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Clinton Needs Sanders' Single Issue



By Marty Kaplan



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Hillary Clinton is going to be the Democratic nominee for president, and Donald Trump is going to be the Republican. But unless she signs on to Bernie Sanders' message, she may not be able to beat Trump, and even if she does, without the mandate and the Congress that running on Sanders' message could win her, she won't be able to govern.

I'm not worried my nominee predictions might be wrong. After all, amnesia has been very good to Bill Kristol, who's never been right about anything, so when the race turns out to be Ted Cruz versus Bernie Sanders, you'll be too preoccupied factoring climate change into real estate prices in Auckland or Vancouver to ream me for whiffing so badly.

But it's not far-fetched that Trump will be on the ballot. True, Marco Rubio's South Carolina resurrection keeps the "establishment lane" narrative going, a relief to the Republican donor class and the lobbyists who love them. But Trump's voters don't want a Beltway lane; they want an off ramp. To them, Rubio is just Jeb 2.0, road kill waiting to happen. To be sure, Cruz has his own outsider appeal, but he's too reptilian to beat Trump on entertainment value, and in an age of show biz, that's a deal breaker.

As for Trump, there's apparently nothing he can say that will turn his base off, and nothing he can do that isn't ratings gold. Plus the rules the GOP adopted for their 2016 primaries, as the *New York Times'* Nate Cohn spells out, mean that in a Trump-Rubio-Cruz race, Trump can win a delegate majority with less than 40 percent of the popular vote — and with even less than that if Kasich and Carson stick around.

I'm thrilled that Sanders has made Big Money the driver of his message. Attacking political corruption, and the economic inequality it services, is the precondition for hosing the stench out of Congress. Without that, no progressive president can

make good on campaign promises. This would require a wave election this fall — the political revolution Sanders talks about, the Democratic version of the insurgency Trump has unleashed.

If that wave comes, young people will power it. Sanders has shown what millennial momentum looks like. In Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada he won more than 80 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds. “This is the first presidential campaign,” says a *New York Times* editorial, in which millennials “make up the same proportion of the electorate as do baby boomers - about one-third.” Those young people, Pew Research Center’s Paul Taylor notes, are “more nonwhite, more liberal, more secular, and more immigrant- and LGBT-friendly.” So when they turn out, it helps Democrats.

But Democrats’ Super Tuesday rules and demographics disadvantage Sanders. Big wins in individual congressional districts, many of which have been drawn to concentrate minority voters, will favor Clinton on March 1. Sanders may have an edge among young voters statewide, but that won’t stop Clinton from putting him in a delegate-count hole all the way to the convention.

What message is Clinton using to beat him? When she calls Sanders a single-issue candidate, she looks like the cat that swallowed the canary. It enables her to reel off problems — like Flint, Ferguson and ISIS — that seem orphaned by Sanders’ single-mindedness. It also has the unadvertised benefit of turning a key liability of hers, one that plagues many progressives, into an implied strength. The weakness: Her message is a list.

Sanders has a theme, an anthem, a crusade; Clinton has a bunch of bullets. They’re good bullets — it’s my to-do list, too. But Democratic candidates tend to suffer from nine-point plans for this and four-pillar programs for that. Of course there’s virtue in being specific, policy-oriented and comprehensive, but there’s also the risk of attention fatigue. The message on Trump’s hat may be a reactionary slogan, and his speeches, if you can call them that, add little to it but braying, but his crowds know what banner they’re marching behind. So do Bernie’s.

Even if Clinton beats Trump, if her mandate is a list, it’s hard to see her win translate to more than the same obstructionist gridlock that clipped Obama’s wings. Yes, I know her message is also her person, and breaking the ultimate glass ceiling will motivate her base, but the billion dollars’ worth of mud the Citizens United crowd will throw at her will make her trustworthiness more salient than her gender or her experience. Trump can be torn down, too, but it’s still fighting on his terms. That’s why a galvanizing positive message is so important.

The morning after Nevada and South Carolina, Trump told CNN’s Jake Tapper that he thinks Clinton, not Sanders, will be his opponent. “Frankly,” he said, “if she gets indicted, that’s the only way she is going to be stopped.” The right has been busily spreading that scenario. FBI director James Comey wants to indict her for putting classified information on her private email server, says Rep. Darrell Issa (R-Calif.). “I have friends in the FBI and they tell me they’re ready to indict,” says former U.S. House majority leader Tom DeLay, “and if the U.S. attorney general doesn’t follow the FBI’s recommendation, “the agency’s investigators plan to blow the whistle and go public with their findings.”

When Mike Bloomberg leaked that he was considering an independent bid for the presidency, his rationale was that Clinton’s candidacy could collapse, leaving Trump to crush Sanders. Clinton’s post-Nevada momentum likely takes a Bloomberg run off the table, unless he wants to risk becoming this year’s Ralph Nader. Clinton won’t be indicted in 2016 (though I can’t predict what Attorney General Giuliani might do). But “I’m still standing” and “a progressive who gets things done” won’t drive the historic turnout Clinton needs to take back at least the Senate.

“Don’t let this [expletive] become president!” is a decent negative message. But Clinton also needs to draw more activists and dreamers to her own crusade. Unless she has a better idea for the fall, appropriating the single issue currently inspiring Sanders’ supporters to feel the Bern - radical reform of our corrupt political system, without which nothing else on her list can get done - may not be such a bad way to go.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.