

The Democratic Establishment Feels the Bern

Written by Uma Purushothaman

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UMA PURUSHOTHAMAN, FEB 11 2016

A year ago, most political pundits in the US and abroad would have scoffed at the suggestion that Hillary Clinton would face a credible and creditable challenge from a 74 year old man. But that is exactly what is happening now. Bernie Sanders, self professed socialist and Senator from Vermont, is giving Clinton a run for her money. This was amply reflected in the results of the Iowa Democratic caucus held on 2 February, which Clinton won in a photo-finish, managing to wriggle a victory with a lead of just 0.3 points. Latest polls show that Sanders is way ahead of Clinton in New Hampshire, where the next Democratic caucus will be held. If he clinches the nomination, Bernie Sanders will be the first non Christian (he is Jewish) to run for President.

Now, who exactly is Bernie Sanders?

Bernie Sanders is a liberal and a “socialist”. He was for many years an independent Senator from Vermont till he decided to run for the Democratic Party’s nomination. He is in fact the longest serving Independent in the US Congress. He has a long history of being a liberal activist—he was active in the Civil Rights Movement as a student and had even applied to be a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. When, a year ago, Sanders announced his intention to run for the Democratic nomination, no one took him seriously because he would be a virtual unknown running against the establishment-backed and formidable Hillary Clinton, a former First Lady, former Senator and Secretary of State with huge funds to run her campaign. In fact, he started with a national approval of a mere 3 percent! Since then, Sanders’s approval has risen steadily and now his approval ratings are high enough to alarm the mighty Clinton machinery.

Policy Positions

Sanders has caught the attention of American voters through his emphasis on curbing the greed on the Wall Street and on redistributing wealth. He has called for a “political revolution” in the country “where millions of people stand up and say loudly and clearly that our government belongs to all of us and not just a handful of wealthy campaign contributors” and has intoned that Wall Street is controlling the Congress. As Sanders says in his political memoir *Outsider in the White House*, “There is something profoundly wrong when the top one-tenth of 1 percent owns almost as much as the bottom 99 percent and when 99 percent of all new incomes goes to the top one percent.” And in a country where the rich are growing richer and increasing numbers of people are being pushed into poverty, Sanders’ message resonates, particularly among the young.

Perhaps what has caught the attention of most people is Sanders’s proposals on taxes. In 2010, he had made an eight and a half hour speech in the Senate against extension of tax cuts to the rich by the Bush administration. This speech, as he admits in his political memoir, is what started off as a movement to get him to run for President. He has promised to increase the tax on the rich so as to expand Medicare coverage to everyone.

He has also promised to increase the federal minimum wage to 15 dollars an hour. He has further criticised the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision which allows unlimited campaign spending by corporations, and wants public funding of elections. He thinks the Affordable Care Act did not go far enough in extending medical insurance to everyone and supports “Medicare for all” i.e. a single-payer system in which the federal and state governments would provide healthcare to everyone. Like President Obama, he wants to create jobs through rebuilding infrastructure. He

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wants to break up the largest banks in the country as he feels they wield too much influence. He supports Paid leave and family leave/maternity leave. He also believes the US needs to reduce its fossil fuel consumption to set the example for countries like India, Russia and China. He sponsored a bill which would force companies to pay for their carbon emissions—the idea being to utilise some of the money raised through this to promote renewable energy technology. He has also supported abortion and gay marriage.

Unlike Clinton, Sanders opposed the Iraq war and has in fact called for cutting the defence budget. He supported the Iran deal and sanctions on Russia. On the Islamic State challenge, he believes that since Saudi Arabia borders Iraq and has the financial and military might, Riyadh should take the lead in fighting it. He has also consistently opposed free trade pacts like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), arguing that they create job losses for the Americans. Clinton has flip-flopped on the TPP and now supports it.

Thus, his positions are considered “progressive” on most issues. The exception appears to be on gun rights where many people believe his position is inconsistent with liberal ideas. Sanders had voted against the Brady Bill which mandated background checks for those buying guns. This has come to haunt him in this election when anger against the National Rifle Association is at a high because of the large number of gun shootings, especially in schools. Even now he wants a “middle ground” solution to the debate on gun control. Clinton, on her part, has supported background checks and denounced the idea that “anybody can have a gun, anywhere, at any time.”

Explaining the Sanders Phenomenon

What explains Sanders’s popularity? It is important to note here that he is more popular among youngsters than older people. A recent poll shows that among voters aged between 18 and 34, Sanders’s popularity is at 46 percent while that of Clinton is 35 percent. A large number of students in the US take loans to graduate. But given the economic situation in the US, they are unable to find well-paid jobs and thus are unable to pay off their loans. Seven out of ten students leave college with student loans. Records show that Americans hold \$1.3 trillion in student debt alone and 43 million Americans have student loan debts. Having grown up during the recession, these youngsters, some of whom were part of the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, are increasingly frustrated with the way the political establishment works and are unable to trust politicians. So, Sanders with his long anti-establishment image and record of supporting women and the marginalised hits a chord with them as he appears genuine to them. Sanders has managed to tap into the frustration among youngsters with his promise of making college tuition free and debt free by imposing a fee on Wall Street speculators. As David Axelrod, President Obama’s former campaign manager, explains, it is often easier to inspire the young with an uplifting theme than a resume, however lengthy it might be.

In addition to the young population, he receives a lot of support from people with low incomes because of his commitment to addressing economic inequality. The income difference between the supporters of the two contenders is eye-opening in this regard. Clinton is much more popular among affluent voters as opposed to Sanders whose supporters tend to be from low income groups.

Furthermore, Hillary’s unpopularity has contributed to Sanders’s lead. Many polls show that Clinton is not trusted by the people. Her Benghazi testimony and involvement in other scandals; her use of private emails as the Secretary of State; and the question mark over the Clinton Foundation have hurt Clinton immensely. She is also seen as “robotic” and unable to connect with the voters. Dana Milbank of *The Washington Post* feels that Sanders’s popularity has as much to do with Clinton as with Sanders: Democrats are eager for an alternative to her inauthentic politics and cautious policies. People feel he is genuine as opposed to Clinton who appears fake and made-up.

To top it all, he has also made smart use of social media to promote his campaign. For someone of the older generation, Sanders has shown himself to be extremely social media savvy and tweets regularly. He has been able to catch the attention of the social media through his tagline i.e. #FeelTheBern. He has more Facebook followers than Clinton.

Challenges for Sanders

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One major obstacle for Sanders is winning over the media that had by far written him off up to now suggesting he was too much of a 'Leftist' to be able to win. The media has not given him much coverage and the little coverage it has given has been mostly negative. Clinton, on the other hand, has received endorsements from major newspapers, including the redoubtable *New York Times*.

The second is in winning over the minority vote which has been solidly supportive of the Democrats. A recent NBC News poll shows that Clinton has a considerable lead over Sanders among Latino Democrats. Among all minority voters, Clinton has a lead of almost 40 percent points over Sanders. The basic problem appears to be that Sanders does not have the kind of name recognition Clinton has among minorities and the fact that he comes from a mostly White State i.e. Vermont.

This is an important constituency because, for instance, in 2012, voter turnout among African-Americans was more than that of White voters and it was these voters who helped Obama win in both 2008 and 2012. In 2016, the African-American vote is expected to be around 12.4 percent of all voters. So far, Sanders's populist messages and talk of economic inequality do not seem to have made much headway among African-American voters. A poll shows that while 64 percent of Black voters support Clinton, only 14 percent support Sanders. This, in spite of him being a civil rights veteran and having participated in the March to Washington with Martin Luther King in 1963. The problem seems to be the lack of an emotional connection between Sanders and African-Americans and his reticence about police brutality and racism. Police brutality, which clearly has racial overtones, is a emotive issue for the community. In fact, Black men who represent around 6 percent of the American population represented 40 percent of the unarmed people killed by police in 2015. But Sanders has not made this the centrepiece of his campaign, focusing instead on social and economic inequality. Sanders's approach seems to be that since his focus is on economic inequality which disproportionately affects African-Americans, they should naturally gravitate towards him.

The same is the case with Hispanic voters who he has found tough to win over. Hispanic voters are expected to comprise 11.9 percent of eligible voters this year, almost equal to the African-American voters. His stance on immigration, linking it to low wages in the country and his vote against an immigration reform bill in 2007 might just return to trouble him in these elections. However, since then, he has tried to make amends by appealing to President Obama to not arrest and deport innocent women and children back to Central America and has called for comprehensive immigration reform, including citizenship for those who are in the country illegally. Clinton, on the other hand, has said she wants undocumented children deported though she is now backtracking from this stance.

The third major problem he faces is the "turnout" challenge. Most of his followers are youngsters who do not have a history of turning up to vote. However, even Obama, who had huge support from youngsters managed to get them out to vote though they are irregular, infrequent voters. Sanders must do the same if he wants to have a chance at winning the nomination and Presidency. He has already shown he is capable of this through his performance at the Iowa caucus.

Moreover, as anyone who follows US elections knows, running for President requires millions of dollars. While Clinton has millions from PACs and corporations to fund her campaign, Sanders like Obama has relied on individual contributions. Interestingly, despite this, he has managed to build impressive campaign funds of about \$75.1 million. But Clinton's ability to raise funds from big corporations, hedge funds, big banks and donors on Wall Street puts her way ahead of Sanders. Her campaign funds total around \$163.5 million. However, the contributions she has received from Wall Street have hurt her politically. Sanders calls her a "friend" of big banks and she has faltered while answering questions about accepting money from corporate companies and receiving money for speeches from them.

But, by far, the biggest obstacle to Sanders winning the nomination and the Presidency is his ideology and his oft-proclaimed claim that he is a "socialist". In a country where being against socialism is an article of faith, thanks to years of indoctrination during the Cold War, this might well be a recipe for defeat. Being a socialist is almost equivalent to being an anti-nationalist in the eyes of many Americans. So, his "socialism" might create mistrust of him among the older generation which has lived through the Cold War. That said, some observers feel that socialism is not a dirty word for today's youth since they were not alive during the Cold War or remember much about it. It seems

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that the youth today is more likely to associate socialism with egalitarianism *a la* Scandinavia than with autocrats who starve their people.

Conclusion

Democrat voters are faced with a tough choice this election year: voting either for “an iconoclast” who has emerged as an emotional favourite for liberal activists or “an establishment politician” who says her lengthy résumé and deal-making ability make her better qualified for the Presidency.

In the end, Clinton might just clinch the nomination by virtue of having bigger war coffers, popularity among minorities and more newspapers’ endorsements, including that of the *New York Times*, than Sanders. The Democratic establishment is also solidly with the Clintons. Even President Obama, who has said he would not endorse anyone in the primaries, seems to be more supportive of Clinton, attributing Sanders’s popularity to his “newness” to the voters. Those who oppose Sanders say his ideas are not practical and that he would have to veer towards the centre if he does become the President. There is also the possibility that because of Sanders’s strong showing at Iowa, the Democratic base might consolidate behind Clinton.

However, even if Clinton wins the nominations, Sanders has exposed enough chinks in her armour for the Republican nominee to take advantage of during the elections and make the Presidential contest tough for her to win. In any case, his strong performance at the Iowa caucus, where Clinton won by the skin of her teeth, will motivate his supporters and give his campaign momentum going into the New Hampshire caucus and Super Tuesday. He has also brought back the idea of social and economic justice to the front and centre of the political debate in the US, which in itself is no mean achievement.

Eight years ago, an unknown, first time Senator with a funny sounding name ‘Barack Obama’ upstaged Hillary Clinton who most pundits thought was a clincher for the Democratic Party’s nomination. Will history repeat itself or will Clinton be second time lucky this time around?

About the author:

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