

Bill Clinton, Blanche Lincoln and Democracy in Arkansas

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Former President Bill Clinton's support for Arkansas incumbent Senator Blanche Lincoln for the democratic nomination grows out of a relationship between the two politicians that goes back decades. It is not surprising that Clinton would support his longtime ally in this regard. However, it is a little surprising that he would express his support for Lincoln by [attacking her opponent, Bill Halter, as being supported by forces that are not from Arkansas -- notably labor unions](#). Bill Clinton, who has lived in either New York state or Washington DC since 1993 could also be accurately described as a non-Arkansas force in the upcoming election. Moreover, Clinton did not seem bothered by these labor unions and other out of state interests getting involved in elections during the decade or so he spent running for, and serving as, president.

The runoff between Halter and Lincoln will certainly be a tough test for the incumbent who is currently, [according to most polls, running neck in neck with Bill Halter](#). Less obviously, it is also a test for Clinton's continued ability to influence democratic primary voters. Clinton weighed in unsuccessfully on behalf of Joseph Lieberman in the Connecticut primary in 2006. Two years later, he had a mixed record in his attempt to help Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. If Clinton is unable to help deliver the nomination for Blanche Lincoln in his one-time home state, other democrats may not value the former president's support in primaries as highly.

For Clinton, the length of his relationship with Lincoln is undoubtedly one of the reasons he is supporting her in this election. It is not, however, altogether clear why this should matter to voters. If Blanche Lincoln were an unknown running for office for the first time, the opinion of the former president would be very important to ordinary voters. In the state of Arkansas, however, Blanche Lincoln is hardly an unknown. In the twelve years that she has served as a US senator from Arkansas, she has become well known to voters in that state.

Halter's primary critique of Lincoln is that in the twelve years that she has been in the Senate, she has become an insider, less concerned about the people of Arkansas than about her own political future. The voters of Arkansas will ultimately decide the validity and relevance of this criticism, but Bill Clinton's endorsement will do little to defuse this attack.

Endorsements are important in politics, particularly in down ballot races, primaries, nonpartisan elections and other races where voters may know little about the candidates. In these types of elections it makes sense for voters to base their decisions, at least somewhat, on who is supporting which candidate. While prominent politicians occasionally endorse candidates based on their talents or records, too frequently endorsement decisions are based on a network of relationships and reciprocal political favors that have no bearing on the lives of ordinary voters or the issues about which they care.

In an election like Lincoln's the general disdain for primary challengers which is held almost universally by political elites is also probably a factor which pushes people like Bill Clinton to

support her. This demonstrates the enduring strength and allure of the insider political culture and the deep fear of a primary challenge which many elected officials fear. After all, if people like Lincoln lose primaries simply because they lose touch with voters, than almost anybody would be vulnerable to a primary challenge. The word for that is democracy; and it is disturbing to again see how many politicians are afraid of it.

This approach also sometimes backfires. Most recently, democratic incumbents in 2006 flocked to endorse Joe Lieberman in his primary against Ned Lamont only to see Lieberman not only lose his primary, but successfully win election to the senate as independent causing countless headaches for democratic leadership, congress, and the White House. It is unlikely that should she get reelected Lincoln will behave as petulantly as Lieberman, but the establishment Democrats, including President Obama, who are endorsing Lincoln are behaving in way that suggests they have learned nothing from that experience and that these relationships are still more important than issues and voters.

If Lincoln loses despite the endorsement of Bill Clinton and others, it will be another example of the democratic leadership being at least a step or two behind their party's electorate, even in a state like Arkansas. A primary victory for Halter, like that of Lamont in 2006, or for that matter Obama in 2008, will be another victory for the activist wing of the party against an initially favored establishment candidate. If that trend continues, endorsements like those of Bill Clinton will be less sought after, regardless of how long he has known the candidate.