

Campaign Stops |  CAMPAIGN STOPS

# Trumpism and Clintonism Are the Future

By MICHAEL LIND APRIL 16, 2016

No matter who wins the New York primaries on Tuesday or which candidates end up as the presidential nominees of the two major parties, one thing is already clear: Trumpism represents the future of the Republicans and Clintonism the future of the Democrats.

Those who see the nationalist populism of Mr. Trump as an aberration in a party that will soon return to free-market, limited government orthodoxy are mistaken. So are those who believe that the appeal of Senator Bernie Sanders to the young represents a repudiation of the center-left synthesis shared by Bill Clinton, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. In one form or another, Trumpism and Clintonism will define conservatism and progressivism in America.

This may turn out to be the most turbulent election year since 1968, but the source of the turbulence is different. The presidential election of 1968 was a milestone in partisan realignment — the breakup of the mid-20th-century Democrats and Republicans and the reshuffling of voter blocs among the two parties. In 2016, this half-century process of partisan realignment is all but complete. What we are seeing instead of partisan realignment is policy realignment — the adjustment of what each party stands for to its existing voter base.

We are accustomed to thinking of the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 as the beginning of a new era. But from the vantage point of 2016, both Reagan and Bill Clinton look more like transitional figures. During this period, the migration from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party of socially conservative, economically populist Democrats, like the supporters of the segregationist

Democrat George Wallace's independent presidential campaign in 1968, was not yet complete. Neither was the flow of moderate Rockefeller Republicans in the opposite direction.

In Ronald Reagan's Republican Party, the traditional conservative wing focused on business and limited government was much stronger relative to the growing number of populist Reagan Democrats or Wallace Democrats. Like Barry Goldwater, Reagan was, in his economic views, much more of a classical liberal or libertarian than a populist. As a candidate, he denounced Social Security and Medicare, although as president he chose not to attack them. In 1986, he supported and presided over the first large-scale amnesty of illegal immigrants in American history. Although he benefited from the support of working-class whites who resented affirmative action, busing, mass immigration, sexual liberation and cultural liberalism, Reagan himself was animated by an optimistic individualism that had more in common with Chamber of Commerce boosterism than it did with the defensive and combative communitarianism of conservative populism.

Like Reagan, Bill Clinton was a transitional figure in an era of partisan flux. He himself had worked in the George McGovern campaign in 1972. Nevertheless, in the 1980s and 1990s, Reagan Democrats were important enough as swing voters that Bill Clinton, Al Gore and other New Democrats sought to distance themselves from the liberal left on the military, policing, the death penalty, censorship and other issues.

But in the midterm election of 1994, when the Republican party captured both houses of Congress, many centrist and conservative Democrats, particularly in the South and West, were replaced by Republicans. The Democrats who survived the slaughter were concentrated in New England and the West Coast, big cities and college towns, and majority black or majority Latino districts. The midterm elections of 2010 wiped out much of the remnant of centrist-to-conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats in the House.

Today's Democratic base is, to simplify somewhat, an alliance of Northern, Midwestern and West Coast whites from the old Rockefeller Republican tradition with blacks and Latinos. To give one telling example, former Senator Jim Webb, the candidate who most fully represented the white Southern working-class base of

the F.D.R.-to-L.B.J. Democrats, abandoned his campaign after receiving little support in a party that bears ever less resemblance to the New Deal Democrats.

For their part, the Republicans of 2016 rely for their votes on the Southern white and Northern white working-class constituencies that were once the mainstays of the other party. With this partisan realignment over, the policy realignment has begun — the closing of the gap between the inherited program of a political party and the values and interests of its present-day voters.

In the Republican Party, the inherited program shared by much of the conservative movement and the party's donors, with its emphasis on free trade and large-scale immigration, and cuts in entitlements like Social Security and Medicare, is a relic of the late 20th century, when the country-club wing of the party was much more important than the country-and-western wing. The anger and sense of betrayal of the newly dominant white working class in the Republican Party makes perfect sense.

Donald Trump has mounted and ridden the horse of conservative populism, but it was already out of the barn. Before Mr. Trump, similar populist themes were sounded by Mike Huckabee, Rick Santorum and Patrick Buchanan. For a while, the strength of the religious right allowed elite Republicans to trade tax cuts for the rich for support for banning abortion and gay marriage. But as religious conservatism declines, a kind of European-style national populism is rising, for which protectionism and immigration restriction are central issues, not peripheral concerns.

Long before Mr. Trump threw his hat into the ring in 2015, the economic libertarians who are overrepresented in the donor class and Republican think tanks and magazines were losing to the populists. Opposition to illegal immigration went from being a fringe issue associated with Patrick Buchanan in the 1990s to a central test of whether one was a "true conservative" or a Republican in Name Only. In 2007 and again in 2013, the opposition of populist Republicans thwarted so-called comprehensive immigration reform in Congress.

Similarly, opposition from their own voters forced the Republicans who controlled both houses of Congress to squelch George W. Bush's proposed partial privatization of Social Security. The Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit,

enacted in 2003, had the support of aging white Republican voters even as it appalled and infuriated free-marketers and deficit hawks on the right.

Whatever becomes of his bid for the presidency, Mr. Trump exposed the gap between what orthodox conservative Republicans offer and what today's dominant Republican voters actually want — middle-class entitlements plus crackdowns on illegal immigrants, Muslims, foreign trade rivals and free-riding allies. Other candidates less flawed than Mr. Trump and more acceptable to the Republican establishment, like Ted Cruz, are likely to bring Republican policy positions and Republican voter preferences more closely into alignment, by moving somewhat to the left on middle-class entitlements and somewhat to the right on immigration and trade.

A similar process of policy realignment is underway among the Democrats. But notwithstanding the enthusiasm of the young for Bernie Sanders, the major tension is not between Mr. Sanders and Hillary Clinton. It is between Hillary Clinton and the legacy of Bill Clinton.

President Bill Clinton, as we have seen, was still trying to appeal both to the so-called rising American electorate of minorities, single women and progressives and to white working-class remnants of the old Roosevelt coalition. Looking back, many progressives today blame the Clinton administration for appealing to white voters by contributing to mass incarceration. Likewise, many progressives resent President Clinton's support of the anti-gay Defense of Marriage Act and the discriminatory "don't ask, don't tell" rule in the United States military.

Today the country and the Democratic Party are more liberal on gay rights. Thanks to the Supreme Court, gay marriage is the law of the land, and the integration of gays and lesbians into the military is official policy, something inconceivable as recently as a decade ago.

At the same time, the success of the Democrats in winning the popular vote for the presidency in every election since 1992 except 2004 has convinced most Democratic strategists that they don't need socially conservative, economically liberal Reagan or Wallace Democrats any more. Many Democrats hope that the long-term growth of the Obama coalition, caused chiefly by the growth of the Latino share of the electorate, will create an all but inevitable Democratic majority

in the executive branch and perhaps eventually in the government as a whole. The Clintonian synthesis of pro-business, finance-friendly economics with social and racial liberalism no longer needs to be diluted, as it was in the 1990s, by opportunistic appeals to working-class white voters.

This realignment within the Democratic Party requires Hillary Clinton to distance herself from many of the policies of her husband's administration and to adopt policies favored by her party's core constituencies. On issues from criminal justice to immigration enforcement, that is precisely what she has done. Even if she had not been challenged by Mr. Sanders, she probably would have done this anyway, because with the departure of the Reagan Democrats, the Democratic coalition has shifted to the left.

What, then, explains the appeal of Bernie Sanders? Part of the explanation, no doubt, is that, as she herself acknowledges, Mrs. Clinton is less charismatic a candidate than Barack Obama or her husband was, despite their similar policies and backers. Part of it is simply generational. Remember, many young people were as enthusiastic about Mr. Obama in 2008 as their counterparts are about Mr. Sanders today.

But on the social and racial issues that are important to today's Democratic base, it is Mr. Sanders, not Mrs. Clinton, who has had to modify his message. At the beginning of his campaign, Mr. Sanders the democratic socialist focused in the manner of a single issue candidate almost exclusively on themes of class, inequality and political corruption. But because he is running for the Democratic presidential nomination, he has had to put greater emphasis on other issues, including racial disparity in policing and sentencing and the environment and immigration.

Having told Ezra Klein of Vox last July that open borders is "a Koch brothers proposal" that "would make everybody in America poorer," Mr. Sanders recently criticized Mrs. Clinton for opposing drivers' licenses for illegal immigrants in 2007. Mrs. Clinton, for her part, told a crowd in Henderson, Nev., in February: "If we broke up the big banks tomorrow, would that end racism? Would that end sexism?"

The centrality of identity politics, rather than progressive economics, to the contemporary Democratic Party is nothing new. In 1982, the Democratic National

Committee recognized seven official caucuses: women, blacks, Hispanics, Asians, gays, liberals and business/professionals. Thirty-four years later, this is the base of the Democratic Party of Hillary Clinton. The pro-Sanders left objects to the solicitude of the Democratic Party for Wall Street and Silicon Valley, the sources of much of its funding. But it is safe to assume that most progressives, when confronted with conservative candidates, will prefer incremental, finance-friendly Clintonism over the right-wing alternative. Moreover, the ability or even willingness of Mr. Sanders to help down-ballot or state candidates is doubtful. The next generation of Democrats are figures like Julian and Joaquin Castro and Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey, who are much more in the mold of the Clintons and Mr. Obama than of the maverick outsider Bernie Sanders.

Most important of all, it would be a serious mistake to assume that the growing sympathy of many of today's millennials for the concept of democratic socialism as embodied by Mr. Sanders will translate into a social democratic America in the 2030s or 2050s. Half a century ago, as the Age of Aquarius gave way to the Age of Reagan, many of the hippies of the '60s became, in effect, the yuppies of the '80s — still socially liberal, but with new concerns about government spending, now that they were paying taxes and mortgages.

For all of these reasons, it is likely that the future of the Democrats will be Clintonism — Hillary Clintonism, that is, a slightly more progressive version of neoliberalism freed of the strategic concessions to white working-class voters associated with Bill Clintonism. On the other side of the aisle, it is probably only a matter of time before the conflict between elite libertarianism and the populism of the voters in the Republican Party is resolved more or less in favor of the voters, by a new orthodoxy that moves left on entitlements and right on immigration, while eschewing Mr. Trump's inflammatory approach.

In the larger perspective of history, 2016 proves that Roosevelt Democrats and Rockefeller Republicans are gone for good. Clinton Democrats and Trump Republicans are here to stay.

Michael Lind is a fellow at the New America foundation and the author, most recently, of "Land of Promise: An Economic History of the United States."

A version of this op-ed appears in print on April 17, 2016, on page SR2 of the New York edition with the headline: Trumpism and Clintonism Are the Future.

