THE POPULIST PROPHET

Bernie Sanders has spent decades attacking inequality. Now the country is listening.

BY MARGARET TALBOT

Sanders’s young fans combine admiration for his progressive conviction with a slightly condescending fondness for cranky old people.

ILLUSTRATION BY EDWARD SOREL

If you attended a Bernie Sanders rally this summer, when his seemingly quixotic Presidential campaign began gathering force, you might have noticed a few surprising things about the crowd. One was the scarcity of nonwhite faces—a problem that the campaign would soon be confronted by, very publicly. Another was how many young people were turning out to see an irascible seventy-four-year-old senator from Vermont. But that’s a little like being surprised that some millennials appreciate Neil Young or Joni Mitchell at a time when it’s easy to find songs from different decades in a promiscuous jumble online. Young people who like Bernie Sanders like him because he sounds like an old record. He’s been talking about the injustices done to working people by unequal income distribution for more than forty years. His voice, often hoarse from his habitually loud and impassioned speeches, even has the crackle of worn vinyl.

In Portland, Maine, on an evening in July, the line to see Sanders looped around the Cross Insurance Arena. Sanders’s popularity had clearly been exceeding his own expectations. In a conversation this summer, he recalled an event in Minneapolis: “I was blown away. We were driving in, we saw these lines of people snaking down the sidewalk. ‘Jesus, what is that? There’s a ballgame going on?’”

At the Portland rally, I met a group of five friends who were drawn to Sanders because of his commitment to banish money from politics: he has sharply criticized the Supreme Court’s 2010 decision, in Citizens United, to permit unlimited campaign spending by corporations, and has lamented the outsize influence exerted by billionaires. Several of the friends praised Sanders’s pledge to raise the federal minimum wage to fifteen dollars an hour. One member of the group, Erin Kiley, a millennial who owns Portland Flea-for-
All, a marketplace of vintage and artisanal goods, said that she developed “a huge political crush on Bernie” in 2010, after Sanders delivered an eight-and-a-half-hour speech on the Senate floor to protest the extension of tax cuts instituted during the Presidency of George W. Bush. Sanders’s gruffness, didacticism, and indifference to appearances—both he and his wife, Jane, told me how much he loathes shopping—are central to his appeal. All the friends described Sanders as “authentic,” a word that many people would be hesitant to apply to Hillary Clinton. Kiley acknowledged that Sanders’s unvarnished qualities might turn off some voters, but noted that in the current election cycle “the whole spectrum of candidates is less schmoozy, polished, and warm.” She went on, “Everyone seems a little off the wall. Howard Dean was thrown off the national stage for being angry. But people like Trump because he’s an asshole and says whatever he wants.” Kiley’s friend Dawn York, who runs a vintage-clothing shop, said, “Most candidates are robotic and rehearsed.” She saw “a real person in Bernie.”

Sanders has been known as a democratic socialist for decades. This didn’t matter much to Kiley or York, or to most other Sanders supporters I met during the next few weeks; mainly, they were impressed that he hadn’t shed the term. York thought that, because of Sanders and his “social-media-driven fans,” socialism was “getting a bit of a P.R. makeover.” She noted that sites like Reddit and Twitter were circulating videos of “Bernie explaining why he identifies as a socialist, and what it means to him, in a really positive light.” She added, “The word had a retro connection to Communism and was originally thrown at him as a damning label by his opponents. But for his supporters it isn’t a deterrent.”

A 2011 Pew Research Center survey found that, among voters under the age of thirty, forty-nine per cent had a positive view of socialism. (Only forty-six per cent had a positive view of capitalism.) Peter Dreier, a professor of politics at Occidental College, who has written about Sanders, says that younger voters “may not be willing to entertain a whole new system, but they are open to a pretty profound critique of the current one. They’re not as naïve as Americans used to be during the Cold War—they know that there are varieties of capitalism, that there is social democracy in Scandinavia and Canada, where the government plays a bigger role in regulating corporations and in expanding the safety net.”

At a recent San Francisco gathering for Sanders, I met Derek Zender, a twenty-three-year-old marketing student. He told me that his parents, who live in Orange County, dismissed Sanders as “a decrepit old socialist who means well but doesn’t understand how the world works.” Zender thought they were overlooking the fact that “many American institutions—Social Security, unions, Medicare, the postal service—have elements of socialism.”
In Portland, Sanders took the stage, a little hunched in a gray suit jacket. His flyaway white hair was largely subdued, but his face turned pink with exertion as he delivered an hour-long speech, during which he did not use a teleprompter and barely consulted a sheaf of loose yellow papers on the lectern. “America today is the wealthiest country in the history of the world,” he declared. “But most people don’t know that, most people don’t feel that, most people don’t see that—because almost all of the wealth rests in the hands of a tiny few.” Sanders signals his moral ferocity by choosing words like “horrific” and “abysmal” and sonically italicizing them, as in “This grotesque level of income and wealth inequality is immoral.” He was born in Brooklyn, and his unreconstructed borough growl reminds voters that he stands apart from the “oligarchy.” His hand gestures are as emphatic as a traffic cop’s. When he delivers speeches, he’ll often jab his finger at the lectern, as though he were enumerating the plagues at Passover.

“This part of the ride always creeps me out.”

Most of his policy proposals have to do with helping working people and reducing the influence of the wealthy. He would like to break up the big banks, create jobs by rebuilding infrastructure, and move toward public funding of elections—and provide free tuition at public universities. (This program would be subsidized, in part, by a tax on Wall Street speculation.) He wants to end the “international embarrassment of being the only major country on Earth which does not guarantee workers paid medical and family leave.” In the speeches I heard, Sanders rarely discussed foreign policy, though he spoke with conviction about climate change and the need for the U.S. to set an example for Russia, India, and China by using fewer fossil fuels. He tends to sound both doleful and optimistic, like a doctor who has a grave diagnosis to deliver—and no time for small talk—but is convinced that he can help his patient heal.

Huck Gutman, one of Sanders’s close friends, is an English professor at the University of Vermont; from 2008 to 2012, he served as Sanders’s chief of staff in the Senate. “It doesn’t matter what issue comes up—Bernie understands that the fundamental issue for Americans is economic,” Gutman said. “His record on abortion, on gay marriage, on a great number of things has been very good and very liberal, but he never sees those as the central issues. The central issue is: Are people doing O.K., or are a small number of people ripping them off?”

Despite this abiding interest, Sanders does not seem to have immersed himself that deeply in the extensive literature on inequality. When I spoke with him in his Senate office, I asked him how his ideas on economic fairness were formed. “No one can answer that,” he replied. “How were your ideas formed?” He did not particularly warm to
discussing the theories of such economists as Joseph Stiglitz and Thomas Piketty. (Gutman told me, “I read a third of Piketty’s book. I don’t think Bernie would read a page of it.” Sanders was interested less in academic arguments, Gutman said, than in hard numbers that “exemplify the disparities he sees and feels and hears about from people.”) Sanders dutifully mentioned that the economist Stephanie Kelton is an adviser to the Democrats on the Senate Budget Committee, of which he is the ranking member, but he was ardent in his admiration for Pope Francis, who has condemned the “economy of exclusion.” Sanders called the Pope “an extraordinary figure,” adding, “My God, he came along right at the time we need him!”

After speeches, Sanders spars about issues with voters or reporters. Garrison Nelson, a political scientist at the University of Vermont, who has known him for decades, says that if Sanders is walking down the street in Burlington “and somebody yells at him Bernie will talk to him—‘What’s the matter? Whadd’ya mean?’” He also understands the necessity of the selfie dance, maneuvering quickly into place and smiling briefly. Sanders does not excel, however, at the middle ground of casual, friendly conversation. He has no gift for anecdote. When talking to voters, Hillary Clinton has perfected the head-cocked semblance of keen interest; it’s clear when Sanders becomes bored. Nelson told me, “Bernie’s the last person you’d want to be stuck on a desert island with. Two weeks of lectures about health care, and you’d look for a shark and dive in.” Nelson has voted for him many times.

Paula Routly, who is the publisher of Seven Days, a popular weekly in Burlington, told me a story that captured the counterintuitive Sanders charm. In 2012, she hosted a gathering of alternative-newspaper publishers, and tried to show them Vermont at its most distinctive. One evening, Jerry, of Ben & Jerry’s, scooped ice cream; on another, Senator Sanders stopped by a group dinner. As Routly recalls, “There were no niceties or glad-handing before he launched into a brief but impassioned rant, tailored specifically for our group. He told us we were doing a great job of covering the arts but a lousy one reporting on economic issues. Message delivered—he didn’t want to meet anyone or eat anything or answer any questions. He was out of there.” Everyone loved it. “He only talks to people in one register, but it’s a very effective one,” Routly said.

Though Sanders is steadfastly earnest, the youthful enthusiasm for him often partakes of irony. Whimsical buttons feature the slogan “Feel the Bern,” and Tumblr is full of memes that play up the contrast between Sanders’s age and his popularity with hipsters. It’s similar to the way that some admirers of Ruth Bader Ginsburg have taken to calling her the Notorious R.B.G. Both fandoms combine admiration for progressive conviction with a slightly condescending fondness for cranky senior citizens. Rich Yeselson, a contributing editor at the left-wing journal Dissent, told me, “The sort of detached, post-Jon Stewart generation—they’re the ones putting inverted commas around what Bernie stands for. ‘Look at this grumpy old Jewish socialist from Brooklyn!’ It’s not cynical, though—they really believe in what he’s saying.”
Sanders’s message is particularly potent for young people who are struggling financially. Several weeks after the rally, I wrote to Dawn York, and she said that she had been thinking about “how refreshing it was to have someone point out to us that, as hardworking Americans, some things aren’t a privilege, they are a right. . . . I’m self-employed, I started my own business three and a half years ago, and my husband works full-time for Whole Foods—and we barely get by. We own a home, we both graduated from college, and we work more than forty hours a week, and we can barely put oil in our heating tanks in the winter. We have no savings and no way to financially handle any hiccups that may come our way. And I had to be reminded that it shouldn’t be that way.”

Garrison Nelson describes Sanders as being “more from the nineteen-thirties left than the sixties one.” In June, when NPR’s David Greene pressed Sanders on whether he embraced the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” the Senator got irritated. “It’s too easy for quote-unquote liberals to be saying, ‘Well, let’s use this phrase,’” he said. “We need a massive jobs program to put black kids to work and white kids to work and Hispanic kids to work. So my point is, is that it’s sometimes easy to worry about which phrase you’re going to use. It’s a lot harder to stand up to the billionaire class.”

Sanders does not argue that greater economic equality would end racism, but for most of his career he has subsumed discussions of race under class. Van Jones, a criminal-justice reformer and a former Obama adviser, derides that approach as “trickle-down justice”—and told Salon in August that he had been “warning the white populists in the Party, behind the scenes, for several months, that their continued insistence on advancing a color-blind, race-neutral populism was going to blow up in their faces.”

“The next number is also birdsong.”

On July 18th in Phoenix, Sanders appeared at Netroots Nation, an annual conference of progressive activists. Before he began his remarks, demonstrators flooded the room and began chanting “Black lives matter!”

After taking the stage, Sanders told the moderator, “Whoa, let me talk about what I want to talk about for a moment!” A few minutes later, when protesters again interrupted the proceedings, he addressed them directly: “Black lives, of course, matter. I spent fifty years of my life fighting for civil rights and for dignity! But if you don’t want me to be here that’s O.K. I don’t want to outscream people.”

A week later, in his Senate office, Sanders sounded chastened. “The issues these young people raised are enormously important,” he said. The video showing the arrest of Sandra Bland, the African-American woman who died in a Texas jail, had just been released, and
Sanders seemed shaken. “It impacted my night’s sleep,” he said. “I don’t sleep that great, and it made it even worse.” He went on, “It’s hard to imagine if Sandra Bland was white she would have been thrown to the ground and assaulted and insulted.” Sanders, speaking more broadly about police violence directed at black people, said, “I plead guilty—I should have been more sensitive at the beginning of this campaign to talk about this issue.”

On July 25th, Sanders addressed the annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, in Baton Rouge. “I’m aware that many of you don’t know me very well,” he said. His tone was friendlier than usual, and he even made a joke: “I was the best and worst congressman Vermont had.” (Vermont has only one.) One of the convention’s listed sponsors was Koch Industries, and it was the first time I saw Sanders give a speech in which he did not inveigh against the company’s billionaire owners, who lavishly support conservative causes. He had folded in a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr., though, which worked well for him: “Now our struggle is for genuine equality, which means economic equality. For we know that it isn’t enough to integrate lunch counters. What does it profit a man to be able to eat at an integrated lunch counter if he doesn’t earn enough money to buy a hamburger and a cup of coffee?”

In August, Sanders’s campaign issued a racial-justice platform that recommended police reform, federal funding for police body cameras, a ban on for-profit prisons, and the elimination of mandatory-minimum jail sentences. The platform also included a broad defense of voting rights. (Among other things, Sanders proposes making Election Day a federal holiday.) The document is divided into sections called “Physical Violence,” “Political Violence,” “Legal Violence,” and “Economic Violence,” strongly echoing the language and priorities of Black Lives Matter. At the same time, the platform reasserted Sanders’s core philosophy: “We must simultaneously address the structural and institutional racism which exists in this country, while at the same time we vigorously attack the grotesque level of income and wealth inequality which is making the very rich much richer while everyone else—especially those in our minority communities—are becoming poorer.”

Van Jones said of Sanders, “He’s shown tremendous character in his willingness to engage and grow and change.” But Vermont is ninety-five per cent white, and Sanders needed to establish stronger bonds with black voters. No African-American leader, Jones observed, would be surprised to get a call from the Clintons. Sanders was “a reliable civil-rights vote, but not somebody who has been connected to these communities, to these kids and their neighborhoods. He’s not showing up to the funerals.”

American politicians know the power of a personal story. The first lines of Jeb Bush’s biography on his official campaign site describe how he met his wife, Columba: “My life changed forever when I was a young man on an exchange program in León, Guanajuato, Mexico. Across a plaza, I saw a girl. She spoke little English, and my
Spanish was a work in progress. But for me, it was love at first sight.” Hillary Clinton’s official online biography sounds like one of those books about great Americans aimed at young readers: her father’s drapery business and “rock-ribbed” Republicanism, her family’s Methodism, and her youthful turn as a Girl Scout all get their due. Elizabeth Warren, the Massachusetts senator whose critiques of income inequality presaged Sanders’s Presidential campaign, often speaks of her parents’ economic hardship to help explain her values today.

Sanders’s campaign Web site lists his educational history, says that he is married to Jane Sanders and that they have four children and seven grandchildren, and mentions that he worked as “a carpenter and a documentary filmmaker” before entering politics. That’s it for personal stuff.

There’s something admirable about Sanders’s reluctance to attribute his political beliefs to autobiography: he doesn’t want voters thinking that his commitment to redistributive economics stems from anything other than a deep-seated sense of fairness. He has neither the conventional politician’s instinct for sharing relatable details nor the contemporary left’s reverence for personal testimony. Still, he’s running for President, and so he has reluctantly cracked open the door to his private life, even if his supporters are drawn to him, in part, because of that reluctance.

When I asked Sanders a question about his early years, he sighed with the air of a man who knows he can no longer put off that visit to the periodontist. “I understand,” he said. “I really do. For people to elect a President, you’ve got to know that person—you’ve got to trust them.” He insisted that he was happy to talk about his life. But he couldn’t resist sermonizing first: “When I talk about a political revolution, what I’m talking about is how we create millions of decent-paying jobs, how we reduce youth unemployment, how we join the rest of the world, major countries, in having paid family and sick leave. I know those issues are not quite as important as my personal life.” And then, unnecessarily: “I’m being facetious.”

“It’s a balloon reminder that all joy is fleeting.”

Sanders did say that two aspects of his upbringing had exerted a lasting influence. One was coming from a family that never had much money. And the other was growing up Jewish—less for the religious content than for the sense it imbued in him that politics mattered. Sanders’s father was a Polish Jew who, at the age of seventeen, came to America shortly after his brother, and struggled through the Depression in Brooklyn. By the time Sanders was born, in 1941, his father was working
as a paint salesman. Sanders had an older brother, Larry, and their mother stayed home, like most of the women in their lower-middle-class corner of Flatbush. He went to public schools, including James Madison High School, an incubator of civic talent, from which Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Senator Chuck Schumer also graduated. He didn’t make the school’s championship basketball team—a deep disappointment—but he ran cross-country, and feels that this activity accounts for some of his formidable stamina today.

“There was tension about money,” Sanders said of his family. They lived in a three-and-a-half-room rent-controlled apartment, and his mother pined for a house. “It wasn’t a question of putting food on the table. It was a question of arguing about whether you buy this or whether you buy that. You know, families do this. I remember a great argument about drapes—whether we could afford them. And I remember going with my mother when we had to buy a jacket. We went to literally fifteen different stores to buy the damned cheapest—I mean, the best deal.” He went on, “I do know what it’s like when the electric company shuts off the electricity and the phone company shuts off the phone—all that stuff. So, for me, to talk to working-class people is not very hard.”

I spoke with a few of Sanders’s contemporaries who had grown up in the same neighborhood, and their memories were rosier: they recalled kids playing stickball on safe, familiar streets until their parents called them home for dinner. But Sanders rarely communicates in the key of nostalgia. He’ll talk about how the “great American middle class” is being hollowed out, but unlike some populists he doesn’t dwell lovingly on the nineteen-fifties, when high-paying manufacturing jobs, union membership, and the G.I. Bill allowed single-earner families to prosper. That’s a political strength, because there are many people—African-Americans, above all—for whom the fifties cannot be recalled as an idyll.

Sid Ganis, a Hollywood producer who grew up in the same building as Sanders, described their neighborhood as an enclave of “ordinary secular Jews,” adding, “Some of us went to Hebrew school, but mainly it was an identity in that it got us out of school on Jewish holidays.” Sanders told me that, in the aftermath of the Second World War, his family “got a call in the middle of the night about some relative of my father’s, who was in a displaced-persons camp in Europe someplace.” Sanders learned that many of his father’s other relatives had perished. Sanders’s parents had been fundamentally apolitical, but he took away a lesson: “An election in 1932 ended up killing fifty million people around the world.”

Sanders’s close friend Richard Sugarman, an Orthodox Jew who teaches religious studies at the University of Vermont, said, “He’s not what you would call rule-observant.” But, Sugarman added, “if you talk about his Jewish identity, it’s strong. It’s certainly more ethnic and cultural than religious—except for his devotion to the ethical part of public life in Judaism, the moral part. He does have a prophetic sensibility.” Sugarman and
Sanders were housemates for a while in the seventies, and Sugarman says that his friend would often greet him in the morning by saying, “We’re not crazy, you know,” referring to the anger they felt about social injustices. Sugarman would respond, “Could you say good morning first?”

Sanders attended Brooklyn College for a year, then transferred to the University of Chicago, where he joined the Young People’s Socialist League and the Congress on Racial Equality. He also took part in protests for the desegregation of the Chicago public schools and of university-owned housing. Jim Rader, a friend who first met him in Chicago, recalls that Sanders was a “leader of the civil-rights movement on campus.” Sanders, who received a political-science degree in 1964, has said that he was a mediocre student because he found the classroom boring and irrelevant—and that he learned “infinitely more on the streets and in the community.”

By the time Sanders graduated, both his parents had died, and his brother had moved to England. (Larry Sanders, who became a social worker and a Green Party councillor, lives in Oxford.) Jane Sanders told me that it had taken her a long time to realize quite how “alone in the world” her future husband had been during his late teens and early twenties. He did a stint on a kibbutz in Israel, worked as an aide at a psychiatric hospital, taught in a Head Start program, and had a carpentry business with a few other guys in New York. It was called Creative Carpentry, and Rader says that it was accurately named: “They advertised in the *Village Voice*, but didn’t know much about carpentry. They’d go to the hardware store to buy supplies, and ask the clerk how to do the repairs they’d been hired to do.”

Sanders got married for the first time, to a woman named Deborah Shiling, just after college, and they took a road trip from New York to Vermont, where Sanders had never been. The couple ended up buying eighty-five acres of wooded land near Montpelier, for twenty-five hundred dollars. They had preceded the waves of back-to-the-land hippies. Sanders told me, convincingly, “I wasn’t a hippie.” He’d been enchanted by the thought of living in lush, green Vermont ever since he and his brother had collected some travel brochures touting the state’s farms.

Sanders and Shiling soon divorced. (She eventually became a wine and cheese buyer for a Vermont food co-op.) In 1969, he had a son, Levi, with Susan Campbell Mott, a girlfriend. In July, *Politico* reported that Levi was not the product of his first marriage, as many people had assumed, in an article titled “Bernie Sanders Has a Secret.” It came as a surprise to reporters who’d covered Sanders for years in Vermont, but it wasn’t the sort of revelation likely to scandalize his supporters in 2015.

> “Row faster, Manny—I just spotted my ex.”
Sanders wore his social conscience on his sleeve, but few people who knew him in the sixties and seventies would have predicted that he would become a leading candidate for the Democratic Presidential nomination. In those days, he occupied himself by writing freelance articles—critiques of the stultifying effects of office work or the social-control mechanism of television—and by making very low-budget educational filmstrips. It’s safe to say that had Sanders stuck with that career he would not have given Ken Burns a run for his money. One filmstrip, a portrait of Sanders’s hero, the socialist Eugene V. Debs, was rendered with static images that remained on the screen for a good long while. Sanders himself voiced Debs, an Indiana native, making him sound like a guy from Flatbush. A narrator chided viewers that if they were like the average American “who watches television forty hours a week” they would know “such important people as Kojak and Wonder Woman” and “have heard about dozens of different kinds of underarm spray deodorants” but would likely never have heard of Debs. (Another cultural foray of Sanders’s that makes you glad he stuck with politics: a 1987 cassette tape in which he talk-sings folk songs, William Shatner style. Imagine “This Land Is Your Land” recited, in stentorian tones, over reggae-style guitar.)

People who knew Sanders when he was in his thirties tend to share stories about how broke and frugal he was. Rader told me that when Sanders first bought land in Vermont, and was still living part time in New York, he sometimes camped out in the new property’s only shelter: a maple-sugar shack. He had devised his own equivalent of Sterno, which his friends dubbed Berno. “It was a roll of toilet paper soaked in lighter fluid inside a coffee can,” Rader said. “He’d cook over that.”

In 1971, Rader invited Sanders to a meeting of Vermont’s left-wing Liberty Union Party, in Plainfield. Sanders brought his son along, and there’s a photograph of them at the meeting: Sanders is skinny, serious, with a luxuriant head of curls, uninhibited sideburns, and Buddy Holly glasses; his towheaded toddler sits in his lap. The organizers asked if anyone would run for the Senate, and Sanders, one of the willing few, got the nod. It was the beginning of his political career, though he shared the fate of most Liberty Union candidates: he lost by an enormous margin. During the next ten years, he ran twice for senator and twice for governor, and never got more than six per cent of the vote. Nevertheless, he discovered that he had an appetite for campaigning—and a keen desire to hold elected office. “The difference between Bernie and most of the lefties is Bernie wants to win,” Garrison Nelson said. “Most lefties don’t want to win, because if you win you sell out your purity.”
In 1980, Sanders’s friend Richard Sugarman suggested that he try for mayor of Burlington. Locals were disenchanted with the five-term incumbent, a Democrat named Gordon Paquette. Sanders ran as an Independent, and won by ten votes. Even in Vermont, it was unusual to elect a socialist in the time of Ronald Reagan; Sanders was a thirty-nine-year-old man who didn’t own a suit. As Paula Routly told me, “Monied interests were shaking in their boots at first.”

Yet Sanders turned out to be a popular and effective mayor, and more pragmatic than some might have predicted. True, he travelled to Nicaragua, where he met with Daniel Ortega and found a sister city for Burlington. (Vermont reporters dubbed the mayor and his coalition the Sandernistas.) But he also presided over economic development that transformed the city into a hipper, more forward-looking place—one of those small cities that appear on lists of the most livable. And he did so without the kind of wrenching gentrification that he abhorred. His administration devised creative solutions for preserving affordable housing, including a community land trust that enabled low-income residents to buy homes. It became a model for other cities. Sanders also resisted a developer’s plan to turn the derelict Lake Champlain waterfront into a cluster of high-rises, promising instead public access and open space. Today, the waterfront has a park, a bike trail, a science center, a community boathouse, and limited commercial development. He created a youth office, an arts council, and a women’s commission, and during his tenure minor-league baseball came to Burlington. Business leaders learned, Nelson said, “not to fear him.” Jim Condon, a Vermont state legislator and a former reporter who used to cover Mayor Sanders, wrote of him recently, “He got a lot done, but not through the art of gentle persuasion. Bernie’s style was top-down and confrontational.” Still, he was reelected three times.

Sanders met Jane O’Meara Driscoll, a community organizer nine years his junior and a divorced mother of three young children, when she invited him to a debate during his first mayoral campaign. After he was elected, he named her the director of a new office dedicated to improving the lives of kids and teen-agers in Burlington. They were married in 1988, and spent what even Sanders admits was “a strange honeymoon,” in the Soviet Union, finalizing a sister-city relationship with the city of Yaroslavl. Jane has worked closely with him ever since, on a volunteer basis—she was his chief of staff for a year in the House, and has handled his press relations at various times. Along the way, she had served as the provost of Goddard College, in Plainfield, where she had earned a bachelor’s degree in social work, and, later, the president of Burlington College. All four children in the Sanders family are now grown. Levi Sanders works as a paralegal at Boston Legal Services; Heather directs the Sedona Yoga Festival with her husband; Carina started a woodworking school, and has served as a state legislator in Vermont; Dave is a senior executive at a quintessential Vermont company, Burton Snowboards.
Jane typically accompanies her husband on the Presidential campaign trail. She smiles more easily than he does, and looks approachable in her slacks and patterned tunic tops. In August, we met in Burlington, and though Jane was nursing a campaign-trail cough, she was animated about her husband: “I feel more, every day, that he can win. My kids find it really frustrating that they always say in the media, ‘But, of course, he can’t win.’” She went on, “I just tell them, ‘They have said he can’t do this until we prove we can. They’re gonna say he can’t until we can. And that’s what’s always happened with Bernie.’” She mentioned a Quinnipiac University poll showing that, in a general-election contest against Donald Trump, Sanders would win by eight percentage points. (The same poll indicated that Vice-President Joe Biden, who is considering entering the race, would win by twelve points.) “Bernie can defeat Republicans—he’s done it here,” Jane said. “And he’s had them join him on certain things. He’s a democratic socialist, but he’ll work with Republicans to get things done.”

“Instead of ‘It sucks’ you could say, ‘It doesn’t speak to me.’”

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When Sanders first ran for the House of Representatives, in 1988, he lost to a Republican named Peter Smith, the scion of a banking family. During Smith’s first term, he co-sponsored an assault-rifle ban. In 1990, Sanders ran again, and the N.R.A. went after Smith, sending letters to its Vermont members describing Sanders as the lesser of two evils, since he wasn’t publicly supporting the ban. Sanders won. This is the origin of the critique that Sanders has weak gun-control credentials for a progressive. Vermont is a gun-friendly state: twenty-eight per cent of its residents own firearms, according to a recent survey, and it has some of the nation’s most permissive gun laws.

In national office, Sanders has not been a vocal proponent of strict gun control. In 1993, he voted against the Brady Bill, objecting to its imposition of a five-day waiting period to buy a handgun. And in 2009 he voted to allow guns in national parks and on Amtrak trains. Over the years, he has also voted for some restrictions, including a semi-automatic-assault-weapons ban and instant criminal-background checks. The N.R.A. has given him grades ranging from C- to F. (It’s a tough grader.) But he has never been out front on the issue, partly because it doesn’t seem to engage him deeply, and partly because he wants to retain the loyalty of voters in northeast Vermont, where hunting is popular. Sanders tends to present guns as an urban problem that Vermonters can afford not to worry about, though mass shootings can happen anywhere and suicides by gun are as much a problem in Vermont as they are in other states. He told me, “I’m proud of my state, and I think I’m in a good position to try to bridge the gap between urban America
—where guns mean one thing, where guns mean guns in the hands of kids who are
shooting each other or shooting at police officers—and rural America, where significant
majorities of people are gun owners, and ninety-nine per cent of them are lawful.”

Sanders’s congressional career did not get off to a promising start. As an Independent, he
had a hard time landing committee assignments. Garrison Nelson recalls, “Bernie shows
up in Washington in 1991, there’s still a chunk of Southerners in the Democratic caucus,
and they do not want Bernie in the caucus.” Sanders didn’t help matters by giving more
than one interview denouncing Congress. “This place is not working,” he told the
Associated Press. “It is failing. Change is not going to take place until many hundreds of
these people are thrown out of their offices.” He went on, “Congress does not have the
courage to stand up to the powerful interests. I have the freedom to speak my mind.”

Some of his colleagues returned the favor. Joe Moakley, a Massachusetts Democrat who
was the chairman of the influential House Rules Committee, told the A.P. reporter, “He
screams and hollers, but he is all alone.” Another Democrat from the Massachusetts
delegation, Barney Frank, was even more blunt. “Bernie alienates his natural allies,” he
said. “His holier-than-thou attitude—saying, in a very loud voice, he is smarter than
everyone else and purer than everyone else—really undercuts his effectiveness.”

Nelson told me that, when he ran into Sanders in Burlington, he warned him not to keep
“pissing in the soup,” adding, “You’re our only representative!” According to Nelson,
Sanders said, “Gary, you have no idea how totally corrupt it is.” Nelson responded,
“Bernie, I'm a historian of Congress. Give me a year, I'll give you a scandal.”

In time, Sanders became slightly more discriminating in his criticism, and made some
allies. He was one of the founding members and the first chair of the Congressional
Progressive Caucus, which has grown steadily over the years, from six members in 1991
to seventy-one today. The C.P.C. produces an annual progressive budget as an alternative
to the one that actually passes; it tends to operate mainly as a conscience of the left. He
worked hard with Democrats to keep jobs in his state and campaigned to strengthen
federal regulation of milk prices, because it helped Vermont dairy farmers. (He once
wrote that he’d developed “an almost emotional attachment” to these farmers, despite not
knowing “one end of a cow from the other” when he arrived in the state.) In national
matters such as curbing the excesses of the Patriot Act, Sanders found that he could at
least try to make incremental changes through the amendment process; in 2005, a Rolling
Stone profile dubbed him “the amendment king.”

At home, Sanders became a symbol of Vermont’s cussed uniqueness, as affectionately
regarded as a scoop of Chunky Monkey. He was reëlected to the House seven times. And
his ascent to the Senate, in 2006, was stunning: he trounced the Republican candidate,
Richard Tarrant, one of the wealthiest men in the state, by thirty-three percentage points.
But when Sanders has run for the Vermont governorship he hasn’t done well. Jim
Condon, the state legislator and former reporter, notes, “That’s telling. People here like him making a lot of noise in Washington for a little state—they’re happy to send a human hand grenade down there.” But they don’t necessarily want Sanders running the state.

Since joining the Senate, Sanders has received the most attention for his gestures of defiance—such as his marathon oration against tax cuts for the wealthiest, which was published in book form as “The Speech: A Historic Filibuster on Corporate Greed and the Decline of Our Middle Class.” Still, he has been a very active legislator. An analysis by the nonpartisan Web site GovTrack shows him tied for sixth place among senators who introduced the most bills in the 2013-14 session of Congress, and in tenth place for the number of bills that made it out of committee. The site also noted that he tends to gather co-sponsors for his bills only among Democrats.

“Yes, sir, caricatures can be very revealing, but that’s not what I’m doing.”

MARCH 5, 2001

Yet Sanders has proved himself capable of bipartisan dealmaking. In the 2013-14 session, he was the chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, and though he did not serve in the military—and typically opposes military interventions—he has been a strong advocate for veterans. Last year, he worked with an unlikely ally, the Arizona Republican John McCain, to hammer out a compromise to reform the ailing V.A. health system. The bill provided five billion dollars in additional funding to hire and train new medical staff, made it easier to dismiss V.A. officials for incompetence, and allowed veterans to go outside the system if the wait for a doctor was too long. Sanders explained to reporters that it was far from the bill he would have devised on his own: “It opens up a fear of privatization, which I strongly, strongly am opposed to.” But he sounded pleased with his ball-passing skills: “When you become chairman, you can’t just say, ‘This is the way I want it.’”

McCain, in turn, expressed respect for his unlikely partner, telling the Huffington Post, “Negotiating with Bernie was not a usual experience, because he is very passionate and he and I are both very strong-willed people, and we spend a lot of time banging our fists on the table and having the occasional four-letter word. But at the end of the day Bernie was result-oriented.”

Sanders is proud of a few other Senate deals. He successfully made an amendment to the Affordable Care Act which allotted eleven billion dollars for community-health centers to provide primary care regardless of patients’ ability to pay. And, he said, he had done
“everything I could do to stop the Republicans—and, sadly, the President and a few Democrats—from cutting Social Security, through the chained C.P.I.” The chained C.P.I., a different way of calculating the annual cost-of-living increases in Social Security, would likely have lowered the increases for most people, and Obama proposed adopting it in his 2014 budget. Sanders helped lead the opposition, and the President recently stopped pushing for the proposal. “It was a tough fight,” Sanders said. “But now, as a result of a lot of grassroots activism, the debate is about expanding Social Security rather than about cutting it.”

Could Bernie Sanders win the Democratic nomination, let alone the Presidency? It is unlikely, for one of the reasons that he’s running for President: money dominates the electoral system. By October 1st, Clinton had raised more than a hundred million dollars, much of it from Super PACs and big donors. Sanders, who refuses to take money from Super PACs, had raised forty-one million dollars, mostly in donations of less than two hundred dollars each. These totals leave him at a major disadvantage. Still, his haul is impressive, and in the most recent fund-raising cycle donations to his campaign were neck and neck with Clinton’s: between July and October, he raised twenty-six million dollars to her twenty-eight million.

It’s impressive, too, that in a recent YouGov/CBS News poll Sanders is leading Clinton by twenty-two percentage points in New Hampshire and ten in Iowa. But the picture in South Carolina is quite different: there Clinton is twenty-three points ahead. That comparison highlights a key distinction between white and nonwhite Democrats. The New Hampshire and Iowa Democratic samples included too few nonwhite voters to break out. But among black Democrats in South Carolina Clinton leads, at fifty-two per cent; Sanders is at four per cent. Nationally, the comparable figures are fifty-seven per cent to ten per cent. And though Sanders quickly modified his platform to accommodate Black Lives Matter activists, he still has a long way to go to win over African-American voters. Latino voters are similarly unfamiliar with him: a Gallup poll released in late August showed that only twenty-five per cent knew of him, and those who did were almost evenly divided between favorable and unfavorable impressions. A Washington Post/ABC News poll released in September shows that, if Biden were in the race, he would attract more nonwhite voters than Sanders (though substantially fewer than Clinton).

Nor is Sanders’s trajectory likely to mirror that of Obama in 2008. Sanders supporters like to point out that, in the summer of 2007, Obama was polling behind Hillary Clinton among black Democrats. But, as Michael Tesler, a political scientist at the University of California, Irvine, recently noted in the Washington Post, Obama enjoyed much higher favorability ratings among black Democrats than Sanders does now.
Sanders’s commitment to recapturing some of the white working-class males that the Democratic Party lost in the Reagan years won’t necessarily help his candidacy; indeed, it could hurt his quest to connect with minority voters. As he’s found, emphasizing class over race can get a progressive in trouble. Although he’s committed to immigration reform and creating a path to citizenship, he sees an ulterior motive in some approaches to the former. “There is a reason why Wall Street and all of corporate America likes immigration reform,” he said at an event held by the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in July. “It is not, in my view, that they are staying up nights worrying about undocumented workers in this country. What I think they are interested in is seeing a process by which we can bring low-wage labor of all levels into this country, to depress wages in America.”

Angelica Salas, an immigration-rights organizer in Los Angeles, whose group was represented onstage at a Sanders rally there in August, told me that she finds the immigration platform of one of his rivals—Martin O’Malley, the former governor of Maryland—to be more “detailed, robust, and impressive.” Latino voters, she said, had been disappointed in Obama’s immigration policy and were looking for candidates who were committed to reform: “For a long time, it was almost like having an affair with the Democratic Party—they say they love you, but they don’t want to be seen with you in public.”

Yet Sanders is doing well enough to concern the Clinton team, and that creates its own challenges. Garrison Nelson said of Clinton, “She’s not worried about Bernie. But she is worried about the Bernie effect—which is to demonstrate her relative weaknesses as a candidate. He hits at her Achilles’ heel, which is authenticity.”

On the trail, Clinton has avoided mention of him; Sanders, for his part, emphasizes their policy differences. He voted against the war in Iraq; she voted for it. He has opposed the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership; she has voiced support for those pacts. But he has rebuked reporters for pressing him to say more about Clinton herself. In a video made backstage at a rally in Iowa, he complained, “Time after time, I’m being asked to criticize Hillary Clinton. That’s the sport that you guys like. . . . I’ve known Hillary Clinton for twenty-five years. I like her. I respect her. I disagree with her on a number of issues. No great secret.”

“As time they did something about the rats!”

APRIL 2, 2012

Sanders appears to be sticking with that approach. But the Clinton campaign may be testing out a more aggressive strategy. Correct the Record, a Super PAC backing Clinton, recently sent an e-mail to the Huffington Post suggesting that Sanders shared many views with the controversial new British Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, then noting that
Corbyn had called the death of Osama bin Laden a tragedy. Correct the Record has also sent trackers—operatives who tape rival candidates, looking for gaffes—to Sanders events.

Sanders has promised not to run for President as an Independent in the general election, saying that he doesn’t want to have any role in handing victory to a Republican. But, even if he fails to secure the Democratic nomination, he has exposed a deep indignation about the distribution of wealth which other candidates cannot ignore. Sanders often says that he is not that far outside the mainstream—that a majority of Americans agree with him on many of his tenets. According to a recent CBS News/New York Times poll, sixty-six per cent of Americans feel that “money and wealth in this country should be more evenly distributed”; seventy-one per cent favor raising the minimum wage, at least slightly; and seventy-four per cent believe that corporations exert too much influence on American politics and life. Other recent surveys show that strong majorities oppose any cuts in Social Security and support workers’ rights to unionize. A Gallup poll in May concluded that nearly half of Americans are “strong redistributionists, in the sense that they believe the distribution of wealth and income is not fair, and endorse heavy taxes on the rich as a way of redistributing wealth.”

It’s hard to see, though, how these sentiments could be translated into policy in the U.S. Many, if not most, voters would likely resist paying more taxes to make such sweeping reforms possible. The American electorate seems to respond simultaneously to calls for redistributive justice and the rejection of the entity most likely to accomplish it: the federal government. And many voters might feel that matters of economic fairness are trumped by such social issues as abortion and guns.

In mid-September, Sanders spoke before the weekly convocation attended by the student body at Liberty University, the evangelical school in Lynchburg, Virginia, founded by the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Unlike many liberal élites, Sanders does not seem to prefer talking to people who share his views; because he is not an especially convivial person, he does not require conviviality from others. Sanders relishes the opportunity to enter enemy territory, where he believes that he can find secret allies.

At Liberty, he began by acknowledging that his positions on women’s reproductive rights and gay marriage are strongly at odds with the views of many evangelical Christians. He did not make knowing jokes about these differences: as usual, Sanders was dead serious. The students were poker-faced but polite. He sought common ground by adding new valences to one or two of his standard arguments. When he called for federally mandated, paid family leave to bring America in line with the rest of the world, he dwelled a little on the preciousness of the bond between mother and baby. He was
rewarded with applause. But the occasion also played to the prophetic side of Sanders—the register in which he can sound like an Old Testament preacher. Unlike his slicker rivals, Sanders is most at ease talking about the moral and ethical dimensions of politics. “We are living in a nation and in a world—the Bible speaks to this issue—in a nation and in a world which worships not love of brothers and sisters, not love of the poor and the sick, but worships the acquisition of money and great wealth.” His voice broke—all those stump speeches had been leaving deep scratches on the record. But his outrage was unmuffled. Staring at the crowd, he quoted the Hebrew Bible, his fist punctuating nearly every word: “Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.”

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