

# Bernie Sanders: The Socialist Outsider Who Took Centre Stage

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Rather than undermine his campaign, Bernie Sanders has made a virtue of the label 'socialist' and is riding a wave of opposition to economic inequality that began with the Occupy Wall Street movement.

Bernie Sanders proud proclamation of himself as a 'socialist' is a daring gambit in a country where it has been a dirty word for half a century. Critics of the 74-year-old junior senator from Vermont expected him to fade quickly from the limelight, but Sanders has surprised everyone - not least himself - in garnering huge support for his left-wing campaign in the Democrat Party presidential candidates. A few weeks ago, Sanders surpassed 2.3 million donations, breaking the Democrat record held by Barack Obama.

Although he trailed Hillary Clinton by 25 points in a recent NBC News/Wall Street Journal poll, Sander's speeches about such issues as economic inequality, breaking up too-big-to-fail banks, removing tuition fees and introducing a living wage, have electrified huge crowds, including 28,000 people in Portland and Los Angeles, 25,000 in Boston and 15,000 in Seattle.

"To have a person not shying away from the label 'socialist' to be up there contending for President is so remarkable that you have to stand up and cheer, or there is something wrong with you," said Professor Richard D. Wolff, who teaches economics at New York University and broadcasts to 50 radio stations in the US.

Wolff added "In the US the word 'socialist' carries overtones of being 'beyond the pale' and raises questions of whether you are a Soviet agent. Even in educated circles, if I say anything positive about socialism - even something namby pamby such as 'you know, the socialists aren't wrong about everything' - the conversation comes to a halt as if you have just dropped your pants. We're talking about a society that has been traumatised by these things for half a century."

Rather than undermining his campaign, however, Sanders' acceptance of the label 'socialist' is central to his appeal. "It has given him a reputation for being courageous and honest because any American politician would have to be a complete lunatic to call himself a socialist otherwise," said Professor Wolff.

Sanders' apparent political ingenuousness has caused the media to underestimate him. They assumed wrongly that he was no threat and would quickly fade from view. However, Sanders possesses an acute understanding of the political game honed over decades during his rise from obscurity in Vermont to become the first independent in Congress in 40 years, and then a candidate for the US Presidency.

"Sanders realised early on that honesty was his best strategy. If he had started looking, smelling or tasting like a male version of Mrs Clinton, he would have vanished without trace and become the Democratic equivalent of Ben Carson, or Jed Bush, who has more money than God, but was swimming against a huge current that drowned him," said Professor Wolff.

However, Sanders is also a man whose time has come. If it were not for the 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement, which used powerful slogans about the dominance of "the 1%" to raise awareness of economic inequality, Sanders would have remained in relative obscurity. Occupy Wall Street began on September 17, 2011 in New York, and spread to more than 100 cities in the US and 1,500 cities globally.

Many of the protesters who cut their teeth in the Occupy encampments are now running grassroots campaigns for Sanders. For example, Stan Williams, a prominent Occupy Wall Street activist, is co-organiser of African Americans for Bernie.

"Occupy Wall Street deserves a lot more respect from thinking people. It was a precedent-breaking liberation as the first modern leftwing movement that did not shy away from economics. It made it possible for Sanders, and others, to advance leftist criticisms without being afraid of forcing economic issues into everyone's face," said Professor Wolff.

He went on to say "My own radio career has exploded as a result. I started out on one station in New York and now I'm on 50 stations nationwide. I've done nothing to solicit it. Stations came to me because listeners were demanding a critical perspective on economics."

For a socialist economist, it is a liberating sensation after years of being considered irrelevant. For two decades after Bill Clinton's accommodation with big business, a declining number on the left were open to criticisms of the prevailing economic orthodoxy.

"The left became lost in the kind of leftism in which Karl Marx became more and more irrelevant and the New York Times became more and more relevant. The definition of 'left' was being concerned about ethnic minorities, or gender discrimination. It was the kind of socialism that was trying to be socially acceptable because everything to do with economics is set aside. What you get is a sanitised version of socialism."

The growing awareness of inequality is behind the openness to socialist points of view. Even as Barack Obama's Democrats boasted of recovery from the 2008 economic crisis, most of the spoils went to the top tier. Emmanuel Saez, at the University of California, Berkeley, analysed average inflation-adjusted income per family for the first years of the economic recovery between 2009 and 2012. He found that, although average income climbed 6%, the top 1% saw a 31.4% rise - 95% of the total gain - whereas the bottom 99% saw growth of 0.4%.

"The newspapers have been full of recovery stories, but the vast majority have had no share in it. This creates psychic distress. They are telling these people, 'you are a three-time loser. You lost in the crash, you lost because you weren't bailed out after the crash and you lost because now you can't climb your way onto the recovery process. You are done. Just go and slink away'," said Professor Wolff.

Sanders has sought to position himself in a long and proud American tradition of socialism that has been marginalised and misunderstood. In a speech at George Town University in November, he attempted to demystify the concept by portraying Franklin D Roosevelt as the incarnation of socialism. "Almost everything he proposed was called 'socialist'. Social Security, which transformed life for the elderly, was 'socialist'.

The concept of the minimum wage was a radical intrusion into the marketplace, labelling it 'socialist'. Unemployment insurance, abolishing child labor, the 40-hour work week, collective bargaining, strong banking regulations, deposit insurance, and job programs that put millions of people to work were all described, in one way or another, as 'socialist'.

Despite the rapturous reception for his anti-establishment views, it is likely Sanders will lose the Democrat election to Clinton. One problem he faces is that most of the major unions support his rival. The American Federation of Teachers and the machinists' union have already thrown in their lot with Clinton and Richard Trumka, the President of the AFL-CIO (America's national federation of trade unions), has warned individual unions against coming out for Sanders.

"The unions know Sanders is a much better articulator of their positions than Clinton, but they think that if they go for Sanders, they will not only have the Republicans and the business community abusing them, but she will not take their calls real quickly either. That's even worse and, therefore, the union leaders won't hesitate to override what a clear majority of their members want," said Professor Wolff.

An even more fundamental problem for Sanders is his lack of support in the African-American community. Although he is trouncing Clinton on a lead of 27 points in the state of New Hampshire that will not worry her, overmuch as it has a 96% white population. A poll in December gave Clinton a 50-point lead in South Carolina because of her massive support among African-Americans.

Clinton is also likely to win other states with large African-American populations, including Georgia, Alabama, Texas, Virginia, Mississippi, Florida, Illinois and Ohio. "The African-American community doesn't know much about Sanders. The media they pay attention to largely ignores him. In terms of her politics, it makes no sense for them to support Clinton and it's a terrible irony of US politics that the African-Americans will vote overwhelmingly for her and probably sway the election result."

Assuming Sanders loses the election; the vital question for the left is how they can build on his legacy. With the rise of Syriza in Greece and left wing parties prominent in Spain and Portugal, as well as the arrival of a socialist leader of the Labour Party in England, there is clearly a renewed appetite for left-wing politics in the west.

Sanders could be an important staging post before a younger, progressive leader arrives. "The rest of the left in the US is already thinking about how to cash in on the energy, drive and money he has inspired. Sanders has opened up a space for all kinds of political initiatives on the left that weren't possible six months ago. The fact the mainstream media can't figure this out is a wonderful example of their giving assistance to the thing they hate," he said.

For the future of the left, there is encouragement in the more positive view of socialism among younger generations. In a recent YouGov poll, 52% of Americans had a favorable view of capitalism, while only 26% had a favorable view of socialism. However, among those younger than 30s, 36% had a positive view of socialism, while 39% had a positive view of capitalism.

That the younger generations should welcome a different economic approach is not entirely surprising. Youth unemployment stood at 11.3% in December; double the national rate of 5.5%. "Sanders and his socialist message have great appeal for them," said Professor Wolff.

"It's no exaggeration to say they are disgusted by politics and distrustful of politicians. For a leader to appeal to them, they have to be seen as an outsider to the establishment. Obama managed it because he was young and black. In addition, there's a parallel with Sanders in that he's another kind of outsider who doesn't deny the label socialist. The young like that as it distances him from the collection of boring politicians they find so disgusting."

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