

Pre-election Hype in America: Hillary-Bernie Skirmishes Begin, Can All-Out War Be Far Behind?

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A month after [attacking Game of Thrones](#), Democratic senator Claire McCaskill of Missouri shifted her attack from fiction to her very real fellow senator, Bernie Sanders. She took the Independent senator from Vermont to task for having the temerity to challenge Hillary Clinton's divine right to ascend to the American political throne of the presidency. Or as McCaskill put it [on MSNBC June 25](#):

Any other candidate that had the numbers that Hillary Clinton had right now would be talked about as absolutely untouchable....

That's the first line of Hillary Clinton's defense, her inevitability, based on polls taken when she was the only Democratic candidate in the race. The argument is more monarchist than democratic and should be offensive to anyone who thinks elections should be about substantive issues.

Team Clinton's basic tactic of ignoring the Sanders campaign ended with the sacrifice of surrogate pawn McCaskill's [attack on Sanders on MSNBC](#) when she said, quite falsely:

The media is giving Bernie a pass right now, I very rarely read in any coverage of Bernie that he is a socialist.

This is evidence that McCaskill doesn't read much coverage of Bernie, since he regularly self-identifies as a "democratic socialist" and most media coverage follows suit. By implication, McCaskill is calling Sanders out for [his policy positions](#), such as universal health care, universal college education, a living wage, good, affordable childcare, and other policy choices that have been sacrificed to "outrageous tax loopholes for billionaires and large corporations." ([The Hill notes](#) that "Sanders's 'socialist' policies sound a lot like Teddy Roosevelt's and Reagan's," and later adds President Taft.)

These days, the "socialist" label is more meaningless than ever, though for some it serves as a pallid form of Red-baiting (call it Pink-baiting). Calling Sanders a "socialist" is not only redundant and irrelevant, it's an intellectually dishonest tactic for avoiding the substance of the issues Sanders is running on. As MSNBC anchor Lawrence O'Donnell never seems to tire of saying, almost all of us are socialists one way or another, and have been for a long time, at least supporters of Social Security, or Medicare, or Obamacare, and so on.

But McCaskill was happy to Pink-bait Sanders, with a bit of libertarian and right-wing baiting

thrown in, as she ran [this riff on MSNBC](#):

You know, Rand Paul's father got massive crowds, Ron Paul. He got the same size crowds. Pat Buchanan got massive crowds. It's not unusual for someone who has an extreme message to have a following, and massive is relative....

McCaskill's critique here is incoherent and suggests the Clinton campaign has yet to figure out how to make any cogent arguments against Sanders on the merits of an issue.

An early Hillary Clinton supporter, McCaskill is also a member of the tired, corporate wing of the Democratic Party, the heart of Clinton's constituency. However the corporate wing of the party may try to spin it, their policies for more than two decades have embraced a whole lot of corporate socialism, to the benefit of the wealthy and the distress of most Americans. McCaskill is a longtime [supporter of the Keystone Pipeline](#), she's a water carrier for [the meat industry](#), she favors [oil drilling in the Arctic](#), and she's a well-reimbursed pusher of the [Trans-Pacific Partnership \(TPP\)](#), despite not knowing what the whole treaty entails. So it was perfectly natural for McCaskill to say:

I think Bernie is too liberal to gather enough votes in this country to become president, and I think Hillary Clinton will be a fantastic president.

That comment says more about McCaskill than Sanders. A [recent Gallup poll](#) says 47% of Americans (and 59% of Democrats) *now* are willing to vote for a ["socialist" for president](#), with the election still 16 months away. McCaskill conflates the current race for the Democratic nomination with the future election featuring the Democratic and Republican candidates. Bernie may or may not win the nomination, but if he does, it's hardly a foregone conclusion that he couldn't beat a Republican in 2016. McCaskill's comment here also undercuts Clinton, underscoring Clinton's [long record of illiberalism](#), as well as its calculated insincerity for the sake of gathering enough votes. Under questioning, McCaskill went defensively dishonest, denying the reality of what she'd just been doing:

I am not here to be critical of my colleague Bernie Sanders ...

In May, McCaskill had also [attacked Senator Elizabeth Warren](#), the Massachusetts Democrat, with the same complaint she had about Sanders, that the media were paying too much attention to Warren. McCaskill later backtracked, saying that Warren deserved the attention and is "strong, smart, and focused."

McCaskill is not the fiercest attack dog the Clinton campaign could send out. But it still seems an early sign of concern, if not panic, to send out a foot-in-mouth pit bull wannabe (McCaskill said Hillary was "working on behalf of income inequality," which actually rings true despite what McCaskill seemed to want to mean). Asked to name three of Sanders' positions that are to the left of Hillary, McCaskill managed two: expanding Medicare and opposing TPP (she also said, redundantly, expanding entitlements). She summed up with an unintentional compliment about opposing the unrealistic:

He's against a whole lot of things that are unrealistic in this day and age.

Taken literally, McCaskill is saying gross wealth inequality is “unrealistic,” minimal taxes on rich people and corporations is “unrealistic,” continuing to use and subsidize fossil fuels is “unrealistic,” or that maintaining lawful bigotry against the LGBT community is “unrealistic.” These are all things that Sanders has long been against. McCaskill, not so much.

When McCaskill spoke on June 25 about Hillary Clinton having numbers that should make her “untouchable,” McCaskill had numbers like these in mind: Democratic primary [June 15 polling](#) in New Hampshire showed Hillary ahead of Bernie 44-32; in Iowa, Hillary led Bernie 54-12; and in South Carolina, Hillary led Bernie 60-10. In a June 7 [straw poll in Wisconsin](#), Hillary led Bernie 49-41

Since then, [Clinton’s slow slippage](#) has continued in Iowa and New Hampshire, and [crowds at Sanders events](#) have continued to reach levels other candidates rarely if ever match. New Hampshire is called a statistical tie with Clinton leading 43-35. Clinton still [leads Iowa 52-33](#), less than half the lead she had a month ago.

In Denver on June 22, Sanders drew some 5,000 people to a Town Hall [meeting in Denver](#). With almost 10,000 people at a [Sanders rally in Madison](#), Wisconsin, on July 1, Sanders claimed:

Tonight we have made a little bit of history. Tonight we have more people at any meeting for a candidate for president of the United States than any other candidate.

Perhaps this is more evidence that “a paradigm shift has taken place,” as a Huffington Post blog argues. And perhaps, if the paradigm shift has taken place, it will survive the [predictable, vicious attacks](#) by the Clinton campaign. Surely the next surrogate into the fray will have more bite, and perhaps more credibility, than Claire McCaskill.

On June 11, Bernie Sanders took Hillary Clinton to task for taking no public position on the TPP trade treaty that remains secret despite several leaks. Sanders has voted [against every trade treaty](#) (NAFTA, CAFTA, etc.) since he’s been in office. Clinton supported TPP as Secretary of State, but has since fallen silent. [Sanders criticized the frontrunner](#) for not speaking forthrightly:

I don’t understand how, on an issue of such huge consequence, you don’t have an opinion.... If she’s against this, we need her to speak out, right now. Right now. I don’t understand how any candidate, Democrat or Republican, is not speaking out on that issue.

Nobody much wonders where Bernie Sanders stand on most issues, and that’s been true for more than 30 years. But it’s hard not to wonder what Hillary Clinton’s emails are saying these days.

Bernie says, “We do need a political revolution.” So who’s up for that?

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