Selfa referred to Wilson as the first Democratic president to "put a stamp on empire," though he's more popularly known as declaring that our actions were designed to "make the world safe for democracy."

The actions of the Democratic Party since that time have reflected this willingness to serve capital rather than democracy. Which leader will be the first to draw a line in the sand against imperialism?

Chapters 7 and 8 are especially revealing, and I'd encourage you to skip ahead to them if you find the slog of repeated incidents of party co-opting activist momentum dreary; the last chapters cover the history of the past century of attempts by the Left to remake the party. The Progressive Democrats of America and the Democratic Socialists of America are the most recent salient examples. The conclusion Selfa arrives at is that "there is no substitute for slow work of building movements on the ground, and of building a political alternative to the Democrats." However, I urge all who are invested in this to be fully aware of the difficulties of our voting system: <https://ncase.me/ballot/>

Selfa laments the "Hobson's choice of one pro-business party that pretends to represent the interests of working people and another pro-business party that doesn't even bother to pretend." My main criticism is that in his lament, he offers little optimism that any political alternative will meet with better results than those which have been tried in the past. But that is left as an exercise to the reader. To me, there's hope in the DSA: <https://dsausa.org>

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### **Vaughn Zeller says**

Anyone who wants to understand how we Democrats have been bamboozled, need only read Selfa's book. I was searching for an explanation as to why the party I thought represented the working class seemed to have abandoned it. Even its best efforts at championing common people's interests always appeared halfhearted and disingenuous. This book explains in great detail how my belief, as was that of many others, was always based upon an illusion. As the other property party, the best the Democrats offered was a curb on the worst excesses of capitalism. When challenges to the rule by the elites was challenged through populists, progressives, labor, etc., the Democrats were waiting in the wings to undermine these efforts at creating a more egalitarian society.

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### **David M says**

What is to be done with the Democrats?

This book makes a solid case that the Democratic Party has been the graveyard for progressive social movements in the US and that the left needs to stop poring its energy into that death machine. Selfa's account ends with Obama's reelection in 2012. Obviously a lot has changed since then. Scanning the index, one finds not a single entry for Sanders.

My guess is Selfa would say Bernie's defeat was yet another case confirming his overall thesis. Others on the left might argue differently; that, especially after the general election catastrophe, the establishment, capitalist wing of the Party is in a historically vulnerable position. That it might even be ripe for takeover to become an actual left-wing party responsive to the needs of the people.

Regardless of where comrades come down on this issue, they'll find a lot of useful information in these pages. Any honest discussion has to start by being clear about whose interests the Democrats represent.

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## Mike says

The predominant sensation while reading *The Democrats: A Critical History* is a simple "I wish I'd read this in 2012." Reading this in the aftermath of the 2016 election is akin to watching the majority of Nostradamus's prophecies come to fruition within a decade of his passing. For not having read *Democracy in America*, I can well imagine that readers of de Tocqueville probably encountered - and have encountered - this sensation of bittersweet prophecy fulfillment about a thousand times a year. After reading about how the Democrats handled Dennis Kucinich and the Green Party in the 2004 election - and still failed - or how it handled Upton Sinclair in California - and still failed - and seeing how they handled Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition - and failed - and juxtaposing that against how the Democrats handled Sanders supporters - and still failed - is frustrating, but emboldening insofar as we can always rely on how history rhymes with itself. I can think of so many people who would read this joyously and with such invigorating recognition.

The read is entertaining and cathartic especially for progressives like myself, and it also illuminates some very biting existential revelations about the Republican Party's virtual dependence on the Democrats for its ability to absorb legitimate grassroots movements, co-opting them, and turning them into oft-ignored caucuses and constituencies. Even though one must maintain a certain distant eye about the possibility of cherry-picked examples, well: even if this is painting a selective picture, the conclusions drawn are still incriminating. The author does an excellent job of not sensationalizing his own point; rather, he still keeps his perspective grounded in the argument that the Democrats are very similarly pro-capitalist to the Republicans, and then expands from there by debunking the myths that the Democrats are weaker leaders in times of war, or less prone to red-baiting than Republicans. Bill Clinton gets a well-deserved beating for his virtually super-conservative reign as commander-in-chief, and the updated revision gets some well-deserved digs on Obama as well. I finally had some historical blanks filled, especially with regard to Wilson, Truman, and, wow, Carter, *wow*.

Some marvelous highlights, however, include its argument that FDR's "socialist" New Deal was really a means of preventing the capitalist system from careening into all-out failure and was meant to bolster the same system back to pre-crash condition (!) and paints him in a much different light than most progressives usually paint him. The explanation he provides about Democrats definitely addressed some of the duplicity and people's chimerical hope in them, and is surprisingly simple: how could someone like FDR allow Japanese internment? How could "Great Society" LBJ have succumbed to war? Well, we have to take care of the assumption of what "someone like FDR" means, and appropriately de-mythologize them. It makes for working around those silly assumptions a moot point, and gets to the elegant, simplistic argument at who the Democrats really are. He applies Occam's razor ever so gently to the face of the party.

The book also made me wonder who spoils what: does the Green Party spoil it for the Democrats, or are the Democrats spoiling it for those desperate for a progressive labor party? Selfa gives the most wonderful argument against the tiresome "perfect as the enemy of the good" claim I've seen in quite some time. Illuminating in its concise yet comprehensive survey of the dark spots of Democratic leadership, and rife with seer-like analysis that called 2016 no problem, *The Democrats* will stay with me for a while. The notion that change from within it is possible is no longer one I could keep in good faith. It's time to move on.

My only reservations are as follows: first, that I am left with a lingering sense that some facets of the narratives here are over-simplified - I'm sure, for example, that it's just not that simple to close to Gitmo - and because of this sense, I'm positive I could be convinced by a mild corrective of some of the author's claims that he misses the mark in some ways. Granted that, I would still be enamored with the cumulative effect of the book. Second, the author is not nearly as interested in Democratic presidents that predate FDR. The passion lies with the 20th century, and while there's some mention of the earlier stuff, it doesn't seem as well-executed or passionately argued. Small quibbles for quite a staggering book that I, admittedly, have so much fervor to discuss right now.

### **Dan Sharber says**

fantastic book. it is thorough and illuminating. if this doesn't break you of the view that the democratic party is (or can be) and vehicle for social change then i am not sure anything will. everyone who has ever told me that they vote for democrats as the lesser evil needs to read this book. well researched and engaging. depressing it the history of democratic party betrayals but ultimately hopeful in our ability to eventually build an alternative.

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### **Kelly Lamb says**

I'll admit that I look at the Democratic Party with rose colored glasses much of the time, in order to justify my "lesser of two evils" feelings when voting. This book busts that thinking wide open, and discusses what progressives really need to do to make the changes that they want to see. This book is nonpartisan in that Selfa criticizes Dems and Repubs equally harshly, but it's certainly meant most for progressives who are trying to figure out what their next steps should be.

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### **Chaya says**

It is 2016, and this book is more relevant than ever as the supposed "socialist" Bernie Sanders vies for the nomination of the Democratic Party. The left has been correct to denounce his usage of the socialist label. There is a logic to saying no to the lesser-evilism of investing in a bourgeoisie party. This is an indispensable book to progressives to understand why a Democratic ticket will continue military ambitions and keep capitalism intact.

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### **Elizabeth says**

This one was a bit of a slog for me, but totally worth it. It's a well-researched and concise critical history of the Democratic Party from a leftist perspective. Even if you don't fully cosign Selfa's conclusions (let's build an alternative to the two parties), you'll find his thorough history of how the corporate elites running the Dems have relentlessly co-opted progressive grassroots movements for their own capitalist/imperialist purposes illuminating. Now I'd like to grab beers with Selfa and discuss Bernie and the future of the Dems, given our current political shit show.

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