

Clinton Needs to Enlist Sanders's Youth Brigade

Her inability to attract young voters in the primaries gives Republicans hope they can win in November.



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If people under 30 were the only ones who could vote in primaries, Bernie Sanders would have locked up the Democratic presidential nomination a while ago.

The good news for Hillary Clinton is that older voters make up the majority of the electorate, even among Democrats. The bad news is that unless she can win over a big percentage of the youngest voting cohort this autumn, she will not become president.

Voters under 30 are a key component of the “Obama coalition” that twice delivered Barack Obama the White House. In fact, had he merely broken even with young voters in Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin in 2012, he would have lost his reelection bid.

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its Clinton's inability to come anywhere near Sanders's success with young voters this year that gives Republicans optimism that, despite their own party's fractious primary battle, they have a good chance of defeating the likely Democratic nominee in November. Republican National Committee Chairman Reince Priebus has been saying for months that he would rather face Clinton than Sanders. "Everyone that analyzes this knows that Hillary Clinton is in the ditch," he said this month on CNN.

Democrats, though, say they feel pretty good about their chances. While conceding that Clinton has poor favorability ratings, they point to a favorite line of the late Boston Mayor Kevin White: "Don't compare me to the Almighty. Compare me to the alternative."

And this November that alternative is almost certain to be either Donald Trump or Ted Cruz—both of whom have even worse favorability ratios among young voters than does Clinton, according to a recent poll from Harvard's Institute of Politics.

"Primaries by their nature are kind of like intra-family fights," said Teddy Goff, who worked for both Obama campaigns and now does digital outreach for the Clinton campaign. "And when they're over, you see the other guy is so much worse."

The playbook Clinton's team will need is one that Goff and other fellow Obama alums will remember well: It's the one they wrote and tested to get the president elected and then, even harder, reelected.

Contrary to widespread misperceptions, Obama did not dramatically increase turnout among young voters. In 2008, their share of the electorate was 18 percent, compared to 17 percent in 2004. Obama's achievement was his overwhelming margin among young voters: 34 percentage points, compared to John Kerry's 9-point margin over President George W. Bush in 2004.

The even bigger achievement came in 2012, when Obama was no longer the inspirational candidate of hope and change but a sitting president saddled with an uneven economic recovery. In his reelection, Obama's margin over Republican Mitt Romney with young voters was only 23 points—but where it mattered most, in swing states such as Florida, Virginia, and Ohio, his margin among young voters actually improved over 2008.

Florida Democratic consultant Steve Schale worked on both Obama campaigns, and said there was no big secret to their success. Winning over young voters, and then making sure they voted come election time, meant recruiting enough staff and volunteers to reach them, neighborhood by neighborhood. "It really is a boots-on-the-ground sort of thing," Schale said. "This is actually the part of the Clinton operation I have the

most confidence in. This is what they do best.”

Obama in his first run had his own challenge unifying the party following a long and divisive primary season. Hard-core backers of Hillary Clinton were calling themselves “PUMAs”—“party unity my ass”—in their refusal to transfer allegiance. In the end, though, the vast majority of them supported Obama in November, letting him win 89 percent of self-identifying Democrats in his comfortable victory over Republican John McCain.

Trump’s big wins in the Northeast over the past two Tuesdays mean that he is the likeliest opponent for Clinton. But many Democrats believe that Cruz’s stated views on climate change, abortion, gay marriage, and other issues important to millennials actually make him a preferable general-election opponent. He is a known quantity, a candidate who will walk and talk like a conservative Republican, and who will be unable to attract many new voters in the key battleground states.

“Who are the people who voted for Obama who are going to vote for Cruz? How does he expand Romney’s number? I just don’t get it,” Schale said.

As for winning over Sanders’s young supporters, many of whom are telling pollsters they will never vote for Clinton, Schale said their purity reminds him of himself—24 years ago. Back then, Jerry Brown was that election cycle’s Bernie Sanders, attracting all the youthful energy and flogging his 800 number to raise money \$5 at a time. Schale said he was dedicated to Brown, and could not imagine helping the front-runner that year, Bill Clinton.

“But come Election Day, I was out on the street waving Clinton signs. When push came to shove, I wasn’t about to help George [H.W.] Bush get a second term,” he said, foreseeing an even easier contrast this time around. “The race will begin to define itself as between Clinton and Trump or Clinton and Cruz. And not between Clinton and Sanders.”

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