



Written by [Charles Scaliger](#) on March 7, 2016

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Hello Socialism, or Bye-bye Bernie?

By now, the whole world knows that maverick self-styled socialist Senator Bernie Sanders won the New Hampshire primary by more than 20 points over establishment darling Hillary Clinton. The white-haired leftist from Vermont, who has been a fixture on the radical Left circuit of Pete Seeger protest songs, Noam Chomsky, and Pacifica Radio for decades, was written off by the mainstream media commentariat when he first announced his campaign for president on April 30, 2015. A fire-breathing, superannuated socialist, the punditocracy reassured themselves, would have about as much electoral appeal as perennial gag candidate Vermin Supreme — good for a few belly laughs and perhaps a moment of serious contemplation of how corrupt and rigged the political system is, but not a character voters would perceive as serious presidential material.



How things have changed.

In less than a year, Sanders has gone from a virtual unknown — except to fans of *Democracy Now's* Amy Goodman — to a rock star-like *éminence grise*, especially among legions of younger and more idealistic voters within the Democratic Party. For the millions of Americans now “feeling the Bern,” Candidate Sanders, the political outsider, represents authentic change. Fiery and articulate, the energetic Sanders purports to be the candidate who will stand up against the Powers That Be on behalf of the little man. Unlike his rival Hillary Clinton, Sanders claims not to be beholden to big corporate interests, especially Wall Street, and to represent a radical new brand of thinking that will emancipate America from the clutches of corporate elites and political insiders. His policies, Sanders promises, will lead to a new era of prosperity. But as is typical with populist politicians, Sanders’ ideas and proposals have not been closely scrutinized by many of his adoring fans. Behind Sanders’ avuncular charm and ideological honesty, the reality is that his proposals are little different from what Democrats and leftists generally have been trying to enact for decades. Sanders’ views — with a few notable exceptions — are in fact in near-perfect alignment with the priorities of the socialist-leaning establishment in both parties. Sanders’ chief virtue is being honest enough to call his program by its proper name.

Radically Consistent

No one can accuse Bernie Sanders of inconsistency. Throughout his decades in politics, he has always self-identified as a socialist and promoted with unswerving devotion all of the pet projects of the American and international socialist Left. While still an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in



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the early 1960s, Bernie Sanders was already plugged in to the American radical Left, being a vociferous member of the Young People's Socialist League and an energetic agitator in opposition to racial discrimination. Nor did Bernie Sanders shy away from confrontation with legal authorities; as is now being reported in the press, he was once arrested for demonstrating on behalf of racial equality. He was eventually convicted of resisting arrest while demonstrating against racial segregation in Chicago's public schools, and fined \$25.

His early involvement in electoral politics grew out of his involvement with the anti-Vietnam War movement. After nearly a decade with the fringe Liberty Union Party, Sanders decided to run for mayor of Burlington, the largest city in Vermont. He ran against a popular five-term incumbent Democrat, and to everyone's shock, won the election by a 10-vote margin. Sanders got himself reelected three times, sometimes defeating candidates endorsed by both major political parties.

It was during his tenure as mayor of Burlington that Sanders began referring to himself openly and consistently as a socialist. In Burlington, a college town long renowned as one of America's top "hippy" destinations, Sanders was able to build a career in politics. But his detractors insisted the quirky leftist Independent would not be electable in any higher office representing a more mainstream demographic.

Sanders proved the skeptics wrong again in 1990, when he was elected to the House of Representatives after a brief break from politics spent teaching at Harvard. In becoming the first Independent elected to the House in 40 years, and the first self-proclaimed socialist ever in Congress, Sanders once again successfully defied conventional wisdom.

Even as a socialist, Sanders' positions during his tenure in the House sometimes contradicted the expectations of the liberal Democrats with whom he usually caucused and voted. Coming from a state with some of the least onerous gun laws in the nation, Sanders was surprisingly pro-gun rights, voting against the Brady Bill mandating federal background checks and waiting periods for all gun purchases. In 2005, he voted in support of a bill that would shield gun manufacturers and sellers from liability if crimes were committed with weapons they made or sold. As late as 2015, Sanders defended this vote, saying, "If somebody has a gun and it falls into the hands of a murderer and the murderer kills somebody with a gun, do you hold the gun manufacturer responsible? Not any more than you would hold a hammer company responsible if somebody beats somebody over the head with a hammer."

Sanders was a vocal critic of both the Persian Gulf War and the Iraq War, voting against congressional measures authorizing use of military force in 1991 and 2002. He has also been a staunch opponent of the Patriot Act since its inception.

In 2005, Sanders decided to run for the Senate for the first time. In theory, he retained his partisan independence, but in reality, he received strong endorsements from leading Democrats such as New York Senator Charles Schumer. This meant that, even though he was still technically an Independent, the Democrats regarded him as a reliable enough ally not to bother trying to run a Democrat against him. As former Democratic Vermont governor and presidential candidate Howard Dean observed, Sanders "votes with the Democrats 98 percent of the time." With the support of a veritable Who's Who of leading Democrats, including Nevada Senator Harry Reid and then-Senator Barack Obama, Sanders agreed with the Democrats to be listed as a Democratic candidate in the primary, but not to accept a formal Democratic nomination if he won. Win he did, defeating not only his primary opposition but his Republican opponent in the general election (by an impressive two-to-one margin).



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Sanders has never looked back. He won reelection in 2012 by an even heftier margin, and has consistently been ranked among the most popular senators in the United States. In the Green Mountain State, at least, Sanders was already a superstar.

In the Senate, Sanders continued to demonstrate his political savvy, agreeing with the Democrats to vote with them except by special permission — in exchange for the accrual of seniority and leadership positions, including the chairmanship of the Senate Committee on Veteran's Affairs in 2013 and 2014 (when majority control of the Senate was wrested from the Democrats). In other words, Sanders has been for many years a Democrat in everything but name, but has used his feisty persona and the carefully cultivated illusion of partisan independence to build his fan base.

Wavy Hair in the Ring

He was encouraged by some on the far Left to run for president against Barack Obama in 2012, but he demurred. Seeds had obviously been planted, however, and by April 2015, Sanders was ready to make his move. To enormous popular acclaim, he announced his candidacy for the presidency on the last day of April, pointedly emphasizing that he would not form a super PAC for funding but would instead rely on small donors.

The popular touch worked like a charm. Within the first 24 hours of his announcement, he had raised \$1.5 million, and by the end of 2015, when the race was in full swing, he had raised more than \$73 million, the result of millions of small donors giving an average of just over \$25.

The Democratic Party, whose leadership had long since anointed Hillary Clinton for the presidency (and presumably quietly discouraged other promising would-be candidates, such as Vice President Joe Biden and upstart Senator Elizabeth Warren, from throwing their hats in the ring), was obviously annoyed by the Sanders candidacy. After all, his brand had always been that of an Independent, and the white-haired radical from Vermont was perceived as too old and too far left to have broad-based appeal.

But Sanders continues to confound the experts. In November, he announced that he would be a Democrat thenceforth, and would run for all future offices as a Democrat. His populist approach made him wildly popular among idealistic youth, and his aura of incorruptible idealism contrasted sharply with the jaded pragmatism and endless scandals associated with Hillary Clinton.

Polling nationally in the single digits to begin with, Sanders has surged to a virtual statistical tie with Hillary Clinton, and in the two electoral tilts as of this writing — Iowa and New Hampshire — has more than held his own. In Iowa he essentially tied with Hillary Clinton, with only tenths of a percentage point separating the two candidates. In New Hampshire, Vermont's next-door neighbor, Sanders won the primary by a huge margin in the popular vote (60 percent to 38 percent) — far larger than polls had predicted — and Team Hillary is starting to panic, with a repeat of 2008 looking more and more likely.

At the moment, Hillary Clinton is relying on two secret weapons. For one thing, she has the support of the Democrats' "super-delegates" locked in; in terms of actual delegates, Clinton already has an overwhelming lead nationwide, and even eked out at least a tie in New Hampshire by that metric. For another, she is counting on the support of blacks, among whom Bill Clinton remains very popular.

But the wily Sanders is already courting the black vote, pointing out that he was active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s and even went to jail for his pains. He has also rolled out a campaign ad featuring activist Erica Garner, the daughter of Eric Garner, the black man who died after a NYPD



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officer put him in a chokehold, and has registered strong public sympathy for the “Black Lives Matter” movement.

As for those super-delegates, they pose a tough but not insurmountable obstacle for Sanders. Should his campaign continue to gather momentum and popularity, and Clinton’s campaign founder, it is unlikely that they will continue to back a losing horse. Given the mood of the electorate in both parties, a Sanders nomination does not appear at all far-fetched to this writer.

So leaving aside his offbeat charisma and socialist label, what does Candidate Bernie Sanders stand for? For the most part, what liberal Democrats have stood for for decades, but repackaged as outside-the-box thinking. In defending the concept of socialism, Sanders routinely invokes socialist “success stories” such as Sweden and Denmark — which is precisely what liberal Democrats have been doing for years. In the long debate over socialized medicine in the United States, socialist models such as Scandinavia, England, and Canada were invoked routinely by the Left. Sanders’ gift is to be rhetorically inventive while retailing the same arguments.

As to policy specifics, Sanders’ positions, per his campaign website, present the same canards that have cluttered Democratic platforms for generations. For example, Sanders, like all socialists, loves to talk about income inequality, observing correctly that more and more wealth is concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, even as average wages for middle-income men and women continue to decline. This much is certainly true, but Sanders misdiagnoses the cause, and consequently mis-prescribes the cure.

Like nearly everyone on the Left, Sanders considers the growing wealth disparity to be a result of too much capitalism, but the truth is that it has been caused by too little — or, in other words, by too much socialism. Socialism has the unavoidable side effect of creating a privileged class with special access to government regulators; by employing lobbyists, the wealthy always ensure that new legislation contains loopholes exempting their businesses and assets from rules and costs imposed on everyone else. Moreover, the wealthy are positioned to take special advantage of socialized finance, that is, the creation of money via the modern central banking system first proposed in Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*. Whenever the Federal Reserve “pumps” new money into the economy, it does so via the issuance of new debt, directly or indirectly; those connected to banks and brokerages enjoying the special ability to deal directly with the Fed (and other central banks) in such “open market operations” stand to make enormous profits every time the Fed decides to “inject new liquidity.” The rest of us, of course, merely pay the price in higher prices and periodic economic busts. The more actively the Fed intervenes in the market, the wealthier the holders of huge portfolios of government bonds and other financial assets whose value is closely tied to such monetary activities will become.

Spending Huge Sums

Sanders, however, wants to resuscitate the economy and restore some semblance of economic equality by resorting to the same old failed policies of Democrats from FDR to the present: raising the minimum wage, hiking taxes on the wealthy and large corporations, pouring taxpayer money into make-work projects that will allegedly resuscitate the jobs market, and breaking up large financial institutions deemed too monopolistic by the federal government. Added to that, Sanders advocates requiring employers to provide “at least 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave; two weeks of paid vacation; and 7 days of paid sick days.” He also intends to enact universal single-payer healthcare, a “universal childcare and pre-kindergarten program,” and free tuition at all public universities and colleges. To



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save the Social Security system, Sanders wants to lift the “cap on taxable income” above \$250,000 — in other words, to raise Social Security taxes massively.

Sanders contemplates spending huge sums on his projects — \$1 trillion over the next five years on his make-work programs alone, for example. The minimum wage is to be more than doubled by 2020 — from \$7.25 to \$15.

Another of Sanders’ passionate concerns is climate change. “The debate is over,” thundered Senator Sanders not long ago, continuing:

The vast majority of the scientific community has spoken. Climate change is real, it is caused by human activity, and it is already causing devastating harm here in the United States, and to people all around the globe. So what are we going to do about it? We will act boldly to move our energy system away from fossil fuels, toward energy efficiency and sustainable energy sources like wind, solar, and geothermal because we have a moral responsibility to leave our kids a planet that is healthy and habitable.

A President Bernie Sanders would continue the radical environmental policies of Barack Obama, and then some. In a lavish position piece, he advocates banning “fossil fuels lobbyists” from working in the White House, ending “the huge subsidies that benefit fossil fuel companies (by “subsidies,” Sanders actually means “tax incentives,” as he makes clear a few lines further), and creating “a national environmental and climate justice plan that recognizes the heightened public health risks faced by low-income and minority communities.” More ominously, the Sanders plan contemplates “Bring[ing] climate deniers to justice so we can aggressively tackle climate change.” If this sounds like some sort of government crackdown on anti-climate change thoughtcrime, be reassured that it is. Sanders plans to crack down on corporations, and perhaps others, who spend money on anti-climate change PR campaigns. According to his campaign website, Sanders is explicit in his intentions:

It is an embarrassment that Republican politicians, with few exceptions, refuse to even recognize the reality of climate change, let alone are prepared to do anything about it. The reality is that the fossil fuel industry is to blame for much of the climate change skepticism in America. Bernie recently called for the Department of Justice to investigate Exxon Mobil, which may have not only known about the dangers of climate change, but has spent millions of dollars to spread doubt about the causes and impacts of burning fossil fuels.

On the burning topic of immigration, Sanders positions himself as the anti-Donald Trump, favoring a “swift and fair legislative roadmap to citizenship for the eleven million undocumented immigrants” and the dismantling of “inhumane deportation programs and detention centers.” Coyly calling illegal immigrants “undocumented people” and “aspiring Americans,” Sanders recommends an immediate cessation of deportation that would allow illegals who have lived in the United States for at least five years — roughly 85 percent of all illegals — to continue to live and work here while a Sanders administration works to make their immigration status permanent and legal. He would also parole illegals in detention and extend all possible government benefits to “aspiring Americans” and their families. The result? Eleven million brand new Americans (Sanders’ number) — all of whom would, presumably, be slavish devotees of the Democratic Party ever after.

Like all leftists, Bernie wants to tilt at the Wall Street windmill, picking up where Barack Obama left off with yet more regulation and control of the financial sector, including capping interest rates that credit cards charge customers and imposing a tax on “speculation” to help defray the cost of free college



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education.

And instead of reducing American dependence on a failing Social Security program, Sanders wants to greatly expand it and many other welfare programs.

As with the proverbial stopped clock, however, Sanders has, however unwittingly, been right on occasion. He has cosponsored legislation to audit the Federal Reserve, an achievement touted on his campaign website. He also advocates getting out of international trade organizations such as NAFTA and CAFTA, and PNTR (permanent normal trade relations), because of the way they disadvantage American workers. He wants to get rid of “Constitution-free zones” within 100 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, where federal agents have essentially free rein to stop, interrogate, and search anyone they please under the guise of looking for illegal aliens. And like Obama, Sanders wants to close down Guantanamo and scale back America’s military commitments overseas.

Overall, however, a Sanders presidency would be yet another catastrophic blow to American liberty and economic well-being. Sanders wants to pay for all his new programs via a bevy of new taxes and other impositions. His program is for still bigger and more intrusive government — which is precisely what socialism entails. Sanders is no American original: Most of his program points are reformulations of things leftists have hankered after since the New Deal. The chief difference between Bernie Sanders and his ideological and partisan predecessors is that the Vermont socialist, if elected, may actually be able to achieve them.

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