

# MR. PRESIDENT: TRUMP'S VOTERS ARE CHANGING REAGAN'S TERMS OF DEBATE

A lot of people are talking about this comment from Barack Obama on the Democratic primary.

**GLENN THRUSH:** I mean, when you watch this, what do you – do you see any elements of what you were able to accomplish in what Sanders is doing?

**PRESIDENT OBAMA:** Well, there's no doubt that Bernie has tapped into a running thread in Democratic politics that says: Why are we still constrained by the terms of the debate that were set by Ronald Reagan 30 years ago? You know, why is it that we should be scared to challenge conventional wisdom and talk bluntly about inequality and, you know, be full-throated in our progressivism? And, you know, that has an appeal and I understand that.

I think that what Hillary presents is a recognition that translating values into governance and delivering the goods is ultimately the job of politics, making a real-life difference to people in their day-to-day lives. I don't want to exaggerate those differences, though, because Hillary is really idealistic and progressive. You'd have to be to be in, you know, the position she's in now, having fought all the battles she's fought and, you know, taken so many, you know, slings and arrows from the other side. And Bernie, you know, is somebody who was a senator and served on the Veterans' Committee and got bills done. And so the—

For example, Greg Sargent argues this represents Obama siding with Hillary's more "realistic" approach to policy.

Obama is basically trying to pour cold water on the loftiness of Sanders' argument, by nodding to the "appeal" of promising another transformative moment, while suggesting that Clinton's more constrained view of what can be "delivered" is more realistic, and that this is actually an attribute that recommends her for the presidency.

I'm struck, though, by Obama's description of what makes Hillary more "realistic:" the terms of debate that Reagan set 35 years ago.

He's making that argument, of course, in a year where Reagan's party has utterly failed to sell its voters on any of the insider candidates for the president: especially not the son of Reagan's Vice President. This is a year when what once got called Reagan Democrats are supporting a loudly racist protectionist, Donald Trump.

A lot of people are ignoring this fact, and failing to consider what it means for this election and potentially even for "reality" in its aftermath. Indeed, a lot of Republicans are rationalizing supporting Trump over Ted Cruz based on their claim that Trump doesn't have any ideology, ignoring that Trump espouses economic views that largely conflict with the neoliberal doctrine of both mainstream Republicans and Democrats.

The growing likelihood that Trump will win the nomination and run on his protectionist policies won't change what incumbents get reelected in the House – and therefore the likelihood that, if a Democrat does win, any legislative agenda will be bottled up in the Congress. But it will change what the Republican party claims to support, and the expectations its voters have of it.

Indeed, one of the only times anyone in this race was able to get Trump to change his public stance came when Bernie Sanders called him on his claim that wages were too low in this country.

Donald Trump, billionaire Republican presidential frontrunner, has changed his mind about wages: Americans aren't earning enough. He's also not keen on Wall Street. The shift has Trump on a collision course with Democrat **Bernie Sanders** – while oddly agreeing with many of his points.

“Wages in are [sic] country are too low, good jobs are too few, and people have lost faith in our leaders. We need smart and strong leadership now!” Trump tweeted on Monday.

[snip]

“[T]axes too high, wages too high, we're not going to be able to compete against the world. I hate to say it, but we have to leave [the minimum wage] the way it is,” Trump said at the time. “People have to go out, they have to work really hard and have to get into that upper stratum. But we cannot do this if we are going to compete with the rest of the world. We just can't do it.”

Sanders, a senator from Vermont and self-described socialist, used those comments to criticize Trump while appearing on CBS *Face the Nation* on Sunday.

“This is a guy who does not want to raise minimum wage,” he said of Trump. “In fact, he has said that wages in America are too high.”

Trump lashed back at Sanders, tweeting: “[Bernie Sanders]—who blew his campaign when he gave Hillary a pass on her e-mail crime, said that I feel wages in

■ America are too high. Lie!"

There's a reason Bernie's attack worked and the feeble attacks launched thus far at Trump from the right have not: because Trump needs to promise the non-college educated white voters who are the key to his popularity that he will improve their lives, and while they may not be college educated they're not so dumb as to believe they need a pay cut.

Of course, the same dynamic that has made Trump such a strong candidate also drives the willingness of voters to support a socialist. Bernie just offers a different solution to the economic woes that 35 years of cuts have brought.

A substantial and very motivated part of the electorate, on both the right and left, is telling pollsters Reagan's rules have failed. Particularly in the face of a Trump candidacy, Democrats will have to decide whether they want to use that as an opportunity to free themselves of those terms of debate, or take ownership of them moving forward.