

# The New York Times

## The Trump-Sanders Fantasy

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The emergence of strong populist insurgencies in both parties has raised the hope that the two constituencies could be joined to create a genuine left-right populist alliance.

There are compelling arguments for and against this proposition. First, the case for a cross-party populist movement.

The electorates of Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders overlap in four important ways.

Both candidates have tapped into the frustration of those stuck on the middle and bottom rungs of the economic ladder.

Both reject the free trade agreements of the past two decades, including the pending Trans-Pacific Partnership, the largest trade deal in a generation.

Both reject mechanisms to limit spending on Social Security and Medicare — and each supports his own version of “health care for all” (although Trump has issued contradictory statements).

Both reject the use of super PACs to raise large political contributions and are convinced that politicians in Washington have sold out to powerful interests that contribute huge sums to campaigns.

The similarity between the two candidates was highlighted at a televised town hall in South Carolina on Feb. 17. Mika Brzezinski, the MSNBC host, asked Trump to identify a candidate who fit the following description:

The candidate is considered a political outsider by all the pundits. He’s tapping into the anger of the voters, delivers a populist message. He believes everyone in the country should have health care.

This candidate, Brzezinski continued,

advocates for hedge fund managers to pay higher taxes. He's drawing thousands of people at his rallies and bringing in a lot of new voters to the political process, and he's not beholden to any super PAC. Who am I describing?

Trump replied: "You're describing Donald Trump."

"Actually," Brzezinski declared, "I was describing Bernie Sanders."

The uniting of the Trump and Sanders electorates under a common banner in a future election has strong appeal, especially to Democrats on the left.

"For decades I've believed, and voter research bears out, that there is a great majority of Americans who would flock to vote for a progressive who runs on a populist economic message and talks in simple terms," Steve Rosenthal, president of the Organizing Group, a political consulting firm, and former political director of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., wrote in response to my email inquiry:

Cobble together Trump's older, less educated, lower income, white soft-Republicans, Independents and his less hard-line conservative voters with Senator Sanders's younger, white, less than \$100K family income, Dems and Independents — along with historic Democratic base constituencies and you've got a potent formula for success. The candidate is fighting first and foremost for American jobs, is pro-choice, supports marriage equality and makes raising wages central to her/his campaign — speaks truth to power in a blunt way — and is real. Sign me up.

Jill Lepore, a professor of American history at Harvard, writing in the Feb. 22 issue of The New Yorker, also describes the similarity of the Trump and Sanders campaigns:

The people who turn up at Sanders and Trump rallies are wed, across the aisle, in bonds of populist unrest. They're revolting against party elites, and especially against the all-in-the-family candidates anointed by the Democratic and the Republican leadership: Clinton and Bush, the wife and brother of past party leaders.

This unrest has been unleashed, in part, by the information technology revolution of the past several decades, Lepore writes:

None of the candidates, not even the party favorites, are campaigning on behalf of their party; most are campaigning to crash it.

The "party system," Lepore continues, "like just about every other old-line industry and institution, is struggling to survive a communications revolution." The "ill effects" of the revolution

include the atomizing of the electorate. There's a point at which political communication speeds past the last stop where democratic deliberation, the genuine consent of the governed, is possible.

While there are obviously striking differences between the supporters of Trump and Sanders, Troy Campbell, a professor of marketing at the University of Oregon, argues that:

Many, but not all, Trump and Sanders supporters have similar concerns and are drawn to a similar candidate with a change-preaching, anti-Washington, entertaining, take-no-prisoners, apologize-for-nothing personality. More and more Americans are becoming less identified with a party and more generally anti the political establishment. This anti-political-elite sentiment runs deep in both the Sanders and Trump community.

Sean Trende, senior elections analyst for RealClearPolitics, noted that Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio might be the kind of politician who could appeal to voters on both the left and the right. Brown, Trende said, "holds a longstanding skepticism of trade and has more blue collar appeal than I could see Elizabeth Warren having."

"On the right, someone like Trump is probably the best bet, to be honest," Trende argues in his email:

What makes Trump interesting is that he appeals to this outsider, blue-collar base, but does so from a secular basis, which theoretically broadens his appeal.

If a "more politically savvy version of Trump emerges, we could see our politics upended," Trende added, with the emergence "of a 'real' European-style right candidate: traditionalist (but oftentimes secular), nationalistic, and in favor of increased social expenditures."

Enthusiasts aside, substantial structural and ideological problems are certain to emerge for any movement or individual attempting to tap populist sentiment in order to construct a bipartisan presidential coalition.

I talked with Bill McInturff, co-founder of Public Opinion Strategies, a Republican polling company that conducts national polling for NBC and The Wall Street Journal together with the Democratic company Hart Research Associates.

McInturff examined recent NBC/Wall Street Journal surveys to find how many of the voters said they could support both Trump and Sanders.

Six percent of all voters said they would consider voting for both men. This hardly encouraging for those who would like to use the 2016 primaries as the basis for a hybrid populist movement. A quarter of all surveyed voters — Democrat, Republican and independent — would consider voting for Trump but not Sanders, 33 percent would consider voting for Sanders but not Trump, and the rest were undecided.

At McInturff's suggestion, I asked pollsters at the Pew Research Center what they had found. Jocelyn Kiley, associate director of research, provided data reinforcing McInturff's analysis that a left-right populist alliance faced insurmountable difficulties. "In our January survey," Kiley wrote,

we asked if people thought each of the candidates would make a great, good, average, poor, or terrible president. Among all voters, just 4 percent said both Trump and Sanders would be either great or good. If you expand that to include average, just 15 percent said both would be at least average.

Kiley made the point that another revealing way of interpreting the data is that

77 percent of those who thought Sanders would be good or great thought Trump would be poor or terrible, and 60 percent of those who thought Trump would be good or great thought Sanders would be poor or terrible.

Scott Keeter, senior survey adviser at the Pew Research Center, added that research conducted in recent years showed that

both parties have potential class cleavages in them that a candidate with the right mix of policies could exploit. Trump's support has shown that not all of the G.O.P. electorate shares the party's orthodox views about limited government, and his views on trade could have appeal to some Democrats. But it's hard to find data to suggest that a large coalition could be formed that would unite the harder core supporters of Trump and Sanders, given the many things they disagree on.

There is additional research documenting the incompatibility of Trump and Sanders supporters.

Emily Ekins, director of polling at the Cato Institute, and Jonathan Haidt, a professor at New York University's Stern School of Business, examined the results of a [November 2015 You.gov survey of 2,000 respondents](#) and summarized their findings in a smart [Vox essay](#).

The [You.gov](#) poll identified [the moral values](#) of supporters of each of this year's presidential candidates. The survey results provide a measure of the strength of current support for each of four values: care/empathy; proportionality/just deserts; liberty; and loyalty/authority/sanctity.

The results — explained and illustrated in the accompanying chart — show that supporters of Trump and Sanders oppose each other on three out of four of these moral values: care, proportionality, and loyalty/authority. They agree only on their support for liberty.

In other words, Trump and Sanders partisans, despite converging economic concerns, are like oil and water. Any politician seeking to enlist them in a political collaboration faces major obstacles.

“Their political personalities are radically different,” Haidt wrote in an email. Sanders’s supporters are “bleeding heart” liberals, “while Trump supporters have a personality style that is closer to the prototypical authoritarian pattern.” Haidt saw other key differences:

the moral narratives that they believe in, about America, and how we got here, and what we must do to get out, are completely incompatible, except for a shared sense that the elites are corrupt.

What might be the long-term ramifications of the populist, information-fueled dynamics of this election cycle?

We have not seen the present levels of intraparty polarization since Barry Goldwater’s challenge to Nelson Rockefeller in 1964 or George McGovern’s to Hubert Humphrey in 1972.

The establishment wings of both parties “will have a very hard time accommodating the blue-collar native-born American who is the core of Trump’s constituency and a vital part of Sanders’s,” Henry Olsen, a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank, wrote in reply to my email. But, Olsen observed, “political death has a tendency to concentrate the mind. A failure of the G.O.P. to win the presidency this cycle would force the G.O.P. to rethink its core assumptions.” (One could even argue that the presence of two Hispanic contenders for the nomination reflects a concentration of the conservative mind on expanding the Republican electorate.)

A failure of the Democrats to win the White House, or “to make meaningful gains in Congress or the states” over the next four years, Olsen suggested, might have a comparable effect.

This intraparty division, compounded by the animosity of the emergent populist wings toward their respective establishments, threatens to undermine the underlying premise of the presidential nomination process: that internal factions compete in caucuses and primaries until a winner emerges, at which time losers lick their wounds and fall in line.

If either Trump or Sanders loses the fight for the nomination, or if both go down to defeat, the question in November will be: Do their supporters fall in line? Do a substantial number stay home? Or will they vote for the opposition?

In 1964 and 1972, bitter intraparty conflict resulted in landslide defeats for both Goldwater and McGovern, losses that forced radical changes in the constituencies of the two parties, in their respective ideological appeal and in their geographic bases of support.

After 1964, in the midst of racial upheaval, the Republican Party shifted to become the party of white America. Anchored in the South, the party evolved into the adversary of all the emerging rights movements — most notably civil, women’s, gay and reproductive rights.

The Democratic Party, in turn, became the political ally of emerging rebellions — moving sharply to the left of American opinion, until American opinion shifted to embrace these very insurgencies.

How the Republican and Democratic parties will remake or reset themselves is part of the drama of this unprecedented collective decision-making season. Or will the two parties be supplanted by an as yet unimagined political system?