

Lieberman's defeat and the state of American politics

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The response of Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman and the Democratic Party leadership to Lieberman's defeat in Tuesday's Democratic primary election says a great deal about the politics of the Democratic Party and the state of American politics as a whole.

Lieberman, a three-term senator and the Democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000, lost by a 52 to 48 percent margin to Ned Lamont, an heir to the Lamont family fortune and multi-millionaire businessman, who ran as an opponent of the war in Iraq.

Lamont, a political unknown when he announced his decision to oppose Lieberman's bid for a fourth term last February, made the war the central issue in his campaign and tapped into the overwhelming antiwar sentiment of Democratic voters, as well as their anger over Lieberman's vocal defense of the war and the policies of the Bush administration more generally.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will, in ensuing articles, examine in some detail the politics of Ned Lamont, which are firmly rooted in the defense of American capitalism and its imperialist interests around the world, notwithstanding his criticisms of the Bush administration's disastrous adventure in Iraq. These criticisms, it should be pointed out, reflect the views of a significant section of the American foreign policy establishment, which has come to see the invasion and occupation of Iraq as a foreign policy blunder of immense proportions.

There is no doubt, however, that Lamont's challenge to Lieberman was a crack in the bipartisan pro-war front of the US political establishment through which popular opposition to the war could be registered in the electoral arena. Tuesday's Connecticut primary was an unambiguous repudiation by Connecticut Democrats of the war and the war's most prominent and strident

Democratic supporter.

Lieberman's response was to announce, in his concession speech Tuesday night, his intention to oppose Lamont in the November election by running as an independent. With this declaration, Lieberman expressed his contempt for the democratic will of the voters within his own party. Even if someone in Lieberman's position had managed to win the primary, one would have expected him to at least give the appearance of being chastened and to make some acknowledgment of the deep and sincere opposition to his policies.

Instead, he ignored entirely the issue which was pivotal in his defeat—the war in Iraq—and cast Lamont's victory as a triumph of “the old politics of partisan polarization.” Implicitly dismissing as illegitimate any opposition to the war, he denounced his opponent for employing “insults instead of ideas.”

“For the sake of our state, our country and my party, I cannot and will not let that result stand,” he declared. No “the people have spoken” here! One is reminded of the ironic aphorism of Bertolt Brecht: When the people make the wrong choice, it is necessary to elect a new people.

The thrust of Lieberman's remarks was an appeal to Republican voters. In the course of a brief speech he denounced “partisan politics” and political “polarization” at least five times. Presenting an upside-down view of Washington politics—where Democratic prostration before Bush and the Republicans is omnipresent—he spoke of the “partisan politics that has assailed Washington today.” Having conceded defeat to an opponent who attacked him for rubber-stamping the policies of the Bush administration, he made the absurd claim that “People are fed up with the petty partisanship and angry vitriol in Washington.”

He called for a “new politics of unity and purpose,” and just in case his message was not sufficiently clear, he added, “I will never hesitate to work with members of the other party if it helps me achieve solutions” and said his campaign would aim to “unite the people of Connecticut—Team Connecticut—Democrats, Republicans and Independents so we can go forward together...”

This is the man who was supported by the entire Democratic Party leadership. Former president Bill Clinton campaigned for him against Lamont, and the leadership of the Democratic Party in Congress backed him, including supposed war critics like Senator Barbara Boxer of California.

To take the measure of Lieberman and the Democratic Party as a whole, one need only compare the senator’s defiance of Connecticut’s Democratic voters with his cowardice and indifference to the theft of the 2000 election. Then, as the vice presidential candidate, he could barely manage a whimper in the face of an open, illegal and ruthless campaign by the Bush campaign and the Republican Party to block the counting of votes in Florida.

Lieberman had, by that point, already demonstrated his inveterate spinelessness before the Republican right with a fawning performance in his vice presidential debate with Dick Cheney. And when the Republicans sought to witch-hunt the Gore-Lieberman ticket and incite the military brass against it in the midst of the legal wrangling in Florida by demanding that illegal absentee military ballots be counted, Lieberman appeared on national television to support the Republican demand.

Lieberman today refuses to accept the verdict of the voters in his own party, but six years ago he accepted without protest the verdict of a Republican majority on the Supreme Court to halt the counting of votes and hand the election to George W. Bush.

No less significant was the response of the Democratic leadership in Congress to Lieberman’s defeat. On Wednesday, Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid and Charles Schumer, the chairman of the Senatorial Campaign Committee, issued a joint statement formally supporting Lamont in the November election. They called the Connecticut primary election a referendum on George Bush, but failed even to mention the issue on which the election turned—the war in Iraq.

Similarly, Representative Rahm Emanuel, the chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, said the election was a “referendum about being a rubber stamp” for the Bush administration. It showed that voters “want change, they want a new direction,” he declared. But again, he avoided any mention of the war.

Emanuel even suggested that Connecticut voters had unfairly judged Lieberman to be in the pocket of the Bush White House, and made the improbable claim that Lieberman’s decision to run as an independent would help the Democrats by bringing more voters to the polls.

None of these party leaders denounced Lieberman for defying the will of Democratic voters and running against the party’s senatorial candidate in Connecticut. When asked if he would call on Lieberman to drop out of the race, Emanuel said the decision was Lieberman’s.

These statements of official backing for Lamont only underscore the central fact that the Democratic Party leadership supports the war in Iraq and wants to exclude this single most critical issue facing the American people from the November elections.



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