

Bernie Sanders' Legacy as an Educator

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I can recall the first time I ever heard about an ornery socialist from Vermont who proposed he could ascend all the way to the American Presidency. To put it bluntly, I found his goals to be laughable. More than five years out from his ascension onto the public stage though, it's hard to imagine that Bernie Sanders once operated in relative anonymity. Against all odds, Sanders pushed mainstream Democrats to the very brink in both the 2016 and 2020 Democratic primaries; in fact, it even looked as though he was going to win the 2020 nomination, [before Super Tuesday helped flip momentum to Joe Biden](#). Going forward, Sanders should be able to further cement his legacy, especially as more far-leaning Democrats find their way to Congress. I still wonder, however: What is that legacy? While some may point to his attempts to become President, or his legislative record, I think that we need to look elsewhere. When I think of Bernie Sanders, I think not of what he's achieved, but the knowledge he's sought to instill into the American political landscape. If Bernie Sanders' legacy can be defined, it's the legacy of an educator.

Sanders has made it clear that he doesn't want to be defined by accolades. When looking at his legislative record in both the House of Representatives and Senate, it's not hard to see why, as ["of the 422 bills for which Sanders has been the lead sponsor during his nearly 30 years in Congress, only three have become law"](#). If Sanders' main goal was to be a workhorse policy maker, this low level of production would render him unremarkable. However, I think it's clear that his goals far surpass what can be surmised by the roll call votes on the floor of Congress. From this standpoint, his closest parallel is not one of his contemporary Congress members but instead the man who Sanders holds upon a high pedestal: American socialist Eugene V. Debs.

It's true that the Vermont senator's longstanding efforts to expand the economic rights of less affluent American citizens are ["channeling F.D.R. rather than Eugene Debs"](#). However, much like Debs before him, Sanders has always rejected being labeled a prophet. Instead, I believe Bernie is following the lead from his proud socialist predecessor, using his position to teach Americans how ["to lead themselves and take responsibility for their own lives"](#). Bernie himself recognizes that ["we don't need a savior, we need a political movement with millions of people"](#). However, there cannot be a movement if the people responsible for partaking in it remain in ignorance. By addressing this ignorance, I believe Bernie Sanders shows his greatest purpose. When we look at the entirety of Sanders' adult life, it becomes abundantly clear that he has tried to challenge other political forces aimed at supporting powerlessness and ignorance amongst the American voting populace.

His efforts began in an (unheated) Burlington apartment during the 1970s, when he assembled a rag-tag educational film outfit called the American People's Historical Society, which created such films as ["Eugene V. Debs: Trade Unionist, Socialist, Revolutionary"](#). I wouldn't want to call Sanders the second coming of Scorsese, given the dubious filmmaking skills he displays during his narrated slideshow. However, Sanders displays an unmistakable dedication to educating the American public, using the medium of film to show ["people and ideas that the major profit-oriented manufacturers of audio-visual material will not cover because of economic and political reasons"](#). In this instance, Sanders used his position to inform his audience of Debs' long-hidden brand of socialism in which workers will have the freedom to ["be the beneficiaries of labor and not some capitalist parasite who has a piece of paper declaring himself to be the owner"](#). While he has since retired from the director's chair, his efforts to talk to the American public about issues which they've long been left in ignorance about have only increased.

In his time since leaving behind his filmmaking career for Washington, Sanders has intensified his efforts to educate the American people. Despite his failure to garner broad support amongst his colleagues for his sponsored legislation, Sanders still gets plenty of attention, and his educational efforts are the main reason why. He has long used the Congressional floor to speak on issues which he's felt the American people must be informed about. Perhaps the clearest example of the Vermont senator using the floor of Congress to inform the American people of new ideas was during [his famous 2010 filibuster](#) against a new tax deal that kept Bush era tax breaks for the nation's wealthiest citizens.

Opposing these tax breaks, Sanders forced a filibuster that lasted eight hours and thirty-five minutes, during which he clearly articulated to the American people that ["it is grossly unfair to ask my kids and grandchildren, and the children all over this country, to be paying higher taxes in order to provide tax breaks to billionaires because we've driven up the national debt"](#). What I find so astounding about this stand is that Sanders knew the bill had overwhelming support; yet, Sanders presented the narrative of inequality that few of his colleagues dared to expose the American people to. I think that's quite remarkable and I'm far from alone in thinking that, [as Sanders trended on Twitter](#) during his speech and crashed Senate video servers after the website received more viewers than it was capable of handling.

Sanders' Presidential campaigns have further solidified his commitment to teaching the American public. Instead of focusing on his life to sell people on his candidacy, Sanders made it clear that ["what \[he\] wanted to do is begin to move forward presenting our perspective on what we think are the most important issues facing America"](#). Sanders used the campaign trail to teach ideas and address the inequalities facing Americans by [introducing his own form of Democratic Socialism](#), which is centered on securing the economic "right to quality health care, the right to as much education as one needs to succeed in our society, the right to a good job that pays a living wage" and more for American citizens. Beyond the description of Democratic Socialism, Sanders also felt the need ["to utilize every new technology that we can find in order to communicate with the American people"](#) to help educate people. Perhaps the most illuminating example comes from his 2016 campaign, during which he started an educational [YouTube video series entitled "Bernie Brief,"](#) in which he gives in-depth summaries of key issues afflicting the American people. These videos closely mirror the educational nature of his old endeavors in Vermont and I believe stand as a testament to Sanders' dedication to teaching Americans of a new form of knowledge.

As Bernie Sanders enters the final phase of his life, I think his legacy is more than secured. While he is unlikely to accede to the role of President of the United States, his efforts throughout his adult life nevertheless leave me with the impression of someone who only wants to inform others even at the risk of his own achievements. When I look back at his career, I see a man who embodies the slogan on which he ran for office: "Not me. Us".