

Hillary Clinton's Leftward Flip-Flops

Faced with a populist surge in favor of Sen. Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton has tacked strongly to the left and in so doing is leaving in her wake many long-held positions on crime, trade, same-sex marriage, etc., to such a degree that it's hard to know what she'd do as president, says Evan Popp.

By Evan Popp

As a strong challenge from the Left emerges in the form of Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, Hillary Clinton, who was once thought to be headed for a coronation in the Democratic presidential primary, has tried to recast herself as a progressive champion. However, in her mad dash to the left, Clinton cannot escape her history of supporting, as the First Lady and then as a senator, the decidedly centrist and corporate-friendly policies of her husband, President Bill Clinton.

The contrast in views espoused by First Lady/ Sen. Clinton, versus 2008, and to a greater extent, 2016 presidential candidate Clinton, could emerge as a major problem for her campaign. Although Clinton has been extremely close-lipped to the media thus far in her latest bid for the Democratic nomination, by attempting to portray herself in speeches as a progressive during a time in which the political winds of the millennial generation are blowing left, Clinton has unwittingly shown herself to be a consummate flip-flopper who takes the positions that are most likely to return her to the White House.

A run-through on a litany of issues important to progressives reveals a candidate in Clinton who once held decidedly anti-progressive views on many of the important questions of the day.

Same-Sex Marriage

Few issues in recent memory have prompted as great a reversal of public opinion in as short a time as same-sex marriage. Between 2003 and 2013, the proportion of Americans supporting marriage equality rose 21 points nationwide, from 32 percent to 53 percent. As recently as May 2015, before the historic Supreme Court ruling that made same-sex marriage legal across the country, 57 percent of Americans were supportive of marriage equality.

Clinton came out in favor of marriage equality in 2013, after a majority of Americans had already indicated their support. To be fair, she was not the only prominent politician to withhold their approval until it was clear public opinion had shifted. President Barack Obama waited until 2012 to come out in favor of marriage equality, following Vice President Joe Biden's comments

supporting same-sex marriage.

But it is telling what Clinton's views on the issue were back in 2000 when the electorate was still squarely against marriage equality. Clinton stated gay couples had no place in the institution of marriage, and said she would have voted for the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as between a man and a woman.

"Marriage has got historic, religious and moral content that goes back to the beginning of time and I think a marriage is as a marriage has always been, between a man and a woman," Clinton said in 2000.

Even as recently as 2014, despite having come out in favor of same-sex marriage the year before, Clinton was hesitant to endorse efforts for nationwide marriage equality, hiding behind the favorite Republican Party talking point of states' rights.

"Marriage had always been a matter left to the states. And in many of the conversations that I and my colleagues and supporters had, I fully endorse the efforts by activists who work state-by-state," she said.

But just a year later, with an ever increasing number of people supportive of establishing nationwide equality for same-sex couples, Clinton changed her tune. She advocated that the Supreme Court rule in favor of same-sex couples, in a clear contrast with her states-based approach from the previous year.

Clinton will say she, like many politicians, has evolved on the issue of marriage equality. But the evolution of her views very conveniently follows the change in public opinion on the issue and falls in line with her overall move to the left to combat the appeal of Sanders, who was one of a minority of members of Congress to vote against the Defense of Marriage Act, to progressive Democrats. And it's not the only issue she has surreptitiously "evolved" on.

Trade

One of Clinton's most conspicuous and recent flip-flops is on the issue of "free trade." As President Obama sought fast track authority from Congress to pursue the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, TPP, Clinton was pressured by Sanders to take a stance on the deal, one that Sanders and many progressive activists and labor groups are vehemently opposed to.

In a move consistent with her attempt to portray herself as progressive, Clinton said she had doubts about the trade deal and stated if she were voting, she would most likely not have supported the trade package moving through Congress at the time, which gave Obama fast track trade authority to negotiate

the deal.

“At this point, probably not,” she said when asked if she would have voted to give Obama fast track authority. However, in 2012, while serving as Secretary of State, Clinton spoke about the TPP in much more glowing terms.

“We need to keep upping our game both bilaterally and with partners across the region through agreements like the Trans-Pacific Partnership or TPP,” Clinton said “This TPP sets the gold standard in trade agreements to open free, transparent, fair trade, the kind of environment that has the rule of law and a level playing field. And when negotiated, this agreement will cover 40 percent of the world’s total trade and build in strong protections for workers and the environment.”

With the TPP coming under intense scrutiny from progressives and potentially representing a dividing issue between her and Sanders, Clinton flipped her script on the trade deal by stating she probably wouldn’t vote for it, just three years after expressing strong support for the TPP.

And it’s not the first time Clinton has flip-flopped on the issue of free trade agreements. While First Lady, she was a supporter of the North American Free Trade Agreement, NAFTA, which was championed by President Bill Clinton. Speaking about NAFTA in 1996, Hillary Clinton said, “I think everybody is in favor of free and fair trade. I think NAFTA is proving its worth.”

Later she discussed NAFTA in a 2003 memoir, writing “Creating a free trade zone in North America, the largest free trade zone in the world, would expand U.S. exports, create jobs and ensure that our economy was reaping the benefits, not the burdens, of globalization. Although unpopular with labor unions, expanding trade opportunities was an important administration goal.”

By 2007, however, Clinton’s views on NAFTA had changed. In a 2007 debate during the race for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Clinton contrasted her previous statements, saying in the debate NAFTA was the wrong course of action.

“NAFTA was a mistake to the extent that it did not deliver on what we had hoped it would, and that’s why I call for a trade timeout,” she said.

On trade, as with many other issues, Clinton has demonstrated a startling propensity to change her mind, most recently flip-flopping in the direction of progressive advocates on an issue she has spoken quite clearly in favor of in the past.

Iraq War

Clinton, and to be fair many Democrats, flip-flopped on the Iraq War, but her change of view is indicative of her tendency to take the politically popular view of the time. In 2002, when Clinton voted to give President George W. Bush the authorization to use military force in Iraq, public opinion was still squarely in support of the war.

In a 2002 speech on the floor of the Senate, Clinton said she supported the measure to authorize force because of Iraq's dictatorial ruler Saddam Hussein.

"Intelligence reports show that Saddam Hussein has worked to rebuild his chemical and biological weapons stock, his missile delivery capability, and his nuclear program. He has also given aid, comfort, and sanctuary to terrorists, including al-Qaeda members," Clinton said.

Clinton went on to say in her Senate floor speech that if left unchecked Hussein would "continue to increase his capacity to wage biological and chemical warfare, and will keep trying to develop nuclear weapons."

In a meeting with CODEPINK in 2003, Clinton also furthered the since debunked storyline that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

"There is a very easy way to prevent anyone from being put into harm's way and that is for Saddam Hussein to disarm and I have absolutely no belief that he will," Clinton said. "The very difficult question for all of us is how does one bring about the disarmament of someone with such a proven track record of a commitment, if not an obsession, with weapons of mass destruction?"

However, by 2007, as public sentiment cooled on the Iraq War, Clinton's view of her vote to authorize the use of force had shifted. In September 2007, in the midst of her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, Clinton said of her war vote, "Obviously, if I had known then what I know now about what the President would do with the authority that was given him, I would not have voted the way that I did."

Then in her 2014 memoir *Hard Choices* with the war in Iraq increasingly remembered as a colossal foreign policy blunder, Clinton went even further in her opposition to the war. "I thought I had acted in good faith and made the best decision I could with the information I had," Clinton said of her Iraq vote. "And I wasn't alone in getting it wrong. But I still got it wrong. Plain and simple."

Clinton is right to say she got it wrong, as the war in Iraq represented a dark chapter in American foreign policy. But the trouble arises with the fact that

she supported the war when it was popular with the American people and only expressed her opposition to it once public opinion turned against the conflict. On this, and these other issues highlighted, it appears that Clinton is much more concerned with pandering to the widest swath of voters than to upholding any personal beliefs.

Crime

Crime is another policy area in which Clinton's rhetoric has changed dramatically from her days in Bill Clinton's White House. In fact, Clinton has made a new approach to dealing with those who commit crimes a central part of her campaign, calling for an "end to the era of mass incarceration."

During her latest campaign, Clinton has been an outspoken critic of the current criminal justice system. "We have allowed our criminal justice system to get out of balance, and these recent tragedies should galvanize us to come together as a nation to find our balance again," Clinton said.

Clinton is right, the current criminal justice system and approach to dealing with crime is inherently counterproductive. But she hasn't always felt that way. Back when the more popular political school of thought was to be "tough on crime," Clinton displayed a much more aggressive approach to punishing those who commit crimes.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, Hillary Clinton supported his tough on crime policies and a 1994 law "that among other things, has increased untold numbers of prison sentences by encouraging states to drastically reduce or eliminate parole and early release."

In 1994, Hillary Clinton's quotes about crime sound very different from her 2016 campaign when she talks about the problem of mass incarceration. "We need more and tougher prison sentences for repeat offenders," she said in 1994. "We need more prisons to keep violent offenders for as long as it takes to keep them off the streets."

Candidates are allowed to change their minds and it is possible that Clinton's perspective on crime and these other issues has indeed shifted. However, the sheer volume of issues that Clinton has flip-flopped on, and the progressive territory she is trying to stake out with these switches as a mechanism for stemming Sanders' momentum, tells a story of a candidate willing to say whatever it takes to win the presidency.

Driver's Licenses for Undocumented Immigrants

A clear and recent example of a Clinton flip-flop is her stance on providing

driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. During her quest for the 2008 Democratic presidential nomination, Clinton generated headlines when she said she would not support a proposal put forward by then-New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer to provide driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants that pass a driving test. This came after criticism that her position on the issue was not clear.

When Spitzer eventually abandoned the driver's license proposal, Clinton praised the decision. "I support Governor Spitzer's decision today to withdraw his proposal," she said in a statement. "As President, I will not support driver's licenses for undocumented people and will press for comprehensive immigration reform that deals with all of the issues around illegal immigration, including border security and fixing our broken system."

This put her in clear contrast with then Sen. Barack Obama, who was supportive of the idea of providing driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants who passed a driver's test. However, in her second bid for the Democratic nomination, Clinton has done a 180 on the issue. Clinton indicated the change in her position through a campaign spokesperson who said "Hillary supports state policies to provide driver's licenses to undocumented immigrants. This is consistent with her support for the president's executive action."

Clinton didn't say what prompted her to switch her position on the issue, but in a primary where she is running in a full sprint to the left, it isn't surprising that she has changed her tune in a way that appeals to progressives.

Ethanol

Perhaps the most egregious Clinton flip-flop came on an issue that's not on most of the country's radar screen: ethanol. However, this issue tends to come up time and time again in presidential primaries/caucuses because of its importance in Iowa and the sway that state holds in the presidential primary process.

An examination of Clinton's rhetoric on ethanol indicates her support for the controversial fuel source has changed at politically convenient times. An article by *The Daily Beast* explored Clinton's position on ethanol and examined how, and likely why, she flipped so dramatically on the issue.

"In 2002, Clinton opposed the mandated use of just two billion gallons of ethanol per year," the article stated. "But a mere five years later, after seeing that she had to go through Iowa, which produces more ethanol than any other state, to return to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, she was advocating the use of 18 times that quantity of biofuel."

Additional proof of her anti-ethanol history is Clinton's participation in

writing a 2002 letter about mandates in ethanol use. The letter stated that an ethanol mandate would add “an astonishing new anti-consumer government mandate, that every US refiner must use an ever-increasing volume of ethanol.” *The Daily Beast* also reported that while serving in the Senate, Clinton voted against measures supportive of ethanol 17 times.

Fast forward to 2007, when Clinton was seeking the Democratic nomination for President, and as her first step in that journey, a win in the Iowa caucuses. While on a campaign stop in Iowa, Clinton stressed the importance of the corn-based energy product, saying the U.S. needed to work on “limiting our dependence on foreign oil. And we have a perfect example right here in Iowa about how it can work with all of the ethanol that’s being produced here.”

The fact that Clinton flip-flopped on ethanol while campaigning for President in Iowa after she had consistently voted against ethanol related measures as a senator is telling of her tendency to take the politically convenient stance, rather than uphold any convictions. It shows that her predominate interest is getting elected, rather than adhering to principle.

Conclusions

So what do all these flip-flops say about Hillary Clinton? The takeaway message is that while she is angling to appeal to the more liberal wing of the Democratic party, progressives should not trust Clinton to follow through if she is elected President, as she has a history of changing her mind on issues at politically convenient times.

I’m not saying that politicians should never be allowed to change their mind, of course political figures’ views are allowed to evolve and shift. But the problem comes when a politician changes their mind so frequently that it becomes difficult to trust them to follow through on what they’re campaigning on.

Such is the case with Hillary Clinton. She may cast herself as a progressive, but her prior history and propensity to flip-flop say otherwise.

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