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How Clinton the moderate got sideswiped to the left by Sanders

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With Hillary Clinton securing the 2383 delegates needed to clinch her party's nomination, the race for the Democratic nomination is finally over. Now, after a campaign that saw her move sharply to the left, the challenge Clinton faces is to broaden her base of support in an electorate that is fractured, polarised and distrustful. The question is whether she can do so given the positions she has adopted and the baggage she carries.

That it has taken this long for Clinton's nomination to be settled is in some respects unsurprising. In the 20 presidential nominating contests that took place between 1972 and 2008, only five eventual nominees had to fight for nomination from the very first to the very last primary: of those five, four were Democrats. The Democratic nominating process is, in other words, far more prone to prolonged and bloody battles than its Republican counterpart.

Yet, at least since the late 1980s, it also has tended to produce candidates that have a strong base of support in the Democratic establishment.

Those outcomes largely reflect the design of the process. Like so much else in the Democratic Party, that design is an uncomfortable mix of features that encourage participatory democracy with elements that seek to vest in the party's establishment a residual degree of control. Born of the trauma of the 1960s, it reflects a compromise between the "New Politics" that emerged from the civil rights movement and the campaign against the Vietnam war, with their focus on empowering the grassroots, and the reality that the party, if it is to win presidential contests, requires the support of a coalition that stretches from organised labour to major corporate donors.

Striking the balance between those conflicting pressures has never been easy. The reforms forced on the party in the wake of its raucous 1968 convention in Chicago (at which vice-president Hubert Humphrey, who had refused to take part in any primaries, was given the nomination by the party establishment over violent protests from opponents of the Vietnam war) required that delegates to the convention be selected by the party's

supporters through an open electoral process.

The theory was that registered Democrats, who until then had determined the choice of delegates to the convention in barely 20 per cent of local Democratic party organisations, would be put in control; in reality, the reforms created space for the most highly committed party activists, who were typically far more liberal than the electoral mainstream, to champion protest candidates.

Requiring the allocation of delegates on the basis of proportional representation (as against the “winner takes all” model used by the GOP in most of the primaries that occur at the middle and the end of its nominating season) worsened matters, as it made it harder for a candidate to amass a commanding lead. That encouraged challengers to stay in the race, delaying the contest’s resolution.

The results, once the reforms came into effect, were predictably disastrous, including the nominations of senator George McGovern in 1972, whose views, rather than reflecting the mood of the American electorate, echoed those of the New Left, and of governor Jimmy Carter in 1976.

The party responded partly by grouping primaries into large regional clusters, beginning with “Super Tuesday” in the south, thereby hoping to advantage candidates with the organisational capacity to manage a substantial number of simultaneous contests and whose centrism would give them broad geographical appeal. Even more important, however, it added to the participants at the convention a number of “superdelegates”, chosen from the party’s current and former elected officials, with the superdelegates’ share of the total vote being set so that they were insufficient to impose an unpopular candidate but could block the nomination of a candidate the party establishment regarded as clearly inappropriate.

With Clinton obtaining pledges of support from 538 of the 715 superdelegates to next month’s National Democratic Convention, it is the superdelegates’ vote that has got her over the line. Yet the fact she has had to rely on the superdelegates highlights how enormously successful Bernie Sanders’s campaign has been in seizing ground from a candidate who initially was regarded as having an unassailable grasp on the nomination.

Beating Sanders's challenge has cost Clinton dearly. She has, in particular, had to shift from being an avowed moderate to advocating positions that have earned her the impending endorsement of senator Elizabeth Warren, the most effective congressional voice of the party's progressive wing. The change that has brought in Clinton's policy stance could not be starker. When she first ran for the Senate 16 years ago, she echoed the "third wave" philosophy of her husband's New Democrats, saying that "I don't believe government is the source of all our problems, or the solution to them"; and in keeping with that philosophy, she supported accelerating fiscal consolidation, pursuing welfare reform, expanding charter schools, reducing the regulatory burden on business and promoting trade liberalisation. In the past six months, however, she has resiled from every one of those commitments, as well as becoming increasingly strident in debates over race and gender.

The space between her and Sanders has shrunk dramatically on issues that range from raising the federal minimum wage to reform of social security, and from the Trans-Pacific Partnership to fracking, the Keystone XL pipeline and the future of fossil fuels. She has thereby locked herself into an agenda well to the left of President Barack Obama's. And with the Sanders camp gaining a role in drafting the party's program, Clinton may have to spend the coming months supporting policies she normally would not have contemplated.

The pressures underpinning that shift to the left are readily understandable. Taken as a whole, the electorate has become increasingly polarised: in 1994, 30 per cent of Democrats were more conservative than the median Republican, while 36 per cent of Republicans were more liberal than the median Democrat; by 2014, only 6 per cent of Democrats were more conservative than the median Republican, while just 8 per cent of Republicans were more liberal than the median Democrat.

The result of greater polarisation has been to make it difficult, if not impossible, for candidates to hew to the centre, as Bill Clinton famously did with his "triangulation" strategy in 1996, since the centre is now so much further from the ideological positioning of most party members. And compounding that difficulty has been the return of race as a prominent factor in the American political dynamic.

That race would come back to centre stage was unexpected. On the contrary, it was widely thought the 2008 election would inaugurate a “post-racial” era.

If race has returned as an issue it is partly because the election of an African-American president gave race greater salience in everyday politics; but it is also due to the clash between racial realities and wildly unrealistic expectations of change. The result of that clash has been to exacerbate the sense of grievance in the black community; and since blacks, and especially black women, are a crucial Democratic constituency — and particularly so for Hillary Clinton — the need to remain in line with that constituency’s expectations has added stridency to Clinton’s rhetoric, with Clinton becoming increasingly committed to the language and symbolism of the Black Lives Matter movement and apologising for saying, as first lady, that violent criminals are “super-predators” that “we have to bring to heel”.

There is little question that the underlying racial problems that fuel those grievances are as severe as they are intractable. For example, despite the progress that has occurred, sociologist Patrick Sharkey showed in a book published earlier this year that 25 per cent of all African-American families have lived in the poorest 10 per cent of all US neighbourhoods in consecutive generations, compared with just 1 per cent of whites. Sharkey also found that the share of black children reared in the poorest American neighbourhoods is actually higher for the cohorts born from 1985 to 2000 than it was for those born in the period from 1955 through to 1970.

Perhaps every bit as tellingly, intergenerational upward mobility among blacks is not only rarer but considerably more fragile than it is for whites: only one out of every 100 black families in the US has lived in affluent neighbourhoods for two consecutive generations, compared with roughly a quarter of white families.

Those differences then translate into enduring gaps in income, wealth, health status and exposure to violent crime, with the gaps, which increased in the recent recession, being significantly larger than economic models would predict on the basis of characteristics such as education and work experience.

Few issues are as controversial as the precise factors that account for the

disparities; what is certain, however, is the re-emergence of those disparities as a political flashpoint. And it is equally clear that by tacking sharply to the left on racial issues, Clinton has cemented an important segment of her base. But it is far from obvious that base is sufficient to secure her the presidency.

That is not to deny that Clinton's support base is substantial. This year, for instance, blacks and Hispanics will each account for 12 per cent of potential voters; adding to them a majority of two other groups in which Clinton leads — white unmarried women and white college-educated women — could bring her base near the 35 per cent to 40 per cent mark.

However, the geographical concentration of blacks and Hispanics reduces their weight in the electoral college. And once that is taken into account, even adding a substantial share of women to Clinton's pool of support would not offset the fact that the difference between Clinton's strength among college-educated whites on the one hand, and non-college-educated whites on the other, is much larger than ever previously recorded for a Democratic nominee.

A recent CBS/*New York Times* poll captured a nearly perfect parallelism in that respect: 68 per cent of white women with a college degree said they viewed Donald Trump unfavourably, while 67 per cent of white men without a degree were unfavourable towards Clinton.

Even if Clinton can secure the vote of Sanders's supporters, she will find it hard to win unless she can significantly improve her standing in the traditional white working class. But many of the progressive positions she has adopted — such as the tighter controls on local police forces that the Black Lives Matter movement demands — are deeply divisive in precisely those constituencies. And the obstacles her policy commitments create are multiplied many times over by the perception that she is not merely another Washington insider but a particularly dishonest one at that.

Nor has Clinton shown much willingness to tackle those perceptions. Rather, as *The New York Times*, which has solidly supported her nomination, editorialised on Wednesday, she has displayed “a tendency to dodge uncomfortable questions”. Given that there is plenty of dirty linen still to be aired, her ability to alter the view, held by a quarter of Democrats and a majority of independents, that she is untrustworthy remains to be seen.

What is beyond doubt, however, is that she will fight to win. And her record demonstrates both exceptional tenacity and the capacity, on occasion, to secure high levels of public respect.

But if she does succeed, her policies would mark a sharp break from those that underpinned prosperity during her husband's administrations. With the American economy showing signs of slowing, that is hardly good news for Australia.

It may be only the fear that Trump would be even worse that makes the prospect of her victory at all reassuring.