About a year ago I was meandering through a semi-rural central New Jersey town near where I live. As I got within view of the old red mill, two young females walked past. One said to the other “No, I live in [klɪ̰ː].” After several months of furious subconscious computation, I figured out that she was saying “I live in Clinton.” In hindsight it was obvious—after all—the town is called “Clinton”.

My New Zealand English pronunciation of “Clinton” is quite different: [kləntən], and occasionally [klɔnʔn]. But given American English phonology, [klɪ̰ː] makes sense. I thought it would be worth talking about why it makes sense now that Hillary Clinton is one of the leading contenders for the US Democratic party’s presidential nomination. If she becomes president, how will Americans say her name? How should the world expect to hear her name pronounced? “President [klɪ̰ː]?“

I should mention right from the start that I’m not claiming that every American says [klɪ̰ː]. A lot of them might be headed in that direction, but there’s a lot of dialect variation. For example, my colleague Tom Stephens told me that people in his South Carolina hometown say [klɪ̰m]. This is phonologically unsurprising: there’s a phonological process in many American English dialects that actively eliminates /nt/ clusters (especially after stressed vowels). So, you hear [mɛɾnt] ‘internet’ and [wɪnə] ‘winter.’ The process is productive, too: I was told that a person who squints is a [skwɪnə], even though they said [skwɪnt], not *[skwɪm]; someone who hinted at the right answer too much was called a [hɪmə]. So, [klɪ̰m] makes sense; from what I hear it’s the usual way to say “Clinton” in the southern states.

* My thanks to Jonathan Wright, Tom Stephens, Catherine Kitto, and the long-suffering students in my undergraduate phonetics and “introduction to linguistics” classes.
So why doesn’t everyone say [klɪmn]? All of my New Jersey students have the /nt/→[n] process (they’d all say [skwɪnə˞] if they had the chance). But none of them say [klɪmn].

Instead, some of them say [klɪmʔn] and others say [kļiʔn]. They even do this productively. I told a couple of students about a verb that means “to act like Clint Eastwood”: to “clint.” I then managed to maneuver them into saying “clinter” (with the suffix -er—someone who clints), and “clinting” (with the –ing suffix, which they say as [n]). They said [klɪnt] for “clint” and [klɪmʔ] “clinter”, as expected (that’s the /nt/→[n] process). But for “clinting” they said [klɪmʔn]/[kļiʔn], not *[klɪmn].

So what’s going on? Well, the final [in] sequence becomes a syllabic nasal: [klɪntn]; this process happens in all unstressed syllables with liquids and nasals (e.g. [ŋr] ‘riddle’). The [t] obligatorily becomes a glottal stop before the syllabic nasal: [klɪmʔn]. The /t/→ʔ/ process is completely productive, as in [mɪʔn] “mitten”, [bʌʔn] “button”, [waiʔn] ‘white+en’, and even [bʌʔn] for “butt-in” (the nominal form “he’s a butt-in” (i.e., someone who butts in); compared with the form when the stress is on the “in”: [bʌtɪʔn]). The /t/→ʔ process inadvertently prevents the /nt/→[n] process from applying: there’s no [t] left to be eliminated.

However, most people don’t say [klɪmʔn], they say [kļiʔn]. My colleague Jonathan Wright reports that this pronunciation is common throughout the U.S. Even on TV, pundits like Chris Matthews and Tim Russert say “Clinton” this way, and participants at the recent Democratic national convention seemed to say this form almost exclusively. For these speakers, every /Vntn/ sequence emerges as [Vʔn] (e.g., Jonathan says mountain [maʊʔn]). This process of [n]-elimination isn’t really surprising. It’s been a feature of African American English for a very long time, and word-final and syllable-final codas are especially susceptible to this process. More and more of my students seem to eliminate syllable-final /n/ wherever they can. They merge it with the preceding vowel to make a nasal vowel. There are now a lot of words that contrast just in vowel nasalization, like [hɪt] “hit” vs. [hɨt] “hint.”

We are getting closer to accounting for [kļiʔn], believe it or not.

Glottal stops often induce creakiness on surrounding elements. So [kļiʔn] often comes out as [kļiʔn]. Exactly how much creak there is varies a lot with my students. In fact, I heard a great presentation by Phil Quick where he observes that the phonological /ʔ/ in the Indonesian language Pendau is often entirely phonetically realized as creak on a nearby vowel. So, it explains why I’ve heard [kļɪn]: the glottal stop is entirely realized as creaky voice.

For some speakers, the realization of /ʔ/ as creaky voice has become more than a process of phonetic realization: it has been ‘phonologized’ so that a glottal stop becomes creaky voice on a
preceding vowel. This raises a problem for [klı[n]—it ends in a coda [n]. The [n] must be eliminated, so you might expect the result to be *[klı], but this form raises a problem: it’s too short. English phonology doesn’t permit words to have a single short vowel. For some speakers the solution seems to be to lengthen the vowel: [klıː]. This lengthening is a bit perplexing since American English doesn’t allow [ı:], but I guess at this point the speaker’s dialect is well on its way to developing contrastive nasal vowels, contrastive creaky vowels, and contrastive nasalized creaky vowels, so a long lax vowel isn’t too much of a stretch. I’ve heard [klı̃ː], too, which has the virtue of avoiding a long [ı:].

There’s even another option. The African American students in my class said [klı̃ʔi] for “Clinton”. In fact, there’s a common expression in the US “No you didn’t” which is properly (it seems) said in the African American dialect. The “didn’t” comes out as [dıʔi] (note that the final /t/ deletes entirely—there’s no creak on the preceding vowel). The same kind of thing happens to Clinton, except that the first vowel is nasalized because of the following /n/: [klı̃ʔi]. I’d expect [klı̃ʔi] to go down the same path as for [klıʔi]: the glottal stop will cause creakiness on the preceding vowel ([klıʔı]), with the glottal stop ultimately eliminated as its own segment [klı], with the creak extending into the following vowel [klı̃]/[klıː]. It seems like all roads are leading inexorably to [klıː].

So, how does this affect you? Well, if you’re listening to the presidential nominee debates you might hear Hillary Clinton called [klı̃n], [klı̃ʔn], [klıʔn], [klı̃ʔi], [klı̃n], [klıː], or [klı̃]. Surprisingly, none of these forms are unexpected depending on what kind of phonology and phonetic system the speaker has.

Of course, there’s a lot about “Clinton” I didn’t discuss here. There’s the sociolinguistic side of things: who says which pronunciation? There’s the diachronic point of view, which is tied in with issues of perception and articulation: how did learners come to actuate a phonological process /nt/→[n]? How about /t/→[ʔ]/_n, etc., etc. There’s the phonetic interface point of view: how is phonological /ʔ/ realized phonetically as creaky voice? It’s crucial to consider all of these aspects to fully explain “Clinton”. My focus was on how productive processes in a person’s phonological system could explain the range of dialect variation.

So, what will “Clinton” become in the US? The southern states’ [klı̃m] is probably at a fairly stable state; at most the next step would be to follow many other dialects and get rid of the final nasal: i.e., future [klı̃]. As for the New Jersey dialect, and for many others, the [klıʔn] form seems to be popular, but the more undergraduates I hear, the more that [klıʔı] and even [klı̃] crops up. African American English seems to be following a different path, but will probably end up in the same place. “Clinton” is a herald of things to come: prepare to hear more and more creaky nasalized vowels emanating from the US.