



Hijacks, Hijinks, History and Hillary: The 2016 Presidential Election

The 2016 US presidential election has already been the most unpredictable in living memory. **James D. Boys** examines the dynamic of the campaign so far and finds Hillary Clinton favourite to become the first female commander-in-chief.

Irrrespective of whatever transpires in the remaining months of the campaign, the 2016 US presidential election has already been one for the history books. It has repeatedly defied expectations, flummoxed seasoned pundits and seen entire careers disintegrate as, time and again, the unexpected occurred during the primary and caucus season. What was most surprising, perhaps, was the extent to which a series of issues impacted both the Republicans and the

Democrats in a campaign season unlike any other.

One of the most remarkable features of the 2016 campaign has been the extent to which efforts were made to hijack both the Republican and Democratic Parties by outsiders with no discernable record of affiliation or loyalty to either group. The Republicans have nominated Donald J. Trump, a real estate mogul and reality TV star. Until recently, he was a registered Democrat and

appears to epitomise the RINO (Republican in Name Only) concept that proved so detrimental to previous candidates. Whatever else he may be, Trump is no conservative. His positions on abortion, religion and a host of contentious policy areas are totally at odds with Republican Party orthodoxy, yet he has prevailed to emerge from a sea of challengers far more experienced in national politics. Little wonder, perhaps, that conspiracy theorists see him as a plant to ensure Hillary Clinton's victory and the implosion of the GOP.

Democratic Dissension

Simultaneously, despite his ultimate failure to secure the nomination, the Democratic Party has been intellectually hijacked by Senator

Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialist from Vermont. Preaching a brand of socialist political philosophy not heard in a political generation, Sanders has sought to move the party to a position more akin to where it last stood in the 1980s. Vitally, this was the pre-Clinton era, and, it must be noted, before a political re-branding that saw the Democratic Party win the popular vote in every presidential election, bar one, since 1988.

For many Democrats, however, the 'New Democrat' policies that Bill Clinton adopted in the 1990s were as unpopular as the 'New Labour' project was with socialists in the UK and were viewed as a betrayal of party principles in a (successful) bid to gain power. Having been out of power for 12 years by 1992, the Democratic Party was inclined to accept such an approach. In 2016, having been in power for the last eight years, this is no longer the case and explains, in part, why many members of the Democratic Party have hankered after a candidate further to the left on the political spectrum. Sanders, who no one expected to be any serious threat to Hillary Clinton, has defeated her in key battleground states and repeatedly drawn tens of thousands to rallies across the country as he advocated an approach very different from that being offered by the Clinton campaign. His remarkable efforts repeatedly drew Clinton further to the left than she intended – simply to gain her party's nomination – ensuring that she will need to dramatically reposition herself once again for the general election in the autumn.

Hillary's Pros, and Cons

Despite the rearguard action that Sanders has waged, the Democrats will make history for the second time in successive elections; having nominated an African-American Senator in 2008 and 2012, they will break the glass ceiling and name Hillary Clinton as their candidate. This is only the latest in a series of historic 'firsts' for Hillary Clinton: she was the first student at Wellesley College to deliver a commencement speech, the first woman on the Wal-Mart board of directors, the first First Lady with an office in the West Wing of the White House, the first First Lady to seek and win elected office, and the first Secretary of State to visit more than one hundred countries. In addition, she was the first First Lady to hold a postgraduate degree and the

first First Lady to win a Grammy Award. She has already won more votes than any woman in US history, graced the cover of *Time* magazine more than any woman in history, and has now become the first woman to be nominated by a major party as their candidate for the presidency of the United States.

As in 2008, the case can be made that the election of 2016 is Hillary Clinton's to lose. As was proven before, victory is by no means guaranteed. The greatest challenge to a Hillary Clinton presidency, as was the case with her husband's administration, is most likely to come from the classic Clinton Achilles Heel: themselves. For all of Hillary Clinton's formidable strengths, she brings with her a series of issues that must be addressed and overcome for her to be victorious in 2016. These relate to her character, her career and her politics and include issues such as her email account as Secretary of State, the Benghazi incident, her age, gender, a changing demographic, her policy initiatives and her role at the Clinton Foundation. For all of the 'firsts' of which she should rightly be proud, Hillary Clinton was also the only First Lady to ever be compelled to appear before a Grand Jury and the only candidate for president to be nominated while under criminal investigation by the Justice Department. She was interviewed by the FBI during the summer as part of its continuing probe into her use of her own private email server extremely careless' by FBI Director

Comey. Her ability to address these issues in the coming months will determine whether she enters the history books as the first female president, or merely as a contender for the greatest electoral prize available.

In addition to her own demons and self-created challenges, Hillary Clinton will face a Republican opponent in November, eager to secure the White House after eight years of the Obama administration. Whatever levels of energy exist for Hillary Clinton's candidacy within the Democratic Party, her campaign will energise the Republican Party base with a 'Stop Hillary' agenda. The great unknown, of course, is Donald Trump. With no experience of political office, his candidacy should have been a joke, but it was not. All 'experts' maintained that he could not win the Republican Party nomination, but few could explain why, even when he emerged victorious. Trump has the money to self-finance his campaign, as well as the name recognition and media attention necessary to prevail. Often overlooked, however, is Trump's age. It is often noted that Hillary Clinton would become the second oldest president if she wins in November; only Reagan was older. However, it is rarely, if ever, noted that Trump would best this and become the oldest newly elected president in history.

Trump: A Political Storm

In his poem *The Second Coming*, Yeats observed 'the centre cannot hold,' ensuring





that 'mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' If Trump has yet to unleash anarchy upon the world, he has certainly brought it upon the Republican Party, which appears as divided as at any time in memory. Not for the first time, an extraordinarily wealthy American businessman with no experience of political office has taken a presidential campaign by storm, and threatened the unity of the political right. In 1992, Ross Perot's candidacy gained 19 per cent in the general election and helped elect Bill Clinton with 43 per cent of the popular vote as the Republican vote splintered. Abraham Lincoln, the first Republican Party President, famously noted that 'a house divided against itself cannot stand.' In 2016, however, its own candidate appears to have done more than anyone to divide the party; all living former GOP presidents and many former officials refuse to endorse him, and some are quietly stating their preference for Hillary Clinton.

The electoral confusion that Trump has helped herald has been exacerbated by events in Europe. Many have speculated that a Trump victory is more likely following the UK decision to leave the EU. This simplistic reading of the situation, however, fails to account for a whole variety of issues and betrays a fundamental misunderstanding of the US electoral system, where an Electoral College exists, in part, to defy such a populist uprising of the masses. What could be far more influential is David Cameron's successor as Prime Minister. Theresa May has become the second female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, before the United States has elected its first female President, which may eventually play into Hillary Clinton's campaign narrative. Given the expectation

that both Trump and Clinton will visit the UK ahead of the election for talks at Downing Street, the optics for Hillary Clinton could be very positive. Quite what Trump will make of Prime Minister May, however, is quite another proposition.

A Nation Divided

Whoever prevails, the next President will preside over a deeply divided nation. Despite the advances made under President Obama, including passage of the Affordable Healthcare Act and the end to active military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, all is not well with the American body politic. The racial divide that many expected to be addressed by Barack Obama as the first African-American president has not healed; economic disparity continues to widen as the number of Americans on Food Stamps has hit an historic high, up from 17 million in 2000 to 46 million in 2015, receiving \$76.1 billion a year. Internationally, US interests are challenged daily by rising world and regional powers. However, despite a national sense of pessimism, the economic figures are considerably improved in comparison to those of 2008. The US Bureau of Labor reported that the national unemployment rate in the United States decreased to a seven-year low of 4.7 per cent in May 2016. The US Bureau of Labor also reported that average wages in the United States hit an all time high of \$10.55 an hour in January 2015, up from a record low of \$9.88 an hour in July 2008. Yet, while the United States is no longer actively engaged in Iraq or Afghanistan, no tangible policy appears to exist to address the clear and present danger to American interests in the region that is posed by Islamic

extremists. Osama bin Laden may have been neutralised and the apparent threat from al Qaeda diminished, but the danger of political violence in the form of extremism has not ended; it has instead morphed into something altogether different and potentially more destabilising.

President Hillary?

For all of the talk about personality, politics and policy, the presidential election is all about electoral mathematics. 270 is the magic number; indeed, it is the only number that counts. All considerations must be geared towards accumulating the 270 Electoral College votes that will secure the White House. The popular vote would be nice, but it is the Electoral College that will decide the election, as Al Gore discovered in 2000. Each state awards a number of electors depending upon its population. California, with the largest population, awards the most delegates (55) and is a state that Hillary Clinton, as a Democrat, would be expected to win.

The Republicans have only won the popular vote in a presidential election once since 1988, ensuring that the Democrats have secured the popular vote in five of the last six elections and won five of the last seven presidential contests. The national demographics appear to point to a Democratic victory. Hillary Clinton's route to electoral victory will depend upon her ability to retain the overwhelming ethnic minority support that secured Barack Obama's two terms in the White House and build upon the large female vote that she secured in the 2008 primaries, but which Obama failed to secure in 2012. Such a combination of Latinos, African Americans and women, as well as the usual percentage of white men who would be expected to vote Democrat, should be sufficient to capture the White House in 2016 and propel Hillary Clinton into the history books as the first female president of the United States.

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