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## Clinton's Senate record suggests past may be prologue

Look through legislative history shows success, failure is in the eye of the beholder

By Dan Freedman and Matthew Hamilton Published 8:37 pm, Saturday, August 20, 2016



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Hillary Clinton celebrates her nomination as Democratic candidate for the US Senate at the state Democratic convention at the Pepsi Arena on Tuesday, May 16, 2000, in Albany, N.Y. At left is her husband, ... [more](#)

### Washington

In a \$3.1 trillion federal budget, the \$211,500 set aside for the **Capital District Women's Bar Association's** Legal Project amounted to pocket change.

But for an organization starting a program to assist military families ravaged by domestic violence amid the ongoing war on terror, that earmark secured by then-

Sen. **Hillary Clinton** and other New York lawmakers in 2008 was priceless.

"Particularly during this time when so many people were coming back from the war and there were so many issues going on, to be able to identify (legal issues surrounding domestic violence and the military) and make sure that people weren't falling through the cracks was important," said **Lisa Frisch**, executive director of the Capital District Women's Bar Association's Legal Project.

Taken on its face, the grant shows the direct impact members of Congress can have on their constituencies. But as Clinton now seeks the White House and campaigns in part on her accomplishments in New York, measuring an elected official's broader rate of success is difficult to view through a crystalline prism and is replete with subjectivity in an area that begs for an objective weathervane.

Clinton's Senate record is germane to several of her 2016 campaign mantras, including her willingness to work with Republicans, her ability to "get things done" and her conviction that she's "a workhorse, not a show horse."

The Senate was her first political foray beyond the protective shield of the White House. Since then, Clinton has proven to be a love-her-or-hate-her public figure — an unabashed progressive fighter for children and working families to some, a scheming political opportunist to others.

Clinton won election to the Senate in 2000, two months short of husband President Bill Clinton's departure from the White House.

Although she had no particular New York roots, Clinton followed the playbook of U.S. Sen. **Charles Schumer**, a fellow Democrat, in assiduously courting upstate voters. She even announced her candidacy in 1999 at the Delaware County farm of departing Sen. **Daniel Patrick Moynihan**.

"She was a singular senator in so many ways: The first First Lady in the Senate, a feminist hero," said **Ross Baker**, a political scientist at **Rutgers University** who studies the Senate. "Her stature was unlike that of almost any senator. And the fact that she attempted to do the petty political things shows she didn't just want to preen and do interviews. She wanted to be taken seriously."

Over time, upstate voters appeared to do just that. In her initial 2000 campaign against then-Rep. **Rick Lazio** of Long Island, Clinton won the three counties of the Capital Region but lost almost everywhere else upstate.

Years later in her 2006 race against Republican unknown **John Spencer**, the only upstate jurisdiction she lost was sparsely-populated Hamilton County in the Adirondacks.

"It shows you she put her head down, worked hard and earned people's trust," Clinton campaign spokesman **Glen Caplin** said. If elected, "she will work tirelessly to improve the lives of American families, just like she did in New York."

With just over two months to go until Election Day 2016, the national media is intensely scrutinizing all aspects of Clinton's record – including the eight years she spent on Capitol Hill.

**The Washington Post** earlier this month followed up on Clinton's senatorial promise to bring 200,000 jobs to upstate. The story concluded she fell well short of the mark though the exact numbers are open to debate.

"It's close to impossible to attribute job growth to any one politician outside the very tangible piece of, 'Hey, I brought this company here,' " **The Fiscal Policy Institute's Ron Deutsch** said.

Even when a federal official seeks to make an impact by assisting with corporate location negotiations, they still must play within the constraints of their state's economic policies and laws. That sometimes presents challenges.

"It's really hard to say that federal policy is going to change much in terms of the upstate jobs picture," said **Ken Girardin** of the Albany-based Empire Center think tank.

The perhaps most obvious metric of success, legislative impact, also is open to interpretation. As senator, Clinton introduced 417 legislative measures, according to **Govtrack.us**. Twenty of those passed the Senate, but never made it through the

House. Of the 11 that arrived at the president's desk, most involved post office namings. And one established the [Kate Mullany National Historic Site](#) in Troy, a tribute to the 19th century shirt-collar laundry union organizer.

There is no landmark legislation with Hillary Clinton's name on it, a la Dodd-Frank, Sarbanes-Oxley or McCain-Feingold.

In terms of bipartisan legislating, CQ Roll Call found Clinton participated in 1,390 votes that were almost strictly party line. Of those, 49 were against the [Democratic Party](#) position, for a 96.5-percent party unity score. The Senate Democratic average at the time was 88 percent.

The non-partisan [Lugar Center](#) pegged Clinton at 156 of 277 senators who served between 1993 and 2014 on its "bipartisan index" — a measurement of how frequent they worked with senators in the opposing party. By contrast, Schumer came in at 161 while former Republican Sen. [Alfonse D'Amato](#), who served from 1981 to 1999 ranked 21.

Clinton's campaign website boasts of her Senate achievements, including bringing broadband to remote areas of the state (a goal that still hasn't been fully accomplished, with Gov. [Andrew Cuomo](#)'s administration just now promising statewide broadband access by 2018) and joining with [Ebay](#) to provide tech support microloans and training to boost small-business sales online.

It also alludes to her work with Sen. [Lindsey Graham](#), R-S.C., in 2003 to expand health care for Reservists and [National Guard](#) troops called up for overseas duty.

But during her failed 2008 presidential run, Clinton got dinged by [FactCheck.org](#) for claiming members of the National Guard and Reserves and their families didn't have health insurance before her measure when, in fact, they had health insurance while on active duty. And four of five had it through other sources while not on active duty [FactCheck.org](#) found.

For any member of Congress, the coin of the realm is responding to the needs of the state or district in a broad range of areas including economic development.

**Kris Balderston**, who worked on upstate economic issues in Clinton's Senate office said the former first lady specialized in leveraging her celebrity status into connecting, say, upstate vegetable growers to budding locavore restaurants, or Seneca Lake wineries to big-name downstate retailers and wholesalers.

Or holding a New York "Farm Day" in which an ice-cream purveyor, **Roxy Hurlburt** of Mercer's Dairy in Oneida County, found herself at a table next to a winemaker. The result: 10 varieties of wine ice cream that are widely distributed and selling well.

"She didn't wave a magic wand, but she had the sense to work with others in a bipartisan way to make things happen," said Balderston, himself a native of Herkime County. "No one had the power to convene like she did."

**Bill Owens**, a Plattsburgh lawyer and community leader who served in the House from 2009 to 2015, gave Clinton high marks for effectiveness and responsiveness to upstate needs.

Owens said Clinton deserved credit for helping to stave off closure of a drug-manufacturing plant in Rouses Point, Clinton County, a mile from the Canadian border. But since then, the pharmaceutical giant Pfizer has whittled the plant's work force from a high of 1,250 to its current 120 and plans to sell the facility or terminate production at the end of 2017.

The Plattsburgh region is sensitive to trade with Canada and Clinton helped secure \$107 million for a new U.S.-Canada border crossing at Champlain in Clinton County. She also scored a \$1 million grant for the Plattsburgh Aeronautical Institute, which trains mechanics for jobs at Canadian companies with satellite facilities in the area, including Bombardier and Nova Bus, Owens said. Both of those companies produce mass transportation equipment, including New York City buses and subway cars.

But one person's governmental helping hand is another person's wasteful pork-barrel spending.

Citizens Against Government Waste, the conservative-leaning anti-pork crusader group, last year gave Clinton a Senate-lifetime score of eight percent (with 100 percent marking a perfect rating). CAGW gave now-former GOP presidential hopeful

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, 99 percent, and Sen. Rand Paul, R-Kentucky, 95 percent.

Along with Schumer, Clinton was an unabashed player in earmarks, the now-discontinued secretive insertion of pet-project funding in appropriations bills.

CAGW data for the brief period of fiscal years 2008 and 2009, when earmarks had to have names attached, showed Clinton involved in 292 such measures for a total of \$350 million.

Among the recipients apart from the Capital District Women's Bar Association: Albany Medical Center (\$487,000), St. Peter's Hospital Foundation (\$312,000) and Albany PAL After School Club (\$164,500).

But the one that got the most attention at the time never actually was approved.

In 2007, Clinton and Schumer worked to obtain a \$1 million grant for a museum as part of the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts in Bethel, Sullivan County, site of the legendary 1969 Woodstock music festival.

It caught the attention of then Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., who along with another Republican senator short-circuited the grant, which he called an example of "self-interested parochial politics that have disillusioned millions of Americans." And, he added, "maybe this is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius for taxpayers."

The museum was built anyway with substantial funding from Alan Gerry, an early cable-TV entrepreneur from Liberty, also in Sullivan County. Today it houses a display of authentic psychedelic-era artifacts and memorabilia.

In fiscal 2009 — during which she left the Senate to become Secretary of State — Clinton ranked 54th among 100 senators for earmark dollar value, according to CAGW calculations. The year before, she was 13th.

"For someone not on the appropriations committee, that's a very high ranking," CAGW President Thomas Schatz said.

But Owens, himself a lawmaker mindful of constituent concerns, said Clinton was a

careful practitioner of the elected official's golden rule: Always return your calls.

"She always got back to people," he said. "You may not be able to solve the problem but it's important to get back — I certainly did."

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