

## **Bernie Sanders Beltway Blunder**

Addison Berger

Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders is at the center of another political storm. This time, he challenged in his trademark style, the limits of Washington D.C.'s political etiquette by serving up a heat-seeking political salvo directed at West Virginia Senator Joe Manchin. In his stinging [op-ed](#), which called out Senator Manchin specifically, Sanders said that opponents of the reconciliation bill lacked the courage to take on “big money interests” and are motivated by greed to help “the rich get richer.” His accusations called out Senator Manchin specifically. No stranger to political hand-to-hand combat, Bernie's latest move was both highly controversial and beyond the comprehension of both his allies and his critics. But this is not the first time that a man with strong opinions about how politics questioned the urgency of politicians. The timing of Bernie's challenge threatened the passage of an important stimulus bill that was already on life support, even before Sanders’ risky move. Ironically, Sanders himself seemed destined to strip away protections for the ordinary people that he’d spent his entire career protecting. Departing from his casting as an “outsider,” Bernie Sanders participated in the usual theatrics synonymous with the D.C. elite, infuriating both sides of the aisle at a pivotal point in contentious negotiations.

The controversy stemmed from a Friday, October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021 [“op-ed”](#) that Senator Sanders published in West Virginia–based *Charleston Gazette-Mail*. The article began with Senator Sanders's passionate case for passage of the 3.5 trillion reconciliation bill and then calling out Manchin's stalling in Congress. While on the surface benign, Sanders’ actions amounted to a declaration of war. By calling out the “moderate” Senator Manchin, he sought to persuade one of two Democrats blocking his progressive wish list. He had more than Manchin in his crosshairs, however, as he characterized opponents of the bill as wanting to “maintain the status quo” with an eye towards helping the “rich getting richer.” This was a fastball, thrown high and tight, intended to get the attention of Manchin, a wealthy energy industry tycoon.

Before we get too deep into the Sanders throwing a monkey wrench in the negotiations, we must first acknowledge the backdrop of this risky stunt. On the political spectrum, Manchin and Sanders couldn't be any more different. Sanders is an anti-establishment crusader who has earned a “rock star” following, and the reconciliation bill for which he was advocating in the op-ed includes elements of his longstanding progressive plan, such as universal healthcare, increasing minimum wage, and free college for all. Manchin, by contrast, was a football player at West Virginia University before embarking upon a lucrative career in the coal industry. Sanders is categorically opposed to Manchin's commitment to protecting the coal industry's interests, which paid the West Virginia Senator nearly \$1.6 million in income in the third quarter of this year alone.

But this is not just a question of personalities, it’s also a story of regions of the US. Ranking among the most progressive states, Vermont's electricity is entirely generated from natural renewable sources. Vermont also provided President Joe Biden his most significant margin of victory in the 2020 election. West Virginia, on the other hand, receives almost all its electricity from coal and, as one of the country’s most conservative states, West Virginia gave Donald Trump his second-widest margin of victory in 2020. Senator Manchin is the only Democrat holding statewide office, and neither Sanders nor Manchin has likely forgotten that Sanders won West Virginia’s Democratic primary in 2016, defeating Manchin-backed Hillary Clinton in the state.

Considering these widely divergent political cultures, we might expect both parties to engage in delicate negotiations on the reconciliation bills. This moment in time called for surgical tools, not a sledgehammer. Appealing to his constituents, Manchin called out Sanders as an

outsider that knows little about the wants and needs of West Virginians. A few months before Sander's declaration, another outsider, Vice President Kamala Harris, appeared on a West Virginia television show and suggested that President Biden's COVID-19 relief bill should be very important to the people of West Virginia. Sanders must have missed Manchin's adverse reaction to the Vice President's comments as he was none too pleased that an ["out-of-stater is telling West Virginians what is best for them."](#) Immediately after Sanders issued his [op-ed](#), Manchin went on the offensive. Appearing on various television networks to set the record straight, Manchin made it abundantly clear he did not appreciate being blindsided by Senator Sanders. He also [reminded his constituents](#) that "Senator Sanders' answer is to throw more money on an already overheated economy" and that "No op-ed from a self-declared Independent socialist is going to change that."

Regardless of one's stance on the reconciliation bill, Senator Manchin is probably better situated to assess what West Virginians value than Senator Sanders was. The slim majority that Democrats hold in the Senate allows Manchin to leverage this situation to the advantage of West Virginians. After Sanders [went on the attack](#) in West Virginia, Manchin began the process of watering down what reporters call "the most powerful part of President Biden's climate agenda" because his powerful constituents want to avoid the costly penalties that coal and gas-fired power plants in his state will face.

Those who have followed Senator Bernie Sanders long political career know that this blunder is not especially out of character. As many of his 2020 Democratic presidential rivals pointed out, Sanders' abrasive style and attraction for media attention aren't for everyone. His critics have stated that Sanders has very little in the way of meaningful legislation on record, despite his decades in the Senate. Even [Senator Elizabeth Warren, a longtime friend of Sanders, has said](#) that he is prone to "organized nastiness" and that he "fails to get much done."

Senator Sanders was one of the worst possible agents to sway the sensibilities of a dug-in and skeptical Joe Manchin, and the West Virginian voters who elected him. While Sanders undoubtedly enjoys mass appeal and a loyal following of dedicated fans, finding a way to get the reconciliation bill over the finish line was not one of Bernie's core competencies. President Biden, a much more politically savvy individual, needed to conduct final negotiations for this bill. A shrewd career politician, Biden is at his best in moments like these, because he can offer the perfect blend of credibility and charisma needed to bring Democrats and Republicans together. Bernie's choice to attack Manchin in West Virginia defied all logic, illustrating Bernie's political incoherence and inability to build consensus in critical moments.

The good news is that Senator Sander's gaffe did not stop Democrats' continued efforts to strike a deal. History will show that Senator Manchin and other dissenters ultimately went along with a modified bill. Senator Sanders took a calculated political risk hoping that the highly principled Manchin would succumb to the pressure he sought to create. One thing is for sure; Manchin didn't make millions in the coal industry by being bullied by grandstanding politicians. President Biden and supporters of the reconciliation bill should have understood that if Democrats wanted Senator Manchin's support, Senator Bernie Sanders was not the negotiator they wanted at the table.