

Democratic Party establishment prevails over Sanders-backed candidate in Cleveland primary election

Patrick Martin
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Tuesday's primary election for a Cleveland-area congressional seat saw a significant defeat for the "left" wing of the Democratic Party led by Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Their favored candidate, Nina Turner, a former state senator and national co-chair of Sanders' presidential campaign in 2020, lost the primary to Shontel Brown, a local Democratic Party officeholder who had the backing of the Congressional Black Caucus, Representative Jim Clyburn and Hillary Clinton.

Brown won by 37,666 votes to 33,420 for Turner, in a district where some 242,098 votes were cast last November for Democratic incumbent Marcia Fudge. The special election was held to fill the vacancy created when Fudge became secretary of housing and urban development in the Biden administration.

The result was considered a surprise, since Turner began the race with a huge advantage in fundraising and media attention, while Brown, a councilwoman in a Cleveland suburb, was less well known. However, as chair of the Democratic Party in Cuyahoga County, which includes the city and most of its nearby suburbs, Brown had the support of the party officialdom.

The low turnout reveals the deep alienation of the largely working class population of the district from all of the factions within capitalist politics, both the party establishment and the so-called "left" represented by Turner, Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez.

The 11th Congressional District covers the east side of Cleveland and the suburban territory adjacent to it, all in Cuyahoga County, then stretches south through Summit County to take in African-American districts in the city of Akron. This is the result of racial gerrymandering to maintain a majority-black congressional district.

The district is the poorest in Ohio, with a median household income of \$42,207, less than two-thirds of the national average. While the district was once heavily

industrialized, based on steel, automobiles and rubber, the most common jobs today are in the low-pay sectors of health care and social assistance.

However, the conditions facing the working class were not an issue in a campaign dominated by mud-slinging and name-calling.

Turner was the initial favorite in the race, having held the State Senate seat that covered most of the district. She enjoyed a huge internet fundraising edge and a great deal of media attention because of her prominence as a Sanders campaign representative.

But the national Democratic Party establishment intervened aggressively last month, with both the Congressional Black Caucus and Representative Jim Clyburn, the House majority whip and Biden's closest ally in the House, coming out in support of Brown and castigating Turner for her anti-Biden comments during the 2020 primary campaign.

It was Turner who famously said—expressing the bitterness among Sanders' supporters—that voting for Biden in the general election, as Sanders demanded, was like eating half a bowl of excrement (Trump being the full bowl). Turner also refused to vote for Hillary Clinton in 2016, endorsing Green Party candidate Jill Stein instead.

Neither the anti-Biden comment nor the vote for Stein would be forgotten by the party establishment, including Clinton, who was an early supporter of Shontel Brown.

By late July, the Cleveland-area district became a crossroads for national figures in the Democratic Party. Sanders and Ocasio-Cortez appeared at rallies for Turner, while Clyburn, New York Representative Gregory Meeks, Mississippi Representative Benne Thompson and Ohio Representative Joyce Beatty, the current chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, addressed gatherings for Brown.

Thompson's appearance was particularly significant. He chairs the select committee established to investigate the

January 6 attack on the US Capitol by a fascist pro-Trump mob. That committee held one hearing, on July 27, and then adjourned without even setting a date for the next hearing, while its chairman went to Ohio to campaign against Turner.

Brown focused her campaign on embracing President Joe Biden and his policy of bipartisan collaboration with the Republican Party. “This is about making progress, and sometimes that takes compromise,” she said in her victory speech. “Because when you demand all or nothing, usually you end up with nothing.”

Political action committees aligned with the Democratic Party establishment played a major role in the final month of the campaign. Third Way, which backs so-called “centrist,” i.e., right-wing, candidates, pumped \$500,000 into anti-Turner ads.

An official of this group, Matt Bennett, echoed one of the main complaints of Clyburn and other House Democratic leaders—that the rhetoric of Ocasio-Cortez, Ilhan Omar and other “lefts” was hurting Democrats in closely contested races. He said: “It matters in an age in which relatively junior members of the House can have an outsize voice on social media and help define what it means to be a Democrat, to the detriment of their colleagues in swing districts.”

Another concern, particularly for members of the Congressional Black Caucus, was that they might face “left” primary opponents next year, backed by Ocasio-Cortez, Cori Bush (who defeated caucus member William Lacy Clay in a 2020 primary), Omar and Rashida Tlaib. They were determined not to allow Turner to join that group.

The Democratic Majority for Israel Political Action Committee (PAC) bought \$2 million in anti-Turner ads, a staggering amount for a primary campaign. These ads said nothing about Israel, although the intervention was motivated at least in part by Turner’s occasionally voicing sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people.

By the time of the primary, the Brown campaign and its PAC supporters had pulled even with Turner in spending, with about \$4.5 million each, gargantuan sums for a primary campaign in a heavily Democratic seat.

The pattern of the vote reflected these interventions. While Turner won precincts located in the city of Cleveland by 52 percent to 42 percent, Brown swept the suburbs, particularly those of higher income.

She won a preponderance of the vote in heavily Jewish suburbs like Beachwood, Shaker Heights and University Heights, where turnout was relatively high. At a victory party, Brown’s campaign chairman singled out Jewish voters for having made a difference in the race.

Jewish voters, however, comprise only a small minority. More important was Brown’s support in black majority

suburbs with median household incomes over \$100,000, where her vote was double that of Turner.

In her concession speech, Turner blamed her defeat entirely on the intervention of outside political action committees, declaring, “We didn’t lose this race—the evil money manipulated and maligned this election.”

This was the line of the Democratic Socialists of America, as expressed in a demoralized commentary in *Jacobin*, the DSA’s semi-official house organ. The article was headlined, “Nina Turner’s Defeat Shows That Big Money Still Rules in US Politics.”

Writer Luke Savage pointed to the \$3 million pumped into the Shontel Brown campaign in the final month, without acknowledging that Turner still had a slight financial edge. In any case, the complaint about “the lengths to which the Democratic machine will ultimately go to defeat its harshest critics” hardly holds water.

Jacobin and the DSA are advocates of a policy of pushing the Democratic Party to the left, claiming that this reactionary party of Wall Street and American imperialism can become the vehicle for progressive social reform. Is it a surprise that the party establishment can mobilize huge financial resources?

If, in general, money determines political outcomes, then all political struggle against an entrenched and fabulously wealthy financial aristocracy is hopeless. The real problem is not the financial standing of this or that candidate, but the bankruptcy of the perspective of the DSA, *Jacobin* and Turner herself.

The Democratic Party is an instrument of the American ruling class, and one of the oldest capitalist parties in the world. It cannot be reformed, let alone become the instrument of social progress, because the crisis-stricken capitalist system is incapable of reform.

The working class must free itself from the domination of this reactionary political party and establish its political independence from the entire corporate-controlled two-party system in order to take up the fight for socialism.



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