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The 1996 U.S. Presidential Election: Return of the "Comeback Kid"

The 1996 American presidential election was, to a considerable degree, a status quo event. Bill Clinton won a second consecutive term, something accomplished by only two other Democrats in this century (Woodrow Wilson in 1916 and Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1936). The Republicans retained their majorities in both houses of Congress, the first time that has happened since 1930. Incumbents of both political parties did very well; over 90 percent of the incumbent House members were duly re-elected. Third-party candidate Ross Perot did poorly, losing more than half of the votes he got in 1992. Voter turnout was down sharply, as were television coverage of the campaign and viewing of the presidential debates.¹ The hunger for change, so prevalent in 1992, and again in 1994, gave way to the mysterious calm of 1996.

What happened to the boiling American political discontent of the early-to-mid-1990s?² How did the United States end up with a divided government after a tumultuous period that threw out a Republican President in 1992, shattered a Democratic Congress in 1994 and upended sixty years of social welfare legislation in 1995?³

How could Clinton come back from the devastating defeat his party suffered in 1994 and easily win re-election two years later? These are questions that political scientists will be studying for years to come. The answers provided in this summary article are of necessity more preliminary, as we go about analyzing the presidential campaign, the election results, and the issue of what the 1996 election may portend for the future.

The Presidential Campaign

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about the 1996 election is not what happened during the course of the campaign, but the changing mood that occurred among the American voters between the 1994 midterm elections and the November 5 presidential contest two years later.⁴ In the spring of 1995, Bill Clinton's presidency looked as if it was on life support. Six months earlier the Republicans, for the first time in 40 years, had won a majority of the seats in both houses of Congress. The president's approval rating was in the 40s; polls had him trailing likely Republican nominee Bob Dole by some 15 percentage points. White House polling showed that voters associated Clinton with three main issues: gays in the military, the tax increase in the 1993 budget and the health care reform debacle. At a memorable prime-time press conference in

April, 1995, Clinton had to point out that according to the Constitution, the President was still "relevant."⁵

It was during this bleak period that Clinton and his consultants, believing that the election would be won or lost before the summer of 1996, began to assemble their "message team." The team, soon to be named the "November 5 Group," consisted of experienced pollsters and political consultants such as Bob Squier, Doug Schoen, Don Baer, and Mark Penn. Another member of the group was Dick Morris, a political consultant whom Clinton had worked with in Arkansas. Morris, who in the past had offered his services to candidates of both parties, soon launched a strategy that he claimed could win Clinton the election. He called it "triangulation," which meant positioning the president solidly in the center above and between both parties. This turned out to be a strategy close to the president's heart and one that he himself had been entertaining for some time.⁶

The first strategic move by the Clinton team was to produce a series of television ads on crime touting the president's support of the death penalty, community policing, and the recently enacted so-called Brady Bill. The ads, which were intended to disarm the crime issue and show that Clinton embodied traditional "middle class values," cost \$2.4 million and went on the air in June, 1995, seventeen months before the election.⁷ This was an inkling of what was to come. Traditionally, parties and candidates have spent their advertising dollars in the late summer or fall of an election year. The Clinton campaign was to change that pattern altogether.

Later that summer, a huge "benchmark" poll was done intended to get a deeper view of the American voter. In order to shape and sharpen the president's image, the pollsters wanted to know the voters' views and thoughts on a wide range of issues. Among other things they found two distinct groups of swing voters, one moderate group leaning toward the Democrats and another group of Republican-leaning independents. Both groups had similar views on crime, health care, and Medicare but differed on taxes, welfare, and fiscal matters, where the Republican-leaning voters took a more conserva-

tive position. Clinton, true to his pragmatic roots, was determined to fashion a message that appealed to both groups.

In his political memoirs, Dick Morris writes about his role in the campaign and how he helped to create what he calls the "first fully advertised presidency in U.S. history." According to Morris, who obviously likes to talk about himself, the Clinton White House provided him with a virtually unlimited budget for polling and market research during the campaign. Vast sums of money were spent on both national and state surveys. At critical times daily tracking polls were conducted at the national level, and there were also a significant number of focus groups. All of which helped Clinton and the Democrats to frame the issues and define their opponents at a very early stage in the race.⁸

The next advertising blitz was launched in August, 1995, and blasted the Republican plan in Congress to cut the growth of Medicare. The ads, which were broadcast in secondary markets outside the big cities to escape media scrutiny, stated that the GOP wanted to "cut Medicare by \$270 billion." Grainy, black-and-white pictures of Senator Bob Dole and Speaker Newt Gingrich conveyed an image of the Republicans as cold, heartless defenders of the wealthy. President Clinton, on the other hand, was cast in the role of noble protector of the elderly, the sick, and the disabled.⁹

The Medicare ads turned out to be a turning point for Clinton and the Democrats. The president's approval rating seemed to go up with every new ad, from 47 percent in August to the mid-50s by December, 1995. By that time the big budget battle was already raging between the Republican Congress and the White House. The budget negotiations soon broke down after both parties refused to compromise. Polls showed that Clinton had found a winning issue by standing up to the GOP on Medicare. The Republicans, with unpopular Speaker Gingrich as the leading player, pursued what became known in the media as a "train-wreck" scenario which eventually ended in a shutdown of the federal government. The impasse came to a dramatic halt when Majority Leader Bob Dole, never quite comfortable with the House Republican

agenda, single-handedly declared the shutdown ended on the Senate floor.¹⁰

Clinton handily won the public relations game. In the eyes of many voters, including independents and GOP sympathizers, the Republican Congress had gone too far in cutting – or proposing to cut – various social welfare programs. The government shutdowns (there were two) became a symbol for the Party's budget-cutting zeal, and the public generally blamed Republican lawmakers for the deadlock. In early June, 1996, polls showed that one in four of the voters who had supported Republicans in 1994 had switched to Clinton. Seventy-three percent of them said that they trusted Clinton on the issues, whereas only 11 percent trusted the GOP Congress.¹¹

What is more, the budget battle also provided Clinton with a message for the ensuing campaign. During the budget negotiations Clinton had accepted, in principle, the Republican idea of a balanced budget. But he insisted that the budget must be balanced in a way that protected "Democratic values" and defended "Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment." This was Clinton resuming the mantle of a "New Democrat," trying to bridge cleavages within his own party between those who wanted to protect entitlements and those who were more fiscally conservative.

By March, 1996, Clinton already had a sizeable lead in the polls over Bob Dole. The numbers were not to change much in the period leading up to the election on November 5. Dole was bruised during the many GOP primaries, where he had to fend off challenges both from supply-side economic conservatives (Steve Forbes), social conservatives (Phil Gramm), and right-wing isolationists (Pat Buchanan).¹² As it turned out, Dole never adjusted to the role of a presidential candidate. His two big campaign decisions, quitting the Senate in June and choosing Jack Kemp as his running mate in August, took nearly everyone by surprise when they were announced. Both decisions, however, turned out to be ill-advised. By resigning from the Senate and relinquishing his position as majority leader, Dole lost an important platform from which he could have continued to influence legislation and ar-

gue the Republican case. And by picking Jack Kemp he no doubt added a man of ideas to the ticket, but he also got a politician who once again, just like in 1988, proved himself to be a poor campaigner.¹³

Dole ran a largely inept campaign which lacked a substantive, consistent theme.¹⁴ His major campaign promise, a 15 percent across-the-board tax cut, never caught on with the electorate. Two months before the election, for example, polls showed that voters felt better than they had in years about the direction of the country generally and about the U.S. economy in particular. Nearly two-thirds of voters, including 52 percent of Republicans, did not think that Dole would cut taxes 15 percent if elected president. To the contrary, four in ten voters felt that he would *raise* their taxes, and fully two-thirds said that Dole could not cut taxes and reduce the budget deficit at the same time, as he claimed he would do. By a surprising 44 percent to 40 percent, voters in one survey trusted Clinton more than Dole to cut the federal budget deficit. Dole's economic plan thus had the unintended consequence of diminishing his credibility as a deficit hawk, one of the few issues where he had held a clear lead in previous opinion polls.¹⁵

Realizing the difficulty to persuade people to vote for him, Dole and his media team spent considerable time trying to persuade them to vote against Bill Clinton. Particularly towards the end of the campaign, Dole kept hammering away at the president's flawed "character" while insisting that the basic issue was "trust."¹⁶ It was not a successful strategy. Surveys indicated that the attacks did nothing to improve Dole's standing among voters.¹⁷ However, neither of the main candidates presented the voters with a compelling vision for the 21st century. True, Clinton did have a theme and a list of incremental reforms primarily in the areas of education, family and juvenile policies. For example, on the stump he repeatedly stressed his support for school uniforms and V-chips on television and warned against the hazards of breast cancer and tobacco smoking. But this platform, dubbed the "Small Deal" by one observer, was less an ideology than an assemblage of tactics geared towards addressing the anxieties of the suburban middle

class.¹⁸ It could hardly be called a governing vision for the next millennium.

What history will remember from the 1996 election, then, is not the strength of the candidates' ideas, but rather the size of the parties' campaign coffers. The two national party committees raised \$263.5 million in unlimited so-called "soft money" donations in the 1995-96 election cycle, nearly triple the amount they raised in 1992.¹⁹ Further, a record \$660 million was raised by all candidates for congressional races, up from \$611.5 million in 1994. In the congressional races, Republicans outpaced Democrats in fund raising, taking in \$349 million to the Democrats' \$306 million. The average cost of a congressional campaign in 1996 was around \$600,000, also a new record.²⁰

Estimates vary as to how much money was spent in the fight for the White House. One can confidently assume, however, that the total amount spent in the presidential election was at least as high (and probably much higher) as that spent in all the congressional races.²¹ What set this election apart from most others was that the Democrats made an all-out effort to raise as much money as early as possible in the campaign. The scope and intensity of the Democrats' fund-raising efforts made them accept donations from sometimes questionable and potentially illegal sources, something which became a controversial issue as the campaign drew to a close.²²

However, the length and magnitude of the Clinton advertising campaign enabled the Democrats to effectively frame the issues and define their opponent to the electorate. By the time Bob Dole and his team started to respond to the ads, Clinton, aided by a healthy economy and an overconfident GOP majority in Congress, had already defined the broad contours of the campaign. Dole's desperate four-day, round-the-clock marathon finish, taking him to 19 states in 96 hours, gave him a late boost, as did news stories about the Democrats' questionable fund-raising methods. But it was too little too late. The 1996 campaign thus reaffirmed one of the standard maxims of the political-consulting business, namely that he who defines first defines last.²³

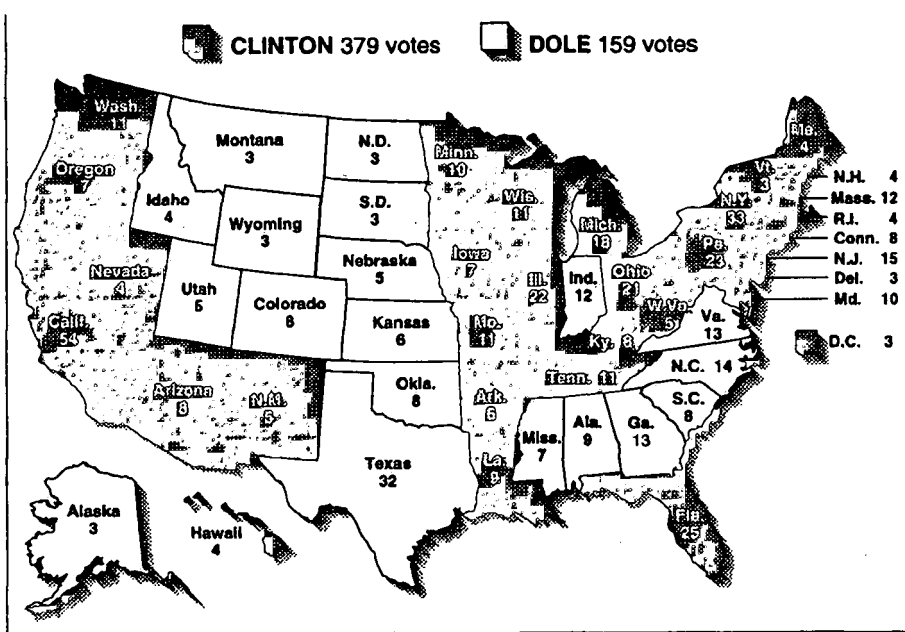
The November Elections

Bill Clinton increased his share of the popular vote, from 43 percent in 1992 to 49 percent in 1996. It was a clear, though hardly impressive, victory. Clinton won 31 states and the District of Columbia, which amounted to 379 electoral votes. (His 1992 result was 32 states and 370 electoral votes.) In other words, Clinton won re-election without getting a majority of the popular vote. That is not altogether uncommon. In seven of the 25 presidential elections from 1900 to 1996, candidates have emerged victorious with less than 50 percent of the popular vote.²⁴

A closer look at the electoral map reveals that Clinton carried states in all regions of the country (see map 1). He was strongest in the Northeast, where he won all of the eleven-states plus the District of Columbia. He also carried most Midwestern states and the entire Pacific coastal region, including vote-rich California, which he won for the second time in a row. Clinton lost three of the states that he carried in 1992, Montana, Colorado, and Georgia in his native South, still his weakest region. He more than made that up, however, by adding Arizona and Florida to his column. Florida, the fourth largest state in terms of electoral votes, has not gone Democratic in a presidential election since 1976.

By contrast, Bob Dole ended up with 41 percent of the popular vote, winning 19 states and 159 electoral votes. That was better than predicted by the final national polls published shortly before Election Day. The results of these polls, when averaged, showed Clinton with 49 percent and Dole with just 37 percent. Apparently, the pollsters were unable to trace a late swing of previously undecided voters toward Dole—possibly because of a drop in voter turnout or the perennial problem of distinguishing likely voters from unlikely voters.²⁵ Among voters who made their decision during the last week of the campaign, Dole beat Clinton by 47 percent to 35 percent. And among those who decided in the last three days, Dole again came out ahead with 39 percent to Clinton's 35 percent.²⁶

Dole also did better than the 37.7 percent George Bush got in 1992, although Bush won nine more electoral votes. As in 1992, the Re-



Map 1. The 1996 U.S. Presidential Election Results by State and Electoral College Vote. Source: *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1996, p. 2.

publican candidate carried the mountain states of the West, the Plains states and a majority of the Southern states, including Texas, the third largest state in terms of electoral votes (after California and New York). Ross Perot's Reform Party won 8 percent and no electoral votes, a considerable drop from the 19 percent he got in 1992. On the whole, the Perot campaign this time was essentially a sideshow, and Perot's influence on the 1996 race was marginal.²⁷ Among the other presidential candidates only two, Ralph Nader of the Green Party and Harry Browne of the Libertarians, got more than one percent of the popular vote.

Voter turnout was a meager 48.8 percent, substantially down from the 55.2 percent figure in 1992 and the lowest in any presidential election since 1924. In one respect, the low turnout came as something of a surprise. The enactment in 1993 of a "motor voter law," which allows people to register when they renew their driving licences, resulted in an increase in the number of registered voters by 9.2 million from 1992 to 1996. According to the Federal Election Com-

mission, almost 73 percent of eligible voters were registered in 1996, the highest number for any election since 1960.²⁸ But the problem is, as pointed out by David McKay, that large numbers of registered voters, especially the young and the poor, simply do not bother to vote. In 1996, moreover, no single candidate or issue galvanized the electorate as apparently happened in 1992.²⁹ "By every available measure," a well-known media critic observed three weeks before Election Day, "both the press and the public are tuning out the contest between President Clinton and Bob Dole."³⁰

The exit polls give a portrait of the 1996 electorate not unlike that of 1992 (see table 1).³¹ Bill Clinton held on to many of the demographic groups who helped him win in 1992 and, in some cases, managed to increase his share of their votes. A majority of women, blacks, young voters (including first time voters), Democrats, liberals, and moderates all gave the president a majority of their votes. He increased his support among union households from 55 to 59 percent, and did well among independents and suburban

Table 1. Distribution of the Vote by Social Groups in U.S. Presidential Elections 1976-1996.

Pct. of total vote	Total vote	1976		1980			1984		1988		1992		1996			
		Car-ter 50	Ford 48	Rea-gan 51	Car-ter 41	Ande-rson 7	Rea-gan 59	Mon-dale 40	Bush 53	Duka-kis 45	Clin-ton 43	Bush 38	Pe-rot 19	Clin-ton 49	Dole 41	Pe-rot 8
48	Men	50	48	55	36	7	62	37	57	41	41	38	21	43	44	10
52	Women	50	48	47	45	7	56	44	50	49	45	37	17	54	38	7
83	White	47	52	56	36	7	64	35	59	40	39	40	20	43	46	9
10	Black	83	16	11	85	3	9	90	12	86	83	10	7	84	12	4
5	Hispanic	76	24	33	59	6	37	62	30	69	61	25	14	72	21	6
1	Asian	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	31	55	15	43	48	8
17	18-29 years old	51	47	43	44	11	59	40	52	47	43	34	22	53	34	10
33	30-44 years old	49	49	55	36	8	57	42	54	45	41	38	21	48	41	9
26	45-59 years old	47	52	55	39	5	60	40	57	42	41	40	19	48	41	9
24	60 and older	47	52	54	41	4	60	39	50	49	50	38	12	48	44	7
35	Republicans	9	90	86	9	4	92	7	91	8	10	73	17	13	80	6
26	Independents	43	54	55	30	12	63	36	55	43	38	32	30	43	35	17
39	Democrats	77	22	26	67	6	25	74	17	82	77	10	13	84	10	5
20	Liberals	71	26	25	60	11	28	70	18	81	68	14	18	78	11	7
47	Moderates	51	48	49	42	8	53	47	49	50	47	31	21	57	33	9
33	Conservatives	29	70	73	23	4	82	17	80	19	18	64	18	20	71	8
23	From the East	51	47	47	42	9	53	47	50	49	47	35	18	55	34	9
26	From the Midwest	48	50	51	41	7	58	41	52	47	42	37	21	48	41	10
30	From the South	54	45	52	44	3	64	36	58	41	41	43	16	46	46	7
20	From the West	46	51	53	34	10	61	38	52	46	43	34	23	48	40	8
6	Not a high school graduate	-	-	46	51	2	50	50	43	56	54	28	18	59	28	11
24	High school graduate	-	-	51	43	4	60	39	50	49	43	36	21	51	35	13
27	Some college education	-	-	55	35	8	61	38	57	42	41	37	21	48	40	10
43	College graduate or more	-	-	52	35	11	58	41	56	43	44	39	17	47	44	7
26	College graduate	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	62	37	39	41	20	44	46	8
17	Post graduate education	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	50	48	50	36	14	52	40	5
46	White Protestant	41	58	63	31	6	72	27	66	33	33	47	21	36	53	10
29	Catholic	54	44	50	42	7	54	45	52	47	44	35	20	53	37	9
3	Jewish	64	34	39	45	15	31	67	35	64	80	11	9	78	16	3
23	Union household	59	39	44	49	6	46	53	42	57	55	24	21	59	30	9
	Family income is															
11	Under \$ 15,000	58	40	43	49	7	45	55	37	62	58	23	19	59	28	11
23	\$15,000-\$ 29,999	55	43	53	39	7	57	42	49	50	45	35	20	53	36	9
27	\$30,000-\$ 49,999	48	50	59	32	8	59	40	56	43	41	38	21	48	40	10
39	Over \$ 50,000	36	63	64	26	10	69	30	62	37	39	44	17	44	48	7
18	Over \$ 75,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	36	48	16	41	51	7
9	Over \$ 100,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	65	32	-	-	-	38	54	6
	Family financial situation is															
33	Better today	30	70	37	55	7	86	14	-	-	24	61	14	66	26	6
45	Same today	51	49	46	47	7	50	50	-	-	41	42	17	46	45	8
20	Worse today	77	23	66	25	8	15	85	-	-	60	14	25	27	57	13

Continued ...

Table 1. Continued.

Pct. of total vote	Total vote	1976 Car-ter 50	1976 Ford 48	1980 Rea- gan 51	1980 Car- ter 41	1980 And- er- son 7	1984 Rea- gan 59	1984 Mon- dale 40	1988 Bush 53	1988 Duka- kis 45	1992 Clin- ton 43	1992 Bush 38	1992 Perot 19	1996 Clin- ton 49	1996 Dole 41	1996 Perot 8
10	Size of place Population over 500,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	37	62	58	28	13	68	25	6
21	Population 50,000 to 500,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	47	52	50	33	16	50	39	8
39	Suburbs	-	-	55	35	9	61	38	57	42	41	39	21	47	42	8
9	Population 10,000 to 50,000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	61	38	39	42	20	48	41	9
21	Rural areas	-	-	55	39	5	67	32	55	44	39	40	20	44	46	10
9	First time voters	-	-	-	-	-	61	38	51	47	46	32	22	54	34	11
49	Congressional vote For the Democratic candidate	75	23	22	69	7	23	76	27	72	74	11	15	84	8	7
49	For the Republican candidate	12	87	83	11	5	93	7	82	17	10	72	18	15	76	8
43	Previous Presidential vote For the Democratic candidate	26	73	29	63	6	18	82	7	92	83	5	12	85	9	4
35	For the Republican candidate	79	18	83	11	6	88	11	80	19	21	59	20	13	82	4
12	For Wallace/ Anderson/Perot	-	-	-	-	-	27	69	-	-	-	-	-	22	44	33
66	Married	-	-	-	-	-	62	38	57	42	40	41	20	44	46	9
34	Unmarried	-	-	-	-	-	52	47	46	53	51	30	19	57	31	9

Source: *The New York Times*, November 10, 1996, p. 16.

voters. Bob Dole got most of his support from conservatives, Republicans, and white Protestants. He also won the votes of more than half of those with a family income of over \$75,000 per year. Other income groups divided fairly evenly between the candidates or supported Mr. Clinton. The general rule was that the lower a group stood on the economic ladder, the higher the president's margin among its voters.

What explains Clinton's victory? A key factor was the way the voters felt about the country and the economy. In 1992, only 39 percent of voters said they thought the U.S. was headed in the right direction. Four years later that figure had grown to 53 percent. Voters also said that the economy and jobs mattered most, followed by Medicare and Social Security. Almost three out of five voters rated the national economy as good or excel-

lent in 1996, and among these voters Clinton beat Dole by two-to-one. The Republican candidate thus learned, like many before him, how difficult it is to oust an incumbent president in times of tranquility and prosperity.³²

But other factors were important too, for example the so-called "gender gap," i.e., the differences in male and female voting for the two main candidates. The gender gap started to get some attention during the Reagan era as analysts noted the emergence of a new trend: men, particularly white males in the South, became more Republican and less Democratic than women. According to Warren Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, the appearance of a gender gap during Reagan's two terms was not as much a function of a pro-Democratic growth in the partisan affiliation of liberal women, as a function of increasingly pro-Re-

publican sentiments among conservative men. At least up to the election of 1992, the authors contended, "the Republicans did not have a new problem with women so much as the Democrats have had a continuing problem among men."³³

The 1996 election signals that the Democrats may still have a problem among men. Clinton increased his share of the male vote only marginally, from 41 to 43 percent. He lost the white male vote by a clear 38 to 49 percent margin. But the more important thing is that he got no less than 54 percent of the female vote, leaving a 16-point gap to his Republican opponent. That represents the biggest gender gap since exit polls were introduced some twenty years ago. Working women voted for Clinton by 56 percent to 35 percent. The outcome was the result of a specific strategy. In contrast to 1992, Clinton deliberately set out to win the female vote by emphasizing his support of the so-called assault weapons ban, the Violence Against Women Act, and the Family and Medical Leave Act. These laws were all passed during Clinton's first term.³⁴ The Republicans, by openly opposing these issues, did themselves no favors among women voters in 1996. Nor do they seem to have benefitted from the tough anti-abortion stance in their election platform. All of which may well present today's Republicans with "a new problem with women."

Another interesting, and perhaps equally important, demographic change was the surge in the number of Hispanic voters. In a year when voter turnout sank to a level not seen since the mid-1920s, the Hispanic share of the national electorate more than doubled. Overall, Hispanic or Latino voters account for about five percent of the voting population of the U.S. But in states such as Arizona, Texas, and Florida they have grown to 10 percent or more of eligible voters, and in California to almost 15 percent. In 1996, it was Clinton and the Democrats who benefitted from heavy Hispanic participation. In 1984, Reagan won 37 percent of the Hispanic vote. Twelve years later that figure dropped to just 21 percent for Dole. Clinton, on the other hand, increased his share of the Hispanic vote from 61 percent in 1992 to 72 percent in 1996. He captured a whopping 75 percent of the Hispanic vote

in Texas, a jump from 58 percent four years earlier. In Florida, which has a large and predominantly conservative Cuban-American community, Hispanics split their vote almost equally between Clinton (42 percent) and Dole (46 percent). In 1992, Florida Hispanics voted almost two-to-one for George Bush.³⁵

Nowhere was the power of the Hispanic vote felt more keenly than in California. Not only did Hispanic voters help Democrats gain congressional seats and retake control of the California State Assembly. They were also instrumental in defeating Robert Dornan in Orange County, a widely publicized contest decided by just a couple of hundred votes. Dornan, one of the most vocal conservatives on Capitol Hill, lost to Loretta Sanchez, a liberal Democrat, who claimed victory in the name of a new movement in American politics.³⁶ These are results which may herald a steady growth of Hispanic political clout in the country. According to census predictions, the number of Hispanics in the U.S. is expected to rise dramatically from nine percent in 1990 to 21 percent in the year 2050.³⁷

The Congressional and State Elections

The 1994 midterm elections were an unmitigated disaster for the Democrats, leaving them with just 198 seats in the House and 47 in the Senate.³⁸ That was the worst result for the Party since 1946. By contrast, the Republicans scored their best congressional results since 1952 by getting 236 House seats and 53 U.S. senators.³⁹ Few analysts expected the Democrats to retake the Senate in 1996. Senate contests have become increasingly competitive and expensive in recent years, making it harder for opponents to oust incumbents. In addition, no less than 14 senators had decided not to run for re-election, eight Democrats and six Republicans.⁴⁰ In terms of pure electoral arithmetic, then, the cards were stacked against the Democrats in most Senate races.

In the spring of 1996, however, as public mood began to change, Democratic party activists became more hopeful that they could regain control of the House of Representatives. After all, they only needed a net pickup of 18 seats to elect

the House Minority Leader, Dick Gephardt of Missouri, as the next speaker. Historically, that has not been an impossible task. In 12 of the last 25 House elections, the winning party has gained at least 20 seats. In eight of those elections, the swing has been at least 30 seats, and in six of them, at least 40 seats (1994 being such a year).

Public opinion polls released in March, 1996, showed a swing against the Republicans. When voters were asked the generic question of which party they intended to support for Congress, the Democrats consistently had an advantage of around five percentage points. That represented a substantial shift from the 1994 congressional elections, when the Republicans outpolled their opponents by six points and gained 52 House seats.⁴¹

Early polls and predictions can be highly deceptive, though. In particular, generic and national polls have a tendency to blur the fact that U.S. congressional elections represent some 468 separate contests, 435 in the House and 33 in the Senate, all of which are influenced as much by local concerns as by national priorities. At least that has been the conventional wisdom up to recent times. Beginning in 1994 and continuing in 1996, however, both parties fought the congressional campaigns as a referendum on national policy. In 1994, the GOP managed to nationalize the elections by turning every race into a referendum on Bill Clinton. Democratic candidates who had been supportive of the president's agenda were characterized as Clinton clones and subjected to a barrage of negative television ads.⁴²

In 1996, Democrats took a leaf out of the GOP's strategy book by basing much of their campaign on public dissatisfaction with Speaker Gingrich. As was the case in the presidential campaign, Democratic candidates around the country portrayed the speaker and his allies as insensitive budget-cutters intent on making the rich richer and the poor poorer. Republican candidates responded by invoking the "L" word (for Liberal) against their opponents, depicting them in ads as either "ultraliberal" or "unbelievably liberal."⁴³

The Democrats' attack strategy worked in some races but not in others. In New Jersey, for

instance, Democrat William Pascrell defeated GOP freshman Bill Martini, in large part by linking him with the unpopular speaker. "People wanted change when they voted Republican in 1994," Pascrell argued, but "they didn't ask us to shut government down." And in Massachusetts, GOP candidate Peter Blute was under assault by Democrat Jim McGovern for having voted with Newt Gingrich 85 percent of the time. McGovern, who also emerged victorious, ran effective television ads asking voters the question, "You wouldn't vote for Newt; why would you ever vote for Blute?"⁴⁴

Yet in the end very little changed. Republicans kept control of both the House and the Senate, thus confirming that skeptical voters, while disinclined to vote for Bob Dole, wanted a check on the Democrat in the White House.⁴⁵ The House of Representatives ended up with a Republican edge in seats of 227-207 over Democrats, the smallest House majority since the 83rd Congress in 1953-54.⁴⁶ In the Senate, the GOP gained one seat, giving them a comfortable 10-seat advantage (55-45).⁴⁷

Overall, 1996 was an excellent year for incumbents. Only 12 of the 70 GOP freshmen elected in 1994 went down to defeat, despite a vigorous campaign from organized labor and the opposition.⁴⁸ Republicans managed to limit their House losses with a slew of advertising at the end of the campaign. The thrust of their message was a tacit admission that the presidential race was over, and a plea to the electorate to opt for divided government.⁴⁹ The ultimate goal was to persuade voters that returning to one-party government would be disastrous for the country. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and other prominent Republicans warned of the dangers that a Democratic-controlled Congress would bring and enumerated the many "liberal" and "far-left" lawmakers that would chair important committees. This argument proved to be quite effective in the final weeks of the campaign.⁵⁰

Republicans secured their majority by winning 10 House seats, 7 of them in the South, left open by retiring Democrats. Democratic gains came mainly in the East, whereas the parties broke even in the Midwest and in the West (for a breakdown of the House vote, see table 2). The

most spectacular Democratic victory – next to the one achieved by Loretta Sanchez in Orange County—occurred in New York, where Carolyn McCarthy defeated GOP freshman Daniel Frisa in a race dominated by the issue of gun control. Mrs. McCarthy, a registered Republican whose husband was killed in a 1993 railroad massacre, changed party affiliation and challenged Mr. Frisa after he had voted to repeal the ban on assault weapons.

There were even fewer changes in the Senate. Republican Larry Pressler of South Dakota was the only incumbent senator to lose his seat. He was beaten by Representative Tim Johnson, a Democrat. The results of the other races pointed in the direction of a more conservative Senate. Three moderate Democrats, David Pryor of Arkansas, Howell Heflin of Alabama, and J. James Exon of Nebraska, retired and were replaced by conservative Republicans – Tim Hutchinson, Jeff Sessions, and Chuck Nagel, respectively. These results further cemented the GOP's majority status in the South, a region where 15 of the 22 senators now are Republicans as well as 56 percent of the House members.⁵¹ Several moderate Republican retirees were also replaced by GOP candidates who ran as staunch conservatives.⁵²

Eleven states held gubernatorial elections. Seven incumbent governors were up for re-election, four Democrats and three Republicans, all of whom retained their seats. Democrats also captured three of the four open governorships. Three of these were won in the traditional GOP strongholds of Indiana, New Hampshire, and Washington State, where Gary Locke became the nation's first Chinese-American governor. In New Hampshire, Jeanne Shaheen, a longtime state legislator, became the state's first female governor.⁵³ However, the outcome did not produce any changes in the gubernatorial balance of power; the lineup remains 32 Republican governors, 17 Democrats, and one independent (Angus King of Maine).

During the first half of the 1990s, Republicans made great electoral gains in the state legislatures across the U.S. In 1994, for example, they doubled to 19 the number of states with both houses under their control. In 1996, however,

with 5,989 legislative seats at stake in 45 states, the GOP's momentum at the state level was halted, at least for the time being. The number of chambers controlled by the GOP fell from 50 to 44, whereas the Democratic Party increased the number of chambers under its control from 46 to 49. Apart from the California State Assembly, Democrats also won majorities in the Illinois and Michigan Houses of Representatives.

State and gubernatorial elections often receive scant attention from journalists and scholars in the field. Both groups tend to view presidential and congressional races as much more important. But the fact is that state legislatures in the U.S. today have a great and growing influence on people's daily lives, shaping the policies of crime, welfare, taxes, transportation, and education, to name but a few key areas. With the adoption of the controversial welfare bill in September, 1996, the role of state governments will expand even further as they have been given the responsibility of moving people off welfare and into work. How state officials succeed in implementing welfare reform, and particularly in dealing with difficult issues such as job training and medical coverage for the poor, will most certainly have a major impact on the entire national agenda.

Bipartisanship – for Now

Bill Clinton is the youngest person ever to be re-elected president of the United States.⁵⁴ He won re-election with a cleverly crafted platform that co-opted several Republican policy positions.⁵⁵ The healthy economy did wonders for Clinton's campaign, as did the weak candidacy of Bob Dole. All in all, it was Clinton's election to lose, and it is highly unlikely that any Republican candidate – whether we are talking about Colin Powell, Lamar Alexander, or any of the influential GOP governors in the Midwest – could have beaten him in 1996.

The most important aspect of Clinton's victory is that the "Republican revolution" of 1994 was halted and that the conservative majority in Congress was reduced. The outcome conforms with recent election trends in countries such as Italy, Great Britain, and France, where conservative

Table 2. How Social Groups Divided in the Vote for the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1994 and 1996 elections.

Pct. of total '94 '96		1994 Dem Rep.		1996 Dem Rep.		
Total vote for House		47	53	50	50	
49	48	Men	42	58	46	54
51	52	Women	53	47	55	45
86	83	White	42	58	45	55
9	10	Black	92	8	82	18
3	4	Hispanic	61	39	73	27
1	1	Asian	54	46	43	57
13	17	18-29 years old	49	51	55	45
32	33	30-44 years old	46	54	50	50
28	27	45-59 years old	47	53	50	50
27	23	60 and older	49	51	49	51
59	66	Married	42	58	46	54
41	34	Not married	55	45	60	40
6	6	Not a high school graduate	58	42	65	35
23	23	High school graduate	47	53	55	45
28	27	Some college	41	59	50	50
26	26	College graduate	45	55	43	57
17	18	Post graduate education	57	43	51	49
23	23	From the East	50	50	56	44
27	27	From the Midwest	45	55	51	49
27	30	From the South	47	53	45	55
23	20	From the West	47	53	51	49
42	47	White Protestant	34	66	38	62
6	6	Black Protestant	95	5	80	20
29	29	Catholic	47	53	54	46
4	3	Jewish	77	23	74	26
14	17	White religious right	37	63	27	73
Family income is						
10	11	Under \$ 15,000	62	38	63	37
20	22	\$15,000-\$ 29,999	51	49	56	44
28	27	\$30,000-\$ 49,999	45	55	50	50
21	21	\$ 50,000-\$ 74,999	45	55	47	53
8	9	\$ 75,000-\$ 100,000	40	60	43	57
7	9	Over \$100,000	36	64	37	63
14	23	Union household	60	40	63	37

Pct. of total '94 '96		1994 Dem Rep.		1996 Dem Rep.		
Family financial situation is						
24	33	Better	60	40	65	35
49	45	Same	46	54	47	53
22	20	Worse	36	64	33	67
36	36	Republicans	8	92	10	90
26	24	Independents	43	57	49	51
36	40	Democrats	89	11	86	14
17	20	Liberals	81	19	82	18
43	47	Moderates	57	43	57	43
36	34	Conservatives	19	81	21	79
43	50	Voted for Clinton	84	16	85	15
39	42	Voted for Bush or Dole	11	89	9	91
The national economy is						
2	4	Excellent	82	18	80	20
40	53	Good	61	39	59	41
47	35	Not so good	39	61	39	61
11	7	Poor	28	72	32	68
Size of hometown						
7	10	Population over 500,000	72	28	69	31
16	21	Population 50,000 to 500,000	58	42	49	51
47	39	Suburbs	43	57	48	52
7	9	Population 10,000 to 50,000	44	56	48	52
23	21	Rural areas	43	57	48	52
23	19	Suburban men	37	62	44	56
24	20	Suburban women	47	53	53	47

Data were collected by Voter News Service based on questionnaires completed by 14,887 voters leaving polling places throughout the country on Election Day. 1994 data were based on questionnaires completed by 10,245 voters. Family financial situation is compared to two years ago in 1994.

Source; *The New York Times*, November 7, 1996, p. B3.

governments have been soundly defeated by center or left-of-center parties.

If history is any guide, two things are likely to happen during Clinton's second term: i) his party

will lose seats in the 1998 midterm elections; and ii) the president, facing a hostile Republican Congress, will have to pay much more attention to foreign policy in order for him to get things

done and secure a place in history. The expansion of NATO and U.S. involvement in international peace-keeping missions are likely to be contentious issues in the next few years. That would be all the more ironic since foreign policy played virtually no role in the 1996 campaign.

Clinton's domestic agenda can be expected to continue to build on the "small government" approach that he first enunciated in his 1996 State of the Union Speech. Thus, there will be no big domestic initiatives similar to the 1993 health care proposal, but rather small-scale, incremental reforms geared toward the Republican policy agenda. A spirit of bipartisanship, symbolized by the balanced budget agreement reached in the summer of 1997, will rule the day.⁵⁶ That is, until the next presidential campaign starts.

Erik Åsard

Notes

1. For example, 46.1 million viewers watched the first presidential debate in 1996 between Clinton and his opponent Bob Dole. This was a viewer falloff of 26 percent compared with 1992, when 62.4 million viewers tuned in to the first Bush-Clinton-Perot debate. Jill Lawrence, "More tuned out than turned off," *USA Today*, October 14, 1996, p. 2A.

2. Cf. Kevin Phillips, *Boiling Point: Democrats, Republicans, and the Decline of Middle-Class Prosperity* (New York: Random House, 1993).

3. Robin Toner, "Coming Home From the Revolution," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1996, p. E1.

4. Unless otherwise stated, the following sections are built mainly on the election issues of *Newsweek* and *Time* dated November 18, 1996.

5. David Maraniss, "The Comeback Kid's Last Return," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, September 2-8, 1996, p. 8.

6. It was also a strategy that distanced Clinton from his own party, and hence left him open to charges, particularly after the election, that he was only interested in pursuing his own agenda while neglecting to campaign for other Democratic candidates.

7. Another important event in the resurrection of Bill Clinton was the April 19, 1995, bombing of the Fed-

deral building in Oklahoma City. The tragedy caused a mourning nation to focus on the president, who rose to the occasion and got wide praise for the way he handled the aftermath of the crisis. Alison Mitchell, "Stung by Defeats in '94, Clinton Regrouped and Co-opted G.O.P. Strategies," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1996, pp. B1, 5.

8. Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office* (New York: Random House, 1997); David Winston, "Dick Morris: Political Genius Or Jerk? Part II," *PoliticsNow* Web Site, February 6, 1997, p. 1 (quote). During the Democratic convention in Chicago in late August, 1996, Morris had to resign from his position as presidential counselor after news stories appeared about him being involved with a prostitute.

9. Curiously, the Republicans never responded to the ads, something which they must have regretted after the election.

10. For an excellent inside report on the big budget battle, see the two articles by Michael Weisskopf and David Maraniss, "Endgame: The Revolution Stalls," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, January 29-February 4, 1996, pp. 6-10; and "Behind the Stage: Common Problems," *ibid.*, February 5-11, 1996, pp. 9-13.

11. CNN Inside Politics, June 4, 1996.

12. Clinton, on the other hand, ran unopposed in the Democratic primaries and never had to face a challenger within his own party.

13. In 1988, Jack Kemp ran unsuccessfully for president as a Republican candidate.

14. Cf. Blaine Harden, "Bob Dole's Garbled Message," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, November 11-17, 1996, pp. 8-9.

15. "Bad News for Dole: Polls Find Voters Satisfied," *International Herald Tribune*, September 7-8, 1996; Alan Ware, "The 1896 and 1996 US Elections: A Re-emerging 'Problem' of the South and West?," *Government and Opposition*, No. 1, Winter 1997, p. 46.

16. The reason for Dole's emphasis on the "character" issue was simple enough: polls indicated that this was Clinton's weakest spot. In one poll, published in early September, 1996, 56 percent of Americans said that Clinton did not have high personal moral or ethical standards, and rated Dole much better on that score. "Bad News for Dole," *International Herald Tribune*, September 7-8, 1996.

17. Edward Walsh, "Dole Assails Clinton for 'Ethical Failures'," *The Washington Post* on the Web, October 16, 1996; Richard L. Berke, "Dole Damages

Image With Attacks on President, Poll Finds," *The New York Times* on the Web, October 22, 1996.

18. *Newsweek*, November 18, 1996, pp. 126-27 (quote); Mitchell, "Stung by Defeats in '94, Clinton Regrouped and Co-opted G.O.P. Strategies," p. B5. Cf. Peter Baker, "Clinton Turns to Niche Economics: There's Something for Nearly Everybody in President's Array," *International Herald Tribune*, September 27, 1996, p. 3.

19. Under federal law, individuals can donate up to \$1,000 to a federal candidate, and up to \$20,000 a year to a party committee. Corporations and trade unions are prohibited from giving money to federal candidates directly, but they are allowed to give unlimited so-called "soft money" contributions to political parties for advertising and party-building efforts.

20. Charles R. Babcock, "Top 1995-96 'Soft Money' Contributors to the National Party Committees," *The Washington Post* on the Web, February 17, 1997; Leslie Wayne, "Gingrich Tops Spending In Campaigns For the House," *The New York Times* on the Web, January 3, 1997.

21. Cf. "Money Votes," *The Nation*, November 11, 1996, p. 5.

22. R.H. Melton and Ruth Marcus, "DNC Donor Controversy Widens," *The Washington Post* on the Web, October 18, 1996.

23. Cf. James Bennet, "The Ad Campaign: Liberal Use of 'Extremist' Is the Winning Strategy," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1996, pp. B1, 7.

24. The previous candidates who have won with less than 50 percent of the vote (excluding Clinton in 1996) are Woodrow Wilson (41.9% in 1912 and 49.4% in 1916), Harry Truman (49.5 % in 1948), John F. Kennedy (49.9% in 1960), Richard Nixon (43.4% in 1968), and Bill Clinton (43% in 1992). Marcus Cunliffe, *The Presidency* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 3rd ed., 1987), pp. 390-92; Gerald M. Pomper, *The Election of 1992: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham, New Jersey: Chatham House, 1993), pp. 136-37.

25. Michael R. Kagay, "Experts See a Need for Refining Election Polls," *The New York Times* on the Web, December 15, 1996.

26. R. W. Apple Jr., "Peace and a Strong Economy Did It: Political Skills Helped," *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1996, pp. 1, 3; Thomas B. Edsall and Richard Morin, "A Historic Gender Gap Propels the Victory," *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1996, p. 2. In terms of popular votes

Clinton got well over 45 million votes, Dole close to 38 million, and Ross Perot almost 8 million.

27. When Perot aired his first so-called "infomercial" on television in 1992, about 11 million people had tuned in. When he repeated the performance in September 1996, only about a third as many watched. *Time*, November 18, 1996, p. 105.

28. Connie Cass, "Mixed Results For Motor Voter Law," CNN-Time AllPolitics Web Site, June 21, 1997; Peter Baker, "An All-Time High for Ballot Box No-Shows," *The Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, November 11-17, 1996, pp. 11-12.

29. David McKay, "Campaigning as Governing: The 1996 US Presidential Elections," *Government and Opposition*, No. 1, Winter 1997, pp. 27-28. Cf. Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), pp. 39-69.

30. Howard Kurtz, "As Vote Nears, Americans Tuning Out Campaign '96," *The Washington Post* on the Web, October 10, 1996.

31. Data for 1996 were collected by Voter News Service based on questionnaires completed by 16,627 voters leaving 300 polling places around the U.S. on Election Day. Those who gave no answer are not shown. For more detailed information about the 1976-1996 surveys, see "Portrait of the Electorate," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1996, p. 16.

32. R. W. Apple Jr., "Peace and a Strong Economy Did It"; David S. Broder, "But Voters Hedge Bets," *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1996, pp. 1, 3.

33. Miller and Shanks, *The New American Voter*, pp. 143-44.

34. Edsall and Morin, "A Historic Gender Gap Propels the Victory." The importance of the female vote was visible in the popular phrase "soccer moms," which was coined during the campaign by the mainstream media. The "soccer mom" became a metaphor for busy mothers who spent much time on their kids, but who could also determine the outcome of the presidential election. Cf. Neil MacFarquhar, "What's a Soccer Mom Anyway?," *The New York Times* on the Web, October 20, 1996.

35. Among the reasons for the sharp increase in Hispanic voting were fears about tight new immigration strictures and cuts in federal welfare benefits for legal immigrants. B. Drummond Ayres Jr., "The Expanding Hispanic Vote Shakes Republican Strongholds," *The New York Times*, November 10, 1996, pp. 1, 18.

36. Bill Schneider, "Latino Voter Turnout More Than Doubles," CNN-Time AllPolitics Web Site, November 21, 1996; "2 weeks After Election, Dornan Loses Seat," *The New York Times* on the Web, November 23, 1996.
37. Predictions are that the total number of Asians, Hispanics, and Blacks in the U.S. will increase from 24 percent in 1990 to 48 percent in 2050. Dag Blanck, "Multiculturalism: Slaget om den amerikanska historien," *Multietnica*, No. 12, 1993, p. 4.
38. Colorado Democrat Ben Nighthorse Campbell later switched to the Republicans, giving the GOP a comfortable eight-seat majority in the Senate.
39. Erik Åsard and Barbara L. Nicholson, "The 1994 U.S. Midterm Elections: Significant Shift or Temporary Turmoil?," *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift*, No. 3, 1995, pp. 324 ff.
40. This was the highest number of open Senate seats since the beginning of the century, when states began electing senators by popular vote and not via state legislatures.
41. David S. Broder, "For Some Political Fun, Watch the House Races," *International Herald Tribune*, April 24, 1996, p. 9.
42. Åsard and Nicholson, "The 1994 U.S. Midterm Elections," pp. 322 f.
43. This is exactly what George Bush did in his 1988 encounter with Michael Dukakis. Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Meaning of the Election," in Gerald M. Pomper et al., *The Election of 1988: Reports and Interpretations* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1989), pp. 189 f. See also Bennet, "The Ad Campaign," pp. B1, 7.
44. *Time*, November 18, 1996, p. 54.
45. Results from the congressional and state elections have been assembled from the November 6-10, 1996 issues of *The New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune*.
46. One independent member, Bernard Sanders of Vermont who usually sides with the Democrats, was also re-elected.
47. According to exit polls, three of five voters said they had an unfavorable view of Speaker Gingrich, but over half of those responding said they were more pleased with the actions of the GOP-controlled Congress. "House Republicans Pledge Cooperation," *International Herald Tribune*, November 7, 1996, p. 4.
48. The AFL-CIO was reported to have spent some \$35 million against GOP candidates in the campaign. Robin Toner, "G.O.P. Leaders Proclaim Victory Over Labor," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1996, p. B3.
49. Elizabeth Drew, in her new book *Whatever It Takes: The Real Struggle for Political Power in America* (New York: Viking Press, 1997), argues that the GOP decision to write off the presidency and concentrate on keeping control of the House was made in early 1995, before a Republican candidate had even emerged. CNN-Time AllPolitics Web Site, June 20, 1997.
50. Fifty percent of all voters said in a poll they feared that a Democratic Congress would be "too liberal." A somewhat smaller share, or 42 percent, said they feared a GOP-controlled Congress would be "too conservative." Adam Clymer, "In Early Results, Voters Give Meager Hints on the Outcome of the Battle for the House," *The New York Times*, November 6, 1996, p. B3.
51. The influence of southern Republicans is even greater among congressional leaders. Both the speaker and the majority leader in the House are southerners, and so is the current Senate majority leader. Ware, "The 1896 and 1996 US Elections," p. 41.
52. The latter included Pat Roberts and Sam Brownback of Kansas, Mike Enzi of Wyoming and Wayne Allard of Colorado.
53. Only one other woman is currently serving as a state's chief executive, Christine Todd Whitman of New Jersey, who was elected governor in 1993.
54. David M. Shribman, "Clinton: Still a Work in Progress," *International Herald Tribune*, January 20, 1997, p. 8.
55. Left-of-center critics within Clinton's own party still refer to this platform as reflecting the "[Dick] Morris strategy of Republicanism Lite." Todd Gitlin, "Blowing Out the Election Candles," *Dissent*, Winter 1997, p. 7.
56. Cf. David S. Broder, "Clinton's Second Term: A Scaled-Down Blueprint," *The Washington Post* on the Web, June 9, 1997.