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Clinton For Obama

Will Hillary Clinton Support Barack Obama?

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At this point, no one can answer that intriguing question. Hillary Clinton pledges to remain in the race until her party chooses a nominee. But that nominee will almost certainly be Barack Obama, and no one knows how she will react to losing. Some pundits suggest she will energetically support Obama to reunite the party and help Democrats defeat Republican John McCain in November.

Others see a more Machiavellian scenario. They say Hillary Clinton would secretly prefer McCain to win the general election so she can have another shot at the Democratic nomination in 2012. If that's the case, don't expect her to campaign enthusiastically for her rival. Both Bill and Hillary Clinton have shown themselves perfectly capable of using the race card when it's to their advantage, and engaging in what they themselves call "the politics of personal destruction."

Whatever the outcome of this year's Democratic primary, American history provides plenty of precedents for high drama. In numerous past races, loyalty to party was hardly a given. Nor was loyalty to presidents.

Take the election of 1800, when something occurred that has never happened since: the sitting vice president, Thomas Jefferson, challenged the sitting president, John Adams, and beat him. The contest was so close and so filled with intrigue that it was thrown into the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, it was a watershed event for the nation since Jeffersonians kept control of the White House for the next quarter century (ironically until John Adams's son, John Quincy Adams, became president).

Fast forward to the Civil War. Republican Abraham Lincoln decided to fire one of his generals, George McClellan, because he was not aggressive enough in pursuing the Confederates. In 1864 McClellan sought revenge by challenging his former commander in chief for the presidency. Running as a Democrat, McClellan received 45 percent of the vote to Lincoln's 55 percent.

The election of 1912 contained quite a twist. Republican Theodore Roosevelt had been president during the first years of the twentieth century. His hand-picked successor, William Howard Taft, occupied the White House after he left office. But Roosevelt became so disappointed in Taft's presidency that he ran against his former colleague in 1912, not on the Republican ticket, but on the Bull Moose ticket. Remarkably, TR got more votes than his erstwhile friend. It was the only time in U.S. history that a third-party candidate received more votes than the incumbent. (However, both Roosevelt and Taft lost to Woodrow Wilson, who went on to serve eight years in the White House.)

The 1960 race was a curious affair. The retiring two-term president, Dwight Eisenhower, did not endorse his own vice president, Richard Nixon, who was seeking the White House. Only late in the contest did Ike change his mind and campaign for Nixon. Perhaps too late. The president's belated support may have cost his vice president the election. In one of the closest races in U.S. history, Kennedy garnered 49.7 percent of the vote, Nixon 49.5 percent.

In recent decades, there have been notable instances when candidates belonging to the same party have refused to support each other. Indeed, three times they have mounted a serious challenge to their party's sitting president. It happened to Republicans in 1992. Incumbent George H. W. Bush was running for re-election, but many conservatives had been disappointed by the president's performance. Republican stalwart Pat Buchanan indicted the Bush administration for being "Reagan lite" and decided to run against him. After winning three million votes in primaries and caucuses, Buchanan withdrew his candidacy and gave tepid support for Bush. His "culture war" speech at the party convention in Houston symbolized the deep divisions between GOP conservatives and moderates. Bush lost decisively to Bill Clinton the following November.

Something similar happened to Democrats in 1980. President Jimmy Carter, running for re-election, headed an administration that was widely seen as feckless. Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy decided to challenge the vulnerable incumbent. On the eve of the convention, Carter had a Gallup Poll favorable rating of only 21 percent – the lowest percentage any president had gotten since polling began in 1936. At the party convention in August, Carter got the support of 2,129 delegates on the first ballot, Kennedy 1,146 delegates. But Democrats left the convention with a party divided, and Carter was badly beaten in the November election by Ronald Reagan.

Speaking of Reagan, I should mention that the actor-turned-politician had a considerable impact in 1976 when sitting President Gerald R. Ford sought re-election. At the nominating convention in Kansas City, Reagan came within a handful of delegates of toppling the incumbent. The Republican party was deeply divided. It has been suggested that Reagan's lukewarm campaigning for Ford that fall contributed to Ford's narrow defeat by Jimmy Carter in November. Ford was the first sitting president in 44 years to be rejected by voters at the polls.

The upshot for 2008: If Hillary Clinton decides not to support Barack Obama, or gives him only lukewarm support, then John McCain might become the 44th president of the United States.

(Question from Lisa Pierce, English & Education, Western Michigan University)