

Pro-war Democrat Joseph Lieberman defeated in Connecticut primary

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The defeat of Connecticut senator Joseph Lieberman in Tuesday's Democratic Party primary has sent shock waves through the American political establishment. Less than six years after serving as the Democratic vice-presidential candidate, on the ticket which won the most votes in the 2000 election, Lieberman was repudiated in a record primary turnout fueled by massive antiwar sentiment among Connecticut voters.

The turnout was estimated by state election officials at 45-50 percent of registered Democrats, double the usual level and by far the largest proportion of the electorate to participate in any recent primary election, particularly one held in the midst of the summer vacation season.

So great was the interest that nearly 30,000 people registered as Democrats in the run-up to the primary so that they would be eligible to vote. Half of these were previously registered as independents and apparently reregistered so they could give expression to their antiwar sentiments by casting a ballot against the most consistently pro-war Democratic senator.

The Connecticut primary campaign had already demonstrated the enormous gulf between the Democratic Party establishment and the vast majority of Democratic voters, as well as the American public as a whole. According to one poll taken in late July, 94 percent of Connecticut Democrats who had decided to vote against Lieberman cited the war in Iraq as their principal reason. The same poll found that, nationally, 80 percent of those identifying themselves as Democrats opposed the war in Iraq, and 75 percent believed that all US troops should be withdrawn either immediately or within the next year.

The issue of Iraq overshadowed all other questions, despite the increasingly desperate efforts of the Democratic Party establishment and Lieberman himself to prevent the primary from becoming a referendum on the war. Dozens of top Democratic Party officeholders and leaders, including former president Bill Clinton and numerous senators and congressmen, urged Connecticut voters to put their feelings about the war to one side and vote for Lieberman despite his

pro-war record. They made this peculiar appeal because it is increasingly impossible to make a public defense of the war before any but a definitively right-wing audience.

Even Lieberman himself, in his final major speech, delivered August 6, admitted that it was futile to seek votes on the basis of his record on Iraq. He told an audience at a senior citizens' center, "I understand that many Democrats in Connecticut disagree with me and are very angry about the war. I don't think there is anything I can say to change your mind about whether we should have gone to war or when we should bring the troops home, and at this point I'm not going to insult you by trying."

Despite the mass opposition to the Iraq war among working class voters in Connecticut, the bulk of the trade union bureaucracy gave its support to Lieberman in the primary. The Connecticut AFL-CIO convention endorsed Lieberman's primary campaign in late June.

Even those who switched to Lamont did so not because of the war, but because of disagreements with Lieberman over other issues, particularly those which affected their specific economic interests, or over Lieberman's support for trade pacts like NAFTA and CAFTA.

Even before the primary vote was in, the American media and its right-wing pundits sought to make light of the upsurge of antiwar sentiment by suggesting that the Connecticut primary had been hijacked by left-wing extremists and Internet bloggers. Any objective observer would have to concede, on the contrary, that the Connecticut primary is one of the rare occasions where mass public sentiment has actually found expression, however limited, in official politics.

Joseph Lieberman became a national figure by catering to the most right-wing elements in both the Democratic and Republican parties. The junior senator from Connecticut first came to national prominence with his September 1998 speech on the floor of the US Senate condemning President Bill Clinton's conduct in the Monica Lewinsky affair. He thereby lined up with the Kenneth Starr investigation and the right-wing campaign to destabilize the Clinton presidency.

His moralistic condemnation of Clinton's "premeditated deception" about his private sexual activities was never matched by any condemnation of far greater and more significant lies of George W. Bush: the fictions about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and Saddam Hussein's alleged ties to Al Qaeda, and the suggestion that Iraq was somehow responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks.

On the contrary, Lieberman became the Democratic senator most beloved by the Bush administration, defending its war policies and legitimizing its right-wing domestic program, particularly the attack on Social Security.

Lieberman went so far as to suggest, in an op-ed column published in the *Wall Street Journal* last November, that those who attacked Bush on the war were guilty of unpatriotic conduct that undermined the US war effort in Iraq and subverted Bush's authority as commander-in-chief. His McCarthy-style baiting of opponents of the war was cited approvingly by White House and Republican Party spokesmen as well as right-wing media outlets like Fox News.

In one of the few insightful analyses of the Connecticut events to appear in a major newspaper, the British *Guardian* commented that it was not just Lieberman who was isolated, but the Democratic Party leadership as a whole:

"What this race has really exposed is not a rift between him and the Democratic establishment, which has now closed ranks to back him, but between the establishment and both its base and the nation at large.

"The partisan divide over Iraq is greater than over any other war in living memory bar Grenada. Democrats are overwhelmingly opposed to the war and in favour of setting a date for troop withdrawal; Republicans are the opposite. According to the non-aligned Pew Research Center, the difference in how the two parties viewed the Vietnam war never exceeded 18 percentage points. The most recent poll on Iraq suggests a partisan gap of 50. Yet while the Bush administration gives full throated expression to its supporters' pro-war sympathies, Democrats rarely find their views echoed by the party. A Quinnipiac poll last month showed 93 percent of Connecticut's Democratic voters disapprove of Bush's handling of the war; 86 percent think the war was a mistake. On this key issue their representative does not represent them."

The Connecticut vote shows the enormous depth and breadth of opposition to the war. But at the same time, the primary demonstrates why it is impossible for the Democratic Party to become the vehicle for mass antiwar sentiment. Some 29 Democratic senators voted for the October 2002 resolution authorizing the Iraq war; virtually all Democratic senators have voted for military appropriations to sustain it. But of all these senators, only

one, Lieberman, has faced a significant challenge for renomination. Hillary Clinton, after Lieberman perhaps the most fervent defender of the Iraq war among leading Senate Democrats, is the early favorite for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination.

The near-unanimous support for the war in Iraq in the leadership of the Democratic Party is not an accident, or the result of political misjudgment. It is a manifestation of the fundamental class character of the Democratic Party, one of the two major political instruments of the American ruling elite. Like the Republicans, the Democratic Party is a capitalist party; it defends the profit system and the worldwide interests of the giant corporations and banks which are the core institutions of American capitalism.

Even those Democratic politicians, like Ned Lamont, who claim to oppose the war in Iraq do so from the standpoint of the defense of American imperialism. They argue that the war has become a diversion from more critical overseas tasks, such as the preparations for war with Syria, Iran and North Korea. Lamont, like Lieberman, is a fervent defender of Israeli aggression in Lebanon, in which US-built bombs and missiles delivered by US-built warplanes have slaughtered thousands.

Lamont is a multimillionaire, great-grandson of one of the founding partners of J. P. Morgan, and himself the proprietor of a cable television company worth hundreds of millions of dollars. His wife is a venture capitalist with a personal fortune equal to her husband's. His candidacy is the byproduct of sharp divisions within the US ruling elite over the disastrous outcome of the adventure in Iraq, but should he win election to the Senate in November, he would be quickly and smoothly incorporated into the Democratic caucus—or into a new Democratic congressional majority that would continue to fund and support the war in Iraq and further wars on behalf of imperialist interests.

The Connecticut primary has confirmed that tens of millions of Americans are bitterly and deeply opposed to the war in Iraq. These sentiments can find no genuine expression within the existing political system. A serious struggle against imperialist war requires the building of an independent mass political party of working people, based on a program that attacks the fundamental cause of war, the capitalist profit system, and offers a socialist alternative.



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