

Sanders Is Not Another McGovern. I Know – I Worked on McGovern's Campaign.

With Bernie Sanders now the clear front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, we are hearing talk — despite polls indicating otherwise — he would not be able to win against Donald Trump. Repeated comparisons are being made to the 1972 landslide defeat of George McGovern — the only time the Democrats nominated a genuine progressive — with the implication a similar fate would befall a Sanders nomination.

Speaking as a political scientist, as someone who is not voting for Sanders in the primary, and as a longtime Democratic activist who worked on McGovern's campaign and was a friend and collaborator with the late senator, I can say there is no justification for the comparison.

First, that election was 48 years ago. [Polls show](#) that Americans are closer on the issues to those articulated by Sanders today than Americans were to those championed by McGovern in 1972. Same with important Democratic-leaning constituencies. For example, the AFL-CIO, then dominated by Cold Warriors, refused to endorse McGovern. By contrast, today's unions are far more progressive and are likely to actively mobilize their resources for Sanders.

Second, Richard Nixon --unlike Trump --was a very popular president at that time. McGovern never came close to leading Nixon in a single poll. Trump, by contrast, has had the most consistently low popularity ratings of any president, and polls have shown [Sanders topping him](#) by wider margins than any of his Democratic rivals.

More importantly, McGovern's progressivism was not primarily responsible for his defeat.

The economy was doing great and there was far less wealth and income inequality than today. Nixon was finally ending the Vietnam War, which had been McGovern's signature issue. The embarrassing fiasco involving the dropping of Thomas Eagleton, his initial running mate, from the ticket due to previously unreported mental health issues from years earlier caused a huge drop in McGovern's numbers from which he never recovered. The "dirty tricks" campaign — planting phony stories, undercover operations, posing as McGovern supporters engaging in disruptive behavior, and more — that was later uncovered in the Watergate investigation that forced Nixon's resignation had an impact in discrediting the campaign. There were weaknesses in the McGovern campaign's organization and McGovern lacked the charisma that has provided Sanders with such an avid following. And Sanders has demonstrated a far more effective fundraising ability than McGovern, who was badly outspent by Nixon.

Those who trumpet McGovern's loss generally fail to mention that when more progressive Democrats were defeated in the primaries because voters were convinced that they needed a "moderate" at the helm, they have usually lost. Examples include 1968, 1980, 1988, 2000, 2004 and 2016.

And let's not forget that when Republicans have ignored the advice that a certain candidate "can't win" because of extreme views, they have generally been able to mobilize their base and win anyway, such as with Reagan in 1980 and Trump in 2016.

Those who fear that Republicans will insist Sanders is a "socialist" and equate his social democratic policy positions with Soviet-style Communism should remember that Republicans apply such labels and worse toward

practically any Democrat, even in situations where the tactic is ludicrous. The Republican attacks are going to be vicious and dishonest whoever is nominated. Furthermore, red-baiting doesn't have the resonance it did during the Cold War. The majority of voters at this point weren't even adults when there was a Soviet Union, which collapsed nearly 30 years ago.

Socialism is not as scary a concept as it used to be: One poll found over [40 percent of Americans](#) actually prefer socialism to capitalism, and other recent polls have also yielded similar figures.

Still, from [David Brooks](#) to [the Clintons](#), the message of Sanders's supposed "unelectability" persists. Notably, these have generally come from conservative anti-Trump pundits and those in the Democratic Party establishment who simply do not want to see a left-leaning president. Indeed, similar arguments were being made against [Elizabeth Warren](#) when she was surging in the polls last fall, even though she self-identifies clearly as a capitalist rather than as a socialist.

They also know that every major Democratic candidate has a good chance at beating Trump, so they naturally would rather see a more conservative Democratic nominee than a more progressive one.

Perhaps Sanders as the nominee would alienate some moderate Republican-leaning voters. They are a vanishing breed, however. There were no serious Republican challengers to Trump's re-nomination. Polls show overwhelming support for Trump among Republican-leaning voters. (This is why Republican members of Congress have been so afraid to challenge him, even when faced with clear evidence of impeachable offenses.) Polls also show Sanders has [more support among independent voters](#) than any other Democrat and is running better than most Democrats in key swing states.

[Jim Hightower](#), a left-wing Democrat who won statewide office in Texas, has noted within the white middle class, there are more downwardly mobile angry voters who would be more attracted to Sanders's call to shake up the system in a progressive direction than a return to normalcy. The status quo ante doesn't have much appeal.

[Studies](#) have shown, for example, that areas in the northern tier swing states that shifted most dramatically from Obama in 2008 and 2012 to Trump in 2016 corresponded almost exactly to areas with the highest casualty rates from Iraq and Afghanistan. Trump actually ran to Hillary Clinton's left on foreign policy, disingenuously claiming — unlike her — that he opposed the Iraq War, would end foreign entanglements and would bring U.S. troops home. He could use the same argument against Joe Biden or Michael Bloomberg.

Trump also made inroads among working-class voters opposed to the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization, which Clinton, Biden and other centrist Democrats supported.

Sanders, by contrast, opposed both the Iraq War and these neoliberal trade agreements. As the Democratic standard-bearer, he would rob Trump of his advantage among the thousands of swing voters whose children were disproportionately sent to fight overseas and whose jobs were sent out of the country.

The antidote to right-wing populism based on a nativist and racist ideology is a multiracial left-wing populism based on inclusion. By contrast, a neoliberal centrism that has left so many Americans struggling economically provides fodder for those who seek to scapegoat immigrants and people of color.

Indeed, a Democratic victory comes within reach if Democrats mobilize higher turnout among youth, people of color, and other left-leaning Democrats and independents who stayed home or voted third party in 2016. Sanders has demonstrated he can do this in increasing youth turnout in the primaries and building a multiracial coalition. And to win in the general election, Democrats also need to beat Republicans in the enthusiasm gap, which can determine the numbers willing to actively campaign for or contribute to their party's nominee.

As [Robert Kuttner](#) and other analysts have noted, energizing Democratic voters to turn out in high numbers would more than make up for the limited handful of centrist voters turned off by Sanders's progressive politics.

It's time for progressives to push back on the Democratic establishment's scaremongering and self-serving arguments about electability. The notion that nominating a progressive candidate will inevitably result in Trump's re-election simply isn't true.