

Bernie Sanders: Ever the outsider, he plays to win

by Cynthia Close

On an unseasonably hot May 26th, 2015 afternoon in Burlington, Vermont thousands of people jostled for position on the grass in the brilliant sunshine of Waterfront Park, and it wasn't to get the free Ben & Jerry's ice cream being offered. Enthusiastic college students barely old enough to vote stood shoulder to shoulder next to white-haired seniors discussing politics as young children squeezed themselves through the crowd to get a better view of the main event. Following several speeches by local dignitaries, Ben (Cohen) and Jerry (Greenfield) among them, Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders took the podium to announce his bid to be the next president of the United States. The cheers of the crowd rose to a deafening roar.

The rumpled, flamboyant Senator gave no sign of his 74 years that day as he spoke passionately about his long-held belief that the income gap between rich and poor had reached historic and untenable proportions. He gestured and stabbed the air with his finger as if to drive home each point when he declared; "Enough is enough. This great nation and its government belong to all of the people, and not to a handful of billionaires, their Super-PACS, and their lobbyists."

Senator Sanders had earned the early support of fellow Vermonter, author and environmentalist Bill McKibben. It was McKibben who stood with him in the dazzling sun that first day of his campaign when Bernie made a plea for "environmental sanity" to fight the "planetary crisis of climate change". There was a certain dissonance in that moment between the dire future of our climate being painted in his speech and the beautiful white sails of the boats against the azure blue sky as they languidly floated in the harbor behind the impassioned Senator.

Waterfront Park with its open grassy field, popular boardwalk, and exceptional views of Lake Champlain, the islands and Adirondacks beyond was a fitting location for this momentous event, for it existed, in large part, due to the efforts in the late 1980's of then Mayor Sanders. He, along with his successor, Mayor Peter Clavelle, worked tirelessly to build the public amenities such as the community boathouse, the boardwalk and the park itself that now plays host to large festivals and community gatherings all year long.

While this overwhelming local response made it clear to Bernie's supporters that he was a viable presidential candidate, many political observers did not take him seriously. Major media outlets largely ignored him.

Back in July, head political correspondent Jamie Bouie, writing for Slate, compared Bernie to other fringe candidates in the past, like the Republican Ron Paul, who had fervent base support but never gained traction nationally. In spite of the fact that Bernie was drawing the largest crowds of any political candidate so far (he had spoken to a crowd of 10,000 in Madison Wisconsin, compared to Hillary's 5,500 on Roosevelt Island in NYC, and Jeb Bush drew just 3,000 when he announced at Miami Dade College in Florida), Bouie contested he would never be embraced by the Democratic Party machine. While Sanders is a fascinating candidate to observe, Bouie claimed his relative independence from the Democratic Party – one of the qualities that has made him appealing to so many across party lines – along with his call for an outright revolution in

American politics, would make Sanders “unsuited for a major party nomination, much less the Democratic one.”

This remains to be seen, but Bernie has long been a thorn in the side of the Democratic Party. As a self-described democratic socialist Bernie was quoted in Politico saying, “My feeling is that the Democratic Party is ideologically bankrupt.” It is nothing short of astounding that this man, who, while he caucuses with the Democrats in the Senate, has never been a registered member of the Democratic Party, the very party he is now hoping will nominate him as their standard-bearer.

Bernie Sanders, the Brooklyn-born son of Polish immigrants, moved to Vermont in 1964 following his graduation from the University of Chicago. Back in the 1970’s, as a member of the Liberty Union Party, Bernie was not winning elections. He ran for governor and the US Senate in four elections, all of which he lost, but these attempts had given him a platform to attack both major political parties. He also had tenacity, proving that he was able to learn from his losses, and he moved on to win the 1981 Burlington mayoral election by ten votes. In 1990, after serving four terms as mayor, he ran for the state’s lone seat in the House of Representatives and won with 56 percent of the vote. All during this time, up to the present, he lead campaigns sounding like the progressive that he is, favoring taxing the rich, supporting health care as a human right, free higher education, voting against the Iraq War and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

In 2006, he ran for the previously held US Senate seat of the then Independent, former Republican, Jim Jeffords. Running as an Independent, Sanders won with 65 percent of the vote. Bernie is now serving his second term in the U.S. Senate after winning re-election in 2012 with a resounding 71 percent of the vote. Since then he has caucused with the Democrats and held key committee posts. These include chairing the Committee on Veterans Affairs, where he forged a bipartisan agreement for a huge reorganization and funding for the VA. When the Democrats lost majority status in 2014, Bernie kept his seat on the Veterans Committee but agreed to be the ranking member of the powerful Senate Budget Committee. While also serving on the Committee on Environment and Public Works, pressing his views that the United States must take the lead in addressing climate change. He champions a move towards renewable solar and wind power, away from fossil fuels via his service on the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources and can wield a powerful influence to improve workers’ lives, a major part of his constituency, via his work in the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Former Vermont Governor, Madeleine Kunin, a staunch Democrat who in 1986 won a reelection bid fending off attacks from Sanders said, “He plays it both ways”, a legitimate observation. Many Democrats still feel the pain inflicted by Bernie’s relentless critique of the party throughout his political career, at one point saying in an interview there was basically, “no difference” between the Republicans and the Democrats. This lingering animosity is apparent today, demonstrated by the fact that leaders of the party in his home state, Senator Leahy and Governor Shumlin are backing Clinton.

The large crowds showing up at Sander’s live events initially seemed to catch his campaign off guard. Even Bernie at times appears surprised when entering a filled to overflowing auditorium of enthusiastic supporters. But he, along with the full backing of his wife, Jane O’Meara Sanders, friends and family, has steadily built a viable campaign, utilizing a very successful approach to social media fundraising. In their last quarterly

report, the Sanders Campaign had raised 26 million, just behind Hillary's take of 28 million. This was all the more impressive when considering all Sanders' money came from small, individual donors, the average donation being under 25 dollars, while Clinton's coffers were filled primarily from big ticket fundraisers organized by super PACS and party insiders. The main super PAC supporting Hillary Clinton's presidential bid brought in \$15.6 million in the first six months of 2015 — a haul that includes a \$2 million donation from a single donor, and six other \$1 million checks.

The October 13th, CNN televised Democratic debate was Bernie's first opportunity to present himself and his progressive ideas to the nation. Over 15 million people watched, the most of any previous Democratic debate. His campaign had encouraged over 4,000 Debate Watch Parties across the country — about half in large public venues — guaranteeing an engaged grassroots public response. Could this grassroots momentum, fueled by Bernie's outrage at the injustices of a rigged political and financial system, survive the harsh glare of the television cameras? Would his straightforward authenticity be able to compete with the well-honed, seasoned rhetoric of the party favorite, Hillary Clinton?

Based on the early assessments of his performance, the answer seems to be a resounding "yes". While Clinton did not disappoint her supporters, it was clear her only real challenge to the nomination by her party was coming from the left flank, with Bernie Sanders leading the charge. It was the simplicity, and convincing clarity of Bernie's responses to the pointed questions thrown his way by CNN's Anderson Cooper that are playing well in the inevitable swarm of sound bites that follow any presidential debate. The first primaries are months away. It is still a horse race, and thanks to Bernie Sanders it has become a race worth watching.

Bio: Cynthia Close is a Contributing Editor for Documentary Magazine, Art Editor for the literary journal Mud Season Review, an advisor to the Vermont International Film Festival. She lives in Burlington, Vermont with her doggie, Ethel.

In a September 28th article in the Huffington Post, blogger H.A. Goodman lists *10 Reasons Why Bernie Sanders Will Overtake Hillary Clinton Before the Iowa Caucus*. Number 4 on that list is: **Women are leaving the Clinton campaign and supporting Bernie Sanders**. According to a new [Washington Post/ABC News](#) poll, "Where 71 percent of Democratic-leaning female voters said in July that they expected to vote for Clinton, only 42 percent do now, a drop of 29 percentage points in eight weeks." In contrast, *The Daily Beast* [writes](#) that Bernie Sanders has gone from 2% support among Democratic women (in December of 2014) all the way to [27% support](#) by the end of August. One would suspect that in Vermont these numbers would be even higher.