

Spin Shift on Bernie: The Escalating Media Assault

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For a long time, as he campaigned for president, a wide spectrum of establishment media insisted that Bernie Sanders couldn't win. Now they're sounding the alarm that he might.

And, just in case you haven't gotten the media message yet — Sanders is “angry,” kind of like Donald Trump.

Elite media often blur distinctions between right-wing populism and progressive populism — as though there's not all that much difference between appealing to xenophobia and racism on the one hand and appealing for social justice and humanistic solidarity on the other.

Many journalists can't resist lumping Trump and Sanders together as rabble-rousing outliers. But in the real world, the differences are vast.

Donald Trump is to Bernie Sanders as Archie Bunker is to Jon Stewart.

Among regular *New York Times* columnists, aversion to Bernie Sanders has become more pronounced in recent days at both ends of the newspaper's ideological spectrum, such as it is. Republican Party aficionado David Brooks (whose idea of a good political time is Marco Rubio) has been freaking out in print, most recently with a Tuesday [column](#) headlined “Stay Sane America, Please!”

Brooks warned that his current nightmare for the nation is in triplicate — President Trump, President Cruz or President Sanders. For Brooks, all three contenders appear to be about equally awful; Trump is “one of the most loathed men in American public life,” while “America has never elected a candidate maximally extreme from the political center, the way Sanders and Cruz are.”

That “political center” of power sustains huge income inequality, perpetual war, scant action on climate change and reflexive support for the latest unhinged escalation of the nuclear arms race. In other words, what C. Wright Mills called “crackpot realism.”

Meanwhile, liberal *Times* columnist Paul Krugman (whose idea of a good political time is Hillary Clinton) keeps [propounding](#) a stand-on-head formula for social change — a kind of trickle-down theory of political power, in which “happy dreams” must yield to “hard thinking,” a euphemism for crackpot realism.

An excellent rejoinder has come from former Labor Secretary Robert Reich. “Krugman doesn't get it,” Reich [wrote](#). “I've been in and around Washington for almost fifty years, including a stint in the cabinet, and I've learned that real change happens only when a substantial share of the American public is mobilized, organized, energized, and determined

to make it happen.”

And Reich added:

“Political ‘pragmatism’ may require accepting ‘half loaves’ — but the full loaf has to be large and bold enough in the first place to make the half loaf meaningful. That’s why the movement must aim high — toward a single-payer universal health, free public higher education, and busting up the biggest banks, for example.”

But for mainline media, exploring such substance is low priority, much lower than facile labeling and horseracing... and riffing on how Bernie Sanders sounds “angry.”

On “Morning Edition,” this week began with NPR political reporter Mara Liasson [telling](#) listeners that “Bernie Sanders’ angry tirades against Wall Street have found a receptive audience.” (Meanwhile, without anger or tirades, “Hillary Clinton often talks about the fears and insecurities of ordinary voters.”)

The momentum of the Sanders campaign will soon provoke a lot more corporate media attacks along the lines of a *Chicago Tribune* [editorial](#) that appeared in print on Monday. The newspaper editorialized that nomination of Trump, Cruz or Sanders “could be politically disastrous,” and it declared: “Wise heads in both parties are verging on panic.”

Such panic has just begun, among party elites and media elites. Eager to undermine Sanders, the *Tribune* editorial warned that as a “self-declared democratic socialist,” Sanders “brandishes a label that, a Gallup poll found, would automatically make him unacceptable to nearly half the public.”

A strong [critique](#) of such commentaries has come from the media watch group FAIR, where Jim Naureckas pointed out that “voters would not be asked to vote for ‘a socialist’ — they’d be asked to vote for Bernie Sanders. And while pollsters don’t include Sanders in general election matchups as often as they do Hillary Clinton, they have asked how the Vermont senator would do against various Republicans — and he generally does pretty well. In particular, against the candidate the *Tribune* says is ‘best positioned’ to ‘capture the broad, sensible center’ — Jeb Bush — Sanders leads in polls by an average of 3.0 percentage points, based on polling analysis by the website Real Clear Politics.”

In mass media, the conventional sensibilities of pundits like Brooks and Krugman, reporters like Liasson, and outlets like the *Chicago Tribune* routinely get the first and last words. Here, the last ones are from Naureckas:

“When pollsters match Sanders against the four top-polling Republican hopefuls, on average he does better than Clinton does against each of them — even though she, like Bush, is supposed to be ‘best positioned’ to ‘capture the broad, sensible center,’ according to the *Tribune*.

“Actually, the elements of Sanders’ platform that elite media are most likely to associate with ‘socialism’ — things like [universal, publicly funded healthcare](#) and [eliminating tuition at public colleges](#) — are quite popular with the public, and go a long way to explain his favorable poll numbers. But they are also the sort of proposals that make Sanders unacceptable to the nation’s

wealthy elite — and to establishment media outlets.”

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