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N.H. voters try to decide as bold rhetoric changes primary

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"It's like a circus, a three-ring circus," said Judi Waldert, a middle-of-the-road Republican.

By Sarah Schweitzer

GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 08, 2016

SALEM, N.H. — Peg Donahue is a feng shui consultant who spends her days using the ancient Chinese art to bring flow and balance to homes and businesses.

In her political taste this election cycle, though, the 59-year-old is all about disruption.

The presidential candidates most appealing to Donahue are the verbal bomb-throwers, the men saying what she thinks needs saying, she said over coffee here last week. Her vote will go to US Senator Bernie Sanders, who “maybe can’t get everything done, but he can start chipping away.” Yet she’s grateful, too, to businessman Donald Trump for giving an outlet for feelings buried too long.

With hours until the primary, New Hampshire voters are entranced by candidates who have gotten behind the big and the bold. It’s a scrambled political world — one that, at least in New Hampshire, looks almost nothing like the one people imagined back, say, a year ago, even six months ago, when Hillary Clinton and former Florida governor Jeb Bush were expected to run away with their parties’ contests.

Four dozen interviews across the state over the weekend — from Peterborough to Durham, from Keene to Pittsfield — revealed an electorate still casting about, torn between candidates saying what they yearn to hear, and candidates whom they might have voted for before the rupturing force of this election.

Both Trump and Sanders retain leads in the polls, including a Suffolk University/Boston Globe survey released Friday that showed Sanders with a 9-point lead in the Democratic race and Trump up by 10 points on the GOP side. But some 33 percent of Republicans and 13 percent of Democrats said they just might change their minds.

“Sanders is speaking about things that are not usually in the conversation, and so he impresses me for that,” Andrew Brescia, a 56-year-old teacher, said as he bought pasta at a specialty food store in Peterborough in the southwestern part of the state.



“In a way, he’s like Trump,” he said.

So is he considering Trump?

“I’m alternating between embarrassment and disgust (for him).”

So Sanders then, right?

“For a while I was embarrassed by Hillary, and now I’m more encouraged that she might get things done, whereas Bernie Sanders, I’m not so sure,” he said.

To hear voters tell it, there are plenty of candidates saying what voters have heard before. These candidates are trundling into town halls, taking questions, doing what’s been asked of them for years by the New Hampshire electorate.

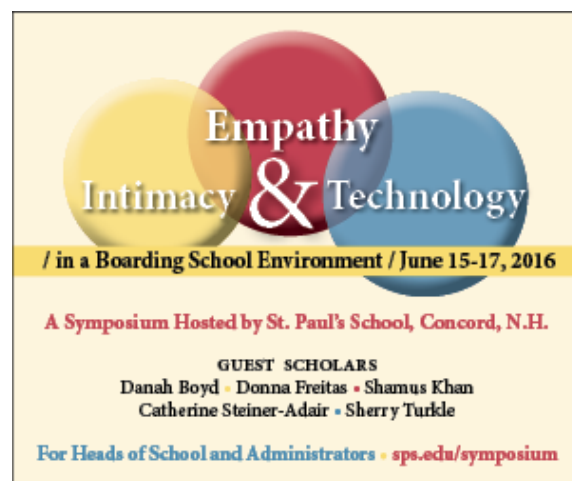
And while that’s all fine and well, it’s not enough this time around.

“I’m very impressed with the way Trump has run his campaign. It’s quite remarkable. He quite obviously is very tuned into what resonates with his base,” said Todd Campbell, a 46-year-old stock market analyst in the college town of Durham on the Seacoast.

Campbell supports Clinton because he likes her fiscal positions, but his 13-year-old son is at him to vote Sanders, and he gets it.

“Sanders has been pleasantly surprising only because he has such passion,” Campbell said.

At Lindy’s Diner in Keene, not far from the border of Sanders’ home state of Vermont, Christopher Mogridge, 66, a loss control consultant and likely Sanders supporter, said it was fair to give Trump his due for playing “a useful role” in getting people to talk about immigration.



“

‘Do we want to hear this for the next four years? Hillary’s too much and Bush is not enough.’

Rich Daigle, retiree, pondering the choices

Even some hard-core party loyalists here mused on the attributes of the loudest voices on the other side.

In Pittsfield, a blue-collar town east of Concord, Cindy Thompson was having a bite at Jitters Cafe on Saturday with her husband. She's "very conservative" and disagrees with Sanders' notions, including free college. "I've been paying student debt for years," she said. "What are you going to do for me?"

Thompson, who works for the National Guard, was bouncing between Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio.

Yet the self-described democratic socialist was not without appeal for her.

"I kind of like the way [Sanders] carries himself and presents himself, and some of the ads he puts together without a lot of funding are impressive."

Rich Daigle, a 73-year-old who retired from computer manufacturing, reflects as well as anyone the fundamental shift that marks the 2016 New Hampshire primary. Over lunch at Manchester's Puritan Backroom, he said the former leading candidates left him cold.

"I saw that clip of Jeb Bush, who I think is a great guy, but where he asked the crowd to clap," he said, referring to Bush's request of an audience in Hanover last week to applaud after he called for stronger national security. "I mean, if you're that low-energy that you can't get people riled up, I'm not sure how you can be president."

He continued: "At the same time, when I hear Hillary start to rail on her commercials — do we want to hear this for the next four years? Hillary's too much and Bush is not enough."

His answer: Trump. Possibly.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Jacqueline Coe and her two daughters, Amelia (left), 13, and Abbey, 15 in their kitchen in Bow, N.H.

Sitting nearby, eating chicken fingers with her two teenage daughters, Jacqueline Coe, a social studies teacher in Bow, a suburb of Concord, said she was unimpressed by a Clinton supporter who launched a women's-issues-centered pitch when he came to her door. The focus hit her afterward, when her Sanders-supporting daughters pointed it out.

“As if I’m not going to care about anything else,” she said.

She’ll be voting for Sanders.

To be sure, Clinton supporters abounded. Sierra Fredrickson a 39-year-old aesthetician from Pelham: “She’s in a solid position to get things done. Other candidates don’t have the same connections and ties to get policies and bills passed.” And Marilyn Bushnell, an 85-year-old resident at a Concord retirement community: “She knows enough about what’s going on and how things get done.”

But in an election in which voters have proven stubbornly resistant to being cornered, there are fewer natural constituencies.



JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

“I have some inklings of traits I find desirable,” Chris Cox said in Kingston, N.H.

Chris Cox is a 22-year-old political science major at the University of New Hampshire. He’s a registered Democrat and likes Sanders’ push for college affordability. But there are other issues, like foreign policy and the recent Paris attacks, that he said are likely to transcend.

“I have some inklings of traits I find desirable,” he said.

It ends there for Cox. He’s still undecided.

In these waning days of the campaign, roadside signs urging “Jeb!” and “Bernie for President” are mud-specked after recent melts.

But primary fatigue appears low.

“It’s like a circus, a three-ring circus,” said Judi Waldert, a 69-year-old middle-of-the-road Republican who has seen eight GOP candidates.

There’s fascination with the uncertainty of the primary’s outcome, as always. What’s different this year is the large numbers of voters confounded and riveted by their own uncertainty.

“I am in the bind that many, many people are,” said Margaret Warner, a 75-year-old retired librarian working the donation table at the Peterborough Unitarian Universalist Church’s monthly open mike/folk music on Friday night.

“I am dying to vote for Bernie,” she said. “I also think that Hillary has a wider exposure of experience with the Department of State. So I honestly am not sure what I’m going to do on Tuesday.”

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