

WHO JOINED THE DEMOCRATS? Understanding the 1996 Election Results

by Ruy Teixeira

In 1992, Bill Clinton was elected president with only 43% of the vote. In 1994, the Democratic congressional coalition collapsed and the Democrats were swept out of power in the House and Senate. At that point, many said President Clinton would never be re-elected in 1996. Yet, not only was he re-elected on Nov. 5, he also bettered his showing over 1992, attracting 49% of the popular vote.

How did this remarkable swing take place? And what does it mean for the political future? Is a New Democrat political coalition now at the center of American politics, poised to dominate our political future as the New Deal coalition once did in the past?

This analysis of exit poll and other data suggests such a conclusion is premature. For example, while it is true that Clinton has occupied the center of American politics on some key issues, it is not clear that those key issues have much to do with being a New Democrat. According to the exit polls:

- the key issues motivating Clinton voters were the economy/jobs, Medicare and Social Security, and education. He did poorly among voters concerned about the deficit and crime/drugs, two signature New Democrat issues.

Nor does it appear that Clinton's victory can be attributed to successful targeting of relatively well-off suburbanites, for whom New Democrat, values-driven themes are supposed to have special appeal. The exit polls reveal that:

- Clinton's increased support came overwhelmingly from non-college-educated voters, particularly those with just a high school diploma (up 9 points) and those with some college (up 7 points). Indeed, increased support from these non-college-educated voters can account for about three-quarters of Clinton's overall increase in support. College-

educated voters, on the other hand, increased their support of Clinton by just 3 points;

- particularly important to Clinton's success were spectacular rises in support among high school graduate women (up 13 points) and women with some college (up 11 points). Indeed the rise in Clinton's support among these two groups is what drove the widening gender gap and can, in and of itself, account for three-fifths of the rise in Clinton's support in 1996.

The class nature of increased Democratic support in 1996 was even more pronounced in the congressional vote, where the Democrats gained 3 percentage points. According to the exit polls:

- the increase in the Democratic congressional vote was confined exclusively to the non-college-educated, especially high school graduates (up 9 points) and those with some college (up 10 points), while support actually *declined* among those with a college education (down 4 points);
- in contrast to the presidential vote, the gender gap actually *narrowed* in the House vote, with the Democrats making strong gains among non-college-educated men, especially those with some college.

While Clinton voters generally felt better off than they were four years ago, examination of underlying economic data shows that these economic gains came from working more hours (which raises family income), rather than increased wages:

- women with some college—whose support for Clinton increased by 11 points over 1992—have seen their wages continue to deteriorate throughout the expansion, so that their wages at the end of 1995 were 5% lower than they were in 1989;
- in general, the non-college-educated who shifted into Clinton's column are extraordinarily vulnerable to an increase in the unemployment rate, since only increased work hours are propping up their family incomes. And they still have not made up the ground lost since the 1990 recession: the median income of non-college-educated households remains 5% below its 1989 level.

Detail on these findings is provided throughout the rest of this paper.

New Democrats as Old Democrats

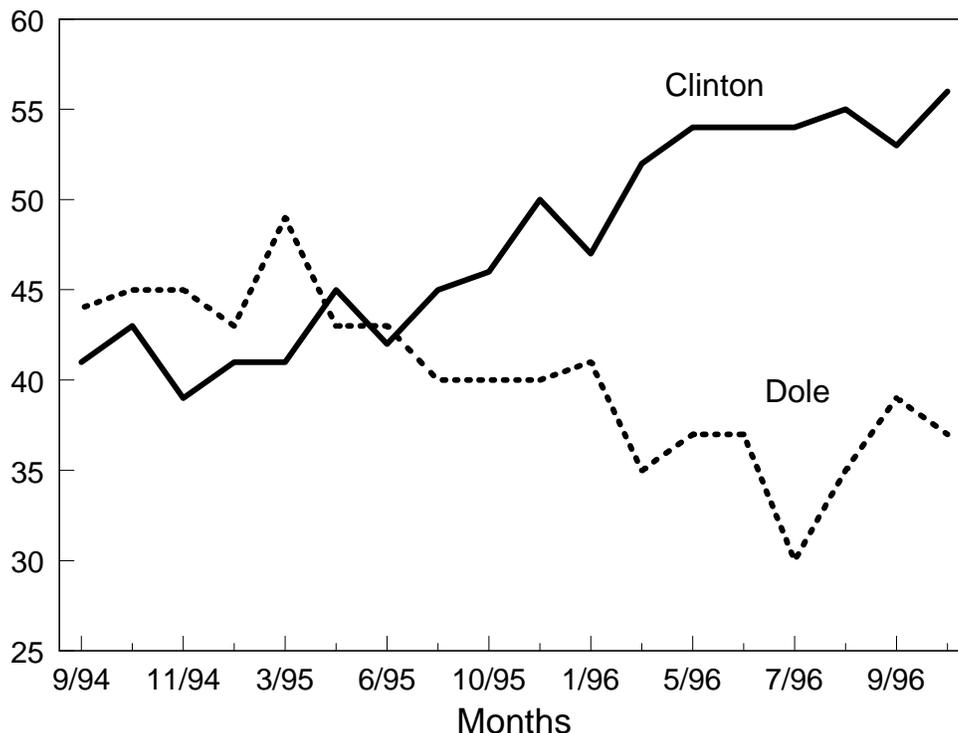
Many observers credit Clinton's victory this year to his move to the "center" as a New Democrat. But does the public actually consider Clinton to be a New Democrat? The polling data show that, during the period in which Clinton built his decisive lead over Bob Dole in the polls, the percentage of the public that thought Clinton was a "new kind of Democrat" actually decreased, reaching the lowest levels of his presidency. Other polling data reinforce this point: in October 1994, immediately before the Democrats' loss of the House and Senate, 44% of the public said Clinton's approach to issues was liberal, 42% said it was moderate, and 9% said it was conservative. In October 1996, right before his successful re-election bid, the public's assessment was not just similar but *identical*: 44% liberal, 42% moderate, and 9% conservative. Finally, another poll from late October of this year showed 51% of the public characterizing Clinton as a "tax and

spend Democrat,” compared to 39% who rejected this characterization.¹

The key to resolving this paradox is recognizing that Clinton’s political resurgence was based most fundamentally on defense of “Old Democrat” programs—Medicare, Medicaid, education, and the environment—as well as (somewhat closer to the election) the public perception of an improving economy. New Democrat issues may have helped inoculate Clinton against Republican counterattacks, but they were not the drivers of his resurgence. According to the exit polls, voters identified the economy/jobs (21%), Medicare and Social Security (15%), and education (12%) as the key issues that moved voters into the Clinton column (three-fifths to three-quarters of voters who said these issues were their most important concerns voted for Clinton). In contrast, among voters motivated by New Democrat-style issues, just 40% of those who identified crime/drugs as the most important issue (7% of the electorate) and only 27% of those identifying the budget deficit (12% of the electorate) voted for Clinton.

But perhaps the most convincing evidence for the central (and early) role of the health care, education, and environment issues is found in the timing of Clinton’s popularity surge in 1995. Clinton embraced the balanced budget goal in June 1995, a time in which he was said to be following Dick Morris’ “triangulation” policy, designed to distance him from the congressional Democrats and showcase his status as a New Democrat. But as the figure below shows, Clinton did not pull away from Dole in trial heats until much later in the year, when he joined with congressional Democrats in defense of Medicare and other popular programs and when the

Support for Clinton and Dole, Percent of Registered Voters



Source: NBC/Wall Street Journal.

Republicans made their disastrous decision to shut down the government. By December 1995, Clinton was 10 points ahead and never looked back.

Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from the polling data is that, while a New Democrat stance may have helped Clinton add to his lead at the margin, it did not create the basic advantage that Clinton rode to his re-election. Instead, through his stalwart defense of “Old Democrat” programs, he was able to tap public commitment to the basics of the welfare state and connect to public sentiment that the Republicans were extreme and only likely to make things worse. Combined with rapidly improving public perceptions of the economy in the months immediately prior to the election, this political stance gave him an insuperable advantage in the election campaign.

Who joined the Clinton Coalition?

Widely cited as a source of Clinton’s growing support has been the widening of the gender gap in his favor. Compared to 1992, Clinton increased his support by 9 percentage points among women and just 3 points among men.

Yet less widely cited, if noted at all, was the class-divided nature of his increase in support. Analysis of exit poll data reveal (see **Table 1**) that Clinton’s increased support came overwhelmingly from non-college-educated voters, particularly those with just a high school diploma (up 9 points) and those with some college (up 7 points). Indeed, increased support from these non-college-educated voters can account for about three-quarters of Clinton’s overall increase in support. College-educated voters, on the other hand, increased their support of Clinton by just 3 points.

Breaking this down further by gender, the table shows that Clinton’s support among men increased in every education category, but more among each non-college-educated category than among the college-educated. A similar pattern obtains among women, with particularly spectacular rises among high school graduates (up 13 points) and those with some college (up 11 points). Indeed, the rise in Clinton’s support among these two groups is what drove the widening gender gap and can, in and of itself, account for three-fifths of the rise in Clinton’s support in 1996.

Are these women the by-now-legendary “soccer moms”? Perhaps some of them are, but, given their socioeconomic status, many of them, even assuming they are married and have children who play soccer, are unlikely to fit the prototype of the Volvo-driving suburban mother whose greatest worry is having enough time to drive her kids to their practices. Instead, they seem more likely to be driving Chevy Cavaliers, struggling to get by economically and worrying that family financial meltdown is right around the corner.

The wage data in the table further illustrate this point. They show that, through the end of 1995, the current economic expansion had failed to lift wages for the non-college-educated. For example, women with some college—whose support for Clinton increased by 11 points over 1992—have seen their wages continue to deteriorate throughout the expansion, so that their wages at the end of 1995 were 5% lower than they were in 1989. Nor does it seem likely they’ve done much better in 1996: the production/nonsupervisory wage series shows only a flattening of wages this year, while the median weekly wage series shows continued overall wage decline for both women and men.

Table 1
Increase in Democratic Presidential Support, 1992-96

	Percent Vote Democratic			Percent Change in Real Hourly Wage, 1989-95
	1992	1996	Change 1992-96	
All				
High school dropout	54	59	+5	-8
High school graduate	43	52	+9	-3
Some college	41	48	+7	-7
College graduate	44	47	+3	+2
Men				
High school dropout	48	56	+8	-12
High school graduate	43	46	+3	-5
Some college	40	42	+2	-8
College graduate	40	41	+1	+1
Women				
High school dropout	57	63	+6	0
High school graduate	43	56	+13	-1
Some college	42	53	+11	-5
College graduate	48	53	+5	+6

Sources: 1992 VRS exit poll; 1996 VNS exit poll; 1989 and 1995 CPS earnings (ORG) files.

If these women were doing poorly with regard to wages, why did they increase their support for Bill Clinton? Indeed, in general, the table shows that those doing poorly increased their support of Clinton the most, while those doing relatively well increased their support the least.

Part of the answer lies in the salience of Old Democrat programs for those who are struggling economically. They literally cannot afford to get by without “big government,” much as they may detest it in the abstract. Thus, Clinton’s defense of these programs was probably particularly important for them.

Another part of the answer lies in the economic survival strategies of the non-college-educated. In an era of declining wages, increasing work hours and having more household members work are the chief mechanisms for maintaining and possibly raising family living standards. It is these mechanisms that the job-creation and reduced unemployment rates of the 1992-96 period have facilitated.

The success of these mechanisms is demonstrated by the rising family incomes of the 1994-95 period. And the reality of these mechanisms is demonstrated by a key statistic from the same survey that showed rising incomes in 1995: as household incomes were rising 3% in 1995,

median earnings of full-time, full-year workers were declining 1% for men and 2% for women. So, it is the relative ease of putting in more hours—for example, being a full-time rather than part-time worker—that has been driving the rising incomes of families, rather than increased wages of the jobs they have.

Due to these factors, many non-college-educated families could reasonably view themselves as better off than in the recent past, even as the wage of the typical worker continued to decline. For this, Bill Clinton has received substantial political rewards, and he is just as likely to receive substantial political punishment when the next recession hits and the unemployment rate increases. The relative ease of getting a job and putting in more hours is the only thing keeping many of these families afloat now. If that is taken away, they will be looking for someone to blame—*especially since the median income of non-college-educated households is still 5% below its 1989 level*. George Bush could remind Bill Clinton how quickly that blame can shift.

Who rejoined the Democrats?

The Democrats did not not take back the House in 1996, but they did gain at least 8 seats and increase their share of the popular vote for the House by 3 percentage points. Who were these voters who rejoined the Democrats?

Table 2
Increase in Democratic Congressional Support,* 1994-96

	Percent Vote Democratic			Percent Change in Real Hourly Wage, 1989-95
	1994	1996	Change 1994-96	
All				
High school dropout	58	65	+7	-8
High school graduate	47	56	+9	-3
Some college	41	51	+10	-7
College graduate	50	46	-4	+2
Men				
High school dropout	59	60	+1	-12
High school graduate	44	52	+8	-5
Some college	34	46	+12	-8
College graduate	42	41	-1	+1
Women				
High school dropout	55	72	+17	0
High school graduate	49	58	+9	-1
Some college	47	54	+7	-5
College graduate	58	53	-5	+6

* Based on two-party vote.

Sources: 1994 VNS exit poll; 1996 VNS exit poll; 1989 and 1995 CPS earnings (ORG) files.

Exit poll data reveal that, contrary to the trend in the presidential vote, the gender gap actually *narrowed* modestly in the House vote. Men increased their support of congressional Democrats by 4 points, while women's Democratic vote went up only 2 points.

Exit poll data also reveal that the increase in the Democratic House vote was even more class-skewed than the increase in Clinton's support. In 1994, the shift away from the Democrats was concentrated exclusively among the non-college-educated.² The change in 1996 was almost a mirror image: the *increase* in Democratic support was confined to the non-college-educated, especially high school graduates (up 9 points) and those with some college (up 10 points), while support actually *declined* among those with a college education (down 4 points) (see **Table 2**).

Breaking down these data by gender, the table shows that, just as with the presidential vote, the increase in Democratic support was greatest among those doing poorly economically and least (in fact, actually decreased) among those doing relatively well. But in contrast to the presidential data, House Democrats made strong gains among non-college-educated men (especially those with some college), not just non-college-educated women.

In general, these data suggest that the congressional Democratic vote is moving in a more class-stratified and less gender-stratified direction than the presidential vote. It will be interesting to see whether congressional Democrats build on those differences to expand their share of the vote, or whether they try instead to mimic Clinton's resolutely non-class approach to governing.

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Endnotes

1. New kind of Democrat: CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup polls, July 7-9, 1995 and May 9-12, 1996; Clinton's approach to issues: NBC/*Wall Street Journal* polls, October 1994 and October 1996; tax and spend Democrat: *Los Angeles Times* poll, October 24-27, 1996.

2. See Ruy Teixeira and Joel Rogers, *Volatile Voters: Declining Living Standards and Non-College-Educated Whites*, Washington, D.C.: Economic Policy Institute, 1996.