

After Her Loss to Obama, Clinton Has Many Options

She didn't break the ultimate glass ceiling, but her run for president wrote a new chapter in American politics

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Sen. [Hillary Clinton](#) may have fallen excruciatingly short of shattering what she has called the highest glass ceiling. But her tenacious race against an equally historic foe for the Democratic presidential nomination was an enormous step nonetheless, and it wrote a new chapter in American politics.



Speaking to the Washington press.
(Jeffrey MacMillan for USN&WR)

During her quest to become the first American woman to win a major party presidential nomination, Clinton obliterated the persistent notion that women aren't tough enough to be commander in chief. And despite criticism that she battled [Barack Obama](#) for too long, with tactics at times too ugly, Clinton established herself as a major political force independent of her husband.

"She did a remarkable thing," says Democratic pollster Peter Hart, who called Clinton, 60, the nation's most polarizing political figure in years. "By the end, I don't think anyone doubted that if Hillary

Clinton were in a room with Russian [leader] Vladimir Putin or any other adversary, she would hold her own or come out ahead."

"Billary" may not be a thing of the past—former President [Bill Clinton](#) was an architect of his wife's flawed strategy and a constant, if not always helpful, presence on the campaign trail. But whether Hillary Clinton ends up as Obama's running mate, returns to the U.S. Senate, runs for New York governor, or takes another shot at the Oval Office, she has earned her own national authority. Her historic run also cast a harsh light on the sexism that can run through even the most public conversations about powerful women, says Debbie Walsh of the Center for American Women and Politics. Clinton was frequently cast as the schoolmarm, the nagging wife, the pantsuited power-grabber. "People have said the slurs were not really about women but about Hillary," Walsh says, "but they used slurs instead of saying, simply, 'Here's what I don't like about Hillary.' "

Loyal fans. And though Clinton's campaign was beset by missteps, she mobilized an enormous, largely female, and fervently loyal network of supporters. She raised \$214 million, though there,

too, fell short of Obama's \$265 million. Her organization is \$20 million in debt, including more than \$6.4 million she and her husband lent the campaign. But what will Clinton do with her new clout? She is expected to make her influence felt at the Democratic National Convention, where she will control the 1,921 delegates she won. She is open to a vice presidential offer, though Obama's strategists haven't warmed to the idea. A sticking point: What would former President Clinton's role be? The prospect of returning to the Senate, where she earned a reputation as a tireless worker, could be a letdown. In a chamber where longevity equals power, Clinton ranks only 36th in seniority out of 49 Democrats. Majority Leader Harry Reid has shown no desire to budge, and 16 Senate Democrats had endorsed Obama; 13 supported her.

Some have suggested that Clinton could fashion a Kennedy-like role in the Senate, with power flowing from her national stature. Bottom line, says Nebraska Sen. Ben Nelson, an Obama backer, is that Clinton, like 12 other current senators who have fallen short in their nomination bids, will have to move on. "If you don't heal fast in this business," he says, "you probably shouldn't be in it."

Clinton has said she will strongly support Obama, and he'll need her, not only to raise money. A recent Pew poll of Democrats found that 44 percent of Clinton supporters said the party would be divided if Obama were the nominee. Many of those supporters, mostly women over 50, white, working class, are angry that Clinton was thwarted by a young insurgent, and they are waiting for her to convince them about Obama. But most experts predict that the number of Clinton partisans who say they won't vote for Obama will dissipate come November. "There are Democratic women who today are very disappointed, sad, and angry," says Ellen Malcolm of Emily's List, a group aimed at electing Democratic women. "But the election isn't going to be held today." Most Clinton supporters, she says, will follow her lead. "We've got to see what Hillary does," said one teary woman after the recent party meeting where leaders snubbed Clinton's effort to seat all delegates from Michigan and Florida. For many women who have waited a lifetime to see the ultimate ceiling shattered, getting so close and losing seemed, for the moment anyway, almost more painful than having no chance at all.

With Katherine Skiba