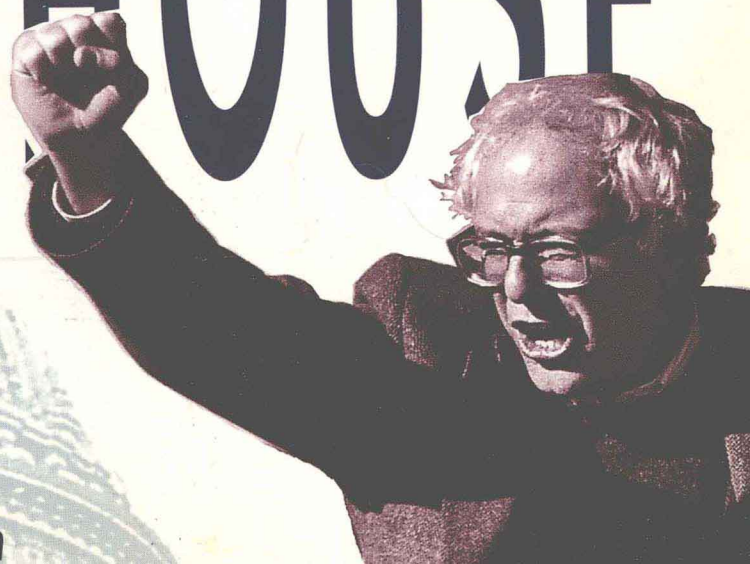


# BERNIE SANDERS

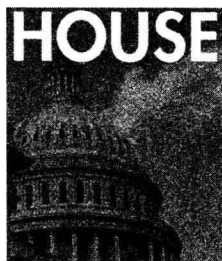
*"The only true voice of opposition in Congress"*  
— Michael Moore

# OUTSIDER IN THE HOUSE

with Huck Gutman



# OUTSIDER IN THE HOUSE



Bernie Sanders  
with Huck Gutman



VERSO

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## Outsider in the House



**For my Parents**  
**Eli and Dorothy Sanders**

# Acknowledgments

I want to thank the people of Burlington, Vermont, and the people of the state of Vermont for their support over the years. In going outside of the two-party system and electing an Independent mayor for four terms, and an Independent congressman for four terms, you have done what no other community or state has done in modern American history.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to serve.

Thank you, Jane. Without your love and support as my wife, much of what is described in this book would not have occurred.

Thank you, Levi. You have traveled the state with me to political meetings since you were a year old. Your love, loyalty, and friendship have always sustained me.

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Huck Gutman wishes to thank his wife, Buff Lindau, for her unstinting love and her endlessly generous support. He also wishes to thank Bernie Sanders for showing Vermont, and the nation, what a progressive politics looks like when it works, successfully, in the real world.

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# Introduction

November 5, 1996. We won. Blowout. By 7:30 pm, only half an hour after the polls close, the Associated Press, based on exit polls, says that we will win, and win big.

The town-by-town election results are coming in by phone and over the radio. In Burlington, my home town where we always do well, we are running much stronger than usual. We even win the conservative ward in the new north end. We win Shelburne, a wealthy town usually not supportive. Winooski. Landslide. We win Essex, my opponent's home town. We're now getting calls in from the southern part of the state. Brattleboro. We're winning there almost three to one. Incredible. We're even winning in Rutland County, traditionally the most Republican county in the state. We're also winning in Bennington County, where I often lose.

By ten o'clock, Jane and I and the kids are down at Mona's restaurant where we're holding our election night gathering. The crowd is large and boisterous. When our victory celebration appears on the TV monitor, the crowd becomes very loud. I can hardly hear myself speak into the microphones. The noise is deafening. The next day the *Rutland Herald* describes my remarks as "vintage Sanders": "We know that there is something wrong in this country when you have one percent of the population owning

more wealth than the bottom ninety percent.” I said a few other things as well. I was very happy.

My Republican opponent, Susan Sweetser, calls to concede and we chat for a few minutes. She then goes on television to thank her supporters and wish me well. Jack Long, the Democratic candidate, drops by to offer congratulations.

The extent of our victory becomes clear the next morning when the newspapers publish the town-by-town, county-by-county breakdown of election results: 55 percent of the vote to Sanders, 32 percent to Sweetser, 9 percent to Long. We won in every county in the state and nearly every town. Who could have imagined it? An Independent victory—much less a sweep—is rare. So rare that when *USA Today* published the nationwide tallies for congressional races, the copy under Vermont read: “At Large—56%, Democrat Jack Long—9%, Republican Susan Sweetser—33%.” Apparently, “Independent” is not a category in the paper’s database.

The newspaper in front of me says that “Sanders is the longest-serving Independent ever elected to Congress, according to Garrison Nelson, a political science professor and an expert on Congressional history.” Gary, who teaches at the University of Vermont, knows about these things. That’s what he studies. Who would have believed it? Thank you, Vermont.

But this had been a tough race, far more difficult than the final election results indicate. Newt Gingrich and the House Republican Leadership had “targeted” this election, and spent a huge sum of money trying to defeat me. Some of the most powerful Republicans in the country came to Vermont to campaign for Sweetser, including Majority Leader Dick Armey, Republican national chairman Haley Barbour, presidential candidate Steve Forbes, House Budget chairman John Kasich, and Republican convention keynote speaker Susan Molinari. As chairman of the House Progressive Caucus, a democratic socialist, and a leading opponent of their “Contract with America,” I’ve been a thorn in their side for some time. They wanted me out—badly.

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My campaign was also targeted by corporate America. A group of major corporations organized by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the National Federation of Independent Businesses put me at the top of their “hit list” and poured tens of thousands of dollars into the state to sponsor negative and dishonest TV ads, as well as a statewide mailing. By the end of the campaign Vermonters were watching four different TV ads attacking me.

The wealthiest people in Vermont went deep into their pockets for my Republican opponent. They wrote out dozens of \$1,000 checks (the legal maximum) and attended \$500-a-plate functions. We also took on the National Rifle Association (NRA), the National Right to Work Organization, and other right-wing and big money organizations. Never before had the ruling class of Vermont and the nation paid quite so much attention to a congressional race in the small state of Vermont—a state with just one representative.

By contrast, as an Independent, my campaign ran without the support or infrastructure of a major political party. There were no campaign contributions from our “central office” in Washington, no “coordinated campaigns” with other candidates, no photo-ops with a presidential candidate at the local headquarters, no votes from families with a long and proud record of commitment to our party’s ideals. We had to fight for every vote that we got. And that’s what we did.

We rose to the occasion and ran the best campaign that we had for many years—perhaps ever. Our coalition—of unions, women’s organizations, environmental groups, senior citizens, and low-income people—had done a terrific job. We raised close to a million dollars, and over 20,000 individual contributions, distributed by hand over 100,000 pieces of literature, made tens of thousands of phone calls, and sent out over 130,000 pieces of mail. The campaign staff was fantastic, our volunteers dedicated—and it all came together on Election Day.

Obviously, this book is more than a manual on running a successful congressional campaign. It is a political biography. It talks

## **OUTSIDER IN THE HOUSE**

about some of the victories that I and my co-workers in Vermont have had, but also about a lot of *unsuccessful* campaigns and derailed ventures. (Given the state of the left in America, how could it be otherwise?)

This is a book about hopes and dreams that will not be realized in our lifetimes. It is about the fragility of democracy in America, a nation in which the majority of people do not know the name of their congressional representative and over half the people no longer vote. It is about a political system in which a tiny elite dominates both parties—and much of what goes on in Washington—through financial largesse.

Here is a story of corporate greed and contempt for working people, of private agendas masquerading as the public good and corporate America's betrayal of workers in its drive for galactic profits. It describes a national media, owned by large corporations, which increasingly regards news as entertainment, insults the intelligence of American citizens daily, and is even further removed from the reality of everyday life than the average politician.

And Vermont. This is a book about the great state of Vermont—my favorite place in the world—and about our “big city” Burlington, with 40,000 people. It visits our small towns where most Vermonters live, and drops by our county fairs and our parades to look at the kind of special relationship that exists between people in this small state.

It is about my eight years as mayor of Burlington, and how the progressive movement there helped make that city one of the most exciting, democratic, and politically conscious cities in America. Yes! Democracy can work. It is about the United States Congress, the good members and the not so good. It examines the two major political parties—neither of which comes close to representing the needs of working people—and the frustrations and successes of helping to create an independent progressive political movement. It reviews some of the battles in which I've participated—for sane priorities in our federal budget, for a national health care system guaranteeing health care for all, for a

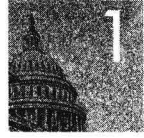
## **INTRODUCTION**

trade policy that represents the needs of working people rather than multinational corporations, for an end to corporate welfare, and for the protection of programs which sustain the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

Most of all, this book is about the struggle to maintain a vision of economic and social justice, and the optimism necessary to keep that vision alive.

It goes without saying that I never would have become mayor of Burlington, Vermont, or a U.S. congressman without the help of dozens of close friends and co-workers who have worked at my side for many, many years. They have energized me and sustained me. Thanks to all of them.





## You Have to Begin Somewhere

May 20, 1996. I'm tired. It was too hot last night and I didn't sleep well. All night a raccoon chattered in the attic of the house, finally waking me up for good at 6:30 a.m., after only four hours sleep. All night I worried about the impact of Dick Armey's visit to the state of Vermont.

Armey, Newt Gingrich's number-two man and the type of reactionary who makes even Gingrich look like a liberal, came to Vermont to endorse Susan Sweetser, my opponent in the upcoming congressional election. More importantly, he came to raise money for her. Sweetser probably made a big mistake by inviting him, since Armey, the majority leader in the House, epitomizes the congressional right wing which is every day sinking lower in the public's estimation. About thirty Vermonters demonstrated at the hotel where Armey was speaking at a \$500-a-plate dinner. They are not great fans of the Gingrich-Army "Contract with America."

The article in the *Burlington Free Press*, the largest paper in the state, gave decent coverage to the demonstrators' protest against the savagery of the Republican cuts in Congress. The press coverage raised important issues about the Republican agenda, with its attacks on the poor, the elderly, and women, and in doing so tied Sweetser to that unpopular agenda. It even quoted someone

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from the local chapter of the National Organization of Women (NOW), a definite plus. Still, Sweetser ended up raising \$30,000 in one night, which is a helluva lot of money, especially in a small state like Vermont.

Sweetser had advertised the Arme y event as a “private briefing by the Majority Leader.” I wondered if Arme y was going to share his wisdom with rich Vermont Republicans about how we should eliminate Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the concept of the minimum wage, ideas he had voiced in the past. Or maybe he was just going to talk about the “Republican Revolution.” In any case, in Vermont \$500 is a lot of money for dinner. I hope these rich folks enjoyed themselves.

I feel in my gut that this is going to be a very, very tough campaign. I won the last election by only three points, and Sweetser is much better organized than my previous opponent. She has started her campaign much earlier and is going to raise a lot more money than he did. I also fear that it will be a nasty campaign, with personal attacks that will become increasingly ugly. It’s going to be a brutal six months, and frankly I’m not looking forward to it.

What is really distressing is not only the negative campaigning—the lies and distortions that have already begun—but the enormous amount of time I am going to have to spend raising money and dealing with campaign operations, rather than doing the work I was elected to do in Congress. Sweetser began her campaign in *November*—less than halfway into my two-year term. That’s crazy. That means that I have to keep my mind on an election for twelve months, rather than focusing on my real work.

The last couple of weeks I played a leading role in opposing the Republican Defense Authorization Bill, which supplied \$13 billion *more* for defense than Clinton’s budget had allocated. And Clinton’s budget was already way too high. But now, instead of concentrating on the important issues facing Vermont and America, I will have to devote more and more energy to the campaign. I am going to have to start getting on the phone and raising money.



I'm going to have to think about polling, and TV ads, and a campaign staff. I'm going to have to make sure that we don't repeat the many mistakes that we made in the last campaign. Basically, I'm going to have to be more *political*. It's too early for that, and I don't like it.

Most people don't realize how far Newt Gingrich, Rush Limbaugh, and their friends have shifted the debate about where the country should be moving. In terms of the defense budget, 75 House Democrats—out of 197—supported the outrageous boost in military expenditures. Of course, almost all of the Republicans (including those fierce “deficit hawks”) backed the increase. The Cold War is over, we spend many times more than all of our “enemies” combined and, with very little fanfare, the defense budget is significantly raised.

In the Armed Forces Committee, the vote for increased military spending was almost unanimous. Only two members, Ron Dellums and Lane Evans, out of the 55 members of the committee, voted against it. That's pathetic. A little pork for my district, a little pork for yours—and taxpayers end up spending tens of billions more than is needed.

Ditto for the intelligence budget. Major Owens of New York, Barney Frank of Massachusetts, and I have been trying to cut the CIA and other intelligence agency budgets for the last five years. This year, while introducing an amendment to trim their budget by 10 percent, I read into the record a *New York Times* article which described how the National Reconnaissance Office, one of the larger intelligence agencies, had *lost* \$4 billion. That's right. They lost the money. They simply could not account for \$4 billion, and their financial records were a complete shambles. No problem. The intelligence agencies got their increase anyhow.

Meanwhile, the Republican Congress, with many Democrats in agreement, are cutting back on every social program that people need—for the elderly, for children, for the sick and disabled, for the homeless, for the poor. That's called “getting our priorities straight.”