

Hillary Clinton's Very Bad Night

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Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's stunning 22-point loss to Sen. Bernie Sanders in New Hampshire is even more devastating when looked at in the context of [the modern history](#) of this first-in-the-nation primary: No one has ever lost by such a margin and gone on to win the presidency.

Among Democrats, no one who lost by even half that margin in New Hampshire has recovered to win the party's nomination. In 2008, Barack Obama lost to Hillary Clinton by 2.6 percentage points; in 1992, Bill Clinton lost to Paul Tsongas by 8.4 percentage points; in 1984, Walter Mondale lost to Gary Hart by 9.4 percentage points; in 1972, George McGovern lost to Edmund Muskie by 9.3 percentage points.

In two of those cases, New Hampshire did favor neighboring politicians – Sen. Tsongas from Massachusetts and Sen. Muskie from Maine – but Tuesday's 22-point margin for Vermont Sen. Sanders cannot be explained simply by making the “nearby-favorite-son” argument. Sanders [swept nearly every demographic group](#), including women, losing only to Clinton among New Hampshire's senior citizens and the state's small number of non-white voters. Sanders's margin among young voters was particularly impressive, 82 percent, roughly the same proportion as the Iowa caucuses last week.

If Hillary Clinton hopes to overcome her New Hampshire drubbing, she would have to look for encouragement from the legacy of Republican George W. Bush who lost the 2000 New Hampshire primary to Sen. John McCain by a margin of 49 percent to 30.2 percent, but even Bush's landslide loss represented a smaller margin of defeat than Clinton suffered on Tuesday.

A Worried Establishment

Clinton's failure to generate momentum or much enthusiasm in her pursuit of the Democratic presidential nomination presents the Democratic Party establishment with a dilemma, since many senior party leaders fret about the risk that Sanders, a self-described “democratic socialist,” might lead the Democrats to the kind of electoral disaster that Sen. George McGovern did in 1972.

Though the Democrats rebounded in 1976 with Jimmy Carter's victory amid Republican disarray over Richard Nixon's Watergate scandal, the Republicans soon reestablished their domination over presidential politics for a dozen years with Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. For the Democrats to reclaim the White House in 1992, it took a “New Democrat,” Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton, to repackage the Democratic message into one proposing “neo-liberal” (anti-regulatory, free-trade) economics, embracing Republican tough-on-crime tactics, and rejecting “Big Government.”

President Clinton also emphasized “micro-policies,” best illustrated by his call for “school uniforms,” rather than proposing “macro-policies” for addressing poverty and other structural problems facing Americans. Though the economy performed fairly well under Clinton – his success lessening pressures from liberal groups – he also opened the door to Wall Street and other corporate excesses (by supporting deregulation of the financial and media industries).

At that point in the 1990s, the “neo-liberal” strategies had not been tested in the U.S. economy and thus many Americans were caught off-guard when this new anti-regulatory, free-trade fervor contributed to a hollowing out of the Great American Middle Class and a bloated Gilded Age for the top One Percent.

The full consequences of neo-liberalism became painfully apparent with the Wall Street Crash of 2008 and the resulting Great Recession. The suffering and hopelessness now affecting many Americans, including the white working class, has led to an angry political rejection of the American Establishment as reflected in the insurgent candidacies of Donald Trump and Sanders.

A Legacy Campaign

Hillary Clinton (like Jeb Bush) faces the misfortune of running a legacy campaign at a time when the voters are angry about the legacies of both “ruling families,” the Clintons and the Bushes. Though Sanders is a flawed candidate faulted for [his muddled foreign-policy prescriptions](#), he (like Trump) has seized the mantle of fighting the Establishment at a time when millions of Americans are fed up with the Establishment and its self-serving policies.

In some ways, the Iowa and New Hampshire results represented the worst outcome for establishment Democrats. Clinton’s razor-thin victory in Iowa and her slashing defeat in New Hampshire have left Democratic strategists uncertain as to whether they should rally behind her – despite her lukewarm to freezing-cold reception from voters – or try to recruit another candidate who could cut off Sanders’s path to the nomination and represent a “more electable” choice in November.

If Clinton continues to stumble, there will be enormous pressure from Democratic leaders to push her aside and draw Vice President Joe Biden or perhaps Sen. Elizabeth Warren into the race.

If that were to occur — and, granted, the Clintons are notoriously unwilling to admit defeat — the Democrats could experience a political dynamic comparable to 1968 when anti-Vietnam War Sen. Eugene McCarthy challenged the prohibitive favorite President Lyndon Johnson and came close enough in New Hampshire to prompt Sen. Robert Kennedy to jump into the race — and to convince Johnson to announce that he would not seek another term.

Many idealistic Democrats who had backed McCarthy in his seemingly quixotic fight against Johnson were furious against “Bobby-come-lately,” setting up a battle between two anti-war factions of the Democratic Party. Of course, the history of the 1968 campaign was marred by the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and then Robert Kennedy, followed by the chaotic Chicago convention, which handed the nomination to Johnson’s Vice President Hubert Humphrey.

Then, after Republican Richard Nixon [secretly sabotaged](#) Johnson’s Vietnam peace talks,

Nixon managed to eke out a victory over Humphrey.

While Campaign 2016 reflects a very different America – and the key Democratic issue is “income inequality,” not the Vietnam War – some parallels could become obvious if the presumptive nominee (Johnson in 1968 and Clinton in 2016) is pushed out or chooses to step aside.

Then, the Democratic choice would be plunging ahead with a back-bench candidate (McCarthy in 1968 and Sanders in 2016) or looking for a higher-profile and more mainstream alternative, such as Biden who (like Humphrey) would offer continuity with the sitting president or Warren who shares many of Sanders’s positions (like Robert Kennedy did with McCarthy) but who might be more acceptable to “party regulars.”

A Warren candidacy also might lessen the disappointment of women who wanted to see Hillary Clinton as the first female president. At the moment, however, the question is: Did New Hampshire deal a death blow to Hillary Clinton’s campaign or can she become the first candidate in modern U.S. political history to bounce back from a 22-point loss in the first-in-the-nation primary?

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