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Bernie Sanders promises a bloody platform battle over Israel

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

If there's one wholly unnecessary thing that presidential candidates would love to wipe off their plates, it's the wrangling over a political party platform. The platform is exhaustively debated, but it doesn't really accomplish anything.

Some may argue that it is a critical statement of important issues for the party, but that's not true at all. No candidate governs based on the adopted ideals. Instead, the platform, which supposedly sets out the party's policy positions for the next four years, is where the losing candidates and aggrieved supporters of other hard-line positions get to try and tie a millstone around the candidate's neck. It may be past time for the parties to get rid of this relic.

These platform fights are always counterproductive to the party, as they distract from the modern goal of a convention, namely shows of unity and attacks on the opponents.

Perhaps the most famous comment about platforms took place in 1983 in the U.K., where the Labour Party's manifesto was called the "longest suicide note in history."

In recent years, both parties in the U.S. have faced numerous problems with party platform battles, though arguably none as embarrassing as when Bob Dole claimed not to have read the platform after his hedging on abortion issues was rejected by the Republicans in 1996.

This year, the Democrats, in the person of runner-up Bernie Sanders, seem to be the ones more intent on seeing how much they can drag down the nominee.

Sanders has spent recent weeks pushing for his platform while complaining about the nomination process — a legitimate complaint, though one that should be mitigated by the fact that he benefited most from the extremely undemocratic caucuses.

Now Sanders seems to be looking to damage Clinton's relationship with a key demographic group — pro-Israel voters. Sanders has appointed two strong critics of the Jewish state to the 15-person drafting committee. Both of these appointees, James Zogby and Cornel West, have already called for changes in the party's platform in regard to Israel.

For Clinton, there may be some flashbacks to one of the last big platform fights for the Democrats.

In 1988, the year her husband took a step onto the national stage with a nomination speech for Michael Dukakis, the Democrats had a platform battle over the party's position on Israel. Primary runner-up Jesse Jackson's supporters were pushing for a plank that was in favor of Palestinian self-determination, at the time an anathema to Israel supporters.

Dukakis controlled the drafting committee and forced the plank to be withdrawn before it was actually voted on. However, Zogby, who was one of Jackson's key aides, bragged that they made "history" with the debate.

Unfortunately for Dukakis, he was right. Prior to the presidential race, Dukakis was popular with Jewish voters. But the platform fight may have caused a drop in his Jewish support. George H.W. Bush won 35 percent of the Jewish vote in the election, 4 percent more than Reagan did in 1984, despite a large drop in the overall election victory numbers.

In the next election, in 1992, after his secretary of state made critical comments against the Israeli government, Bush's Jewish support cratered — he won only 11 percent of their vote.

Even though there was a popular third-party candidate in Ross Perot, the Jewish vote for Democrats went from 64 percent in 1988 to 80 percent in 1992.

Bush's Jewish vote total in 1988 was tied for the second-highest percentage for a Republican since Dwight Eisenhower's re-election run in 1956, with Richard Nixon's 35 percent in 1972. Nixon in that year also won 61 percent of the general-election vote. The only higher total amount was Ronald Reagan's in 1980, when he garnered 39 percent of the Jewish vote against the incumbent President Jimmy Carter, who was highly critical of Israel. Nixon and Reagan won their general-election race by a larger percentage of the overall vote than Bush did in 1988.

This year, as in the past, Sanders supporters are claiming that their plank will appeal to a silent group of Jewish voters, specifically younger ones with a more tenuous connection with Israel. But that's quite an assumption, and one that can cost the party in key states like Florida and Ohio.

Republicans have already done somewhat better among Jewish voters in recent years. After failing to break 20 percent of the vote from 1992 to 2000, the last two elections have seen John McCain get 24 percent and Mitt Romney grab 30 percent — the highest percentage of Jewish votes for a losing Republican candidate since World War I.

This change is not a surprise, as more politically conservative Orthodox Jews and immigrants from the former Soviet Union have proved to be more interested in the Republican Party's social and harder-line foreign policy positions.

The 2012 Democratic platform, which dropped a plank calling Jerusalem the capital of Israel, did not help Obama's efforts with Jewish voters either. Republican strategists certainly understand this fact.

It may not be a coincidence that the Republicans' best presidential election streak since before the Great Depression — winning all but one election from 1972 to 1988 — came when their proportion of the Jewish vote topped 30 percent.

It could be that a platform fight won't hurt Clinton that much. But it is hard to see how it will help her. What makes this — or really any platform fight — particularly dangerous for any candidate is that in most elections turning off only a small percentage of voters in key states could have fatal consequences.

Those swing voters aren't reading platforms, and they're definitely not voting for a candidate because of a party's platform position. However, the platform will undoubtedly be used in negative campaign ads by the other side.

There's little to be gained and a lot to be lost from any but the most anodyne position that may deviate from the presidential candidate. Dukakis understood the dangers of the platform — the Democratic platform in 1988 was the shortest in half a century. But by the time it was all voted on, Dukakis had already lost an important public relations battle.

Hillary Clinton cannot be looking forward to another battle with Sanders's supporters over an otherwise ignored boring political document. The question now for her is whether she can avoid the problems that Dukakis faced thanks to a disappointed runner-up, a platform committee and a Jewish state.

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