Could Elizabeth Warren Threaten Hillary Clinton's Nomination?

By David Paul Kuhn

Red, white, and blue boater hats dotted the crowd. "Elizabeth Warren for President," they read. Several attendees waited to unfold banners with her picture and block letters, "Run Liz Run." Blue signs were branded: "I'm from the Elizabeth Warren wing of the Democratic Party." The activists began to gather about 90 minutes earlier, packing the conference hall, waiting for their woman. Then she was introduced. The crowd cheered and whistled. Banners were spread. She raised her right arm and hollered "whooo," smiling, waving, alternating arms. They chanted: "Run, Liz, Run! Run, Liz, Run!"

"Sit down, sit down," she whispered into the microphone. They chanted on. She raised her voice, "Come on, let's get started, sit down, sit down," clapping her hands once. And the young Democrats quieted. So she eased into her firebrand. "The game is rigged," she said, patting her fist. "And the rich and powerful have lobbyists and lawyers and plenty of friends in Congress. Everybody else, not so much." She crossed her arms and leaned her elbows on the podium and her tone became conversant. "So the way I see this. We can whine about it, we can whimper about it." She paused and hinted a smile. "Or we can fight back. I'm fighting back! Are you ready to fight back on this?" And they cheered and chanted: "Run, Liz, Run! Run Liz, Run!"

Welcome to the draft-Warren…well, it's too nascent to be a movement. The organization that handed out thousands of those plastic boaters, "Ready for Warren," was three days old that July day. Its volunteers had brought the banners, passed around a few hundred signs and numerous stickers, and lined a carpeted hallway with the paraphernalia of a presidential campaign that does not exist. Yet exist? Likely not? Warren insists not. But the hopeful hang on to "yet." The other signage, heralding Warren Democrats, was courtesy of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee. So were the hoodies, the t-shirts, and the bumper stickers. The crowd was not in Detroit for Warren. They had come for the Netroots Nation conference. A litany of progressive pols did, too. Even Vice President Biden spoke. But it was Warren who roused them.

"It felt like a campaign rally," said Erica Sagrans, the campaign manager for the unofficial campaign, "Ready for Warren." "People were really pumped up. It was electric." The media agreed. Outlets wrote of the "liberal superstar" and "celebrity." The New York Times declared, in a sentence resonant of Democratic primaries of old, "Progressives like—or at least tolerate—Mrs. Clinton (and think she can win). But they love Ms. Warren (even if they are not sure she can)."

Yet, even for a news cycle, the Clinton consensus sustained. The Washington Post's Chris Cillizza declared that same day: "Hillary Clinton is going to be the Democratic presidential nominee in 2016." That may be true. But lower in the column, Cillizza noted something equally true of Warren. "The Massachusetts Senator is the only person who could credibly mount a challenge to Clinton," he wrote. "But she's not going to do it." Because, while the Beltway loves a good game of will-he, won't-she, the political class is largely convinced Warren will not run. And even if she did, few believe any Democrat can defeat Clinton.

There Hillary was on the cover of The New Republic beside one word: "Inevitable." NPR headlined,

“Hillary Clinton, The Inevitable? Sure Seems Like It.” Earlier this year, Time magazine placed her on the cover and asked, “Can anyone stop Hillary?” It was meant to be a rhetorical question.

Of course, in 2008, the inevitable proved evitable. Clinton is better positioned this cycle. She consistently leads other potential Democratic candidates in polls by over 50 percentage points, according to the RealClearPolitics average. In the 2008 primary race, Clinton’s largest lead rarely reached 30 points in that same average. Early polls are not predictive. But sizeable leads help corral donors and party leaders, as well as dissuade those who also want to be president.

This lead may say less about Hillary, however, than her unrealized opposition. Today, more Democrats are behind her. But they are not more excited about her. CNN polling finds that this cycle, as in 2007, four in 10 Democrats say they would be enthusiastic if Clinton were their nominee. That means a majority would not.

This is how Gary Hart sees it. The former senator, the man who came closer than most movement candidates to defeating the establishment choice of his day, stressed in an interview that “frontrunner is a function name recognition.” When one notes Clinton’s commanding position in the polls, he emphasized how little other candidates are known. A significant minority of “Democrats want someone else,” he said.

And many activists think they found someone else. A thousand supporters raucously cheered her at an Oregon hotel. In Kentucky, the “overwhelming” crowd stretched at least three blocks. It was standing room only inside a ballroom in West Virginia. They had come to see her, the woman who could be president. And her name is not Hillary.

It is Warren, not Clinton, who has proven a “powerhouse” on this year’s campaign trail. Yet however popular Warren is, however often her name is floated as a potential candidate, the Clinton consensus endures.

After that day in Detroit, a Slate headline read: “The movement to elect Elizabeth Warren president is make believe.” Of course, that’s news to people like Sagrans. Her group’s website, ready4warren.com, launched in mid July. She said volunteers have “grown exponentially” since. That, “grassroots donations are flowing in steadily.” The group is still forming its fundraising apparatus, including a finance committee. She recently held a conference call with about 100 volunteers. She flies into Iowa today for the state fair, a hive of presidential glad-handing. A priority, she added, is to organize volunteer staff in Iowa and New Hampshire.

“Our goal is to show her there are people backing her, to show that people want her to run,” she said of Warren. “We don’t want to push her in anyway. We want to elevate her.” But establishment skepticism runs deep. As Slate’s David Weigel wrote, “The evidence for a left-wing challenge to Clinton that could defeat her is thin to nonexistent.”

Is that the right way to think about it? Warren is unknown outside the world of activists and the political class. At this stage, the telling fact may be that the exceptionally known frontrunner is, to paraphrase Bill Clinton, dominating because Democrats are falling in line, not falling in love. And it’s the latter that Bill said more often wins out.

Are these Clinton’s Democrats?

The Clintons were sixties Democrats. By 1972, they worked on George McGovern’s campaign. It was a blunt lesson in the limits of idealism. In time, both Clintons came to symbolize New Democrats, but also cohesion between old and new, a caution, a centrism, as well as a sober willingness to recognize that you can’t defeat the other side, or work with them, if you do not know them. In one sense, that trait may be appealing today. Washington’s current dysfunction makes the 1990s looked tolerable, which speaks volumes to anyone familiar with

that decade's partisanship and vitriol. Still, Hillary may find herself inseparable from the politics of this day. And with confidence in government at record lows, no political veteran can rest comfortably on her experience.

Today's Democrats are also not the same voters who backed Clintonian centrism. In 1994, based on the Pew Research Center's political values index, 30 percent of Democrats held liberal views. Today, 56 percent of Democrats have a liberal outlook on issues ranging from the role of government to cultural politics. Yet, in the electorate writ large, few voters are critical of President Obama for being too conservative. For example, according to a CNN poll, only 17 percent of the public opposes the health care law because they believe it is "not liberal enough."

Populism has gone mainstream, however, and to a degree unseen in more than a half century. Last year, Gallup did find that a slim majority of the public still believes there is "plenty of opportunity" for "anyone who works hard" to succeed, but that was the lowest level of belief found since the question was first asked in 1952. By comparison, 43 percent agreed, "the average person doesn't have much chance" (in 1998, less than a fifth said that; in 1952, less than a tenth). In fact, Warren's hallmark line, that the "game is rigged," has become rather un-radical. Six in ten Americans believe that the "economic system unfairly favors the wealthy." This week, the Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll reported that three in four Americans "do not feel confident" that their children's generation will have a better life than them. It was a record high since the question was first asked a quarter century ago. A recent Marist survey found that a majority of Americans still believe the nation is in a recession.

And they have their reasons. Economists' declared the recession over in 2009. Emmanuel Saez, of the University of California, Berkeley, helps explain what's happened since. In a paper published in 2013, he found that inflation-adjusted income per family rose 6 percent between 2009 and 2012. But where did that income go? The earnings of the top one percent amounted to 95 percent of the total gain. The incomes for the bottom 99 percent amounted to 0.4 percent of the total rise in income. The examples of remarkable economic growth over that period raise similar issues. Most glaringly, WhatsApp was founded in 2009 and sold for $19 billion this year. It also created only 55 jobs. This is why most Americans view a recovery with scant wage growth as economic stagnancy. The key question of these times is not whether there is economic growth, but whose growth?

That question provides a window into why the attraction to Warren is about her, but also larger than her. By the modern standards of this hyper-capitalist nation, America is teeming with populist movements. On the political right, amid tea party activists and libertarian insurgents, old-time cultural populism has been energized by the cause against cronyism. That energy is dispersed between the new icons of the Grand Old Party. Names like Paul and Cruz hold even with a Bush in presidential polls. On the left, however muffled beneath the Obama presidency and the Clinton consensus, there is a populist energy in search of its champion.

"The progressive wing is looking for a candidate," said Joe Trippi, who served as the chief strategist for Howard Dean during his insurgent bid against John Kerry. "I think Obama created a shadow where both the progressive wing and the establishment wing could get behind him. Because of his candidacy, the two wings kind of fell in step. It's reopening again."

Political bases often bottle their discontent when their party has the presidency. The heat has no outlet, amid the pressure to back your own leadership. And at the dusk of the Obama era, that steam is beginning to show. "There is a battle for the heart and soul of the Democratic Party," said Stephanie Taylor, who co-founded the Progressive Change Campaign Committee in 2009. Of course, Democrats have long had primary battles for hearts and minds. But Democrats are ascendant in a respect they have not been since FDR's day. Not only do expectations come with that power, what was once impractical becomes more possible.

This is not the America that rejected yesterday's Massachusetts' liberals. In 1988, Michael Dukakis won 40

percent of the white vote and lost the election by nearly 8 percentage points. In 2012, Obama won 39 percent of the white vote and won the election by almost 4 percentage points. John Kerry challenged an incumbent during wartime. Michael Dukakis challenged Ronald Reagan's heir. By comparison, in the general election (because of her role as Obama's secretary of state), it is Clinton who would be challenged to show that she is not this president's heir. Meanwhile, in Sagrans' words, Democrats have a "hunger for a progressive champion." To Trippi, "Warren's very attractive to the progressive wing of the party, probably even more so than Howard was in 2004. But the question will be, does she run?"

The woman who could also make history

Before she was even a senator, Democratic activists wanted Elizabeth Warren to be president. During the worst years of the Great Recession, Warren was the leading liberal voice in the televised debate. Today, she's more than a Massachusetts senator; she is the most visible populist in the Democratic Party.

Yet this populist seemingly shies from challenging Clinton's monopoly. Warren's memoir "A Fighting Chance" glossed over past criticism of Hillary. Warren has also said she hopes Clinton runs. She told reporters, "I'm not running for president and I plan to serve out my term." She may mean it. Warren has not padded her military or foreign affairs resume with Senate committee assignments, as wannabe presidents have from John Kennedy to Hart to Hillary and Obama.

Still, candidates often say they aren't running until they are. Obama undercut his viability and pledged on "Meet the Press" he would not run in 2008. As political scientist Jonathan Bernstein aptly noted, "When it comes to presidential runs, watch what the candidates do, not what they say."

Warren is doing more than stumping for Democrats. Her memoir was released this year, in keeping with a conventional campaign timeline. It has a domestic focus but reads like a campaign book. The book tour took her from "CBS Sunday morning" to "Morning Joe" to "The View," where Barbara Walters cited her trajectory from single mom to senator and called her an "American success story," only to tease, eyebrows arching, "could her next move be the White House?" Stay tuned.

If she wants it, this is likely Warren's one chance at the presidency. She is 65 years old. All hopefuls must think two presidential terms ahead. And just as another freshman senator realized by 2007, the presidential opportunity can prove too rare, too good, to ignore.

Warren's story is compelling. This daughter of a janitor became a star student, married young, had two children, moved for her husband, only to divorce. Soon she remarried, earned a law degree, worked out of her home and her way up to a Harvard professorship, only to become a consumer advocate, a senator, and the populist nemesis of Wall Street. It has made Warren the liberal darling of the moment. Yet political love is fickle. And like all love, it can veer blind.

Long in the media eye, Warren has been the subject of numerous flattering profiles from Vogue to the New Yorker. Her weaknesses garner less scrutiny. There's biographic fudging. She listed herself as a minority in academia due to her tenuous claims to Native American ancestry. There are structural hurdles as well. In the age of Obama—where we are reminded of the benefits of knowing the system from the inside before you must work it—would America want to bet on another freshman senator? Maybe. Political neophytes have long frustrated veterans. "Jack was out kissing babies while I was passing bills," Lyndon Johnson said of Kennedy, as he watched the younger man soar ahead of him.

Warren would have to convince Democrats to bet on another newcomer. That is more likely to be a question of experience than worldliness. For one, outside wartime, Americans generally don't vote on foreign affairs. Hart

subscribes to the idea that voters "want to know whoever walks in to the door is prepared." Yet even recent memory demonstrates, from George W. Bush to Obama, that candidates with scarce foreign policy experience can become president. Polls also indicate that American isolationism is at a height likely unseen since before the Second World War.

So it may be the right time for a candidate with her eyes on domestic issues. But for populists like Warren, a general election presents its own challenges. In 2016, any Democratic nominee likely must emphasize "opportunity" over "inequality." Early this year, Quinnipiac University asked the public: what should be the "top priority" for Washington in 2014? The plurality said the economy or jobs. Only one percent agreed that it should be "class inequality." Far more Americans also see big government as the greater "threat" to the nation's future than big business. Yet about seven in 10 Americans do think the government should take some action to "reduce the gap between the rich and everyone else." In campaign parlance, the balance may be found in proposing programs that police elite efforts to bend the rules, rather than stressing initiatives that equalize the prizes of those who succeed on the playing field.

But the general election is probably the easy part. If Warren entered the race, she would face a Democratic establishment that is more united than anytime in decades. Howard Dean may have become the chairman of the Democratic National Committee but he retains the temper, if not outlook, of an outsider. Yet in an interview, when asked whether he is considering running in 2016, Dean replied without hesitation, "Certainly not if Hillary does."

"There is a lot of energy behind Elizabeth Warren," Dean continued. "I don't think that means there's clearly an energy behind looking for someone else [than Clinton]. I think if Hillary runs she'll get the vast majority of the support and she'll get it gladly."

That may prove true. In a primary, Warren would face demographic obstacles similar to the movement candidates who preceded Obama. She would need to join her liberal base, and perhaps moderate women, with a robust share of the black and Hispanic vote. Yet these Democrats may not be Hillary's to lose.

The debate about the tens of thousands of unaccompanied Latino minors crossing the U.S. border could cause fissures on the left. Clinton originally said most should be "sent back." Later in July, she tellingly clarified her statement. She spoke of the need to distinguish between refugees and migrants, adding, "Some of them should be sent back." Between those two comments, Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley, a likely 2016 candidate, argued the minors are "refugees" and returning them is akin to sending "children back to death." In the 2008 contest for black voters, the Clintons' remarks were often taken out of context but they were still indelicate. Wounds might fester. That demographic calculus would be further complicated if a viable minority contender enters the field, like Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick.

Whoever it is, with Clinton almost sure to run, her challenger will come. The political media abhors a vacuum. A contested race equals higher ratings, online clicks, campaign reporters' raison d'etre. A challenger can fall fast, as Dean learned. But if the media doesn't find him, he will find it. Yet with Hillary ready and capable, for it to be a true contest, the challenger must almost surely be a her.

"If it's Hillary Clinton and Andrew Cuomo, Hillary runs away with it," Trippi said. "It's gotta be someone like Hillary and Elizabeth Warren, or," and he could not think of another name. "If Hillary doesn't run, Joe Biden or Andrew Cuomo will react, oh my God, I've got a chance at this thing, only to find out that the next Obama is Elizabeth Warren or whatever woman gets into this thing. I think this urge is pretty strong from the unfinished business of 2008."

In Hart's phrasing, name recognition fuels most frontrunners. But Clinton's status also appears linked to what

remains undone, as much as what she has done. In March, Gallup asked Americans what would be the "best or most positive thing about a Hillary Clinton presidency?" The most popular response was her status as the "first woman president." The second choice, at half the rate, was Clinton's political experience—among the public, women and Democrats. Thus if Clinton's supporters rally to her most because of the history she could make, would they rally to any Democratic woman with that same history at her back?

To a unique degree, Democrats care about a woman making history. Last time Hillary ran, Gallup found that Democrats were twice as likely as the public writ large to desire a female president. In 2013, as part of its Madame President initiative, the progressive women's group Emily's List commissioned a poll of likely voters in swing states. Fifty-eight percent of Democrats expressed strong feelings about the statement "a woman president would be a good thing for this country," compared to 38 percent of independents and 23 percent of Republicans. The survey also found that Democrats were twice as likely as others to say they would be "much more likely" to follow the 2016 race if a woman ran for president.

Some liberal women do, however, see any challenge to Hillary as bad for them and the chances of electing a female president. But as The New Republic's Rebecca Traister wrote, "When a single avatar stands in for womankind, womankind projects onto that avatar its own varied ideas and priorities and standards." In that vein, a singular champion can limit feminism to one type of woman. Meanwhile, two serious female contenders might also show that America has moved beyond tokenism.

For Democrats, ideally, there would be a Democratic female contender with a gubernatorial pedigree. One possible figure, if she wins reelection, is New Hampshire Governor Maggie Hassan. Still, a Hassan bid in 2016 is as probable as her odds of posing a threat to Clinton. Back in Washington, all 16 Democratic female senators have, unusually, already signed a letter encouraging Clinton to run—including Warren. But encouragement is not an endorsement.

If she enters the 2016 race, Warren is the sole Democrat who wields a triumvirate: a primetime persona, an issue of our time, as well as the capacity to excite progressives for history's sake and for her's. It's often better to be the candidate arguing with power than the personification of it. It also helps to have an argument. As Politico headlined, we are still "searching for Hillary Clinton's big idea."

The inevitability facade

Clinton's staff will say they welcome any challenge. Primary campaigns plant roots in swing states. They prepare the candidate for the circus to come. But no matter what the spinners say, a candidate prefers the safe road. Myriad frontrunners have caused their own downfall, from Edmund Muskie to George Romney. Democratic primaries are also more historically unpredictable, when one considers polls more than a year ahead of voting. In open contests since 1960, the early leader in Republican presidential polls has won at least seven of nine primary races. Among Democrats, over that same period, the frontrunner has won only four of nine contests. In 2007, when Clinton last led the Democratic field, Gallup asked about her "best" attribute as well. Then too, the public cited her trailblazing status above all else. That historic mantle proved transferrable. To Obama.

During the 2008 primary, Hillary hoped to deny Obama room to run by moving leftward on the Iraq war. She knew Lyndon Johnson became electoral history because he failed to cover his left flank on Vietnam. But the more Obama talked about Iraq, the more presidential he seemed. And after he crossed that threshold, demographics propelled him. Obama eventually did what other Democratic movement candidates could not. He won white college-educated liberals and blacks. From Hart to Paul Tsongas to Bill Bradley to Howard Dean, polls show that no other modern movement candidate proved able to join that liberal base with blacks. Thus the establishment choice prevailed.

Today, to a greater extent than 2008, Clinton is the establishment candidate. And she is covering her flank once more. The public's chief concern in 2006 was Iraq. At similar rates, that's true of the economy and jobs today. For Democrats, the economic issue is inexorably linked to inequality. About nine of every ten Democrats think the government should do more to address the "gap between the rich and everyone else," while only four in 10 conservative Republicans agree, according to Pew.

So we hear Clinton now talk about the "cancer of inequality." But populism may prove an uncomfortable fit. She has earned hundreds of thousands of dollars speaking at Goldman Sachs events. The Clintons have raised about the same share of money from the financial industry as Mitt Romney, according to the Journal. Then there's the dynastic issue. Amid talk of Roosevelts and the two Adams, it's awkward to run as a champion of meritocracy. Or as Hart put it, "I think Secretary Clinton's challenge—it is not age or centrism or any of the rest of it, although those are hurdles to overcome—it's, does she understand the world of today?"

Clinton's clumsy book tour has reminded the political class that she is not a stellar political athlete. Her comments about being "dead broke" reminded liberals of what they like about Warren. Much is made of the Clinton money machine. Party mandarins, including moneymen, are already walking lockstep with Hillary's potential bid. Wall Street Democrats would likely donate truckloads of extra cash to Clinton if she faced Warren. Nevertheless, Warren's coffers would be large enough to make the money race moot. She raised $42 million for her Senate campaign. That's more than any other congressional candidate in 2012. As one of the Democratic Party's top fundraisers put it, commenting on background in order to avoid appearing partial to any candidate, "Wall Street will not like her—obviously—except for the really enlightened ones. But 4 million citizens giving $100 adds up, too."

Even activists hedge their bets against Clinton

Yet does Warren want it? To run for president, as Dean said, "You have to have tremendous drive in your gut." If she has that—and few ever know beyond the candidate—Warren does have time. "She is one of the people who could wait the longest because of her following," Trippi said. But Trippi remains skeptical. Indeed, even some of Warren's true believers hesitate to over invest in her.

"There are a lot of people who try to push the Democratic Party to a more conventional position," said Stephanie Taylor, of Progressive Change. "But I think there is this visceral and emotional reaction to Warren." At this stage, however, the closest Taylor will come to endorsing Warren for president is to say, "I think a lot of people would like to see Warren run." Then the grassroots organizer hedges her bets. "We want anyone who runs for president to embrace Elizabeth Warren's economic agenda," she added.

Should Warren sit 2016 out, the populists who support her will likely settle for pulling Hillary closer to them. That will be less possible, however, without Warren in the race. And while it may be a long shot, Trippi is still not ready to discount any movement to draft Warren. "They get candidates' thinking about it, the buzz starts to build, and it grows, and some of these candidates end up going," he said. "I think that there is not enough wind at her back yet to convince her that now's the time."

If Warren became convinced, the uphill fight is assured. Yet it's also difficult to see the downside. Politicians are rarely worse off because they ran for president. And what if Warren announced before Clinton? Suddenly, she is the woman who could be president.

And Clinton could feel more like the past. Hillary has been present in American life longer than the Internet. That makes her more vulnerable to public overexposure. It also means impressions of her are set. Still, her experience carries upsides. Pew finds that about seven in 10 Americans say "tough" is the best word to describe Hillary. And while partisans will argue over the grade her background deserves, no fair-minded observer can say

she is not prepared to be president.

Last time Hillary sought the presidency, in state after state, white female Democrats proved her bulwark. By the close of the primary, women's affection was strong enough to weigh down Obama's standing, and likely contributed to Obama performing worse with white women than Al Gore on Election Day. For the public, as decades of Gallup polls indicate, Clinton has been at her most popular when she was less political, either as secretary of state or first lady. And if she runs, she will be at her most political. Clinton's ardent supporters did, however, gravitate to her in a fight. Yet these same voters may be prone to back any likeminded woman in a similar fight.

Ultimately, any Democratic female nominee will face the same electoral gravity as the men before her. No Democrat has won a majority of white women since 1964. During the 2008 primary, there was no evidence non-aligned women were willing to cross party lines for Clinton. The women who rally around feminism are already Democrats. The issues that rouse liberal women may cause an equal and opposite reaction among conservative women. As the media often overlooks, the majority of social conservatives are women. And Republicans could offer history too, though it could be Latino history instead of women's history. However, if a woman won either party's nomination, there would be a fiercer contest for the small share of persuadable women. More practically, as Obama did with black voters, a female Democratic nominee would aim to increase the turnout of progressive women. Hillary could be that woman. But could Warren as well?

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