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Feeling the Bern: From Presidential Campaign to Our Revolution

The year 2016 is now seared into the collective conscious thanks to a contentious and rancorous the race to the White House. Millions of people, many of whom are currently carrying out peaceful protests in large cities across the country, have expressed distress and sorrow over the current cloud hanging over our democracy following the devastating news that the demagogue and morally derelict business mogul Donald J. Trump had won the electoral vote and secured the presidency despite losing the popular vote. Alas, Hillary Rodham Clinton—the candidate with the most experience after working for thirty years in government, and who had adopted numerous stances and ideas from Senator Bernie Sanders’ primary platform in her own campaign in order to rally all of the Democrats and Independent voters—did not win as journalists and pundits in major news outlets and publications had previously predicted. It does no good to wonder what would have happened had Senator Sanders been on the Democratic ticket against the GOP nominee in the general election. One thing is certain: Sanders has mobilized millions of people into participating in a political movement that comprehensively challenges the status quo in Washington.

Though he has experience as mayor of Burlington, Vermont and as a senator pushing for campaign finance reform and addressing income inequality in Congress, Bernie Sanders was the “fringe” candidate with no money and no political organization. Margaret Talbot from *The New Yorker* even described Sanders as “quixotic” and had entitled the featured profile she wrote about him as “The Populist Prophet.” He refused to accept funds from super PACS to finance his

primary campaign in his initial bid to secure the Democratic ticket for the White House. Yet throughout the primary season of 2015-2016 had ran a campaign backed by fiery youthful enthusiasm—a grassroots-level movement mobilized by social media that was comparable to Barack Obama’s 2008 “Yes We Can” presidential campaign—which was able to rival his opponent. Despite these setbacks, Bernie Sanders still managed to successfully inspire people to join him in creating a new social movement consisting of three different progressive platforms, culminating into what he fondly envisions and refers to as “Our Revolution.”

This “revolution” is an evolving message that began during Sanders’ political activism in his college years at the University of Chicago during the 1960s, and it has remained a core part of his identity, his outreach, and his blunt speaking style as a politician throughout his career. As reporter Tim Murphy wrote in *Mother Jones*: “That crusade was classic Sanders: firm in his beliefs, fiery in his rhetoric, and unafraid of confrontation.” Sanders’ early interest in activism stemmed from his deep-sated beliefs in socialism and in his history of standing up against authority to end racial discrimination. Sanders fought against systematic racial housing discrimination in university-owned apartment buildings and he was the chapter leader of the Congress of Racial Equality—a civil rights group that organized the Freedom Rides and organized sit-ins at the university president’s office to end the practice (Murphy). Sanders had also led a picket of a segregated restaurant, attended the historic 1963 March on Washington, and had gotten arrested for protesting outside of a segregated school (Murphy).

His experience with protesting racial segregation and fighting for civil rights during his college years in the midst of the 1960s civil rights movement provides Sanders with more ethos as an ally for the more recent Black Lives Matter movement. During his primary campaign, Sanders had embraced a “racial-justice platform” which made sure to include recommendations

for police reform, a call for federal funding to provide police body cameras for increased transparency, a ban on private for-profit prisons, and the elimination of mandatory-minimum jail sentences (Talbot). Sanders understood that race and income inequality are tied together, and his core philosophy reflects this socioeconomic understanding when he had stated: “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” (Talbot).

Sanders had also joined the Young People’s Socialist League (“Yipsel”) in college, which was an organization that advocated for the “social ownership and democratic control of the means of production and distribution” but remained anti-communist (Murphy). Another group that he had joined in 1970 was the Liberty Union Party, which protested the two-party system and the Vietnam War, and during which time Sanders had started a small monthly zine called *Movement* to advance the party’s agenda (Murphy). However, Sanders did not remain a member of these groups for too long, since he eventually wanted a larger platform to spread his ideas about democratic socialism as a way to resolve the issues of income inequality and address financial corruption in government. Sanders’ active involvement in these previous organizations during his youth provides us with a glimpse into the depth and scope of socioeconomic and political revolution he wanted to create decades later.

Journalists are usually quick to point out the generational gap between Sanders and his millennial followers. However, Sanders’ message continues to resonate with progressives, and he remains consistent in addressing the concerns that young adults who are struggling financially can easily identify themselves with, such as the issue of resolving income inequality by going

after the big banks on Wall Street and raising the federal minimum wage to fifteen dollars per hour. Many have earned their degrees from college but continue to face financial challenges when it comes to paying off several hundred thousand dollars of student loan debts while trying to meet the rising costs of living after graduation on an entry-level salary, assuming that they were fortunate enough to find a job with a livable wage in the first place. Most of his supporters are young adults who are either in college or are trying to transition into their careers and live independently. These same young people are the ones who mobilized his campaign across social media platforms, spreading Sanders' message through catchy memes and hash-tags such as “#feelthebern” on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Although he does not speak often about his own personal life, Sanders' humble start actually helps his ethos, and thus makes him a candidate that most people who come from low-income and middle-class backgrounds can relate to and share a common understanding. After graduating from college, Sanders had also lived frugally and worked several types of jobs in order to make ends meet and pay the bills—occupying himself by writing freelance articles that critique the effects of office work or the social-control mechanism of television (Talbot). Sanders started building his documentary film company called the American People's Historical Society and produced several low-budget educational filmstrips for elementary school classrooms. The filmstrips focused on topics such as women in American history and heroes from different states, which he then sold these to school administrators (Murphy). During his October 2015 interview with Margaret Talbot from *The New Yorker*, Sanders stated, “When I talk about a political revolution, what I am 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.”

Despite his concession to Hillary Clinton at the Democratic National Convention in July, Bernie Sanders stated in multiple interviews and press releases that he will continue to launch organizations that would help advance the causes of the progressive movement. In terms of strategy, Sanders has revealed plans to launch educational and political organizations that would help keep his movement and its momentum alive (Gaudiano). His plan for a new progressive revolution consists of three organizations: the Sanders Institute, which will raise awareness of “enormous crises” facing Americans; the Our Revolution organization, which will help recruit, train, and fund at least 100 progressive candidates’ campaigns who are running for office across all levels of government, even if they are not necessarily registered Democrats; and finally a third political organization (the name of which has yet to be determined) will eventually play a direct role in campaign advertising for the progressive candidates (Gaudiano).

The Our Revolution organization, which is structured as a 501(c)(4) social welfare organization, has built at least 10 staffers, and they have continued to work with Revolution Messaging, the “punk rock” firm that crafted the image of Sanders’ campaign (Wagner & Weigel). Each of the three organizations have hired staffers who have experience working with campaign outreach and communications, as well as economic professors and other experts, to lead the movement and correspond with Sanders’ database of voters who have registered their emails on his campaign website to receive newsletters about the new leadership and the revolution that is unfolding within the Democratic Party (Wagner & Weigel). Even now, Sanders refuses to accept funds from super PACs and large corporations. His own primary campaign had fundraised millions of dollars at a grassroots level that managed to rival Clinton’s campaign funds from super PAC donors, averaging contributions of \$27 per household from his supporters.

Bernie Sanders created and led a political campaign that inspired millions of new voters with a far-reaching vision and message that culminated into a progressive movement greater than himself, greater than his own personal ambitions. He ran a campaign of ideals, and he continues to carve those ideals in his efforts to transform the Democratic Party in the aftermath of the general election. His supporters have now brought “long-submerged elements of progressive politics” to the forefront of the national conversation in reshaping current policies (Roller). Bernie Sanders provides his fellow Americans with an outline to continue the political revolution, challenging everyone to take ownership in its formation and process because the country’s future is at stake. As Sanders wrote in the introduction section of his newly published book from St. Martin’s Press:

This campaign was never just about electing a president of the United States—as enormously important as that was. This campaign was about transforming America. It was about the understanding that real change never takes place from the top on down. It always takes place from the bottom on up. It takes place when ordinary people, by the millions, are prepared to stand up and fight for justice.

That’s what the history of the trade union movement was about. That’s what the history of the women’s movement is about. That’s what the history of the civil rights movement is about. That’s what the history of the gay rights movement is about. That’s what the history of the environmental movement is about. That’s what any movement for justice is about.

That’s what the political revolution is about. (Sanders, 2016)

Although he may not have been elected as the 45th President of the United States, Bernie Sanders still managed to reach millions of people with his message of creating a revolution that disrupts the Democratic Party establishment and transform it into a platform that truly represents the cultural and socioeconomic interests of the people.

“It was important to me to know that I could run a good campaign, in which I carried the banner and carried the ideas that meant a lot to millions of people,” he told *The New Yorker*’s Margaret Talbot during an interview. “It wasn’t about losing personally or not doing well. It was about carrying the banner for family and medical leave, for a massive jobs program, for climate change, for campaign-finance reform” (Roller).

Those who have felt and continue to “feel the Bern” understand that this brand of populism is not merely about uprooting the plutocrats from digging their heels further into government, but rather about pluralism and upholding the public’s vested interests in healthcare, education, prison reform, environmentalism, equal opportunity, and voicing the civil rights concerns of the underrepresented. Bernie Sanders successfully transformed a “fringe” campaign into a growing grassroots social movement that continues to touch lives and spark conversations about policy changes in the name of a future that everyone in America can believe in.

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