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A New Democratic Party? Bill Clinton as Public Philosopher and Party Leader

More than anyone else, Bill Clinton helped establish the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) as a source of ideas within the Democratic Party. As a founding member of the DLC, and one of the organization's early chairs, Clinton was instrumental in the effort to modernize the party by articulating the "Third Way" philosophy. Despite being the leader of the party, however, he largely failed to transform it into a "New" Democratic Party.

This paper examines Clinton's role as both public philosopher and party leader. First, I identify the Third Way ideology as defined by Clinton in his speeches, statements, and writings. Second, I analyze the ideological structure of the Democratic Party - based on a variety of indicators including party platforms, congressional roll call records, and post-Clinton Democratic presidential campaigns - from just prior to Clinton's first term to the present. The results imply modest changes (at best) in the party's ideology under Clinton's influence. Finally, I suggest reasons for Clinton's inability to significantly alter Democratic Party philosophy.

Clinton himself has indicated that he would like his legacy to be the transformation of the Democratic Party in accordance with the Third Way. Ultimately, this paper addresses that legacy. Despite the success Clinton enjoyed in his eight years as president, he appears to have been unable to achieve the one goal that he placed above all others - a reinvented Democratic Party.