

Bernie Sanders, Democratic Socialism, and the American Media

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Throughout his entire political career, many have struggled to classify Bernie Sanders in American politics. A self-ascribed “Democratic Socialist,” Bernie Sanders has advocated for a set of policies including universal healthcare, tuition-free public colleges and universities, and increased environmental regulations, as well as many other progressive social and economic policies. Although Bernie gave himself the title of democratic socialist across various news interviews, his obsession with Marx and other socialist and communist thinkers throughout his early life have left many doubting his positions on numerous issues, wondering whether or not Bernie is closer to a Marxist than the democratic socialist ideas of the Scandinavian countries. Others on the left see Bernie Sanders in a completely different light, noting his much more moderate positions compared to other democratic socialist politicians on important issues such as gun control, racial justice, and fracking just to name a few. On the progressive left, many view Bernie as a watered-down version of their ideals who compromises too much. Depending on which section of the American media a person follows most closely, they will probably have an entirely different conception of whether Bernie Sanders is a “pie in the sky” liberal with no chance of ever implementing his policies, or someone who is too willing to compromise on many important issues to appeal more to the mainstream American public.

Coming from a typical democratic household in California, my parents were glued to the television during the COVID-19 pandemic, and being in quarantine in the same house with them, I was also forced to watch hundreds of hours of CNN, MSNBC, and ABC news just to name a few of the programs they typically watched. Coming from a perspective of someone on the progressive left, I quickly realized through watching their coverage of Sanders’ campaign that these news outlets had a very different perception of Bernie than I had. This perception, I argue, is based more on the establishment bias present within these networks rather than honest coverage of Bernie’s policies and their salience in American society.

Through watching these mainstream cable news networks, I identified that the main critique of Bernie Sanders was that it would be impossible for someone advocating for Sanders’ policies to beat Donald Trump in the general election. In this instance, I found that most cable news networks usually cite anecdotal evidence that Americans would be unreceptive to socialist ideas. Despite the prevalence of this narrative among news outlets, polls from numerous sources during the 2020 presidential election cycle showed overwhelming popularity for Bernie’s policies among the American population. For example, in [a poll from the Pew research center](#), most Democrats supported Bernie Sanders’ Universal Healthcare proposal over Biden’s Public Option. Bernie Sanders also maintained a strong lead over Trump in [general election polls](#), although this lead was not as large as the lead Biden had over Trump.

If all this is true, how is it possible that Bernie Sanders could have lost the primary to Joe Biden if his policies were so popular? To me, the answer is the agenda setting power of the mainstream American media. This “electability” narrative is purely a construction of the media. There was an argument to be made that Bernie was “unelectable” in 2016 when running against Hillary Clinton, one of the most well-funded and well-known politicians of the 21st century, whereas Bernie had very little name recognition in comparison. In the 2020 election, however, Bernie Sanders had similar name recognition to Joe Biden as he had spent the past election cycle constantly campaigning and had become one of the most popular candidates in the upcoming primary, usually [ranking second in most Democratic Primary polls](#). When the media sets an agenda, they choose which issues are important and which issues they cover, and since the media is the only way that

Americans can find out about events without conducting their own research, the mainstream media effectively lays out what issues Americans know and care about, and has almost full control over the narratives.

The reason why I believe that the electability argument was so common among mainstream pundits is because most of these reporters have experience working in politics or in previous presidential administrations. Since these journalists have extensive political experience, it makes sense logically that mainstream networks would choose these anchors to give their programs credibility in the world of politics. The problem with mainly hiring journalists out of Washington is that many of them are unable to see the popularity of outside political thinkers among the general population. These pundits may have lost sight of the rising popularity of Bernie Sanders, just like they failed to predict Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 election against Hillary Clinton. This establishment bias helped shape the narrative that Bernie Sanders would be unable to beat Donald Trump, since his policies were too far outside the mainstream and would not galvanize support among moderates.

Even though this narrative was so prevalent in the mainstream news media, Bernie still had a [significant amount of support from young voters](#). Younger voters get their news from a variety of different sources that could include cable news outlets, but also include independent news outlets operating on YouTube, Reddit, Facebook, and other social media platforms. While the mainstream cable news outlets portray Bernie as a purist, many sources in the new media view Bernie as a pragmatist, who already has made significant compromises from traditional democratic socialist ideas to match the American political landscape.

As I’ve learned from studying Bernie’s life, thinkers, and politicians such as Eugene Debs, Karl Liebknecht, and other socialist and democratic socialist thinkers inspired much of his perception about labor rights and wealth inequality in the United States. Bernie, an independent for most of his political career, chose to run as a democrat because he acknowledges the disadvantage that running as an independent would provide. His policies also do not call for a restructuring of the economic system in the United States, but instead advocate for an increased social safety net while working within the established capitalist system. Policies such as universal healthcare, tuition-free public colleges and universities, and the green new deal work within the current structure of American society but work to change these systems from within.

While the Sanders campaign worked tirelessly to fight the electability narrative, it proved too difficult a task for the campaign, as mainstream pundits continued to question if Bernie Sanders could motivate moderates to support his candidacy against Donald Trump in the general election.