

10 questions with Bernie Sanders

PUBLISHED TUE, MAY 26 2015 6:10 AM EDT UPDATED MON, OCT 7 2019 2:11 PM EDT

John Harwood [@JOHNJHARWOOD](#)

Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont is the only self-described socialist in Congress. Now he is mounting a long-shot bid for the 2016 Democratic presidential nomination against former Senate colleague Hillary Rodham Clinton, who served most recently as secretary of state.

The 73-year-old Sanders calls for nothing less than a “political revolution” that would use tax policy to reverse what he calls the massive transfer of wealth from ordinary families to the most affluent over the past generation. He sat down to discuss the campaign with me over spaghetti and meatballs at a bistro near the Capitol. What follows is a condensed, edited transcript of our conversation.

HARWOOD: I read that you ran track in school. Was athletics important to you as a kid?

SANDERS: I came in third in my junior year in the New York City public school one mile. I think my best was 4:37, which is not superstar, but it’s pretty good.

We used to play ball every day, we chose up teams. One of the differences, by the way, between today and way back then is maybe you learn a little bit about democracy. Kids are out on the street. There wasn’t any supervisors. There wasn’t any parents. You chose—punch ball, softball. Everybody knew how good you are. It didn’t matter how much money you had. You were the third-best basketball player. Everybody knew it, ’cause they played with you day in and day out. Baseball the same.

You want to know who [was on] the Brooklyn Dodger team of 1951? Gil Hodges, Jackie Robinson, Pee Wee Reese, Billy Cox, Gene Hermanski, Duke

Snider, Carl Furillo, Roy Campanella, Don Newcombe. How's that? Were they important to me? We would occasionally go in the bleachers, which were then 60 cents. And when we really could put together the money and really were goin' big, we would sometimes get a buck-and-a-quarter seats.

HARWOOD: After the revolution, what does it look like? What do you see happening to the 1 percent?

SANDERS: What is my dream? My dream is, do we live in a country where 70 percent, 80 percent, 90 percent of the people vote? Where we have serious discourse on media rather than political gossip, by the way? Where we're debating trade policy, we're debating foreign policy, we're debating economic policy, where the American people actually know what's going on in Congress? Ninety-nine percent of all new income generated today goes to the top 1 percent. Top one-tenth of 1 percent owns as much as wealth as the bottom 90 percent. Does anybody think that that is the kind of economy this country should have? Do we think it's moral? So to my mind, if you have seen a massive transfer of wealth from the middle class to the top one-tenth of 1 percent, you know what, we've got to transfer that back if we're going to have a vibrant middle class. And you do that in a lot of ways. Certainly one way is tax policy.



Sen. Bernie Sanders

Getty Images

HARWOOD: Have you seen some of the quotations from people on Wall Street, people in business? Some have even likened the progressive Democratic crusade to Hitler's Germany hunting down the Jews.

SANDERS: It's sick. And I think these people are so greedy, they're so out of touch with reality, that they can come up and say that. They think they own the world.

What a disgusting remark. I'm sorry to have to tell them, they live in the United States, they benefit from the United States, we have kids who are hungry in this country. We have people who are working two, three, four jobs, who can't send their kids to college. You know what? Sorry, you're all going to have to pay your fair share of taxes. If my memory is correct, when radical socialist Dwight D. Eisenhower was president, the highest marginal tax rate was something like 90 percent.

HARWOOD: When you think about 90 percent, you don't think that's obviously too high?

SANDERS: No. That's not 90 percent of your income, you know? That's the marginal. I'm sure you have some really right-wing nut types, but I'm not sure that every very wealthy person feels that it's the worst thing in the world for them to pay more in taxes, to be honest with you. I think you've got a lot of millionaires saying, "You know what? I've made a whole lot of money. I don't want to see kids go hungry in America. Yeah, I'll pay my fair share."

HARWOOD: In the latter part of the 20th century, Ronald Reagan came along and there was a big pivot in our politics. It revolves around the idea that we need less government and more market forces. Do you think that basic pivot was wrong?

SANDERS: Let me answer it this way, John. I think there is obviously an enormously important role for the free market and for entrepreneurial activity. I worry how free the free market is. In sector after sector, you have a small number of companies controlling a large part of the sector.

Certainly, in my view, the major banks should be broken up. We want entrepreneurs and private businesses to create wealth. No problem. But what we're living in now is what I would call—what Pope Francis calls—a casino-type capitalism, which is out of control, where the people on top have lost any sense of responsibility for the rest of the society. Where it's just "It's all me. It's

all me. And to heck with anybody else.” I want to see the result of that wealth go to the broad middle class of this country and not just to a handful of people.

“You don’t necessarily need a choice of 23 underarm spray deodorants or of 18 different pairs of sneakers when children are hungry in this country. I don’t think the media appreciates the kind of stress that ordinary Americans are working on.”

- Sen. Bernie Sanders

HARWOOD: If the changes that you envision in tax policy, in finance, breaking up the banks, were to result in a more equitable distribution of income, but less economic growth, is that trade-off worth making?

SANDERS: Yes. If 99 percent of all the new income goes to the top 1 percent, you could triple it, it wouldn’t matter much to the average middle class person. The whole size of the economy and the GDP doesn’t matter if people continue to work longer hours for low wages and you have 45 million people living in poverty. You can’t just continue growth for the sake of growth in a world in which we are struggling with climate change and all kinds of environmental problems. All right? You don’t necessarily need a choice of 23 underarm spray deodorants or of 18 different pairs of sneakers when children are hungry in this country. I don’t think the media appreciates the kind of stress that ordinary Americans are working on. People scared to death about what happens tomorrow. Half the people in America have less than \$10,000 in savings. How do you like that? That means you have an automobile accident, you have an illness, you’re broke. How do you retire if you have less than \$10,000, and you don’t have much in the way of Social Security?

HARWOOD: It came out in disclosure forms the other day that Hillary Clinton and Bill Clinton, in the last 16 months, have made \$30 million. What does that kind of money do to a politician’s perspective on the struggles you were just talking about? Does it make it difficult for recipients of that kind of income to take on the system?

SANDERS: Well, theoretically, you could be a multibillionaire and, in fact, be very concerned about the issues of working people. Theoretically, that's true.

I think sometimes what can happen is that—it's not just the Clintons—when you hustle money like that, you don't sit in restaurants like this. You sit in restaurants where you're spending—I don't know what they spend—hundreds of dollars for dinner and so forth. That's the world that you're accustomed to, and that's the world view that you adopt. You're not worrying about a kid three blocks away from here whose mom can't afford to feed him. So yes, I think that can isolate you—that type of wealth has the potential to isolate you from the reality of the world.

“The minimum wage in Vietnam is 56 cents an hour. Workers there cannot form independent unions. And if you protest government policy, you might end up in trouble. OK? What does this trade agreement have to say about that? Not a goddamned thing.”

- Sen. Bernie Sanders

HARWOOD: I read an interview that you did about the corporate media. And you said the corporate media was reluctant to call out people for lying in public debates. You're on corporate media right now. Who's lying in our politics?

SANDERS: I'm the ranking member of the Budget Committee, OK? Leader of the opposition. The Republican budget does the following: It throws 27 million people off of health care by ending the Affordable Care Act and cutting Medicaid by \$440 billion. Have you seen that in print? Have you seen that statement? There is a reality that goes on here. And you have many people who try to be, “Oh, I've got to be even-handed here and even-handed there. You got the Koch Brothers there, Bernie Sanders there.” That's nonsense. And I think a lot of right-wing people get away with murder because the media doesn't call them out on it.

HARWOOD: President Obama, in talking about trade the other day, said that Elizabeth Warren and some of the people taking her position were just making things up about the Trans-Pacific Partnership. Do you think he's making things up in selling it? He says it's the most progressive one that's ever been negotiated.

SANDERS: Yeah, like what? The minimum wage in Vietnam is 56 cents an hour. Workers there cannot form independent unions. And if you protest government policy, you might end up in trouble. OK? What does this trade agreement have to say about that? Not a goddamned thing. Not a bloody thing. In this trade agreement there is language, what we call the Investor State Dispute Resolution. This is what it says that Philip Morris can take Australia and Uruguay to court and try to collect many millions of dollars. For what reason? You know why they can do that? Because Australia and Uruguay have passed strong legislation trying to keep their kids from smoking. And Philip Morris is aggrieved because their future profits are being threatened by strong anti-smoking legislation. That is exactly how you undermine American democracy.

“Hillary Clinton is known by 95 percent of the American people. And clearly, in terms of money, I will be very, very, very heavily outspent. As I’ve said before though, don’t underestimate me.”

- Sen. Bernie Sanders

HARWOOD: You and I talked some months ago. You said you were going to take a look at running, and you weren't going to do it if it wasn't viable. What did you see that made you think it was viable?

SANDERS: If I do badly, and I don't run a good campaign, and we don't get our message out, and we don't bring people together, it reflects not just on me, but on the ideas that I'm talking about. A couple months ago, I was in California, a beautiful sunny day. We had 500 people coming out at a union hall. I went to Austin, Texas, we had about 600 people coming out. I was in Las Vegas, we had 300 people coming out. Went to Chicago, we had 400 people. So I am sensing that based on that trip and trips that I made to Iowa, New Hampshire, that there is more disconnect and more anger at the

establishment—the corporate establishment, the political establishment, the media establishment.

Is there the potential support out there? I sensed that there was. Gut feeling, that's all.

I fully concede that I get into this race as a major underdog. No question about it. I mean, Hillary Clinton is known by 95 percent of the American people. And clearly, in terms of money, I will be very, very, very heavily outspent. As I've said before though, don't underestimate me.

We're going to do better than people think. And I think we got a shot to win this thing.