

WHY I WOULD VOTE FOR HILLARY

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Spending lots of time at home with a new baby in recent weeks, I have become captivated by the US presidential contest. The outcome of the current nomination battles will have significant effects for all of us. Bush's disastrous policies on Iraq, climate change, and the US economy, among other things, have already had an enormously negative impact internationally. It is imperative that we see a change of regime, and a Democrat elected to the White House.

But which Democrat? That is the issue really troubling me, and so many others. The problem is that both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are immensely worthy candidates. Whoever the Republicans select, either Democrat would make an infinitely superior President. The choice is very difficult.

Clearly, Hillary is better known, her past extensively scrutinised by a largely hostile US media during her husband's presidency. By contrast, Barack Obama has surprised everyone. I have listened to breathless reporters describe in extravagant terms the mounting excitement surrounding his candidacy, the wonderful rhetoric of his speeches, the growing numbers at his rallies. Many have become seduced by his ability to inspire through powerful oratory. Like everyone else, I'm impressed. Like thousands, I'm enthused.

But if I had a vote, I would still vote for Hillary.

Obama has a real magic, rare in the modern media-driven world of spin doctors. His words, his delivery, all echo his key theme of hope, of 'Yes we Can'. People leave his rallies with an enthusiasm, a vision of a better world. His slogan has inspired a hit song, audiences are moved by his message.

But politics is not just about enthusiasm and slogans. The key thing for the left, here and in the US, must be a candidate's track record and capacity for action. Hillary wins on both counts. Through years of relentless attacks upon her from the right, she has maintained an immense level of consistent support, as witnessed by her great wins in California, New Hampshire, Massachusetts and other States the pundits predicted she would lose to Obama. Voters rally to her. And the main reasons they do, I am convinced, are her track record, and their belief in her capacity to deliver change.

Seriously concerned about the growing crisis in the US economy, voters want to be sure they can trust a candidate with proven economic policies that will return their country to the prosperity brought by an earlier Clinton presidency. 'It's the economy, stupid' was the slogan with which her husband famously defeated Bush Senior. The same slogan could become the mantra that wins Hillary the Democratic nomination and the White House.

There are other important issues in the Democratic race too, like the ongoing war in Iraq. I am deeply troubled that Hillary voted to authorise the use of force in Iraq. Barack's consistent opposition to it is, for me, a major point in his favour.

But what really matters is what each candidate would do about it if elected President, and there is little or no difference between them there. Both promise withdrawal of US troops, and a change in foreign policy to favour diplomacy – a welcome contrast to Republican warmongering.

A key policy difference does however exist between the Democrats - on healthcare. Here, as Jonathan Freedland has pointed out in the *Guardian*, Hillary is on the left of Barack. Her commitment to universal healthcare provision is unwavering, and unusual in a country where the market reigns supreme. Her long campaign to bring about radical change in this area – to move closer to Berlin than Boston – is a key reason why I believe she is the better candidate.

Finally, there is the gender factor. The focus on race as a significant issue for voters has meant that Barack is often portrayed as the only candidate with an appeal to a disadvantaged and effectively unrepresented group, a community that has had to fight every step of the way for civil liberties and equal rights.

Yet acceptance of this largely uncontested claim misses a vital point about Hillary's candidacy. Like African-Americans, women have had to fight for civil liberties and equal rights over many generations. Just as Barack is a powerful role model for African-Americans, so is Hillary a powerful role model for women across the US, inspired by her feminist message, who are voting for her in great numbers.

A unique combination of ambition, vision and ability is required to bring about progressive political change. Both Hillary and Barack have plenty of ambition and vision. But now more than ever, America needs a President with the ability to take real action to deliver change. Action to end health apartheid in the country, action to end the disaster in Iraq, action to tackle climate change, and action to restore credibility for the US internationally. I believe Hillary has the greater ability to achieve change. That's why she has my vote.

Any other time, I'd relish the opportunity to campaign for Barack Obama for President. But just now I'm backing Hillary.