

Democratic Party establishment lines up against Nina Turner in Ohio congressional election

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In a highly unusual intervention into a primary contest, House Majority Whip James Clyburn has endorsed Shontel Brown, a Cuyahoga County councilwoman, over Nina Turner, the former national co-chair of the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign, in Ohio's 11th Congressional District.

The special election was called after Representative Marcia Fudge stepped down to head the Department of Housing and Urban Development in the Biden administration. The primary is set for August 3, with the winner nearly certain to win the general election November 2, in a district which has given 80 percent of its vote to the Democrats for three decades.

Turner, who previously was a member of the Cleveland City Council and then a state senator, came to national prominence after endorsing Bernie Sanders during the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries. She subsequently became president of Our Revolution, a Sanders-affiliated organization focused on corralling left-wing voters back behind the Democratic Party, and then acted as national co-chair of Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign.

She was a sharp-tongued critic of Hillary Clinton in 2016, and the most conspicuous African American supporter of Sanders in 2020. This background and celebrity, along with a huge fund-raising advantage (more than \$1 million of the \$1.4 million raised by a dozen candidates), has propelled Turner into the lead, according to the minimal polling conducted so far.

Her frontrunner status, however, is what has provoked the intervention of Clyburn, as well as Hillary Clinton. While Turner (and Sanders) have invariably claimed that the Democratic Party can be moved to the left by their activities and campaigns, Clyburn and

Clinton are demonstrating that the reflexive action of the Democratic establishment is to move in the opposite direction, lurching to the right.

In a telling statement to the *New York Times*, Clyburn explained that his endorsement of Brown was directly tied to his rejection of Turner's supposedly more radical program. He specifically pointed to the calls to "defund the police" and "abolish ICE" as affirming his decision to back Brown, although Turner is not campaigning on either slogan.

The majority whip's statements, however, were directed more broadly at the Democratic Party's "progressive" faction, many of whom have endorsed Turner. This includes the group of congresswomen known as the "Squad"—Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ilhan Omar and Ayanna Presley—and Bernie Sanders. Turner was also endorsed by the Akron Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) along with a number of local Democratic Party officials.

Meanwhile, Turner has sought to downplay her association with left-sounding criticism of the Democratic Party leadership, including Biden, even though her frontrunner status is the product of popular discontent. She has issued statements that largely reflect an attempted conciliation with the more conservative wing of her party.

According to her campaign website, Turner lists seven key issues for her platform, including COVID recovery, economic justice, housing as a human right, environmental justice, Medicare for all, expanded public education and reimagining public safety.

Her platform's rhetoric is noticeably to the right of the previous campaigns by Ocasio-Cortez and Sanders, as her campaign website includes no references to US

wars or the “billionaire class.” Her website’s only reference to immigration is a single demand to end for-profit immigration detention centers.

Despite Turner owing her national standing to Sanders’ campaigns, she has opted to downplay Sanders’ endorsement of her campaign. Similarly, Turner has begun backpedaling on her attacks on Biden, having previously compared voting for him to eating a bowl of excrement. Pointing out Kamala Harris’ criticism of Biden during the 2020 primaries, Turner told the *Times*, “If those two can be side by side now, then surely the president and I can come together.”

Turner comparing herself with Harris, a former prosecutor and pro-militarist senator who occasionally mouths progressive phrases, is perhaps more revealing than the congressional candidate intended. Harris was chosen as Biden’s running mate in a clear rejection of the party’s “progressive” wing. Harris is now deeply involved in the crackdown on immigrants fleeing to the United States.

Jeff Weaver, a Sanders aide and consultant to Turner, has also claimed that the “progressive movement,” by which he means his faction of the Democratic Party, “is in a period of maturation.” He further elaborated that this movement is now governing “in coalition with more conservative elements of the party.”

While Weaver has framed the coalition of “progressive” and conservative elements as a positive development, the adaptation by nominally “left” Democrats to the party’s conservative apparatus discredits claims by Turner and the DSA that the Democratic Party can be transformed.

Jacobin has framed the backlash against Turner as a rejection of “Medicare for All” by lawmakers in the pocket of pharmaceutical lobbyists. However, even the DSA-affiliated publication admits that the district “has been represented for nearly thirty years by lawmakers who have supported legislation to create a government-sponsored single-payer health care system.”

In other words, the supposedly most left-wing aspect of Turner’s campaign is not a radical departure from demands by Democrats like Fudge and Stephanie Tubbs Jones, who previously held the seat. Fudge and Tubbs Jones were pillars of the Democratic Party establishment, in a district which was held for more than a quarter century by Louis Stokes, brother of

Cleveland’s first black mayor.

It is notable that Clyburn, the most influential figure in the Congressional Black Caucus and the man responsible for rescuing Biden’s flagging presidential campaign in the South Carolina primary, has felt it necessary to step in against Turner. The Democratic establishment has used the outcome of the 2020 congressional elections, where the party lost seats even though Biden won the presidency, to argue that the party must move to the right on issues like curbing police violence.

Initially, this was presented as a necessary accommodation to supposedly more right-wing popular sentiments in marginal districts. But now Clyburn & Co. have chosen to intervene in a heavily Democratic district where there is no possibility of a Republican victory.

Regardless of whether Turner wins or loses the election, the rightward movement of the Democratic Party will continue unabated. Workers and youth must draw the lessons of the Sanders campaigns, break from the Democrats and Republicans and establish their political independence, as part of the fight against war, inequality and police brutality.



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