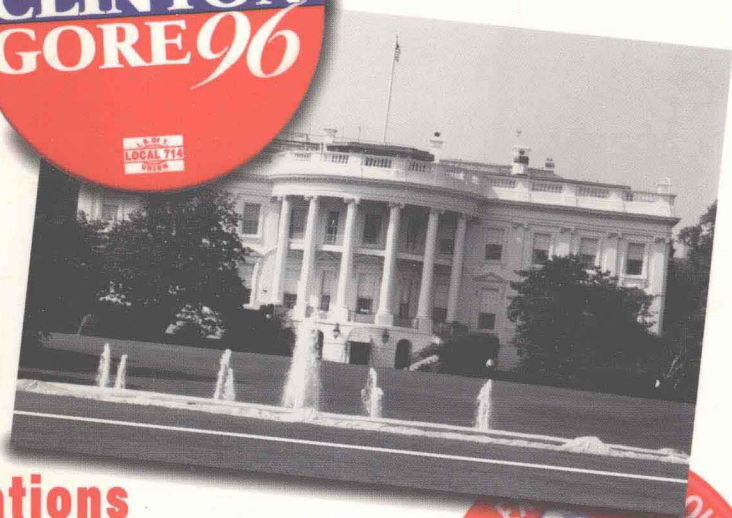
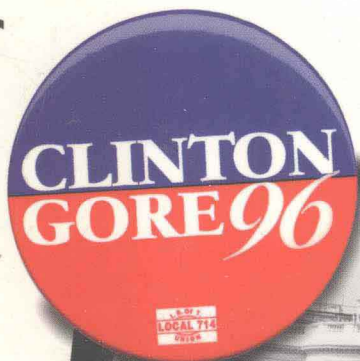


# The Election of 1996



## Reports and Interpretations

Gerald M. Pomper

Walter Dean Burnham

Anthony Corrado

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Chatham House Publishers, Inc.  
Chatham, New Jersey

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Chatham House Publishers, Inc. / Post Office Box One / Chatham,  
New Jersey 07928

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Publisher: Edward Artinian

Production editor: Katharine Miller

Jacket and cover design: Lawrence Ratzkin

Composition: Bang, Motley, Olufsen

Printing and binding: R.R. Donnelley and Sons Company

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

The election of 1996 : reports and interpretations / Gerald M. Pomper  
... [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56643-056-9. — ISBN 1-56643-055-0 (pbk.)

1. Presidents—United States—Election—1996. 2. United States.

Congress—Elections, 1996. 3. Elections—United States.

I. Pomper, Gerald M.

JK526 1996b

324.973'0929—dc21

97-4618  
CIP

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# Preface and Acknowledgments

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*The Election of 1996* is the sixth volume in a series on U.S. elections since 1976. In this lengthening perspective, the latest national contest seemingly combined experiences of the past two decades. As in 1976, a southern Democrat was elected president amid concerns over campaign financing. As in 1980, Republicans scored well in congressional races. As in 1984, the incumbent president was returned to office in a time of prosperity and good feeling. As in 1988, the quality of the nation's decisions was diminished by advertising and reporting in the mass media. And, as in 1992, William Jefferson Clinton won the White House.

Yet, change is also evident. The 1996 election evokes speculation about the future of American politics as well as reminiscence about its past. The nomination process now strongly advantages candidates of wide reputation and deep pockets, dispatching dark horses to history books. The gender gap, differences in preferences between women and men, now emulates established divisions of class, race, and region. Candidates and parties have found new ways to spend vastly larger funds. Novel political coalitions have appeared, even as a Democratic president has won reelection for the first time in half a century, and Republicans have held control of Congress for the first time in over six decades. The nation seeks a new public philosophy as it realizes the frailties of both governmental liberalism and free-market conservatism.

America is always a history in the making, its politics an enduring parable. At this writing, we find it difficult to define the deeper significance of the election of 1996. In our analyses, we can more easily understand what

did *not* happen: the government did not shut down permanently, President Clinton and most incumbent legislators were not defeated, the course of public policy was not shifted in revolutionary directions. But, despite our presumed expertise, we frankly have only a dim view of what *will* happen in the coming years. Perhaps that is the most appropriate stance as we approach the end of the decade, century, and millennium.

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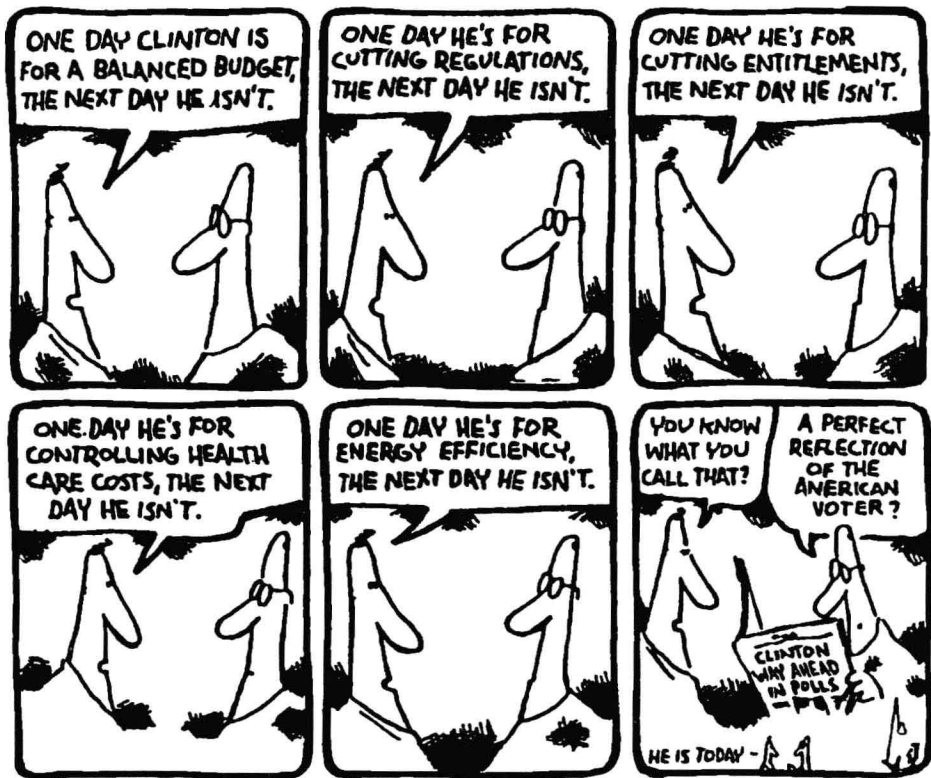
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Inevitably, we have relied on many friends and colleagues to help our work. The individual authors acknowledge particular persons in their chapters. For all of us, Kathleen Frankovic, Director of Surveys, has been especially helpful in providing access and analyses of the excellent CBS News poll. Ross K. Baker, a former contributor to this series, continues to provide sound judgment and good humor. Chatham House, now a major publisher, still provides the warmth and individual attention of devoted booklovers; we appreciate the care of Edward Artinian, Irene Glynn, and Katharine Miller. I am personally thankful to Larry and Sherry Delsen for their hospitality at the Republican convention; to Ken Dautrich, Kim Downing, John Hart, Stanley Kelley, Andrea Lubin, Sandy Maisel, and Maureen Moakley

for professional advice; and to Joanne Pfeiffer for secretarial assistance. I am even more grateful to my family, especially for the wonder of two future voters, Aidan and Jacob Pomper.

As we travel toward the future, we are particularly thankful to those who share the journey, our spouses and lovers. We dedicate this book to them, specifically Tish Burnham, Howard V. Hershey, Rosemary Jann, Hal Just, Susan Kenney, Amy Logan, Nancy Riley McWilliams, and Marlene Pomper.

— Gerald M. Pomper



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# INTRODUCTION

## Bill Clinton: Riding the Tiger

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WALTER DEAN BURNHAM

All other doubts, by time let them be clear'd,  
Fortune brings in some boats that are not stear'd.  
— *Cymbeline* (IV, iii)

### *The Triumph of Luck, Skill, and Adaptability*

When considering candidates among his generals for promotion to the supreme rank of marshal, Napoleon was thoroughly briefed about their abilities in the field. But then he asked the decisive question: “Yes, yes, but is he lucky?” And he would appoint no one, however distinguished his credentials, if he was not. In social science we tend to transmute the term into the concept of contingency, perhaps in the hope of taming its always lively potential for disorder. Contingency is a more systemic term, luck a more personal one: a “wild card,” perhaps, in any analytic scheme. This chapter seeks to put in a good word for luck as at least a descriptive reality, and to view Bill Clinton accordingly.

This introduction should by no means be thought to deprecate or underestimate Clinton’s skills, determination, and on-the-job achievements as president. But something we sometimes also call “destiny” does take a hand in politics—not least in the shaping of opportunities for and constraints on

presidential ambitions to make a mark on American politics. Thus, Bill Clinton's first election required the opening of a huge power deflation affecting the Republican incumbent, George Bush; candidates of Bush's party had largely dominated presidential elections for the preceding generation. Beyond such elemental strikes of fortune comes the question of what happens after a given individual takes the oath of office. Quite apart from his own gifts and professional ambitions, the moment in political time when he takes the oath is crucial in defining the opportunity available to an incoming president for action and for achieving "greatness" in office. Both Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy were keenly aware of the limitations imposed upon them by the times in which they lived. Each of them, TR in particular, chafed at not having a context in which he could be as big as he might be under better circumstances. This is hardly surprising. Presidents may be routinely order disrupters, as Stephen Skowronek has claimed.<sup>1</sup> But the presidency as an office thrives on crisis. No "great times," no great presidents: such has been the rule.

Let us turn first to a very brief review of Bill Clinton's ascent to power. The biographical data about William Jefferson (Blythe) Clinton are too well known to acquire elaborate discussion here. Born in Hope, Arkansas, in August 1946, Clinton seems to have had a passion for politics from his earliest days. This passion was linked to high intelligence and abounding energy. Graduating from Yale Law School, where he met his future wife, Hillary Rodham, he was elected at age thirty-two to the governorship of his home state in 1978. Defeated for reelection two years later, he came back in 1982 and remained in the governorship until his election to the presidency a decade later. As he had been one of the youngest incoming governors in Arkansas history, on inauguration day Bill Clinton became the third youngest of incoming American presidents, after Theodore Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy. Since Arkansas pays its governors only \$35,000 a year, Hillary Rodham Clinton was the chief breadwinner of the family as a practicing attorney during this period, from which the murky Whitewater affair stems.

In his prepresidential public life, Bill Clinton proved so effective a chief executive that he won acclaim from his fellows as the "best governor" of the lot. He was also a leader of the moderate-to-conservative Democratic Party group, the Democratic Leadership Council. In view of subsequent developments, it is worthy of note early in our discussion that in 1992 Clinton ran explicitly as a "new Democrat," in no way identified with the liberal core of the national party or its unsuccessful presidential nominees. You can take the man out of Arkansas, but you cannot take Arkansas out of the man, and Arkansas is a southern state.

There was a critical realignment in the late 1960s, out of which grew a sixth electoral system that lasted until 1994.<sup>2</sup> Institutionally, this system was particularly marked by divided government as a normal state of affairs. The presidency then was normally Republican, the House of Representatives always Democratic, and the Senate more often Democratic than Republican. In the formulation provided by Byron E. Shafer in 1991—just as this system was about to come to an abrupt end—the presidency was normally Republican because it was the focus of public concern about foreign policy and social values, a concern that was conservative.<sup>3</sup> The House remained Democratic even in the face of Republican presidential landslides in 1972 and 1984 because it was centered on social welfare and service provision. Here the position of the “median voter” was liberal. The Senate, amenable to both sets of concerns, oscillated in its partisan control during this period.

Given this conjuncture, any Democratic presidential candidate has obviously had a great deal to overcome. Victories, when they occurred, were not overwhelming. Jimmy Carter in 1976 received 50.1 percent of the total vote. And Bill Clinton, in his two three-man races of 1992 and 1996, garnered only 43 percent on the first occasion and 49.2 percent on the second. Carter and Clinton were both southern governors relatively removed from the “liberal” taint. But another condition also had to be satisfied: for different reasons in each case, the incumbent Republican opponents had to be highly vulnerable.

In 1992 the dominant issue was “the economy, stupid.” The first half of this decade was marked by an outpouring of public rage and anxiety directed against established politicians. In 1992 (and again in 1994) the public was in a china-smashing mood. George Bush’s primary background and interests lay in the realms of foreign and defense policy. At a time when the abrupt implosion of the USSR had suddenly revolutionized geopolitics and eliminated a Manichean threat to the American way of life, these assets suddenly traded at a 90 percent discount. The domestic impact of corporate downsizing and the ever fuller integration of the United States into the disciplines of a global economic order based on free trade interacted with a pervasive public sense of malaise. The perception grew that the president was out of touch with America on economic issues of vital concern to Americans’ well-being.

As so often in the past, malaise and alienation gave ample scope for the emergence of a significant third candidacy, that of Texas billionaire Ross Perot. With 18.9 percent of the total vote in 1992, Perot received the third-largest vote share of all time for any third candidate and the highest share in history for a candidate with no prior career as a leading figure in the pol-

itics of a major party. This vote was mostly siphoned off from previously Republican voting streams. While it is possible that Clinton would have defeated Bush in a two-man contest, there is little doubt that Perot's entry made his task considerably easier.

Bill Clinton's tenure in office has been noteworthy for a number of major shifts in policy direction, and to an extent for which little parallel exists in modern presidential history. One is at times reminded of an earlier process of change in Italian politics called *trasformismo* ("transformism"). Such a process dominated the politics of the liberal Italian state before World War I. Politicians would make and remake coalitions and policies as opportunity indicated or exigencies required: great premium was placed on simply staying on top of the situation, whatever that might require. Some of these politicians, notably one long-term prime minister, Giovanni Giolitti, became internationally recognized virtuosi of this particular art form. Something quite similar also developed in the interwar history of the French Third Republic.

Of course, a certain opportunism verging on lack of integrity pervaded the political scene and contributed to growing public cynicism about politics. This was the price to be paid for such dexterity. In today's America—to the fury of conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats alike—Bill Clinton has emerged as a one-man incarnation of *trasformismo*, (American-style, of course). But it must be said that he has had to deal with two radically different political environments in his first term in office. These were separated by the earthquake election of 1994 and the huge power shift in Congress it produced. Getting on the tiger is one thing; staying on top of it for the whole ride is something else again. Clinton thus, and uniquely in modern times, has had in effect two administrations within a single term, those of 1993–94 and 1995–96.

The new administration got off to an unpropitious if not chaotic start, beginning with a fateful symbolic misstep, the emergence in the earliest days of the issue of gays in the military. Clinton's credibility also was jeopardized almost at once by his abandoning the middle-class tax cut he had promised in 1992. The difficulties that Clinton had in organizing his administration bespoke not only his personal lack of interest in nuts-and-bolts administrative questions but also two other major weaknesses. The first of these, which has tended to disappear with time and with experience, was the distance in political fact, one better measured in light-years than in miles, between politics and government in Little Rock and in Washington. The second weakness in part grew out of his pledge to form an administration that "looked like America." One price to be paid for this effort was the making



of certain unfortunate nominations and the withdrawal of others, in a highly visible response to the pressures generated by the dense network of claimant constituency groups within the Democratic Party's coalition. This, along with a distinctly liberal policy thrust reflected, for example, in the sponsorship and enactment of the Brady bill and the "motor-voter" act, conveyed a message to Middle America that Clinton may have run as a "new Democrat" in 1992 but was governing as a liberal one in 1993-94.

Three major initiatives dominated the policy scene during the first half of the Clinton administration. By far the most spectacular and comprehensive was a highly complex national health-care plan in which Hillary Clinton as quasi "co-president" played a key role. The second of these initiatives was an increase in taxes falling mostly on the top 1.5 percent of income receivers and called ever since by the Republican opposition "the biggest tax increase in the history of the world." This measure passed through Congress without a single Republican vote in either house. The third initiative, abundantly displaying the president's devotion to free trade, was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In sharp contrast to the tax measure, this was enacted with predominantly Republican support in Congress over the bitter protests of core Democrats and the organized labor movement.

Without going into great detail over these policies, some general themes emerge when they are considered as a whole. Liberals had tended to support a single-payer system for delivering medical care, that is, one that would essentially cut out the private insurance companies and create government-based funding for the program. In truth, at the end of the day the president could have hardly done worse by adopting something resembling the Hawaii-Rochester-Canadian model for reform. The administration plan as unveiled could too easily be attacked by the insurance industry and congressional Republicans as a Rube Goldberg contraption, a textbook case of Big Government run amok in an area that constitutes one-seventh of the national economy. We all remember "Harry and Louise," actors in an industry television commercial, for who could turn on a television set in 1993-94 without seeing them and hearing their complaints? The failure of the Clinton health-care plan even to come to a vote in Congress controlled by his own party disclosed the political effectiveness of attacks on Big Government as the way to define, and thus settle, the issue. It also played into opposition claims that in addition to being a tax-and-spend liberal, President Clinton was an ineffective leader.

Another major policy item was the 1993 tax increase. This has ever since been mischaracterized by Republican campaigners as having an im-