



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on July 21, 2015

On Gun Control, Bernie Sanders Is a Conundrum

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders (shown) reflects the bifurcation evident in his state almost from its very beginning. One of only two states to vote against Franklin Roosevelt in all four of his presidential campaigns, Republicans dominated Vermont's politics from 1854 until the mid-1970s. Since then it is one of the most reliably blue states in the union. In 2013, it became the 17th state to decriminalize marijuana, while in 2014, it was the first state to call for a constitutional convention to overturn the Supreme Court's decision in the *Citizens United* case, wherein the court decided that Americans didn't lose their right to financially support political candidates just because the Americans form a corporation. That same year it also became the first state to require GMO labeling.



It is also known for being the state that allows its citizens to carry sidearms without first obtaining a permit, known nationally as "Vermont carry" or "constitutional carry."

When Sanders, then Burlington, Vermont's mayor, decided to run for the House in 1990 as the state's at-large representative, he declared himself to be Independent. [With the assistance of the National Rifle Association \(NRA\)](#), Sanders replaced Republican Peter Smith, who violated his pledge to support the Second Amendment. Taking the position that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," Wayne LaPierre of the NRA wrote, "Bernie Sanders is a more honorable choice for Vermont sportsmen than [incumbent] Peter Smith." The NRA wanted to punish Smith for switching sides on the "assault weapons" ban then being proposed in Congress, and then work to replace Sanders two years later. Judy Shailor, Smith's campaign manager, predicted that that would never happen: Sanders was too savvy a politician ever to let go of his seat. She said, "You won't get him out. He's one of the best master politicians I've ever come across."

True to his word, Sanders voted against the Brady Bill being offered in Congress. Five times. This put him on Mark Joseph Stern's watch list. Writing for *Slate* in May, Stern said that Democrats "should remember that the Vermont senator stands firmly to [Hillary] Clinton's right on one issue of overwhelming importance to the Democratic base: gun control."

Stern took Sanders to task not only for voting against the Brady Bill but for voting in favor of the NRA-backed Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, which protects gun makers and dealers from liability if firearms made or sold by them are used criminally. Stern called it "one of the most noxious pieces of pro-gun legislation ever passed."

Stern's rant delighted Damon Root of *Reason* magazine, who called Sanders the real "gun nut" in the race for the Democratic nomination for president. Politifact.com backed up Root's claim when it investigated a claim by Martin O'Malley's super PAC, Generation Forward, in an attack ad claiming that



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“Bernie Sanders voted against the Brady Bill, background checks and waiting periods.” Learning that Sanders had indeed voted against the bill numerous times as it was wending its way through Congress, Politifact rated O’Malley’s attack ad as Mostly True.

Trying to walk the fine line between his socialist tendencies and his quasi-support of gun rights — he describes himself as a “democratic socialist” — Sanders has baffled the NRA, which at times has rated him C- to F over the years since their initial dalliance in 1990. As former Vermont Associated Press bureau chief Chris Graff explained:

I think he [Sanders] has disappointed many progressives in Vermont with his gun positions, which sort of walk a middle line — angering both sides through the years.

Gun control is a tough issue in Vermont for all politicians.

Stepping back from the muddle over gun rights and looking at Sanders’ positions on other issues is revealing and helpful to conservatives considering him as a possible presidential alternative. For instance, Sanders has bought the line of “excessive wealth inequality” in the country, calling the once-free market now a “rigged economy” that “just doesn’t belong to a handful of billionaires.” Accordingly he supports repeal of some of the tax deductions favored by the highest-income Americans and raising the capital gains tax rate on those same Americans.

He favors breaking up the biggest banks, saying in a politically savvy sound byte: “If an institution is too big to fail, it is too big to exist.”

On trade, however, he has opposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which he called “a continuation of other disastrous trade agreements, like NAFTA, CAFTA, and permanent normal trade relations with China.”

He supports unconstitutional federal funding of “infrastructure” to be paid for by closing “loopholes” in the income tax code favoring the rich. He shows his true socialist colors by supporting the concept of state-ownership of major industries to be controlled by their employees. He wants to expand student loans, making them more affordable to more students. Going further, Sanders favors providing public funding for college students, introducing in May his College for All Act, which would use a 50-cent tax on every \$100 of stock trades to fund it.

Sanders has bought the “green” propaganda that global warming is a serious problem and that government needs to do something about it. He cosponsored, along with California Senator Barbara Boxer, the Global Warming Pollution Reduction Act in 2007, and was rated the Climate Hawks Vote’s top-rated senator in the 113th Congress.

He wants to eliminate the construction of new nuclear power plants and supports the DISCLOSE Act in response to the Supreme Court’s decision in *Citizens United*.

On foreign policy he tries to straddle that elusive middle ground. Sanders has called the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) “a barbaric organization” and a “growing threat” to the United States but opposes perpetual war in the Middle East to neutralize that threat.

On the surveillance state, Sanders remains critical of the NSA, voting against the Patriot Act and all of its renewals, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in May:

In my view, the NSA is out of control and operating in an unconstitutional manner. I worry very much about kids growing up in a society where they think “I’m not going to talk about this issue,



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read this book, or explore this idea because someone may think I'm a terrorist." That is not the kind of free society I want for our children.

Sanders thinks that ObamaCare hasn't gone far enough and looks forward to the day when the sham and the fraud in the program are finally exposed, and a single payer system is installed in its place: "If you are serious about real healthcare reform, the only way to go is single-payer."

He wants to interfere further into the economy and the business-place by mandating that employers provide paid vacations and paid maternity leave for both parents, with similar grants given to workers diagnosed with cancer or who have other serious health problems. He has cosponsored a bill that would force employers to grant their employees at least seven paid sick days a year in the event of a short-term sickness, to take care of routine medical care, or to care for a sick family member.

Perhaps the conundrum faced by those trying to label Sanders was best expressed by the potential Democratic presidential nominee himself when he voted in favor of the NRA-backed Protection of Lawful Commerce in Arms Act, saying:

If somebody has a gun and it falls into the hands of a murderer and the murderer kills somebody with [it], do you hold the gun manufacturer responsible? Not any more than you would hold a hammer company responsible if somebody beats somebody [else] over the head with [it].

We have millions of people who are gun owners in this country — 99.9 percent of those people obey the law. I want to see real serious debate and action on guns, but it is not going to take place if we simply have extreme positions on both sides.

I think I can bring us to the middle.

For his efforts to do so — to find that soft squishy middle ground where everyone is happy — Sanders has earned a Freedom Index rating of just 26 out of 100 when comparing his votes to the requirements of the Constitution he has sworn to uphold and defend.

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