

# Bill Clinton, from rock star to pariah

LITTLE ROCK, ARK.

In an election shaped by women, allegations have tarnished his legacy

BY LISA LERER

When a Republican state legislator in Arkansas pushed last year to rename the Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport in Little Rock, Clarke Tucker stood up for the former president.

"The argument was that the people of Arkansas don't support the Clintons," said Mr. Tucker, a Democratic member of the state House of Representatives. "My thought at the time was, well, the people of Arkansas voted for Clinton eight times."

But now, as the Democratic nominee in the tightest congressional race in this state, Mr. Tucker is happy for the former president and his wife to remain a plane ride away. Mr. Clinton, who was governor and attorney general of Arkansas, was once a near-ubiquitous presence helping Democrats in tough races back home, but the former president hasn't been asked to appear on the trail for Mr. Tucker.

There are no plans for him to do so. Nor, for that matter, to appear publicly with any Democrat running in the midterm elections.

"Every election is about the future," Mr. Tucker said, as he drove to a campaign fund-raiser in Little Rock.

As Democrats search for their identity in the Trump era, one aspect has become strikingly clear: Mr. Clinton is not part of it. In the final days before the midterm elections, Mr. Clinton found himself in a kind of political purgatory, unable to overcome past personal and policy choices now considered anathema within the rising liberal wing of his party.

The former president, once such a popular political draw that he was nicknamed his party's "explainer-in-chief," has only appeared at a handful of private fund-raisers to benefit midterm candidates, according to people close to him.

He added one more recently, headlining an evening fund-raiser in New York City to benefit the campaign of Mike Espy, Mr. Clinton's former agriculture secretary who is running for the Senate in Mississippi. Mr. Espy's campaign declined to comment on the event.

The absence of Mr. Clinton is a notable shift both for a man who has helped Democratic candidates in every election for the past half century and for a party long defined by the former first couple. Hillary Clinton has slowly become a more visible presence in the 2018 election, even seeming to crack open the door to another presidential bid in an interview a week ago, but she is also a frequent Republican target and a burden to Democrats in some parts of the country.

In an election shaped by the #MeToo movement, where female candidates



Clarke Tucker, center, a Democratic nominee for Congress from Arkansas, defended the Clintons in a political skirmish last year but is keeping the ex-president at arm's length.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA MORALES FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Marion Baker, 93, from Conway, Ark., started a Hillary Clinton fan club in 1993 to show support for the former first lady.



Photos of Bill and Hillary Clinton hanging at the Clinton Presidential Library in Little Rock, Ark.

and voters are likely to drive any Democratic gains, Mr. Clinton finds his legacy tarnished by what some in the party see as his inability to reckon with his sexual indiscretions as president with a White House intern, Monica Lewinsky, as well as with past allegations of sexual assault. (Mr. Clinton has denied those allegations.) Younger and more liberal voters find little appeal in Mr. Clinton's reputation for ideological centrism on is-

ocrats have reassessed the party's support for Clinton's behavior in light of changing views about women, power and sexual misconduct.

"It was an abuse of power that shouldn't have happened, and if the Clintons can't accept that fact 20 years later, it's hard to see how they can be part of the future of the Democratic Party," said Ms. Katz, who worked as a strategist on Cynthia Nixon's failed bid to unseat Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York this year.

Mr. Clinton, 72, currently chairs the board of the Clinton Foundation, helping to promote and manage the philanthropic organization he founded after leaving the White House. Angel Ureña, a spokesman for Mr. Clinton, said the former president believes "this election should be about these times and these candidates."

"President Clinton is encouraged by the large number of impressive Democrats running for office who are personally telling their stories and laying out their vision for how to get America back on track," he said. "They are the people voters need to hear from."

The uneasiness around Mr. Clinton

may serve as a warning sign for others considering their political futures in the party. Joseph R. Biden Jr., the former vice president, has been struggling to address his role in leading the 1991 Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill hearings. Michael R. Bloomberg, the former New York City mayor, recently drew criticism for questioning the #MeToo movement.

Several party strategists who have been in discussions with Democrats weighing presidential bids suggested that reckoning with Mr. Clinton's legacy could become a litmus test in the 2020 primary race, with candidates being asked whether he should have resigned after the Lewinsky affair became public.

The Clintons recently announced a 13-city arena tour, produced by Live Nation, guaranteeing they'll continue to be in the spotlight into the spring. Some Democrats worry the tour will become a distraction just as the party attempts to shape a national message that could effectively challenge President Trump in the presidential election.

The couple still has pull, in part because of their decades-long personal re-

lationships with so many strategists, donors and activists. Few Democrats were eager to talk publicly about Mr. Clinton's future role in the party. Though they are reluctant to say it out loud, Mr. Clinton's political exile is an open secret in Democratic circles.

At a rare public appearance by Mrs. Clinton recently in South Florida to benefit Donna Shalala's House campaign, Ms. Shalala — a former Clinton administration cabinet secretary — lavished praise on the Democrats' 2016 presidential nominee, calling her "wonder woman" and "one of the great political leaders of our times." When asked whether she would invite Mr. Clinton to campaign for her, Ms. Shalala passed on the idea: "He has a great political mind. I actually haven't talked to him myself."

While people close to Mr. Clinton say candidates have asked for his advice privately, at least a few rejected public help. Mr. Clinton's offers to campaign last year for Ralph Northam, the governor of Virginia, were rebuffed. Andrew Gillum, the Democratic nominee for governor of Florida, did not ask the president to campaign for him, after Mr. Clinton called with congratulations on his primary win. In August, the New Hampshire Democratic Party stripped Mr. Clinton's name from its annual fall dinner, changing it from the "Kennedy-Clinton Dinner" to the "Eleanor Roosevelt Dinner." The state party chairman, Raymond Buckley, said the new name highlighted the party's "commitment to electing Democratic women."

Even in his home state, some Democrats are struggling with how to reconcile Mr. Clinton's policy achievements with his personal behavior.

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## A nation in turmoil ready to deliver its verdict on Trump

ELECTION, FROM PAGE 1

can strategists have argued that about two dozen races are within the margin of error in polling; should right-of-center voters swing back to them on Election Day, they say, Democrats could fall short of winning enough seats to take control of the House.

Republican officials were more confident about their prospects in the Senate, where they had an opportunity to enlarge their majority in an otherwise difficult year. Nearly all of the most important Senate races are being fought on solidly conservative terrain, including North Dakota, Missouri and Indiana, where Democratic incumbents are in close contests for re-election. Mr. Trump won all three states by landslide margins in 2016.

There was an unmistakable dissonance between the relative health of the economy and the dark mood of the country, as voters prepared to go to the polls just days after a wave of attempted mail bombings and a massacre at a Pittsburgh synagogue that left 11 dead.

"The nation is in political turmoil," said Representative Carlos Curbelo, a Florida Republican facing a difficult reelection, in part because of Mr. Trump's unpopularity. "The economy is roaring, but the mood is so sour. It's a very sad time in this country."

The mood that has imperiled lawmakers like Mr. Curbelo has buoyed Democrats across the country. A class of first-time candidates has been lifted by an enormous surge of activism and political energy on the left, as an array of constituencies offended by Mr. Trump — including women, young people and voters of color — has mobilized with a force unseen in recent midterm elections.

Early voting across the country reflected the intensity of the election: More than 28 million people had already cast ballots by the end of Friday, about 10 million more than at a comparable point in the 2014 midterm elections, according to the Democratic data firm Catalist.

Voters have helped nominate a record number of female candidates for Congress and delivered Democrats a wide and unaccustomed financial advantage



A rally in Cleveland on Sunday encouraging people to vote. In early voting, more than 28 million people nationwide had already cast ballots by the end of Friday.

MADRID MCGARVEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



A get-out-the-vote rally on Sunday in Macon, Ga., in support of the Republican gubernatorial nominee, Brian Kemp. President Trump headlined the rally.

AUDRA MELTON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

toward the end of the campaign. If Mr. Trump has animated a powerful national campaign against him, Democratic candidates have largely avoided engaging the president personally in the closing days of the election, instead hewing close to a few favored issues, like health care.

At a Saturday morning rally, Representative Ben Ray Lujan of New Mexico, the head of the Democrats' campaign committee in the House, drummed home the party's ethos of ignoring Mr. Trump while riding the backlash against him.

"We don't really have to even talk about this president — he's going to do all the talking about himself, for himself," Mr. Lujan said, addressing volunteers in Los Lunas, where Democrats are making a push to pick up an open House seat. "I want you to concentrate on families here in New Mexico."

But Senator Martin Heinrich, appearing beside Mr. Lujan and Xochitl Torres Small, a water-use lawyer who is the Democratic nominee for Congress, cast the election in dire terms familiar to worried Democrats across the country. "This is a battle for who we are as a

nation," said Mr. Heinrich, who is expected to win re-election easily on Tuesday.

That mind-set on the left has given Democrats an upper hand in campaign fund-raising. Political spending in the election is expected to exceed \$5 billion, making it the most costly midterm contest in history, according to a report by the Center for Responsive Politics. The report found that Democratic candidates for the House had raised more money than their Republican competitors, by a margin of more than \$300 million.

Many Senate Democrats have also raised more money than their contenders, a sobering reminder to Republican officials about the rise of small-dollar and billionaire contributors on the left.

"If alarm bells aren't ringing across the Republican landscape as a result of the dollars Democrats have raised and the mechanism they raised them with, then we don't deserve the majority," said Senator Cory Gardner of Colorado, who oversees the Senate Republican campaign arm.

Mr. Gardner warned that the Democrats' newfound fund-raising prowess

could buffet his party even more in 2020, when a less-inviting list of seats is up for election — including his own. "We may be able to survive with this map in 2018, but we cannot survive that map in 2020," he said.

It is the House, though, where Republicans face greater peril.

Most critical to determining control of the chamber are likely to be prosperous, culturally dynamic suburbs — around cities like New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Miami, Chicago and Los Angeles — where Republicans are defending several dozen districts packed with voters in open revolt against Mr. Trump. Democrats have won over many swing voters in these areas with a message focused on Republican health care and tax policies that are even less popular than the president himself.

"I don't think you can find a race in the country where health care hasn't been a dominant issue," the Democratic strategist Jesse Ferguson said.

The fate of Republican lawmakers in the East Coast suburbs could offer an early harbinger on election night of whether the party can maintain even a tenuous grip on the House.

Many of those communities could also tip powerful governorships into Democratic hands for the first time in a decade.

Former Gov. Ted Strickland of Ohio, the last Democrat to lead that state, said the election had effectively become a referendum on Mr. Trump, leaving Democrats "confident about the House and a little concerned about the Senate."

"He's on the ballot, regardless of whether his name is there or not," Mr. Strickland said of the president.

Mr. Trump has appeared to turn his attention in the last few days away from the effort to keep control of the House and toward shoring up Republicans in coveted Senate races. He has focused predominantly on electrifying the right, rather than soothing some of the swing voters who backed him over Hillary Clinton two years ago.

In the final weeks of campaigning, Mr. Trump has delivered slashing attacks on immigration, railing against birthright citizenship, linking immigration without evidence to violent crime and amplifying debunked conspiracy theories about a migrant caravan in Latin America.

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**"I'm not sure that with all the issues he has, he could really be that helpful to the candidates."**

Mr. Clinton's absence from the campaign trail is all the more striking given the number of candidates with close ties to the Clinton legacy. Beyond Mr. Espy, there's Ms. Shalala, also a former president of the Clinton Foundation, and Nancy Soderberg, a representative to the United Nations and a White House national security aide under Mr. Clinton. Ms. Soderberg is also running for a House seat in Florida.

A former Clinton speechwriter, Josh Gottheimer, is running for re-election to a House seat in New Jersey. J.B. Pritzker, the Democratic nominee for governor of Illinois, is a family friend and, like a number of other candidates across the country, supported Mrs. Clinton's presidential campaign.

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