Bernie Sanders, American socialist

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The US primaries begin on 30 January. Hillary Clinton's adversary in the US Democratic primary, Bernie Sanders, has ideas that could be a catalyst for popular discontent among American voters.

One of the strangest things about Bernie Sanders is how familiar his background is to leftists in the US. The Vermont senator and presidential candidate for the Democratic Party (he is not a member) entered politics as most socialists do, through dying organisations on the fringes of American political life.

He was born in Brooklyn in 1941 to Jewish immigrants from Poland and at college joined the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL), the youth wing of the Socialist Party of America. Within a decade that party splintered, and Sanders, like other young members, devoted most of his energies outside YPSL. He threw himself into the movements of his time in the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He then made independent political bids, losing spirited campaigns for Senate and governor on the ticket of Vermont's tiny Liberty Union Party.

He took a break from politics in the late 1970s, working on educational projects, including a Folkways Records collection for which he recited speeches from Eugene V Debs, presidential candidate for the Socialist Party of America, including the line: "I am not a capitalist soldier. I am a proletarian revolutionist. [...] I am opposed to every war but one." The language was out of place in a country about to enter the Reagan revolution, when even the modest accomplishments of the American welfare state were attacked. Yet in 1981 Sanders became mayor of Burlington, Vermont's largest city. The *Vermont Vanguard Press* celebrated the "People's Republic of Burlington" with a special issue, and Sanders put up a portrait of Debs above his new desk.

'Basically a liberal Democrat'

He served three terms as mayor before joining the House of Representatives and entering national politics in 2006 as Vermont's senator. (His Debs portrait now hangs in his Capitol Hill office.) Sanders is technically an independent but caucuses with the Democrats, and his socialism is more like that of Swedish prime minister Olof Palme than the Bolshevik-sympathising Debs. Sanders compares the accomplishments of the Scandinavian welfare state with the inequity of American society, highlighting childhood poverty and lack of affordable healthcare.

For Sanders, socialism is a nod to the rich history of US radicals and reformers, mostly erased from the story of national progress. His voting patterns align closely with progressive Democrats. As Howard Dean said in 2005, "He is basically a liberal Democrat. [...] The bottom line is that Bernie Sanders votes with the Democrats 98% of the time."

So he is not a revolutionary, not as radical as Jeremy Corbyn and his peers on the British Labour left. Sanders focuses on struggles for redistribution, not ownership and control: he went out of his way recently to tell his audience he didn't believe in "government ownership of the means of production" (1), which is not a question that comes up in American political campaigns. However, his defence of the welfare state and denunciations of the wealthy contrast with frontrunner Hillary Clinton's business-friendly policies.

The candidates could not be more different. Clinton is polished and her talking points carefully vetted, Sanders is scraggy and prone to speaking off the cuff. When Sanders was a young socialist and civil rights activist in 1964, Clinton was a supporter of ultra-conservative Republican candidate Barry Goldwater. But the real difference is in their language and the way they frame their appeals, the style

and substance of their politics. Clinton reminds audiences that she "represented Wall Street" as New York senator, Sanders speaks of a "political revolution", not for a socialist programme but to involve people more in democracy and political life (in the way that the politician Jean-Luc Mélenchon speaks of a citizen's revolution in France).

That a socialist could be so popular so fast in 21st-century America surprised many. Mainstream politicians with far-left roots are not anomalous in Europe, but they are in the US, where left-of-centre opinion has been overwhelmingly dominated by social liberal, not socialist, forces. Unlike most of Europe, the US never developed a mass labour party that vied for power and built a generous welfare state. Yet for most of the 20th century, many within the Democratic Party were able to build the fragments of one, and the constituencies that did this — labour unions, civil rights organisations and community groups — are still around. But as they lack structural control of a party that fundamentally represents the interests of capital, they are easily tossed aside, often without any significant resistance. As the gap between them and the policies of party leaders like Barack Obama becomes more evident, it's not a surprise that Sanders gets a wider hearing.

A third way New Democrat

Hillary Clinton's ideological background can be traced to the "third way" New Democrat tradition. New Democrats rallied together under the auspices of the now defunct Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) in the late 1980s, their platform a direct response to the Reagan-era triumph of conservatism. With tax-and-spend liberalism electorally unviable and the labour movement in decline, Democrats promoted a leaner and less obtrusive government, while tinkering with some progressive social policy at the margins.

The role of Bill and Hillary Clinton in transforming the Democratic Party nationally through the 1990s is undeniable. It was Bill Clinton, not Ronald Reagan, who balanced the budget and ended "welfare as we know it". Hillary, as first lady, strongly supported landmark, DLC-backed achievements like the 1996 welfare reform bill, which affected the poorest. President Obama, despite his promises of change in the 2008 primary battle with Clinton, has represented continuity with much of the DLC agenda, apart from his unfinished health insurance reform. His willingness to compromise with business has disappointed part of the Democratic base.

Several political currents have swept against the Clinton line, especially after the 2008 financial crisis. The Tea Party movement and bombast of Donald Trump dominate headlines, yet the Occupy movement, the Chicago Teachers Union strike, fast-food worker activity, movements against police violence, and attention to income inequality all point to the incipient re-emergence of the American left. Sanders is attempting to build organisation and pressure from this left: "If I run, my job is to help bring together the kind of coalition that can win, that can transform politics" (2).

The long-term effects of his campaign remain to be seen, but he is striking a chord. The longshot candidate is within reach of Clinton in Iowa and leads in New Hampshire, home to the second Democratic primary. Surprisingly, Sanders has kept up in the money game, hugely important to US politics. In October, Sanders raised nearly $41.5m from 681,000 people. This progress has forced Hillary Clinton to rethink positions, and last October she announced her opposition to the Trans-Pacific trade pact (TPP), which she had previously backed.

Even so, Sanders faces nearly insurmountable barriers. He trails in other states, voters still perceive him to be less electable than Clinton (despite polls that show him winning over Republican contenders), and he doesn't have the same name recognition. He also has almost no pledged support from "superdelegates" — current or former officeholders, free to back any candidate, about 20% of Democratic convention delegates. Even the most progressive figures in the Democratic Party — Elizabeth Warren, Jesse Jackson and Bill de Blasio — have not publicly backed him.

Little help from the unions

Socialist Sanders gets only limited help from the unions, a telling illustration of the state of the American labour movement. In November, the two-million-member Service Employees International Union (SEIU) endorsed Clinton, over the objection of many of its locals. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) had already done the same. Clinton now has the support of unions representing about 9.5 million union members, 66% of the dwindling union base (3). There are a few exceptions: the National Nurses United, with over 180,000 members, and the American Postal Workers Union, with 200,000, both endorsed Sanders. In December, the Communications Workers of America, the largest US media union, with 700,000 members, announced it was supporting Sanders (its former president, Larry Cohen, is the labour adviser to Sanders' campaign). But the big players in labour do not want to break with the frontrunner. The same is true of influential networks of black pastors, state legislators and others in civil society who are less familiar with Sanders and not prone to supporting party outsiders. Clinton does not have to worry much. Nationally, she's the best known and most popular Democratic figure and elicits the most confidence from primary voters wary of the early success and rhetoric of Trump in the Republican primaries. Centrist Democrats have long maintained their dominance by presenting themselves as the lesser evil.

The Sanders campaign is not a movement to transform the Democratic Party from within — like Eugene McCarthy in 1968 or George McGovern in 1972 — nor is the left strong enough to build something like the National Rainbow Coalition that emerged out of the Jesse Jackson campaign in the 1980s. But it is a way for millions alienated from mainstream politics to voice discontent with the status quo, and that is why Sanders resonates with voters: he believes that government can help ordinary people and that the way to get reforms is through building movements capable of coercing capital and winning concessions.

Despite his rising appeal in recent months, there are not more than a few thousand Sanders supporters, a small number in a country of 330 million. That may be enough to push socialist ideas into public debate, and present arguments to those who blame the "billionaire class" — as Sanders calls it — for their situation. Given the nature of the Democratic Party, and its history of co-opting insurgencies from the left, working within its primary is a questionable strategy. But Sanders has little to lose and much to gain — especially the potential for a large new audience interested in the "s-word" to connect to.