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Obama, Clintons must make room for new leaders

*Their presence is a double-edged sword for
Democrats who desperately need to build their bench*

by JOSHUA SPIVAK

As the Democrats gird for at least two to four years in the political wilderness, three political figures stand out for their willingness to stay in the spotlight. Barack Obama is laying plans to preserve his legislative legacy and organize opposition to the Republicans. And Bill and Hillary Clinton are expected to jump back into the policy, politics and fundraising fray in the next few months.

Yet this may be a double-edged sword for the party long-term. Democrats have a remarkably thin bench on the state and local levels, having lost over a thousand offices since Obama's victory in 2008. To move forward, the Democrats require new faces and new names to take the lead. And arguably just as important, like Bill Clinton before him, Obama has a poor track record of helping other officials.

The fact that a president — or a losing presidential candidate — is not a great party builder should not be a surprise. Modern presidents have not always risen through the ranks, Donald Trump being the most extreme example. Recent presidents don't have a personal history of pulling up others to success or even making much of an effort to establish coattails for lower level officials except in driving up turnout in their own election year. In off-year elections, presidents are almost invariably a drag on the party. In the last three off-year races, in fact, the president's party has lost control of at least one house of Congress.

This was especially true for both Clinton and Obama, when the Democrats not only lost significant levels of support, in 1994 they lost control of the House for the first time in 40 years. Part of the reason was a long-time erosion of support from Democrats in the South, but neither of these leaders was able to halt the trend. Obama has announced a push for nationwide redistricting reform, though it's unclear how much it will help his party.

Despite the problems Democrats have had in capitalizing on their former leaders' successes, they are in an unusual position because Obama and the Clintons remain personally popular. By contrast, most recent Republican presidents have left office either unpopular with voters, like George W. Bush; having lost an election, such as George H.W. Bush and Gerald Ford; or under an ethical cloud, like Richard Nixon. In many of these cases, the president was unpopular with the party base as well as the general public.

The only notable exceptions were Dwight Eisenhower, arguably the least party-focused president ever, and Ronald Reagan, one of the strongest party builders of the 20th century. But Reagan left office facing dementia-related issues and, because his own vice president succeeded him, he was not needed to serve as a party leader immediately after his term.

Obama and Bill Clinton left office with strong poll numbers, especially among the party faithful. Hillary Clinton, while losing the presidency, won the popular vote by almost 3 million ballots. But their staying power may not help lower-level candidates and may instead hinder

potential presidential aspirants. Bill Clinton's personal popularity among Democrats did not enable his wife to win the 2008 nomination against Obama or quash a draining challenge last year from Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

The Democrats have another unusual feature for a losing party — they don't have much of an internal ideological fight in front of them. There is no great divide over trade or foreign policy, for instance, like the one that plagues the GOP. So Obama and the Clintons are not needed to serve as bridges.

Democrats have a few senior officials with 2020 potential taking on high-profile roles, notably Sanders and Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts. Younger politicians with national ambitions, like New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker and New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, are also becoming more active. Obama needs to ensure that his activity doesn't prevent people like them from getting the experience and publicity they need to run.

It is not unheard of for a past president to try to guide his party after a dispiriting defeat. Harry Truman did this in 1956 — and he did not come out looking good. Three-time losing presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan tried this as well in 1924 — and contributed to Democrats having one of the worst political conventions of all time.

Obama and the Clintons will be seeking to unify their party, solidify strong opposition to the Trump administration and drive up turnout in future elections. But Democrats need other leaders to step up, at every level, if they want to return to power. It may be difficult for the next group of players to rise while past leaders, sucking up oxygen in the battle against Trump and Republicans in Congress, remain on stage.

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