

Bernie Sanders's Bold Economic Agenda Seeks to Transform Politics

The senator has a twelve-point plan for getting the debate, and perhaps the movement, started.

By John Nichols

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(AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli)

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders will “make a decision within the first few months of 2015” on whether to bid for the presidency of the United States. It is not certain that he will run. And, if the independent senator from Vermont does decide to run, he says he has yet to determine precisely

how he might do so: as a challenger to presumed front-runner Hillary Clinton for the Democratic nomination or as an insurgent independent taking on both major parties. Sanders has in recent months spent a good deal of time in the first caucus state of Iowa and the first primary state of New Hampshire, and he acknowledges that this has stoked speculation that he is likely to go the Democratic route. He also declares, “I will not play the role of a spoiler”—tipping a fall 2016 race to a right-wing Republican. Yet, the senator expresses deep frustration with the failure of the Democratic Party to adopt positions that are sufficiently progressive and populist to build a movement to change the debate and the direction of the country.

Sanders explained in an interview with *The Nation* that he is convinced, after visiting not just Iowa and New Hampshire but Wisconsin, Minnesota, South Carolina, Mississippi, California and other states, that “there is a real hunger in grassroots America for a fight against the greed of the billionaire class, which is wrecking havoc on our economic and political system.”

At the same time, like many progressives, he is unsettled by the inability of Democratic leaders and the party establishment to channel that anger into political action—as Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman once did.

“This country faces more serious problems today than at any time since the Great Depression,” says the senator. “We have already, in the midterms, gone through an election where there was no substantive debate about the most important issues, which is why you have, I think, the lowest voter turnout since 1942. The idea that we could go through a

presidential election, where you have all these right-wing Republicans on one side talking about their issues and then, within the progressive community, not to discuss issues like the collapse of the middle class, the growth in poverty, the fact that we're the only country in the industrialized world without a national healthcare program...not to discuss climate change when the scientific community tells of that we have a short window in which to address it; not to discuss these and other issues would, I think, be horrendous for this country. Absolutely horrendous.”

Always uncomfortable with political discussions that get bogged down by process and personalities, Sanders does not spend time bashing Clinton or other prospective contenders. He rejects the narrow constraints of horserace politics and asks the essential question: “Do we have a desperate need for a candidate, or candidates, to be representing the middle class and the working class of this country, standing up to the billionaire class, raising issues that are never talked about here in Congress, or in the media? The answer is absolutely, absolutely yes. But the other side of the equation is, if you do have that candidate—myself or anybody else—doing that, you have to figure out and be certain that you can run a strong and effective campaign.”

Such a campaign cannot be built around traditional fundraising or name recognition calculations, says the senator, who argues that, “We are in a new order right now, new territory, in terms of *Citizens United* [and money in politics]. It is my full expectation that, within a few months, the barrage we saw during the [2014] campaign will return. No one should think that these ads are going to be on three months before an election anymore. I suspect they will be on

eleven months or a year before [the 2016 election]. That's the new politics. And these people [billionaire donors who fund the ads] have—and I use the word advisedly—unlimited sums of money. They will do everything they can [to determine what] the issues are; they will make horrendous attacks against anybody who stands up to them.”

And Sanders does not believe that the media will effectively check and balance what progressives of another era referred to as “the money power.”

“I can tell you from personal experience: I get on TV a lot. It is very hard for me to fight through the questioning and to actually talk about policy issues,” he says. “There is a real prejudice and a desire not to talk about the collapse of the middle class, about the level of poverty in this country, about income and wealth inequality. They don't want to talk about that; they want to talk about anything else—to make it into a personality match: ‘What do you think about Hillary Clinton?’—rather than ‘How do we help the middle class? How do we deal with income and wealth inequality?’ ”

In the new money and media order, Sanders acknowledges, “there are some people who are arguing that it can't be done anymore, that you cannot defeat the billionaire class. What you have is a situation where the Koch brothers and others will be supporting a set of candidates, and then the opponents of them—in order to get half the money that the Koch brothers have—are going to have to reach out to if not the billionaire class, then the multimillionaire class. And what's left for working people?”

What's left, Sanders suggests, are the ideas, the issues that have in the past and might again inspire mass movements. If there is a prospect for galvanizing a movement to change the politics and the governance of America, it rests not in the processes of petty politics but in the process of framing agendas that are bold enough to make working people believe again in the necessity of voting.

So Sanders is getting the discussion going. Whether he runs for the presidency or not, he is getting specific about the issues that the senator says need to be at the center of the debate in the new Congress and on the 2016 campaign trail.

This week, Sanders took to the Senate floor to outline a twelve-point economic program that challenges both major political parties and the process itself. No one who has followed the senator's career doubts that he would prefer to begin implementing the agenda now. But no one who knows the math of the incoming Congress, and the current disconnect between debates in Washington and the real issues facing America, doubts that a lot about our politics must change before a progressive populist economic agenda is approved by the House and Senate.

So, when Sanders talks about his program, he is really talking to the American people—as a senator and as a prospective presidential contender, but perhaps most of all as an old-school organizer—about what voters can and should demand from their government

To that end, Sanders argues that the United States ought to

- * Invest in our crumbling infrastructure with a major program to create jobs by rebuilding roads, bridges, water systems, waste water plants, airports, railroads and schools.
- * Transform energy systems away from fossil fuels to create jobs while beginning to reverse global warming and make the planet habitable for future generations.
- * Develop new economic models to support workers in the United States instead of giving tax breaks to corporations which ship jobs to low-wage countries overseas.
- * Make it easier for workers to join unions and bargain for higher wages and benefits.
- * Raise the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 an hour so no one who works forty hours a week will live in poverty.
- * Provide equal pay for women workers who now make 78 percent of what male counterparts make.
- * Reform trade policies that have shuttered more than 60,000 factories and cost more than 4.9 million decent-paying manufacturing jobs.
- * Make college affordable and provide affordable childcare to restore America's competitive edge compared to other nations.
- * Break up big banks. The six largest banks now have assets equivalent to 61 percent of our gross domestic product, over \$9.8 trillion. They underwrite more than half the mortgages in the country and issue more than two-thirds of all credit cards.

- * Join the rest of the industrialized world with a Medicare-for-all healthcare system that provides better care at less cost.

- * Expand Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and nutrition programs.

- * Reform the tax code based on wage earners' ability to pay and eliminate loopholes that let profitable corporations stash profits overseas and pay no US federal income taxes.

Sanders does not suggest that this is the whole of a progressive agenda. What matters, he argues, is framing a deeper and more serious debate. The senator believes that speaking clearly and boldly on core economic issues—in a way that most politicians no longer do—has the potential to excite and engage the tens of millions of Americans who have grown increasingly frustrated with an empty and dysfunctional politics.

“[The] goal is to, number one, make people aware that decisions made here in Washington, DC—whether it is trade policy, whether it is environmental policy, whether it is a jobs program or raising the minimum wage—are enormously important to people’s lives,” says Sanders. “And, second, the goal is to figure out—though it is very difficult—a way for them to become actively engaged in the political process.”

Sanders does not argue that presidential campaigns are the only vehicles for fostering that engagement, nor even the best vehicles. But he recognizes that the obsession of the media with presidential politics creates a “venue” for raising and advancing issues. So the senator continues to wrestle

with the prospect of a candidacy. If he runs, he says, it will be to win. But what he seeks to win is more than just a nomination or an office. It is a different and better politics.

Sanders says he is looking beyond the specific question of what a campaign by him or another progressive populist might entail to the broader question of whether there is sufficient interest, sufficient excitement and sufficient commitment to mount a campaign that transforms politics so that economic issues are seriously discussed and addressed.

“These issues have got to be discussed. A massive effort has got to be undertaken to demand that working people and low-income people begin to stand up and fight for their rights—and that we take on the billionaire class for the sake of our kids and grandkids—that is a given. That is exactly what has got to happen,” says Sanders. “What I simply have to decide is whether there is the kind of political infrastructure that exists in this country—and I’m talking about rallying millions of people—so that the campaign that I run is either a winning campaign or at least is a campaign where at the end of the day people say, ‘Whoa, I didn’t know that there was so much anger out there at what’s going on in America. Wow!’ ”

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