



The Battle for DNC Chair: Palestine and Democratic Party Politics after Trump's Election

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2016 was a tumultuous year for the Democratic Party. Democrats lost the White House, both houses of Congress, and a large number of gubernatorial races (two-thirds were won by Republicans). The party also suffered through an ever-continuing email scandal, starting with presidential nominee Hillary Clinton, then DNC chair Debbie Wasserman Schultz, who resigned after emails revealed bias against presidential nominee Bernie Sanders, and even interim DNC Chair Donna Brazile, whose emails suggested she provided a debate question to Clinton before the actual presidential debates.

Given the current state of the Democratic Party, the race for its leadership is vital for defining the future of the party and its ideology, reshaping its message, and setting its strategy for countering the Trump Administration's agenda.

During the weekend of February 24-26, 2017, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) is expected to convene to elect the DNC chair. A simple majority of 224 votes of the 447 DNC members is required for a win. The elected DNC chair will play a central role in defining the party's future direction and shaping its message.

Six candidates thus far have announced their candidacy for the party's leadership, including executive director of the Idaho Democratic Party Sally Boynton Brown, chairman of the New Hampshire Democratic Party Raymond Buckley, chairman of the South Carolina Democratic Party Jaime Harrison, US Secretary of Labor Thomas Perez, South Bend-Indiana Mayor Pete Buttigieg, and Representative Keith Ellison from Minnesota.

Since announcing his candidacy in November 2016, Keith Ellison had been the top contender until he was challenged by Democratic Party leaders who put Tom Perez up for the job, and more recently, when Mayor Buttigieg entered the fray.

Defining the Future of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party faces an uphill battle after the paramount failures and email scandals of 2016. The race for the head of the DNC has turned into a proxy fight between the progressive wing of the party and the centrist establishment democrats to define the future ideology of the party. Additionally, Democrats find themselves having to choose between appealing to the minority base of the party, which did not turn out for Clinton, and the white working class voters who tipped the scale for Trump.

In order to rebuild the party, three divergent strategies have been proposed. First, some argue that what is needed now is to appeal to white working class voters; this is especially important after the losses the party experienced in the “Rust Belt” states of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania. Some leaders in the party are concerned that Keith Ellison, the Muslim African-American candidate, would repel these white voters who voted for Trump. Pete Buttigieg, the 34-year-old Indiana mayor from the Midwest, a Navy veteran, and a former Rhodes scholar, might be the right candidate to appeal to those voters. He won the popular votes in South Bend, Indiana twice, by 74 percent in 2011 and by 80 percent in 2015, succeeding among blue-collar and white-collar voters. However, having publicly announced that he is gay might not be seen to bode well with a conservative Trumpist voter base.

The second approach comes from the progressive liberals in the party, who insist that Clinton’s defeat was due to the party’s failure to motivate its minority and left-leaning bases, and thus they support Ellison’s bid as a recovery mechanism. Ellison is a progressive known for his focus on economic inequality and civil rights and for his strong support of Bernie Sanders in the party’s presidential nomination race. He is [not](#) the favorite choice for the DNC leadership among most establishment Democrats.

On the other hand, the Obama White House and the Clinton camp maintain that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by close to three million votes, so they would rather opt for an establishment Democrat like Obama insider and Clinton supporter Thomas Perez. Perez was indirectly endorsed by President Obama and Vice President Biden.

While the Democratic Party tries to appeal to two (or three) opposite segments of the American population, it loses track of what it means to be a Democrat. As such, whoever gets elected as the DNC chair will play a central role in not only setting the direction and strategy of the party, but also in defining its future ideology.

Palestinian Rights Remain a Contentious Matter

Among the top candidates, Representative Keith Ellison of Minnesota’s 5th congressional district is the most divisive because of his views on Palestine/Israel and, more implicitly, because he is Muslim.

Ellison is also the co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the first Muslim to be elected to the US Congress, and the first African American elected to the House of Representatives from Minnesota. Raised Catholic, Ellison converted to Islam in college. He is considered part of the progressive wing of the Democratic Party and was among the few House Democrats to endorse Bernie Sanders for the party’s presidential nomination.

Ellison was first to declare his candidacy for DNC chair on November 14, 2016 and emerged early on as the top contender. His announcement was followed by support from Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid, and pro-Israel incoming Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (though only to [save](#) his new position from progressive protestors). Ellison's candidacy was also met with vicious opposition, primarily due to his record on Palestine/Israel.

For years, Ellison has been an outspoken supporter of Palestinian rights. He is known for his effort to insert language on Palestinian rights in the Democratic Party platform after being selected by Bernie Sanders to sit on the drafting committee along with Professor Cornel West and James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute (AAI). During a trip to Hebron in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in June 2016, Rep. Ellison shared a [post](#) on Twitter with an image calling out Israeli apartheid policies.

He voted against the recent [resolution](#) condemning the UN Security Council Resolution 2334 opposing Israeli settlements. To explain his opposition, he [said](#) that he believes the two-state solution is the only way to achieve peace. "This [congressional] resolution makes that goal less achievable," he said, "and that is why I cannot support it." His earlier voting record shows opposition to giving Israel \$225 million to replace military equipment during Israel's war on Gaza in 2014, [stating](#) that the priority should be placed on a ceasefire. He also [advocated](#) ending the Israeli blockade on Gaza in order to achieve peace.

Ellison's record on Palestinian rights has received ample criticism from pro-Israel organizations and Democrats, who started a smear campaign against him.

The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a right-wing pro-Israel organization, released a [statement](#) in December 2016 calling Ellison's remarks on Israel "deeply disturbing and disqualifying" for his DNC leadership candidacy. The statement refers to comments made by Ellison in a 2010 [speech](#) he gave at a fundraiser in which he suggested that Israeli interests govern US Middle East policy and encouraged Muslims to organize in a similar fashion.

Based on that speech, American-Israeli businessman and Democratic Party mega-donor Haim Saban [called](#) Ellison "clearly an anti-Semite and anti-Israel individual" who "would be a disaster for the relationship between the Jewish community and the Democratic Party."

In an attempt to increase attacks against Ellison, others have dug up his earlier statements (during his college years) in support and defense of the Nation of Islam (NOI) and its leaders, especially of comments made by individuals associated with the organization which were considered anti-Semitic.

In response to accusations of anti-Semitism, Ellison sent a [letter](#) in 2006 to Minnesota's Jewish community renouncing his association with the Nation of Islam and spoke at a synagogue [saying](#)

he wasn't proud of his work with NOI. More recently, Ellison [wrote](#) an op-ed in December 2016 explaining that he “disavowed them long ago, condemned their views, and apologized,” and emphasized that he has been working since 2002 to combat anti-Semitism, confront Holocaust denial, and promote interfaith dialogue.

Moreover, despite the accusation, reports show that Ellison did not defend anti-Semitic remarks but supported the freedom of speech of those who question Zionism. A CNN [KFile review](#) of him found no evidence of him making anti-Semitic comments himself.

The campaign against Ellison is clearly a result of his outspoken support for Palestinian rights and not based on any evidence of anti-Semitism. J Street's President Jeremy Ben-Ami told a Jewish audience in December 2016 that there is a “[witch hunt](#)” against Ellison from the Jewish community.

However, although Democratic Party leaders and pro-Israel democrats are trying to influence the race, [decisions](#) (by more than 70 percent of voters) are based primarily outside Washington at state levels. About a quarter of DNC members (112) are chairs and vice chairs from states and territories, another 208 are elected at state levels, 48 represent national groups, and 75 are appointed by the DNC chair.

Nonetheless, as some [report](#), the Jewish community is not only a solid voting bloc for the Democratic Party but also includes the party's largest donors, a fact that often affects votes and actions of party members who wish to advance their political careers.

Keith Ellison knows that too well. He responded with an open letter to the ADL, [confirming](#) his support for Israel and his belief that “Israel and the US-Israel relationship are, and should be, key considerations in shaping US policy in the Middle East.” Ellison also voted for aid packages to Israel and recently [made public](#) his opposition to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. Thomas Perez even [held](#) a conference call in December 2016 with more than 50 prominent Jewish leaders and activists, to distinguish himself from Ellison and highlight his pride in working with the ADL.

A Changing Democratic Party Base

While Jewish Democrats and Democratic Party leaders continue their “witch hunt” against Ellison and pile on their [support](#) for Perez, the party's base has been evolving in a different direction.

Democrats are increasingly more supportive of Palestinian rights. A recent [poll](#) shows that 65 percent of Democrats either strongly or somewhat support Obama's backing a resolution against settlements, and 70 percent support him backing a UN resolution outlining the “parameters for ending” the conflict. More than half of Democrats (55 percent) see Israel as a burden to the

United States and that Israel has too much influence on US policy. The numbers are generally higher among the youth, and higher than previous years.

The US population at large is also changing. Almost two-thirds of Americans [would not](#) oppose a UN resolution for creating a Palestinian state. Moreover, population projections estimate that by 2020 the white population will decline to 60 percent and, by 2050, the United States will have a minority-majority electorate. Such rapid demographic change will have a large impact on the outcomes of elections.

While the establishment Democrats are busy appeasing the Israel lobby and white working class America, they are losing the very base that makes the party.

This is a critical juncture for the Democratic Party to define its future direction and political ideology. Will it be the party of the centrist establishment bought out by donors, or a progressive left-leaning party that caters to its voter base?

Despite the campaigns against Ellison, he persists in the race for the DNC leadership and has gained support from Democrats and even from liberal Zionists. Will a black, Muslim, and supporter of Palestinian rights be allowed to lead the Democratic Party? This is probably unlikely at this time.

To be sure, the upcoming DNC leadership elections will not only decide the DNC chair and the future of the Democratic Party, but also how much influence the pro-Israel lobby will exert over the party.