

Sanders defeats Clinton in West Virginia primary by large margin

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Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders handily defeated Hillary Clinton in the Democratic Party primary contest in West Virginia on Tuesday. With most of the vote counted, Sanders won 51 percent, compared to Clinton's 36 percent.

Sanders' victory points to the deep social tensions in the state and the continued hostility to Clinton, despite the fact that she is being presented as the inevitable Democratic Party nominee and has a significant lead in delegates. Indeed, many voters in West Virginia considered their selection of Sanders a form of protest against the Democratic Party establishment.

Sanders, a self-described "democratic socialist," carried the vote in most of the coal producing and impoverished rural areas. While Sanders was leading in every county, he was expected to be picked up only five more delegates than Clinton due to the proportional representation system used in the state.

The Republican nomination has been consolidated around presidential candidate Donald Trump. He swept the Republican vote by a wide margin Tuesday night in both West Virginia and Nebraska after his last remaining competitors dropped out of the race.

Record numbers of West Virginia voters participated in the early balloting beginning April 27; by election day nearly 9 percent of the state's 1.2 million voters had already cast their ballots.

ABC News exit polls reveal high voter turnout motivated by "extraordinary economic stress," with fully two-thirds of West Virginia voters saying they're "very worried about the direction of the nation's economy in the next few years". The network notes that this rate is "by far the highest level of economy worry in a Democratic primary this year—far above the average, 40 percent". Six in 10 Democratic voters said the economy and jobs were "the most important issue"

in their vote.

Significantly, ABC reports that of Democratic primary voters polled, only a quarter "want the next president to continue Obama's policies," a position closely associated with Hillary Clinton. Sanders has been associated with opposition to inequality and the economic crisis, something that has been outrightly denied by the Obama administration.

An NBC poll found fully 44 percent of those voting for Sanders would back Trump over Clinton in the general election, and another 31 percent said they would vote for neither. It is no surprise that the desire for change is manifested in support for the perceived "outsider" candidates Sanders and Trump.

Along with being one of the poorest states in the country—ranking 49th or 50th in measures like per capita income and income tax revenue—West Virginia is also a state historically dominated by the Democratic Party.

Clinton won the state's primary in 2008 over Obama, but her approval has plummeted in the wake of hemorrhaging job losses in coal and other industries in the last few years. The state's official unemployment rate, consistently the worst in the country, stands at 7 percent.

West Virginia has the lowest labor force participation of any state in the country. As of March, 47 percent of the state's working age population were not working. Metrics for health, education, life expectancy, drug addiction and more bear out the reality of the social crisis. More than one in four children live in poverty, in addition to growing numbers of the elderly.

In counties worst hit by the collapse of the coal industry, where Sanders received high percentages of the vote, the figures are reminiscent of a war-torn country or the social conditions suffered during the

Depression of the 1930s.

Unlike the crisis of the 1930s, however, the ruling class has responded to the conditions not with infrastructure projects and social reform, but with corporate tax handouts, sweeping cuts to elementary safety net programs, and hiking health care and education costs. For the past eight years, the Democratic Party has stood at the helm overseeing these attacks.

The share of registered Democrats has declined substantially in West Virginia. In 1994, 65 percent of registered voters were Democrats. Today only 45 percent are Democrats; one in five West Virginians are registered Independent. For the first time in 80 years, the Republican Party gained control of both the Senate and House of Delegates in 2014.

The primary results in West Virginia, a small state of 1.8 million, contribute only a small number of delegates to the candidates. Sanders and Clinton are dividing 37 elected delegates. Democratic Party leaders including Governor Earl Ray Tomblin and Senator Joe Manchin are among six of the eight so-called “super delegates” who have already pledged to endorse Clinton.

Governor Tomblin was booed at a rally headlined by former President Bill Clinton in Logan County May 8, when he called Hillary Clinton “the best choice to unite the Democratic Party”. He insisted that “Democrats have always been there for West Virginia and we remain committed to helping our people realize the bright future they have in this state and in this nation.”

The liberal establishment, which contemptuously presents the Appalachian coalfields as a hotbed of racism, has portrayed both Clinton’s fall in popularity and the votes for Trump as evidence of the hopeless backwardness of the white working class population.

However, notwithstanding the confusions that exist in sections of the working class—exploited by Republicans under conditions in which the Democratic Party has abandoned any pretense of social reform—the vote for Sanders is an unmistakable sign of rising discontent in the working class with the existing political setup.

Sanders's own role is to channel this opposition back into the Democratic Party. He has repeatedly pledged to back Clinton if she is nominated. While seeking to tap into opposition to social inequality and economic distress, he has no program to offer the masses of

working people and youth who are being drawn into struggle.



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