

Why is Bernie Sanders Chairman of the Budget Committee?

Hunter Phalen

[“If we lose the Senate, do you know who becomes the chairmen of the Senate Budget Committee? A guy named Bernie Sanders. You ever heard of him?”](#) Those words, uttered by Paul Ryan in 2016, have proven prophetic. Bernie Sanders is now chairmen of the Senate Budget Committee and is gearing up to help pass President Biden’s Build Back Better plan once it receives approval in the House. It faces a difficult battle once in the Senate, and it could prove to be a major legislative victory -- or defeat -- for the Biden White House. Seemingly, the Democrats have chosen to reward a faithful party member by appointing him to such a pivotal committee in the Senate, but Sanders holds no party affiliation. Why would the Democrats feel the need to reward the socialist independent senator from Vermont with such a vital role in the Biden legislative agenda?

In the Senate, committees are broken down into the three following categories: [A committees, B committees, and C committees](#). Senators can only serve on two A committees, one B committee, and as many C committees as they choose. Each party has different methods for selecting committee appointments, but for the purposes of this commentary, we will focus on the Democrats. The Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee, a standing committee that nominates its members for committee assignments, is responsible for nominations to all three types of committees. Another group, the Democratic conference, consists of all Democrats in the Senate and approves the nominations. Committee assignments are then considered and [approved by the whole Senate](#).

Independents, like Senator Sanders, must caucus with one of the parties to receive their Senate committees. This seems like a disadvantage, as the party may choose to look after its own, but that has not been the case in recent years. [Senator Sanders currently sits on three Class A Committees and two Class B Committees, of which he chairs one. Exceptions to the rule restrictions are common](#), but it seems surprising that Democratic leadership would bend the rules for Senator Sanders, so who led the Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee and appointed Sanders to this role? [Bernie Sanders](#). He was the Outreach Chair and alongside [Steering Chair Amy Klobuchar](#), made the nominations for the various committees that included his appointment to budget. This makes him the first independent in U.S. history to hold a party leadership position since the modern leadership structure took place in the early 20th century and his action of nominating himself to the budget committee has set the stage for the independent socialist to oversee the first pivotal bill of Biden’s presidency.

Sanders has voted in favor of almost every major Democratic piece of legislation and he twice sought the presidential nomination of the Democratic party. In 2020, his campaign manager, Faiz Shakir, stated: [“He’s a Democrat.”](#) As the old adage goes, “If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck.” So why is he not a member of the Democratic party? And why does the party continue to reward him with plush committee appointments and leadership positions within a party he refuses to join? We can begin by noting that Sanders is one-part legislator and one-part revolutionary a mantle that he claims in his autobiography called *Our Revolution*. In that book, he writes that a presidential campaign “would give me the opportunity to get some public attention on issues I felt strongly about: income and wealth inequality, the declining middle class, climate change, a corrupt campaign finance system, etc. The national media is much more interested in what a possible presidential candidate has to say than it is in the words of a plain old senator” (54). The national media is also far more interested

in the words of the only active socialist in the Senate than a simple senator from Vermont. Alongside his unique status as a socialist, he sits as an independent, which means that he can introduce any bill he sees fit, propagate his ideas independently of party oversight, and bring attention to any issue he desires. He only answers to the Democratic party in matters of his vote. And thus far, he has almost always taken the Democratic party line.

Why are the Democrats so supportive of Sanders? [Some people point to his loyalty to the party, and to his longstanding friendships with former majority leader Harry Reid and current majority leader Chuck Schumer.](#) But the reasoning goes deeper, into places that the Democratic leadership see as lacking. Sanders connects with a demographic that Democrats are losing touch with: the young people of America. On [Super Tuesday](#) in March 2020, Bernie Sanders carried 60% of the 18-29 age demographic and 41% of the 30-44 group, far and away the largest proportion by a Democratic candidate. For comparison, Joe Biden took 17% of the 18-29 demographic and 23% of the 30-44 demographic. Back in 2016, results were similar for Hilary Clinton. Even in her home state of [New York](#), Clinton was only able to muster 35% of the 18-29 bracket, with Sanders bringing home the other 65%. In [New Hampshire](#), it was worse. Bernie took 83% from 18-29 and 66% from 30-44. Both [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Joe Biden](#) were criticized for being out of touch with the young people in America and, as the data shows, rightfully so.

Sanders gives the party the opportunity to connect with the future of America, a generation that will shape our democracy and elected officials moving forward. By placing him in positions of power and prominence within the party, they link the party and the person together in an effort to engender the same goodwill and dedication given to Senator Sanders. It may seem a steep price to pay to allow Sanders all the benefits of the Democratic party without any of the costs, but his sway with this key demographic, and overall popularity, has made the swap worthwhile.

Hunter Phalen “Why is Bernie Sanders Chairman of the Budget Committee?” *AmeriQuests* 17.1 (2022)

Works Cited

Bernie Sanders, *Our Revolution*, Thomas Dunne Books, 2016.