

Why Trump Won't Get Sanders' Supporters

He's making a populist play for 'Bernie Bros' in the Midwest, but the ideological differences are too great.

Bill Scher

May 10, 2016

For a presumptive nominee who's well behind Hillary Clinton in most polls, Donald Trump doesn't seem terribly worried about unifying the GOP behind him in the general election. Perhaps that's because Trump has another strategy in mind: stitching together a bipartisan coalition by winning over the nearly 10 million supporters of his comrade in populist anger, Bernie Sanders.

In his first naked appeals to the Bernie left last week, Trump suddenly announced on CNN he is "open to doing something" with the minimum wage and hinted on ABC's "This Week" that "I wouldn't mind paying more" in taxes. His campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, uncritically lumped Sanders together with Trump, saying they "have reignited a group of people who have been disenfranchised and disappointed with the way Washington, D.C., and career politicians have run the country ... and we will bring those people in."

In some ways, the strategy makes sense. The only way for Trump to make up his national deficit to Clinton may be with a gang-buster performance in the white-dominated Midwestern Rust Belt, where the issue of jobs lost to trade—a touchstone for both Trump and Sanders—looms larger than elsewhere, and the appeal of another supposedly anti-Big Money candidate would be strong. Of the eight national trial heats conducted in April, six post a Clinton lead of from 7 to 13 percentage points. If you assume Trump can't compete in the swing states with pivotal nonwhite voting blocs—Florida, Virginia, Colorado and Nevada—then perhaps he can add Ohio and Pennsylvania to the 2012 Mitt Romney states. He would still need two or three more in the north, such as Michigan, Iowa and New Hampshire. If Trump can't snag Pennsylvania, he would need to add bluer Minnesota and Wisconsin—a near-sweep of the Midwest.

Various number-crunchers have concluded Trump would need to reach stratospheric levels of white support to run the table in the Midwest. Remember, Mitt Romney won 61 percent whites without a college degree, the best any Republican did with white working-class voters this century. Yet for Romney to have won the national popular vote, he would have needed to boost that to 66 percent. And since Trump performs worse than Romney with women—recent polls show Trump 10 points off Romney's poor pace—Trump may need to win more than 75 percent of white men. Where will he find them? The "Reagan Democrats" have been Republicans for a

long time; perhaps the only way for Trump to hit his targets is by poaching the white male Sanders supporters known as the “Bernie Bros.”

On the surface, Trump has a case to make that he’s a more natural home for frustrated “felt-the-Bern” voters than Clinton is. He is a more vociferous critic of global trade rules than she is. He does less big dollar campaign fundraising than she does. And he is a greater skeptic of military intervention than she is.

But Bernie’s revolutionaries are not now buying many tickets for the Trump Train, even as they confront the reality that Sanders can’t win the nomination. While Clinton may have struggled to win millennials—particularly white working class millennials—in the primary against Sanders, they appear ready to forgive. Harvard’s Institute of Politics, which specializes in surveying young voters, found Clinton trounces Trump 61 percent to 25 percent with voters under 30 years of age, a bigger margin than Obama had over Romney.

The problem for Trump is that the few areas of ideological overlap don’t come close to outweighing the long list of issues where Sanders and Trump are practically opposites. Sanders supports a carbon tax; Trump calls global warming a hoax. Sanders wants a \$15 minimum wage; Trump has said “our wages are too high.” Sanders wants to jack the top income tax rate up to 54 percent; Trump wants to slash it to 25 percent.

Their foreign policies do not dovetail that neatly. Sanders’ anti-imperialist fans would not echo Trump’s call to “take the oil” in Iraq. Nor would they want to “authorize something beyond waterboarding” for suspected terrorists, let alone “take out their families.”

Then there is the enormous gulf on race. Sanders has linked Trump’s proposed ban on Muslims entering the country to Adolf Hitler’s Holocaust, as a reminder “what a lunatic can do by stirring up racial hatred.” While Sanders rails against excessive police violence and mass incarceration; Trump has said the police are “absolutely mistreated” and endorsed a beating of a Black Lives Matter protester at one of his rallies, saying “maybe he should have been roughed up.”

And when Donald Trump tried to hold a rally in Chicago, it was Bernie Sanders supporters, outraged by Trump’s racially divisive rhetoric, who took over the arena and chased Trump out of town.

That’s a lot of disagreement for a shared view of the Trans-Pacific Partnership to overcome.

Finally, the Sanders-Trump divide runs deeper than an issue checklist. The two camps live in different politico-sociological worlds. As the *New York Times*’ Thomas Edsall explained, citing the research of political scientist Emily Ekins and social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Trump and Sanders supporters register on opposite sides of the spectrum regarding their core values in the areas of authoritarianism, empathy and “proportionality” (the desire for people to “reap what they sow”). In contrast, the value sets of Clinton and Sanders supporters are fairly close to each other.

In turn, Trump would need to go beyond tweaks in his platform and emulate Sanders’ more compassionate worldview, even though doing so could risk a further fracturing of the Republican base. But the kind of “pivots” Trump displayed recently on economic issues falls well short of

the mark. Trump's thin talk of a minimum wage increase was quickly followed, on NBC's "Meet The Press," by a punt: "I'd rather leave it to the states. Let the states decide," which makes his stance no different than any other Republican opposed to a federal increase. His feint on tax hikes came with the insistence that "we're giving a massive business tax cut." For good measure, during a CNN interview last week, he threw in a dig that Sanders "could be beyond a socialist" before predictably bragging he can win his supporters.

Trump also can't flip-flop in a vacuum. The Clinton campaign—perhaps with Sanders' help—presumably is prepared to undercut Trump's populist aura by savaging him as a billionaire phony who outsources the manufacturing of his products overseas, pays his casino workers below the Las Vegas Strip average and is refusing to negotiate a new contract with his newly unionized employees. And Trump's other flip-flop this week—hiring a former Goldman Sachs partner to spearhead a big-dollar fundraising push—robs him of another opportunity to impress Sanders' supporters who detested Clinton's pursuit of Wall Street campaign cash.

Moreover Clinton, as she did with Sanders, is unlikely to cede issues like trade to Trump. Die-hard Sanders supporters didn't believe her when she abandoned her past support of TPP, but she blurred the distinction with Sanders well enough to win where it counted: the Rust Belt states of Ohio and Pennsylvania. In both contests, she split the white working class vote and won with voters who said global trade takes away American jobs. In fact, those are two of the eight states that Clinton won in both 2008 and 2016 primaries. Primary performance doesn't predict general election performance—Obama's Rust Belt primary losses meant nothing come November—but Clinton at least is experienced at downplaying her husband's record in support of global trade agreements among the voters most bitter about it in the most critical swing states.

For Sanders supporters, trade is not a stand-alone voting issue—most of his base is too young to have lost a factory job because of NAFTA or Permanent Normal Trade Relation Status with China. Trade is part of a broader critique about how the rules are rigged for the billionaire class, of which Trump is a member. Trump's promise to negotiate better deals doesn't automatically signal to millennial democratic socialists that what he thinks is a better deal matches what they think is a better deal, if at the same time he's on record supporting low wages and low top end tax rates.

True, Clinton heads into the general election with tenuous party unity. One quarter of Sanders voters said in a McClatchy-Marist poll last month they would not vote for her in November. While that number is likely overheated by the intensity of the primary, it would not be surprising to see Clinton lose some of her left flank, if not to Trump, then to the Libertarian Party's Gary Johnson or the Green Party's Jill Stein, both of whom are actively courting Sanders' voters. Anyone who believes that Clinton is a war-mongering tool of Wall Street will at least be open to the argument that Trump is a lesser evil.

But Trump needs far more than a faction of protest votes. The 2016 race starts with more blue states than red states. The general election polls prove that, as of today, there are more #NeverTrump Republicans than #BernieOrBust Democrats. Trump must outright capture Bernie's revolution to compensate for the damage he's inflicted on Republican Party unity and swipe the Rust Belt from the Democrats. To pull that off, he's going to have to sound a lot more revolutionary than he actually is.

