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Trump and Clinton's unlikeliest promises

POLITICO breaks down the nominees' pie-in-the-sky policy proposals

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Hillary Clinton promises to create jobs in coal country and provide debt-free college education for the middle class. Donald Trump pledges to rip up trade deals like NAFTA, negotiate lower drug prices for Medicare and get Mexico to pay for his border wall. And both presidential hopefuls are trying to outdo each other with grandiose plans for upgrading the nation's crumbling roads and bridges.

But don't bet on either candidate having an easy time delivering on those promises in the White House.

The two candidates are on different planets in their overall approach to policy — Clinton's dozens of position papers and hundreds of informal advisers contrast with Trump's skimpy agenda, bare-bones staff and frequently vague, contradictory pronouncements from the stump. But they are alike in the massive political, practical and financial hurdles that their campaign promises would confront.

Drug companies are prepared to unleash hell on any president who seeks to open Medicare drug negotiations, while reworking NAFTA would require buy-in from Mexico and Canada, and Clinton's college plan would cost tens of billions of dollars per year. And of course, the next president will still face a Congress that has proven incapable of agreeing on much of anything.

Here is POLITICO's breakdown of the nominees' pie-in-the-sky policy proposals:

Trump: Getting Mexico to pay for the wall

"We will build a great wall along the southern border. And Mexico will pay for the wall. One hundred percent. They don't know it yet, but they're going to pay for it." — Donald Trump, Aug. 31

The New York businessman has been remarkably consistent about one promise throughout his campaign — not only will he build his border wall, but he'll somehow get Mexico's government to pick up the tab.

Even after he began wavering about how many undocumented immigrants he plans to deport, Trump doubled down on his wall pledge after meeting last month with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto. "They don't know it yet, but they're gonna pay for the wall," Trump told a

crowd in Phoenix on Aug. 31, just hours after Peña Nieto said he had told Trump otherwise during their private meeting.

Trump's campaign has said he will compel Mexico by threatening to block immigrants living illegally in the U.S. from wiring money back home. That move would cut off a multibillion-dollar flow of cash that Trump describes as "de facto welfare for poor families in Mexico." But if Mexico agrees to pay for the wall, he will not impose the regulation. (His campaign website predicts this would all happen by "day 3.")

In addition, Trump would be willing to use trade tariffs, increase visa fees and even cancel visas to pressure Mexico to pay for the wall.

But experts say there's no reason to think the Mexican government will change its mind.

"I think the chances that the Mexican government will pay for a wall are near zero," said Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.

Trump's strategy of threatening Mexico will only further infuriate the country's leaders, he said. "Trump has just held out a stick and he's said we're going to beat you with this no matter what," Nowrasteh said.

Instead, he said, Trump could offer carrots to Mexico's leaders, such as an increase in visas or other measures that would make it easier for Mexicans to work in the United States. But that approach is totally antithetical to Trump's hard-line platform and would essentially force him to "change his entire policy on legal immigration," Nowrasteh said.

Trump's campaign estimates that the wall would cost \$5 billion to \$10 billion, but analysts have put the tab at \$166 billion or more.

Clinton: Debt-free college

"American families are drowning in debt caused by ever-rising college costs, and it is imperative that the next president put forward a bold plan to make debt-free college available to all. My New College Compact will do just that — by making sure that working families can send a child or loved one to college tuition-free and by giving student debt-holders immediate relief."
— Hillary Clinton, July 6.

Clinton has campaigned heavily on a \$-billion "college compact" plan focused on expanding college access and refinancing existing student loan debt. In July, as she sought to mend fences with Sen. Bernie Sanders before the Democratic National Convention, she adjusted her plan to ensure that families with incomes up to \$125,000 would eventually pay no tuition for their children to attend public colleges and universities. That means more than 80 percent of families would qualify for the benefit when it takes full effect in 2021, her campaign said.

The proposal faces numerous roadblocks, though — particularly if Republicans keep control of the House and Senate in November. GOP lawmakers have shown little appetite for tackling the corporate tax overhauls that the Clinton campaign has said would be used to fund the plan.

In addition, Obama gained no traction on Capitol Hill for the less-ambitious proposal he announced last year for free community college. And Clinton's proposal has drawn opposition from many private college presidents concerned that their institutions will see enrollments decline if students can attend public universities for free.

"I think it would be really difficult to get it through Congress," said Jason Delisle, a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who focuses on higher education.

Delisle noted that even when Democrats controlled the House and Senate in 2009, they watered down Obama's proposal for a \$4,000 tax credit for college expenses. The final proposal, first included in the 2009 stimulus law, was capped at \$2,500.

"Even when it was fully Democratically controlled, lawmakers didn't feel like they needed to go as far as the Obama administration proposed — and that was basically when money was no object," he said.

Meanwhile, some experts have said Clinton's plan could be a "bonanza" for public colleges and could even have the unintended effect of raising tuition.

Clinton and Trump: Saving coal country

"If we put our minds to it, we're going to revitalize coal country. Towns that have been knocked flat, we're going to help them get up. We can do that with infrastructure, with advanced manufacturing. We can do that with clean energy." — Hillary Clinton, June 30.

"Their jobs have been taken away, and we're going to bring them back, folks." — Donald Trump, Aug. 10.

Both candidates pledge to bring back jobs to regions like Appalachia whose economies have been battered by declining use of coal. But they take totally opposite approaches: Trump vows to spur demand for the fossil fuel by rolling back Obama administration climate regulations and other "job-killing policies," while Clinton calls for creating new jobs in industries such as renewable energy.

Each plan would be swimming against economic tides, however.

Hillary Clinton's dozens of position papers and hundreds of informal advisers contrast with Donald Trump's skimpy agenda, bare-bones staff and frequently vague, contradictory pronouncements from the stump. | Getty

Contrary to Trump's promises, it would be nearly impossible for the next president to totally revive a coal sector that is being battered on all sides by competition from natural gas and a worldwide shift toward renewables, which has caused once-promising markets in Asia to dry up. U.S. power companies have shut down dozens of coal-burning plants in recent years, and their plans for future construction rely most heavily on gas and wind.

"Coal is in a period of decline. It's not going to go away overnight. It's going to be around for many, many years, but it's in a declining environment in the U.S.," said Andy Roberts, a mining engineer and consultant at the firm Wood Mackenzie. "Could Trump help the coal industry? Yes.

Could he stabilize things? You bet. But is he going to take the coal industry back 30 years and reverse its fortunes? That's not going to happen."

Clinton, for her part, has proposed a \$30 billion plan for "revitalizing coal communities" that includes investing in renewable energy, protecting workers and "making federal investments that help people to find good jobs without having to move."

But experts say the massive Clinton plan could take years, if not decades, and would require a sustained commitment from a Clinton administration and cooperation from Congress, which would need to appropriate billions of dollars.

"It would be unrealistic to believe that you could, overnight, transform an industry into something different," Roberts said.

Trump and Clinton: Negotiating drug prices

"In her 2008 campaign, she called for allowing Medicare to negotiate with drug companies to reduce prices and rein in costs. She's been committed to this fight throughout her career, and is continuing it today." — Hillary Clinton's campaign website.

"We don't do it. Why? Because of the drug companies." — Donald Trump on his proposal to save billions by allowing Medicare to negotiate with drug companies, Jan. 25.

Both Clinton and Trump have vowed to flout one of the pharmaceutical industry's red lines by giving Medicare the power to negotiate prescription drug prices.

Those negotiations now take place between the drug companies and private insurers, and the government is blocked from any involvement under the 2003 law that set up Medicare's drug benefit. Health policy experts say that's almost certainly how it will remain under the next administration, because of drug companies' big spending and deep relationships on the Hill.

"The drug industry just doesn't lose any of these fights," said John McDonough, a former aide to the late Sen. Ted Kennedy who worked on the Affordable Care Act. Despite the current furor over drug prices — from the high cost of new breakthrough hepatitis C treatments to huge price spikes of old generic drugs — "I'm still waiting to see one pharma friend turn on them, Republican or Democrat," McDonough said.

In another long shot, Clinton also said she wants to bring back the "public option," a government-run plan that would compete with private insurers on the Obamacare exchanges. The proposal was jettisoned in the drafting of the ACA over objections from moderate Democrats and is sharply opposed by the insurance industry. It would face an uphill climb on the Hill, including likely universal opposition by Republicans.

Clinton said she wouldn't try to push the idea through Congress, instead using flexibility under Obamacare "to empower states to establish a public option choice."

Offering a competing vision to Sanders' single-payer Medicare for all, Clinton also floated the idea of letting people as young as 50 buy into Medicare, the insurance program for people 65 or older. The catch: It's diametrically opposed to Republicans' proposal to gradually raise the age to 67 in an effort to shore up the program's finances.

Trump and Clinton: Renegotiating trade deals

“I have said repeatedly that I would like to renegotiate [NAFTA]. I think there were parts of it that did not work as hoped for.” — Hillary Clinton, March 10.

“I’m going to tell our NAFTA partners that I intend to immediately renegotiate the terms of that agreement to get a better deal for our workers. And I don’t mean just a little bit better, I mean a lot better.” — Donald Trump, June 28.

Both candidates have promised to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement to get better terms for the United States, and Trump has said he’ll withdraw if he can’t get an acceptable deal with Canada and Mexico. The next president could pull the U.S. out of the pact six months after providing written notice. But withdrawing would disrupt trading relationships built up over the past two decades and trigger a huge fight with the business community.

And renegotiating NAFTA would be a complicated and risky endeavor.

“Either you scrap the whole thing and we’re back to where we started, which isn’t good for anybody,” said David Biette, a NAFTA expert and a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. “Or you can try to negotiate. But since we’re all coming from different places ... it’s going to be really hard negotiating.”

Added Laura Dawson, director of the Canada Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars: “Trade agreements are notoriously difficult to unravel or unwrap. They are developed like geological layers.”

In addition, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a proposed 12-nation deal that both Trump and Clinton say they oppose, is in many ways already a renegotiation of the 22-year-old NAFTA pact in areas like labor and the environment. In fact, Obama promised in 2008 to renegotiate NAFTA but chose to do the TPP deal instead.

One of Clinton’s main criticism of the TPP is that it does not include enforceable rules against currency manipulation, even though the Obama administration negotiated a side agreement to discourage countries from devaluing their currency for an unfair trade advantage. Pushing for binding rules that would expose the United States and other TPP countries to possible trade retaliation over downward currency moves would be fiercely resisted by the U.S. Federal Reserve, if not the Treasury Department itself, even in a Clinton administration.

In addition, it seems unlikely the United States could persuade Japan and other TPP members to go along, without making major concessions that could greatly diminish the worth of the agreement to American companies.

Trump has repeatedly pointed to the huge trade deficit with China — \$366 billion in 2015 — as evidence the United States is losing on trade, and he has promised to slap tariffs on Chinese goods to restore balance to the relationship. But carrying out this promise will be tough under U.S. trade remedy laws since it would require filing a multitude of cases. Consumers also might not like the result if it boosts prices.

In addition, many goods imported from China no longer have U.S.-made equivalents, so any drop in trade from that country would just open the door for suppliers like Vietnam or Malaysia to step in.

Trump has also promised to “cancel” the climate change agreement that the U.S. and nearly 200 other nations reached last year in Paris. He could certainly repudiate the deal and refuse to comply with it, but it still would take years for the United States to formally withdraw if the agreement enters into force before Obama leaves office (as international leaders hope).

Trump and Clinton: Hundreds of billions for infrastructure

“Our roads, bridges, and airports are in a sorry state. Hillary will invest in the infrastructure America deserves.” — Clinton campaign on Twitter, December 2015.

“We have a great plan and we are going to rebuild our infrastructure. By the way, her [Hillary Clinton’s] numbers is a fraction of what we’re talking about, we need much more money than that to rebuild our infrastructure.” — Donald Trump, Aug. 2.

Both Clinton and Trump have promised big-spending infrastructure plans to revitalize the nation’s highways, railroads, bridges and airports — while largely skipping the hard questions about how to pay for it. In their current form, neither plan seems to have much of a chance of going anywhere without a nearly unprecedented compromise in Congress.

Clinton has proposed a five-year, \$275 billion infrastructure plan as part of the agenda for her first 100 days in office, of which \$25 billion would be used as seed funding for a national infrastructure bank. She proposes to pay for her plan with “business tax reform,” making this the latest in a long list of proposals to pay for various needs by scrubbing the tax code.

But a wholesale overhaul of the tax code would present an enormous, drawn-out battle. Even if lawmakers eventually strike a deal, many other priorities would compete for the money. Beyond that, Clinton’s one specific plan — the \$25 billion for the infrastructure bank — is an idea that Obama has floated in almost every budget proposal, and which has failed to get anywhere despite winning some support from Republicans.

Trump proposes to spend an even more eye-popping \$500 billion on infrastructure but is even more nebulous on how to pay for it, essentially suggesting it would be financed through debt, such as bonds.

“We’ll get a fund, we’ll make a phenomenal deal with the low interest rates and rebuild our infrastructure,” Trump said in an interview with Fox Business Network. “We’d do infrastructure bonds for the country, from the United States.”

But with much of Congress still wary of spending that isn’t paid for, \$500 billion in debt-financed infrastructure would be hard to swallow. In addition, lawmakers have largely been uninterested in large-scale bonding for infrastructure projects at the national level, with the exception of Build America Bonds, which they enacted as part of the 2009 stimulus program when local bond markets were hurting. Those bonds expired in 2010 and Congress has not renewed them.

Even long-time advocates of massive infrastructure investments acknowledge it won't be easy.

“The problem is the lack of political courage in Congress to find the revenue needed for a meaningful federal infrastructure package,” said former Obama administration Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who has repeatedly lamented Congress' failure to increase the gasoline tax.

LaHood — who is now co-chair of Building America's Future, a group that advocates infrastructure investments — said finding an agreement on revenue sources will be “a struggle.”

“If we want to maintain global economic competitiveness, we can't rely on a one-time increase in funding,” he said. “We need a more sustainable solution and dedicated revenue, like increasing the gas tax or approving other user fees, to provide the big pot of money this country really needs to rebuild our roads, runways, rails, ports and pipes.”

A Clinton campaign aide strongly disputed the notion that her plan is far-fetched, noting that both Democratic and Republican lawmakers have expressed support for investing in infrastructure. More broadly, Clinton has “put rigorous thought into [her policy proposals] — consulting experts, hammering out the details and figuring out ways to pay for them,” campaign spokeswoman Julie Wood said.

“She's fully committed to working with both sides of the aisle on the legislative components and has an extensive record of doing that successfully, unlike Donald Trump who has zero legislative experience,” Wood added.

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment for this article.