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How Bernie Sanders would transform the nation

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In the America that Bernie Sanders wants to create, tuition would be free for every student at every public college.

Which, of course, is another way of saying that the government would pay for it. To do that, the Democratic presidential candidate would spend \$750 billion over 10 years, and raise the money with a new tax on Wall Street trades.

And, once government was paying for college, colleges would run by government rules. Sanders's rules. For one thing, Sanders thinks student centers are a waste of government money. He'd make sure they didn't get any more of it.

If he becomes president, Sanders would spend an enormous amount of money: \$3.27 trillion. At the very, very least. But he is not just a big-spending liberal. And his agenda is not just about money.

It's also about control.

The biggest pieces of Sanders's domestic agenda — making college, health care and child care more affordable — seek to capture these industries and convert them to run chiefly on federal money.

Sanders thinks this would consolidate areas now shaped by a confusing mix of federal rules, state laws and the private market, and make these systems cheaper and more efficient.

The risk is that this authority would expand the federal bureaucracy, which has sometimes struggled to make itself run cheaply and efficiently.

Sanders said voters would welcome the change. Even if it means Americans must turn to the federal government to oversee new sectors of their lives. He bristles at the idea that this might be considered an intrusion.

“You’re not ‘turning to’ the government. You’re assuming that the government is some kind of foreign entity,” Sanders said in an interview. “The government, in a democratic society, is the people.”

Bernie Sanders — a senator from Vermont who describes himself as a “democratic socialist” — will never get everything he wants in Washington.

And that still would be true if he became President Sanders. Republicans in the Congress would fight him fiercely. Democrats might not be much help. In fact, Sanders’s most recent Senate bills — legislation that would make college free and provide universal health care — attracted exactly zero Democrats as co-sponsors.

But now, the same ideas that have made Sanders a lonely leftist in the Senate have made him a star on the campaign trail. And he is setting himself up as a champion of liberal ideals while making rival Hillary Rodham Clinton appear cautious by comparison.

After years of debate about how much government to cut, Sanders has succeeded — at least with a piece of the electorate — by promising that he would make it grow substantially.

This assessment of Sanders’s vision is based on an examination of his current and past legislation; his campaign speeches; and interviews with him, his chief policy aide and experts.

“I want you all *not* to think small. I want you to think big,” Sanders said during a speech in South Carolina in August. “This is the wealthiest country in the history of the world.”

The simplest parts of Sanders’s platform are the parts that are simply very expensive. New money. But pumped through old pipes.

He would allot, for example, an extra \$1.2 trillion for Social Security beneficiaries, paid for by higher taxes on people earning more than \$250,000. He also would create a new Social Security benefit: paying for Americans of any age to take 12 weeks off to care for a new baby or deal with a serious illness. The funding for that would be new taxes on wage-earners and businesses, raising \$319 billion.

Clinton also has called for family leave, but her staff declined to say how she would pay for it.

In Sanders’s more ambitious plans, however, the mechanism is different.

To provide a benefit, the government doesn’t write checks. It takes an existing industry with many paying customers, and reshapes it so there is one major customer: the government. And, analysts say, the bureaucracy would then be tasked with making sure the government’s money is spent according to the government’s wishes.

“Now it looks like the federal government is funding schools directly. And if it is funding the schools directly, then it seems much more clear that the federal government should be writing all the regulations,” Neal McCluskey of the libertarian Cato Institute said about Sanders’s college plan.

Sanders’s plan for free tuition would not apply to private colleges. They would still charge students, and their students could still apply for traditional federal scholarships.

Public schools, too, could opt out of the free-tuition model to avoid the government’s rules. In theory. Good luck with recruiting.

“Free,” McCluskey said, is “very hard to defeat with something that’s not free.”

In his speeches, Sanders focuses on the potential benefits of this big idea. Low-income students could find college doors opened to them. All students could graduate without debt.

The downside, left unstated, would be that all colleges might start to look alike. And that a huge industry would spend its time waiting on bureaucrats, and trying to game their rules.

Take, for instance, that rule against spending money on “non-academic” buildings.

It’s probably not that simple.

“That one line: Absolutely, somebody’s gonna have to write a rule about what an ‘academic’ purpose is,” said Gerald Friedman, a professor at the University of Massachusetts who has studied Sanders’s ideas and mostly agrees with them. After the rule is written, Friedman said, will come the special cases, nitpicks and loopholes. What if there’s a chemistry lab in the football stadium’s basement? What if the student center is 50 percent classrooms? Forty percent? “Then you’re gonna have to litigate the rules, because colleges aren’t going to like it,” he said.

The federal education bureaucracy is already not a speedy machine. Recently, the Education Department needed 18 months and 7,000 words in the Federal Register to define the college term “credit hour.”

This part of Sanders’s agenda would be paid for if Congress agreed to his plan to add a small tax to every Wall Street trade. That would be an increase worth \$54 billion to \$300 billion per year, according to Sanders’s staff.

More broadly, Sanders has proposed more than \$3.4 trillion in new taxes, most of them targeting the rich or large companies. But right now, it seems that even this enormous tax increase would not pay for Sanders’s full vision.

That's because Sanders has not provided details about two of his most ambitious ideas — revamping the health-care and child-care systems. He hasn't said exactly what he would do to improve these areas or how he would pay for the changes.

“The point is, we haven't finished the proposal yet,” Sanders said, when asked about the details of his health-care plan. A recent report in the Wall Street Journal quoted an estimated that a plan Sanders has supported in the past that would cost \$15 trillion over 10 years. Sanders said that missed the point. “Even assuming that it *were* \$15 trillion over 10 years . . . [Americans] would no longer be paying private health insurance” at the same time, so they'd be saving money that way, Sanders said.

Sanders said he wants to model his plan on Medicare, the popular federal health-insurance program for seniors. He has proposed similar, very detailed plans to expand Medicare into a national health-care program in the past. But, in this election, he has made a point of saying that those old plans are not his official campaign proposal. He's still working on the official one.

Left undecided: Exactly how would it hold down costs, with so many new enrollees? How would it deal with unhappy customers, in a system in which Congress would be both the funder and the national complaint department?

“Nobody likes whoever pays. Whoever controls the money, people hate,” said John McDonough, a professor at Harvard University's school of public health, describing the new role the government would take on. “If the government is the source of all health-care financing, the government then becomes the source of all dissatisfaction.”

On child-care reform, Sanders hasn't decided what it would cost.

Or how it would be regulated.

But he is certain that the government would become the major funder for the industry. That means child care for every American who wants it. And rules to make sure the money is well spent.

“The goal is to make it universal,” said Warren Gunnels, Sanders's policy director. “Just like you make health care universal. Just like you make public colleges and universities tuition-free.”