

The Last of a Dying Breed: The 2016 Referendum on Clintonism

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For many young voters, the Democratic Party's nomination of Hillary Clinton for the US presidency in 2016 seemed surprising, considering she was a problematic candidate at best. Bedeviled by record-low trustworthiness, limited relatability, and a host of questions about her judgment, no major party ever nominated such an unpopular candidate—that is, until the Republicans nominated Donald Trump. In addition to her perceived faults, the fact that she seemed preordained for the nomination by the establishment bloc of the party was frustrating to the liberal populists and more progressive members of the party. To the political neophytes who came of age during or after the former secretary of state's first presidential bid, her unsuitability for office and the intraparty rejection of her candidacy probably raise a host of questions about why the Democratic Party and Democratic National Committee (DNC) poured massive resources into propelling her to the White House.

The Democrats' seeming infatuation with the former senator and secretary of state originated from a place of nostalgia. For the better part of a quarter century, both Hillary and Bill Clinton were the fulcrum of the Democratic Party's ethos. This working political ideology—eponymously named Clintonism—was the basis for years of electoral strategy and a change in approach to international affairs from the conservative presidents of the 1980s and early 1990s.

The Rise of Clintonism

While Hillary Clinton represented the contemporary nature of Clintonism, the ideology originated from the successes of her husband, former President Bill Clinton. Bill Clinton was a relative newcomer to the national

political scene in the early 1990s when he unseated then-President George H.W. Bush. In the political climate of the time, Democrats appeared to be lost in the woods with no discernible path to relevance. In that era, they were perceived as advocates of big government, wild spending, and relaxed treatment of criminals and, in the post-Reagan years, that was not a Democratic Party that would see any success in the ballot box. Then-candidate Bill Clinton demonstrated a rare aptitude for co-opting Republican talking points and presenting himself as a Democrat who would govern moderately. He built a base of support on a coalition of centrists who became known as "New Democrats" and, with his electoral success, appeared to single-handedly reposition the Democratic Party for years of political success.

Domestic and International Policies

Once in office, Clinton did, in fact, govern moderately, appealing to the centrist coalition—even if often alienating members of his own party—that earned him the election. Domestically, Clinton pulled the Democratic Party toward the center on a host of issues. He oversaw a time of fiscal responsibility culminating in a balanced budget, a level of deregulation that is atypical of traditional Democratic values, and the passage of major free-trade agreements. The president also ushered in welfare and criminal justice reforms, which appeased Republicans as well as more conservative Democrats. Admittedly, President Clinton stumbled out of the gate in the field of national foreign policy. He bungled early responses to crises in Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti, but he eventually found his footing and honed in on a doctrine for his administration's foreign policy. He would prioritize

“engagement and enlargement,” meaning the United States embraced internationalism, engaged the world diplomatically, and advocated the free flow of goods and capital and, through similar means, empowered the growth and flourishing of free, democratic societies across the globe. At the crux of these strategies was the idea that the United States was an “indispensable” nation.

Pressure Builds on Hillary’s Clintonism

As President Clinton’s tenure as commander in chief concluded, the Democratic Party fully embraced Clintonism as its *modus operandi*. In the two succeeding election cycles, former Vice President Al Gore and Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) won the Democratic presidential nominations, in part, through their attempts to emulate Bill Clinton’s electoral tactics. In the early 2000s, New Democrats were still a valuable voting bloc, so the two nominees took some steps to position themselves to the right of the party’s more progressive members. Although they were unsuccessful in the national elections, this did not deter all down-ballot Democrats from embracing similar tactics in races across the country. At the same time, the cofounder of Clintonism was transitioning from first lady to junior senator of New York. Hillary Clinton was elected as senator partly for her record of working alongside her husband as he oversaw the most peaceful and economically prosperous time in the country in half a century. Although considered inherently more progressive and more hawkish than Bill, Hillary was well versed in the techniques that helped make him the first Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt to win reelection. She was always willing to find common ground with Republicans, particularly when it came to foreign policy and military matters.

To say Hillary Clinton simply regurgitated the talking points of her husband’s strain of Clintonism would not be fair; fundamentally, however, they shared the same vision and many of the same ideals. To be sure, she was reflexively more hawkish on the use of military force and more progressive on issues like health care reform, but in general, she was capable of compromising if it meant securing a strong deal. Unfortunately for her, it was during her time in office that the allure and viability of Clintonism as a working political ideology began to diminish. The downfall began in 2008 as she ran against then-Senator Barack Obama in the Democratic presidential primaries. Like her husband, she intended to garner the support of the New Democrat coalition, even if that meant leaving aside the more progressive factions of her own party.

In Barack Obama, Senator Clinton faced a breed of Democrat in many ways similar to, yet different from, Bill Clinton. Obama was equally as young, unproven, and charismatic as Bill was a decade and a half earlier, but unlike former President Clinton, Obama would blatantly disregard the white, middle class voters who were the backbone of the New Democrat coalition. Also, Obama openly repudiated the old *à la carte*, incremental policy initiatives embodied in Clintonism; he vowed not to be progressive on a particular issue and conservative on another one. Obama’s rise in popularity was an early and ominous sign of the future of Hillary Clinton and the Clinton ideology. The soon-to-be president represented a population and party that were growing ever more progressive. Hillary suffered in voter opinion for her record on criminal justice reform, finance reform, and foreign adventurism, all of which were policies that earned the Clintons more support in the primacy of their careers. In other areas, she was

not progressive enough. Although she had long championed health care reform, many Democratic voters were more receptive to Obama's liberal ideas for reform.

Obama-Clinton Foreign Policy

After Barack Obama was named president, Hillary Clinton accepted the role of secretary of state, positioning herself for another presidential bid in the future. But, her time at the State Department would not be as self-serving as she might have envisioned and, in fact, her ties to the Obama Administration would eventually come back to haunt her. Being the face of US foreign policy, she attempted to maintain the Clintonist approaches of engagement and enlargement—in the larger context of President Obama's policy agenda—by initiating the infamous “Russian reset,” brokering the early back-channel discussions with Iran on its nuclear program, and initially supporting the adoption of the Trans-Pacific Partnership. All of these moves elicited backlash from Democrats and Republicans alike, indicating that although she largely operated under the same ideological framework as her husband had during their time in the White House, the political landscape had shifted beneath her. As her tenure drew to a close, the Clinton brand would be further tarnished by numerous scandals and poor decisions.

Clinton's New Fight

Secretary Clinton survived to run again, but as the results demonstrate, the time for Clintonism was rapidly expiring. In the 2016 Democratic presidential primaries, she faced an even more progressive opponent and was forced to dramatically change course. In the general election, she would again face a man who

challenged her long-held belief in centrism. Her opponent, Senator Bernie Sanders (D-Vermont), and general election nemesis, Donald Trump, were both candidates who were fueled by voter frustration, feelings of betrayal, and a heightened sense of partisanship. Voters of both parties were frustrated with the proliferation of establishment politicians, of which Hillary Clinton seemed to be the embodiment. The betrayal that large portions of US demographics felt was a result of two Obama campaigns saturated with rhetoric about hope and change, but passing by with few results and a great deal of perceived abandonment. For liberals, the pursuit of the progressive values that Obama supposedly stood for was ultimately contradicted by the relatively centrist governance he crafted. Here, Secretary Clinton's ties to the Obama Administration were damaging, as they gave her the appearance of being more centrist than a new generation of Democrats was willing to support. Within the Democratic Party, Sanders's bid for the nomination was a reflection of a new class of voters—those increasingly young and progressive voters who expected not just rhetoric about pursuing progressive causes, but real action.

Hillary Clinton—the deal maker, willing to sacrifice progressive values for results—suffered from other issues that were mostly out of her control. First, the basic geopolitical landscape in the United States had shifted dramatically since her earlier years. The “Reagan Democrats” and the New Democrats throughout the South and Midwest who won her husband two terms were a dying breed. Whether a result of gerrymandering or voluntary population redistribution, the voting bloc on which her husband depended for two terms in office was less available, and rural and Southern Democrats—those who are typically

more conservative than their coastal, urban counterparts—tended later to vote for Republicans. Second, many of the white, middle class voters in the Midwest who twice elected Barack Obama later shunned the Democratic Party as a whole due to perceived neglect by President Obama. Right or wrong, President Obama was largely able to ignore those constituents due to the massive amount of support he received from the rising American electorate—a coalition of young, minority, and women voters—and Hillary would inevitably be tied to that neglect. Hillary Clinton would have been naïve if she believed she could simply inherit the Obama coalition, though. Aside from demographic differences and limited relatability, Clinton simply was not the charismatic personality that Obama—or her husband, for that matter—was and she did not have the ability to bridge policy differences using her charm or wit.

There was one last crucial factor that ultimately helped usher in the end of Clinton's time as a leader in the Democratic Party. Throughout the 2016 election, there was a concerted, multifaceted effort by Russian parties to sabotage Secretary Clinton's candidacy. From a Russian perspective, Clinton's brand of foreign policy was prohibitive regarding the Kremlin's geopolitical ambitions. Clintonism allows for international cooperation, but when a nation is outside the good graces of the United States, like Russia, the globalist approach of Clintonism is often to build international consensus for issues like levying sanctions and mutual protection. A multilateral collaboration could not be more evident than the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which was established to dissuade Russia from interfering in the affairs of western European nations. From Vladimir Putin's perspective, Hillary Clinton would maintain the

collaborative efforts of NATO allies to punish Russia, while Donald Trump—who has a much more favorable posture toward the Kremlin—is Putin's best hope for weakening the United States' commitment to the global order and international cooperation.

In order to successfully derail Secretary Clinton's campaign, Russian entities set out to exploit the weaknesses already showing in the once-strong political ideology. With bipartisanship steadily growing in the United States, the Russian officials' goals were to widen the gap between the voters of the parties and erase the middle ground that a centrist Clinton would need to stand on. To accomplish this, Russian hackers and cyber wonks obtained sensitive information from the DNC and deliberately leaked the damaging information throughout the campaign cycle. In addition, these same individuals disseminated demonstrably false news reports and deployed fake social media accounts for the purpose of promoting leaked material, misleading narratives, and false news stories. When combined, this cyber presence could ostensibly have helped drive voters apart and convince swing voters to steer clear of Secretary Clinton.

The State of the Democratic Party and Clintonism

Secretary Clinton inherited a Democratic Party that is much more liberal than the one under her husband's helm. It simply is no longer a hospitable climate for the Clinton-brand of centrism. The rise in popularity of progressive senators and representatives is indicative of the state of the party. Democrats, again, look to be lost in the proverbial wilderness and that is partially due to the chasm that has developed in the party—as illustrated by the uncharacteristically tense recent race for DNC

Chair. The most popular leaders rising from the ashes of the Democratic implosion are not the Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumers of the old guard, but rather the progressive darlings like Senator Bernie Sanders, Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Massachusetts), and Representative Keith Ellison (D-Minnesota). In addition to the liberal wing garnering more support from Democratic voters, one survey determined that Democratic and Independent voters overwhelmingly preferred that Hillary Clinton not run for president in 2020. All of this indicates that members of the Democratic Party are lurching left at a dizzying pace and they no longer prefer the centrist New Democrat crafted in the image of the Clintons. Perhaps, one day, voters will reorient toward moderate, centrist candidates, but for all intents and purposes, Clintonism as we have seen it is dead for now.

The election of Donald Trump will also prove to be a rejection of Clintonism as a strategy for foreign affairs. President Clinton's foreign policy was one that embraced globalism and engaged other countries diplomatically and economically. Hillary Clinton's personal views of foreign policy were a little more hawkish than those of Presidents Clinton or Obama, but she also focused on using economic and diplomatic means for engaging—or pressuring—world governments. Now, however, President Trump's economic and foreign policies appear to be geared toward isolationism and protectionism as well as an increased likelihood of economic or military confrontation. Hillary Clinton's time as secretary of state spoiled her reputation in foreign affairs as many disgruntled voters believe Obama and Clinton ushered in a time where the United States is no longer an indispensable power. President Trump capitalized on this narrative and vowed to increase the US military's might, avoid

enlargement and engagement strategies that are negatively attributed to nation-building, and adopt hostile postures toward other countries. For at least the next four years, the White House will forego internationalism for the “America First” priority of the Trump Administration.

The End of an Ideology

Like the Clintons themselves, Clintonism has faced some serious setbacks and has lacked influence for some time. It seems that the accumulation of voters at both poles of the US political spectrum, the intraparty revolt championed by progressive Democrats, and the nationalist shift inward in economic and foreign policies have signaled the inevitable death of that once-hallowed, centrist ideology crafted by President Bill Clinton and co-opted by former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. What does the end of this ideology mean for the party, its future, and contemporary foreign policy? Domestically, in the short term, the Democratic Party will—or should—continue to go through a learning phase in which leaders will jockey for repositioning the party on a host of issues. Right now, the most fervent activists in the party are more liberal and progressive than the party's traditional base. As the party's base gets younger and more diverse, it will likely move its platform further left of center.

In foreign policy, we already see this shift taking place. Young members of Congress, like Connecticut Senator Chris Murphy, are voicing their desire to reevaluate the neoliberalism of the Clinton days. If the discussions being raised by Senator Murphy and others are any indication, a more progressive party would address issues in the Middle East in a way similar to that during the post-World War II Marshall Plan. The new Democratic Party would emphasize nonmilitary involvement in

the region, like humanitarian and economic aid, and employ development initiatives to build and strengthen critical infrastructure and social

institutions, as well as burnish the United States' reputation in the region as a benevolent actor.

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