

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand: #MeToo, McCarthyism and machine politics

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The World Socialist Web Site is publishing a series of articles profiling the major candidates for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in the 2020 elections. WSWs writers are examining the political history and program of each candidate and making the case for a socialist alternative for the working class to both the Democrats and the Trump administration. Profiles of Elizabeth Warren, Pete Buttigieg, Kamala Harris and Beto O'Rourke have already been published.

New York Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, whose campaign has yet to gain substantial traction, is running as the most pro-#MeToo and anti-Russia candidate. While Gillibrand appears likely to be eliminated from future Democratic debates because of poor polling, her campaign illustrates certain trends within the Democratic Party.

Gillibrand is for the most part an entirely conventional Democratic politician, combining identity politics, warmongering, empty “progressive” platitudes and a long record of defending corporate interests. This has unsurprisingly failed to win her mass support. The one aspect of her campaign that demarcates her from the other Democrats is a heavier emphasis on identity politics, to the point that in one debate, she seemed to be appealing only for the votes of women.

Largely because her expressed positions have shifted significantly over the years, she cannot point to any particular political accomplishment or constituency. When she was a US House of Representatives member from a “red, red, red” district in upstate New York (2007–2009), she was anti-immigrant and anti-gun control, on the right wing of the Democratic Party. After she was appointed to Hillary Clinton’s vacated US Senate seat in 2009 she shifted her views to be more conventionally liberal.

#MeToo and an “unabashedly feminist campaign”

More than any other Democratic campaign, including the candidacies of other Democratic women senators, Gillibrand’s is focused on gender politics. The *New York Times*, in a February 12 article on her campaign, wrote, “While multiple women are serious contenders for president for the first time in American history, Ms. Gillibrand is the only one who is making running as a woman, for women, the central theme of her candidacy.”

As part of her “unabashedly feminist campaign,” to quote the *Times*, Gillibrand has positioned herself as a leader of both of the witch-hunts backed by the Democratic Party: #MeToo and the anti-Russia campaign.

Both #MeToo and the anti-Russia campaign provide a basis for the Democratic Party to channel opposition to President Donald Trump and his administration’s right-wing policies into a no less reactionary direction, undermining democratic rights and allowing the ruling class to sort out its differences over foreign policy without allowing the population as a whole to have any say.

Gillibrand distinguished herself as a leading #MeToo candidate when she was the first Democratic senator to call for the resignation of Senator Al Franken, a Minnesota Democrat who was accused of sexual harassment in November 2017. Within a couple hours of Gillibrand’s statement—which came despite the allegations having been referred to the Senate Ethics Committee—other prominent Senate Democrats piled on against Franken, who soon after resigned.

Demonstrating that she was willing to throw fellow Democrats to the wolves retroactively as well, she told the *New York Times* shortly afterwards that President Bill Clinton should have resigned in the face of the Republican Party’s attempted right-wing coup in the form of the Kenneth Starr investigation and impeachment drive. “Yes, I think that is the appropriate response,” she said.

In other words, Gillibrand is to the right of the bulk of the Democratic Party during the 1990s, and even some Republicans (ten Republicans voted Clinton not guilty of perjury, and five voted him not guilty of obstruction of justice).

Gillibrand’s statements on Franken and Clinton were designed to strengthen the Democratic Party’s efforts to make sex scandals and the use of unsupported allegations a key mechanism for the resolution of political disputes. However, it appears that this tactic may have backfired on Gillibrand. Many Democratic Party donors and operatives were incensed at her statements, and her campaign has blamed this for her lackluster fundraising.

Philippe Reines, an aide close to Hillary Clinton, tweeted at the time: “Senate voted to keep [Bill Clinton]. But not enough for you @SenGillibrand? Over 20 yrs you took the Clintons’ endorsements, money, and seat. Hypocrite. Interesting strategy for 2020 primaries. Best of luck.”

Gillibrand’s stance on Bill Clinton’s impeachment has reportedly cut her off from the Clintons, with whom she had been associated since they campaigned for her in 2006. She therefore seems to have isolated herself from a powerful section of the Democratic Party apparatus.

To the extent that she has attempted to position herself as a “leader” in a field of two dozen candidates, it is on those issues where gender politics can hold sway: sexual misconduct, abortion, child care and family leave. Under the “Kirsten’s Priorities” section of her campaign website, “Fighting for women and families” comes second, after the catchall category of “Restoring our values.”

The legitimate concerns involved in these issues—which are fundamentally *class* issues—are diverted behind a right-wing feminist campaign, either through reactionary proposals or statements that commit Gillibrand to nothing. In the first instance, the #MeToo campaign undermines fundamental democratic rights, particularly the presumption of innocence.

Gillibrand encouraged this reactionary development even before #MeToo kicked off in 2017. She introduced the allegations by Emma Sulkowicz—the Columbia University student widely known as the

“mattress girl” for carrying a mattress around campus because her rape allegation was investigated by the university and the New York City Police Department without bringing charges against the alleged perpetrator—at a press conference that publicized the story in 2014. She also invited Sulkowicz to Obama’s State of the Union speech in 2015. The Sulkowicz case was dubious and the campaign around it undemocratic, involving the on-campus distribution of flyers naming the alleged perpetrator despite the lack of any evidence besides an unsupported allegation.

The measures she proposes to actually assist families with child care and family leave are extremely minor. The Modernizing Obstetric Medicine Standards Act (“MOMS Act”) proposed by Gillibrand and fellow senators and Democratic presidential contenders Cory Booker and Kamala Harris would provide a mere \$40 million to address the maternal mortality crisis.

In some parts of the United States, the maternal death rate is comparable to that of Egypt and Tunisia. Maternal mortality has nearly doubled from 1990 to 2015. The MOMS Act, even if passed, would be a drop in the bucket.

Gillibrand also calls for a \$15 minimum wage, which would leave millions of workers in poverty, and “affordable child care.”

The Family and Medical Insurance Leave Act (FAMILY Act), which Gillibrand has introduced in Congress as an annual stunt for years, would provide 12 weeks of paid leave, funded by regressive taxes on the workers themselves.

When an interviewer asked her if payroll taxes are regressive, Gillibrand absurdly claimed: “No. No. Because if you pay for it with a tax increase on the rich, it can be taken away the second the Congress changes. But if you make it an earned benefit, it’s yours! You bought in. It will never be taken away if it’s yours. An earned benefit is a better model for a social safety net.”

In other words, even modest social improvements cannot be allowed to impede the accumulation of wealth by the super-rich, but must be funded by workers themselves. The claim that these programs are therefore secure is belied by the proposed attacks on Social Security and Medicare.

The anti-Russia campaign, immigration and foreign policy

Perhaps the most overtly reactionary aspect of Gillibrand’s campaign is foreign policy. She is the third-ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, meaning she has been intimately involved in the machinations of US imperialism. In April, Gillibrand told CNN: “Russia is a foreign adversary of the United States, and we all must learn serious lessons from their cyberattack on our election systems in 2016. Russia will be back.”

Significantly, Gillibrand pioneered a “written pledge never to seek, accept or weaponize stolen or hacked information from foreign adversaries, like Russia.” Her campaign statement announcing this pledge is premised on the unsubstantiated claim that Russian government hackers supplied WikiLeaks with emails from the Hillary Clinton campaign in 2016.

The “pledge” presumably means that if WikiLeaks were to publish newsworthy emails from the election campaigns of Trump or one of her Democratic rivals she would studiously ignore them if the campaigns claimed they were “stolen.”

Moreover, she would support the prosecution of anyone who leaked or published such information. Her attitude toward Assange in this respect is revealing. In 2010 Gillibrand declared that Assange “should be thrown in jail for a very long time” and said he may be guilty of “terrorism” or “espionage.” When asked about Assange after his arrest in April, she laid

out her McCarthyite boilerplate on “Russian interference” and then called for an investigation into Assange.

On immigration, Gillibrand emphasizes the need to “secure our borders effectively,” but calls a border wall, family separation and Trump’s Muslim ban “cruel and ineffective.” This suggests that if they were cruel but effective, she might support them.

She has withdrawn her demand to abolish Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the federal agency responsible for innumerable crimes against immigrant workers. She also boasts that she and other Democrats have supported militarizing the border, even voting to give Trump funding to “start doing the things [he wants] to do” on immigration as part of a deal related to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program.

Economic nationalism and tepid reforms

On domestic economic issues, while not highlighted as much in her campaign messaging as gender politics, Gillibrand has adopted a counterfeit “progressive” stance by echoing some of Senator Bernie Sanders’ rhetoric along with watered-down versions of his already mild reforms.

She has endorsed Medicare-for-All to make “affordable [i.e., not free] health care a reality for everyone”—funded by payroll taxes. She has also endorsed the so-called Green New Deal, which is so meager that calling it “inadequate” to address climate change is being generous.

In other words, a national “solution” to the global problem of climate change, and regressive taxes to pay for health care. Hardly a program to solve the urgent needs of the population!

Where she, Sanders and Trump find common ground is the promotion of economic nationalism. Her campaign site says that “workers deserve a president who has their back,” then presents unions—pro-capitalist, nationalist organizations that no longer defend even the most elementary economic interests of workers—as the way forward.

The rest of the section on workers’ rights begins with saying that Gillibrand has “fought for manufacturers,” then says that she has “led on legislation to stop corporations from shipping US jobs overseas, stop federal tax dollars from subsidizing these companies, and reward companies that bring jobs back home.”

This economic nationalism lines up American workers behind “their own” bosses and divides workers internationally. The logic of this leads inexorably to trade wars, economic wars and eventually shooting wars—with nuclear-armed China most immediately in the crosshairs of US imperialism’s economic threats.

Significantly, while trying to link herself to Sanders, Gillibrand disclaims even a phony rhetorical association with “socialism.” She told an interviewer: “I am a capitalist—but I think there is a huge difference between capitalism and greed. I don’t think every business is evil, but some businesses *are* greedy.”

Media promotion and fundraising

While currently supported by only a narrow layer of probable Democratic primary voters (around 1 percent), Gillibrand has received generally favorable media coverage, including by the *New York Times*, CNN and the *Nation*.

The left-liberal *Nation* published a lengthy and particularly fawning

article in April headlined, “Kirsten Gillibrand Isn’t Afraid of Anything.” The article gives Gillibrand a platform to boast of her “bravery” for criticizing Trump, a widely hated figure.

The central feature of the *Nation* article, by Joan Walsh, as with Gillibrand’s campaign itself, is the relentless focus on gender politics. Gillibrand is portrayed as a champion of a “cadre” of women flooding into the Democratic Party, running for office, donating and otherwise becoming politically involved.

Her targeting Franken, one of the most liberal Democratic senators, is dismissed as something only of interest to “the national media, hyperactive Twitter folks, and some big Democratic donors.” Of course, the first and third categories play an immense role in politics, particularly in the early stages of primary campaigns.

Gillibrand has lagged in fundraising, coming in last among the senators running for the Democratic nomination during the first quarter and raising only \$3 million. Her second quarter performance was even worse, raising only \$2.3 million from April through June, while her campaign spent \$4.2 million. Although she was able to transfer \$9.6 million from her 2018 Senate campaign, where she faced only token Republican opposition, that financial cushion would quickly be exhausted by the demands of a campaign that goes beyond the four initial primary and caucus states.

Her 2018 campaign raised its money mostly through donations at or above \$200 (raising 59 percent of its funds in such donations). Lawyers and law firms donated \$2,606,379, making them the largest sector, followed by retirees and the securities and investment sector. Two law firms that formerly employed her, along with Pfizer, were in the top five contributors for her 2018 campaign.

A family of Albany political hacks

Gillibrand winning her House seat in 2006 is portrayed as something of a breakthrough for her and the Democratic Party, each at best a half-truth. Her 2006 election victory, in which she won in a heavily Republican district, is touted as evidence of her ability to appeal to a wide section of Americans. In reality, it was largely a result of her conservative program and evidence that emerged in the waning days of the campaign that the incumbent had physically abused his wife.

Moreover, Gillibrand is a known quantity, entirely a product of the corrupt and incestuous Albany machine—mostly, but not entirely, Democratic.

Her maternal grandmother, Polly Noonan, was credited with being the real leader of the state Democratic Party by none other than former Governor Mario Cuomo (father of current Governor Andrew Cuomo). She was reportedly anti-Semitic and openly corrupt, recounting, “I’d tell our Democratic members, if they wanted to put their girlfriend on the payroll, fine, but only do it after a Republican senator put his girlfriend on the payroll.”

This is the woman whom Gillibrand says “made a lasting impression” on her!

Her father, Douglas Rutnik, has worked as a lobbyist, including for Lockheed Martin, and is close to New York Republican figures, including former Governor George Pataki and former Senator Alfonse D’Amato, with whom Gillibrand interned before working at a law firm that defended tobacco company Philip Morris.

Gillibrand also worked for Andrew Cuomo while he was head of the Department of Housing and Urban Development under Bill Clinton, then worked on Hillary Clinton’s 2000 Senate campaign.

Gillibrand received support from both Republican and Democratic figures, including Pataki and Hillary Clinton, in the run-up to her 2006

House win.

Gillibrand is, both politically and personally, the spawn of the two-party system and its corrupt appendages. Her candidacy is indicative of a section of the ruling class donning feminism in order to provide a pseudo-progressive gloss to an increasingly right-wing program of war and austerity.



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