THE ELECTION OF 1996

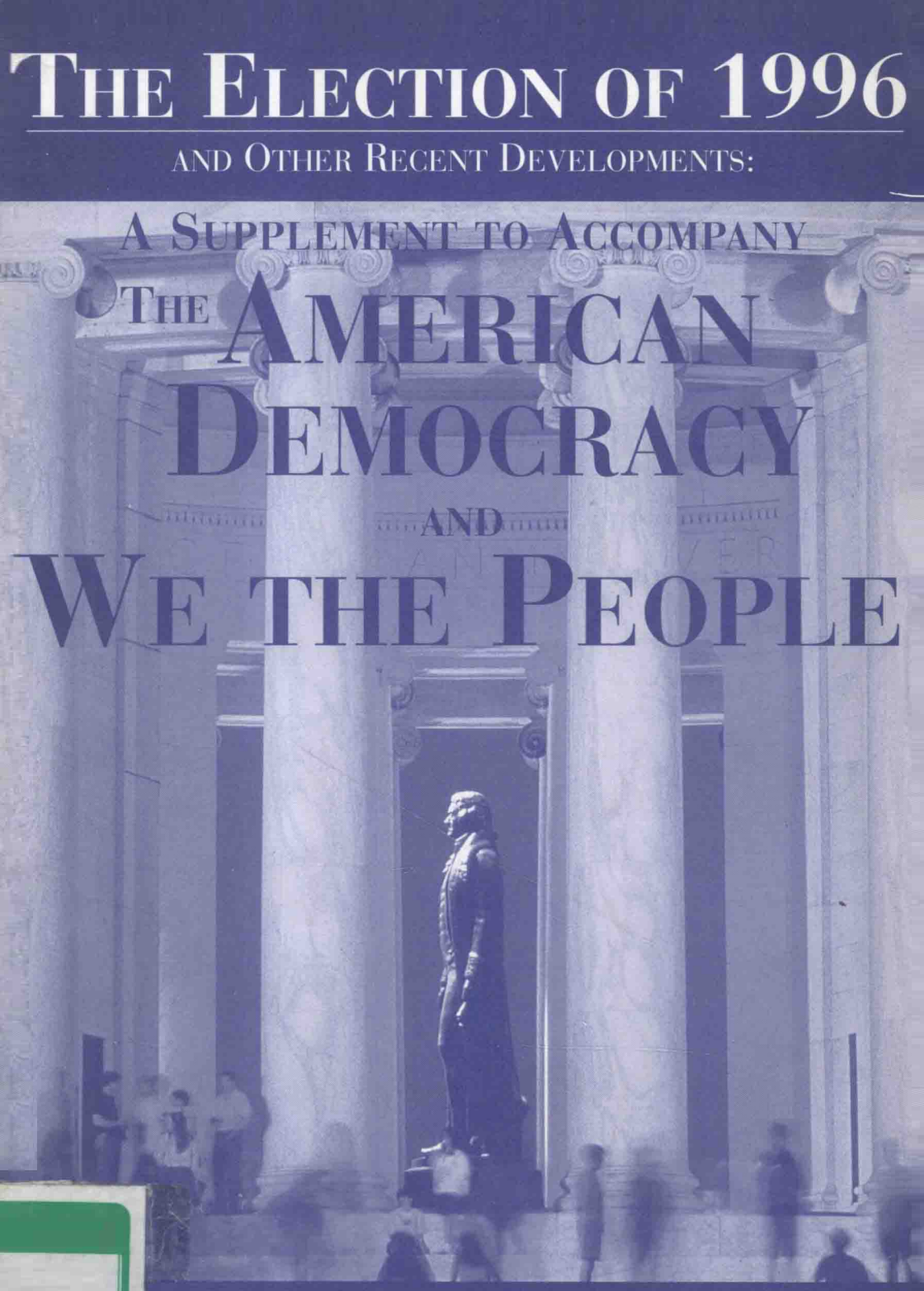
AND OTHER RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

A SUPPLEMENT TO ACCOMPANY

THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

AND

WE THE PEOPLE



THOMAS E. PATTERSON

THE ELECTION OF 1996
AND OTHER RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:

A Supplement to Accompany

THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY
AND
WE THE PEOPLE

THOMAS E. PATTERSON

Benjamin Bradlee Professor of Government and the Press
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University

THE McGRAW-HILL COMPANIES, INC.

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland
Bogotá Caracas Lisbon London Madrid
Mexico City Milan Montreal New Delhi San Juan
Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

McGraw-Hill
A Division of The McGraw-Hill Companies

THE ELECTION OF 1996 AND OTHER RECENT DEVELOPMENTS:
A Supplement to Accompany
THE AMERICAN DEMOCRACY AND WE THE PEOPLE

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 HAM HAM 9 0 9 8 7 6

ISBN 0-07-049129-1

http://www.mhcollege.com

Table of Contents

The 1996 Election

Other Recent Developments in American Politics

The 1996 Election

Thomas E. Patterson

On November 5, 1996, Bill Clinton won a second presidential term, becoming the first Democrat to do so since Franklin Roosevelt won reelection in 1936. In other respects, however, Clinton's victory bore little resemblance to Roosevelt's.

There was no historic legislation such as the New Deal that Clinton could point to with pride. Clinton had several notable policy achievements, including the Family and Medical Leave Act, the Brady bill, and the NAFTA and GATT free-trade agreements. But his major proposal, a bill that would have provided health-care coverage for nearly all Americans, was defeated in Congress without even coming to a vote.

Clinton also did not gain the landslide vote that kept Roosevelt in office. Although Clinton finished well ahead of Republican challenger Bob Dole, the Reform party candidate Ross Perot drew enough support to deny Clinton a majority of the popular vote. By receiving only 49 percent of the total vote, Clinton became the first president since Woodrow Wilson in 1916 to win reelection with less than a majority. Clinton did gain an electoral-vote majority by virtue of placing first in 31 states and the District of Columbia, which gave him 379 electoral votes to Dole's 159 electoral votes. But the even the size of this majority was merely average by historical standards.

Clinton also did not provide the coattails that Roosevelt had extended to Democratic congressional candidates in 1936. Although Clinton's Democratic party gained nine seats in the House of Representatives, Republicans retained their majority in the House and added two seats to their majority in the Senate.

The 1996 election, then, did not produce a decisive outcome. Democrats and Republicans alike could find hopeful signs for their party in the results. But the election may be remembered best for what it did not do. It did not settle the great issues of the moment, did not give either party a decisive edge, and did not launch the country on a clear course. In any case, the larger significance of the election is only partially revealed by who won and who lost. A fuller account includes the story

of the campaign itself, which began at the point where candidates were deciding whether to run for the presidency.

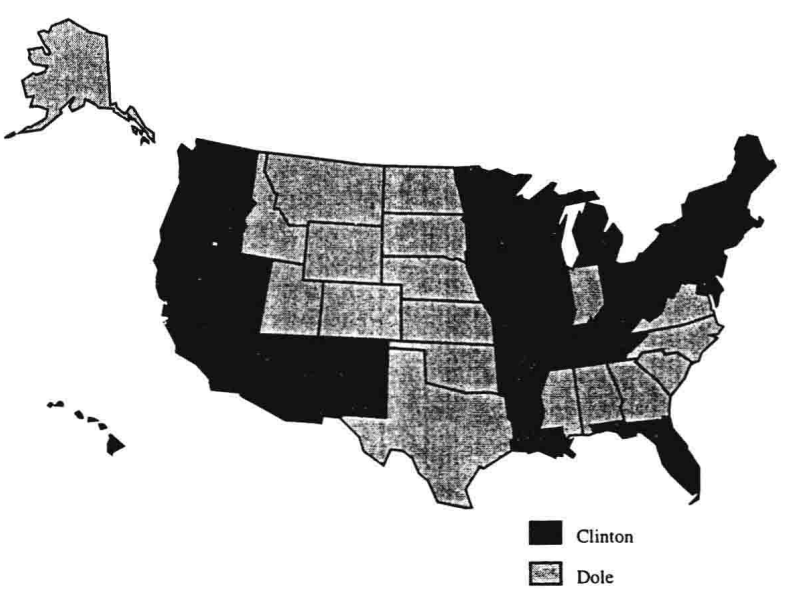
Before the Primaries: The Crucial Role of Money

After their big win in the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans eagerly looked forward to the 1996 race. Bill Clinton had all the earmarks of a one-term president. His public approval rating was barely above 40 percent, a level that had meant defeat for incumbents George Bush and Jimmy Carter in 1992 and 1980.

A promising sign in 1995 for Clinton was the economy. A poor economy may have cost Gerald Ford a second term in 1976 and had contributed to the failed reelection bids of Bush and Carter. In 1995, however, the economy was growing, and it increasingly appeared that

THE ELECTORAL VOTE, 1996

Clinton carried thirty-one states and the District of Columbia for 379 electoral votes, while Dole took nineteen states for 159 votes.



the upward trend would not slow down before the end of 1996. Ronald Reagan had won reelection on the strength of the economy, and Clinton hoped to do the same. However, Clinton's presidency was mired in allegations of personal and official misconduct, some going back to his days in Arkansas, and his party had not yet recovered from its beating in the 1994 election. If ever there was an incumbent who could be defeated despite a growing economy, Clinton looked to be the one.

Republican presidential hopefuls certainly thought so. Many of them were eager to take their chances in a race against Clinton. It was also clear, however, that money would help determine who the GOP nominee would actually be. After 1992, a large number of states had rescheduled their primaries and caucuses for the early weeks of the nominating process so as to increase their impact on the outcome. Twenty-four states would hold their primary or caucus in the first month alone. To compete effectively in so many contests within such a short time span, a candidate would need money, lots of it.

Former vice president Dan Quayle and former U.S. representative and cabinet officer Jack Kemp were the first Republican hopefuls to take themselves out of consideration. Pete Wilson, California's governor, thought he could get the money but then lost crucial weeks to throat surgery and dropped out of the race. Only Senator Dole of Kansas, Senator Phil Gramm of Texas, and former governor Lamar Alexander of Tennessee succeeded in raising the $15-25 million that would be needed. The television commentator Pat Buchanan also figured to be a factor in the race. He could not compete with the major candidates in terms of funds, but he had substantial name recognition and a loyal following that had backed him four years earlier against the incumbent George Bush.

These four candidates were joined by five other Republicans, four of whom had meager funds and made little headway in the race. The one who did make an impact was the millionaire publisher Steve Forbes, who funded his campaign with his own money.

Bill Clinton's campaign also got a boost from money, only it was in the form of the federal budget and came from an improbable source: congressional Republicans. They had dominated the national debate since their 1994 election victory and had concluded they could force Clinton's hand on nearly any issue. Accordingly, they devised a budget plan that would eliminate the federal deficit in seven years by slowing the growth in spending on domestic programs, including Medicare. House Speaker Newt Gingrich bragged to aides that Clinton would "cave" on the issue.

Clinton did not "cave." He vetoed the budget plan, saying he would never agree to legislation that threatened the well-being of America's elderly. Believing that Clinton was bluffing, Republican lawmakers refused to pass a temporary spending bill that would keep the government running during negotiations with the White House. They soon relented, but then shut the government down a second time when the budgetary dispute remained unresolved.

It was a high-stakes showdown that backfired on the Republicans. A CBS/New York Times poll indicated that 53 percent of Americans disapproved and only 29 percent approved of the Republicans' actions. By the time GOP lawmakers retreated from their position, the damage was done. Clinton's public approval rating had climbed to the 50-percent level, which he consolidated with a sparkling State of the Union address that pundits called the "speech of his life." Republicans did not know it at the time, but their lengthy budget standoff with the president was to become the single most important event in his successful reelection bid.

The GOP Nomination: Dole Wins, but Finds a Way to Lose

When viewed in its entirety, the race for the Republican nomination was not close in the least. No out-party candidate since Richard Nixon in 1968 had so thoroughly dominated a nominating race as Bob Dole did in 1996. Yet Dole came out of the nominating campaign looking weak. Why?

Part of the answer lies in the way opinion polls are used and interpreted in presidential campaigns. Dole was far ahead of his rivals in 1995 polls. Yet his lead narrowed as the primaries and caucuses drew closer, leading pundits to dismiss Dole as a weak frontrunner. In fact, Dole's lead in the polls was virtually guaranteed to shrink. He was by far the most recognized candidate in the race, so much so that Dole was often the only candidate known to Republicans when they were asked in 1995 their choice for the party's nomination. Once the other candidates began to campaign, Dole had nowhere to go in the polls but down.

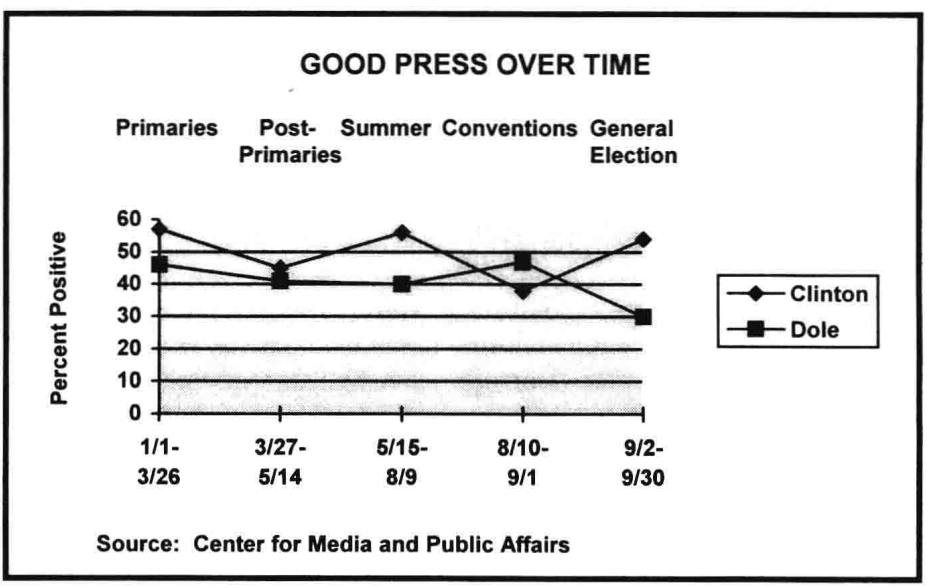
Nevertheless, the press took the early polls at face value, using them to establish "expectations" for each of the candidates. Dole was said to need "big wins" in Iowa and New Hampshire in order to legitimate his claim to frontrunner status. He failed to meet the media's standard. He won narrowly in Iowa and lost to Buchanan in New Hampshire.

Dole's troubles in these states were partly self-created. His speaking style was better suited to the cozy confines of the Senate than the open

platforms of the campaign trail. But the Dole campaign was also beset by problems that afflict all frontrunners. To win, the others had to knock him down. In effect, the Republican race was eight against one. Dole complained that he was serving as the other candidates' "punching bag." The news media, always eager to stage a good fight, played up the attacks. Dole's news coverage during the early primaries was nearly 60 percent negative.

Dole's campaign abruptly turned around with South Carolina's March 2 primary, which he won handily with the backing of the state's top Republicans. He then swept the states that held contests the following Tuesday. The victories were impressive in their scale (40 percent or more of the vote in each state) and scope (his victories included Connecticut, Colorado, Georgia, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington). He cleaned up again the next week, finishing first in all nine states, including New York, Texas, and Florida. By March 26, when California held its primary, he had locked up the GOP nomination.

Yet Dole came out of the GOP campaign with a reputation for ineptness. Journalists who portrayed him as a poor campaigner during his early struggles never revised their opinion. His primary victories came so quickly that the race was over and out of the news before journalists had time to reflect on its larger dimensions. Then, too,



because of their tendency to focus on personality, journalists overlooked Dole's less apparent strengths, such as his skill at coalition building. "He's been weakened by it," is how one Republican leader summarized Dole's victorious campaign.[1]

The Democratic Nomination: A Double Break for Clinton

Bill Clinton did not face any primary opposition, becoming the first Democrat since Roosevelt in 1936 to have the advantage of running unopposed. Although incumbents can usually win a contested nomination, their campaign is almost always damaged in the process. In 1992, George Bush's chances for a second term were diminished by Buchanan's attacks on his economic policies during the Republican primaries.

Clinton also gained a second advantage from running unopposed: he did not have to waste campaign funds fending off challengers within his own party. Like Dole, Clinton was allowed by law to spend only about $30 million on his nominating campaign.[2] Unlike Dole, Clinton secured nomination without spending any money, which meant he could target his resources solely at Dole. In the months preceding the convention, the Clinton campaign spent more than $20 million on an advertising blitz. Having used up nearly all his allotted funds in his fight for nomination, Dole was unable to respond with a substantial advertising campaign of his own. "We don't have any money," a Dole aide lamented.[3] The spending imbalance contributed to a widening Clinton lead that ballooned to 20 points shortly before the national party conventions.

Summer Interlude: Feeding Frenzies

Dole's campaign strategy called for a return to Washington after he had wrapped up the nomination. Once there, he would make news in his role as Senate majority leader. This approach was less effective than Dole anticipated. He became embroiled in legislative controversies, such as the debate over raising the minimum wage, that were peripheral to his campaign. After two frustrating months, Dole decided to act boldly in an effort to jumpstart his campaign. He not only resigned his position as majority leader but gave up his Senate seat as well. "When the election is over," he said, "I will have only two places to go--the White House or my house."

His dramatic gesture produced one of the few periods in which his campaign received positive press coverage. The media reviewed his Senate accomplishments and noted the enthusiastic crowds that now greeted him at campaign stops. But Dole then became the victim of the type of media "feeding frenzy" that every presidential candidate dreads. During an interview, Dole called smoking a habit and implied that smokers more than tobacco companies were responsible for the health effects of cigarettes. For days, Dole was dogged by reporters who demanded to know why he seemed to ignore evidence that tobacco firms had manipulated nicotine levels in order to turn smokers into addicts. Reporters also questioned whether tobacco firms' contributions to his campaign had influenced his statement. When Dole finally admitted that his comment might have been misguided, his momentum had already been lost. Thereafter, Dole rarely spoke to the press except to read from prepared statements.

During the summer months, Clinton relied upon a "Rose Garden strategy," taking advantage of the publicity opportunities inherent in the presidential office. But the President also had to contend with a media feeding frenzy. The felony convictions of his friend Arkansas Governor Jim Guy Tucker and his Whitewater partners Jim and Susan McDougal gave new life to charges about Clinton's character. Yet his lead over Dole was only marginally affected by these developments. Perhaps the voters had heard about Whitewater for too long without seeing convincing evidence of the President's involvement. Or perhaps they had already factored the character issue into their view of Clinton.

But Clinton had also shaped his campaign to draw people's attention to their problems. He recognized the big changes that were taking place in the home, at work, and in the schools, and had developed ideas for addressing them, such as tax credits for higher education and job training, portable health insurance, and extended leave from work for medical and family needs. "Our job," said Clinton, in a sentence that summarized his philosophy, "is to give people the tools to make the most of their own lives." It was a theme of personal empowerment that many Americans found appealing.[4]

The idea of personal empowerment was also a component of the Republican-prepared welfare reform bill that Clinton signed into law shortly before the Democratic convention. He had promised in his 1992 campaign "to end welfare as we know it." Some of the President's advisors warned him that the legislation would anger Democratic liberals and could cost him votes among the party's traditional supporters. But Clinton was committed to some form of welfare-to-work program and

chose to sign the legislation, saying it would "need some fixing" later on. As the campaign wore on, Clinton increasingly talked about the welfare reform bill, citing it as an example of how government could help people to help themselves. Republicans argued that Clinton was taking credit for one of their accomplishments, a complaint they made frequently during the campaign.

The Conventions: Television as Theater

The Republican National Convention in San Diego gave Dole another chance to revitalize his flagging campaign. Four years earlier, Bush's effort to reach out to moderate voters was undercut by Buchanan's divisive "cultural wars" rhetoric, which he carried onto the podium of the Republican convention. Dole's staff staged a very different kind of convention. It was carefully orchestrated to project the image of a broadly inclusive party united behind Bob Dole's leadership. Buchanan was kept off stage, as was House Speaker Newt Gingrich, who symbolized the budget debacle that had turned the campaign in Clinton's favor.

The convention gained energy from Dole's selection of Jack Kemp as his running mate. Kemp was a surprise choice since pre-convention speculation had centered on midwestern Republican governors. Yet Kemp was a stronger running mate than any of the others. His supply-side economic theories endeared him to the party's economic conservatives, while his anti-abortion stance appealed to the party's social conservatives. Kemp was also popular among moderates. He was one of the few conservatives who regularly urged the Republican party to pay more attention to the problems of the poor and minorities.

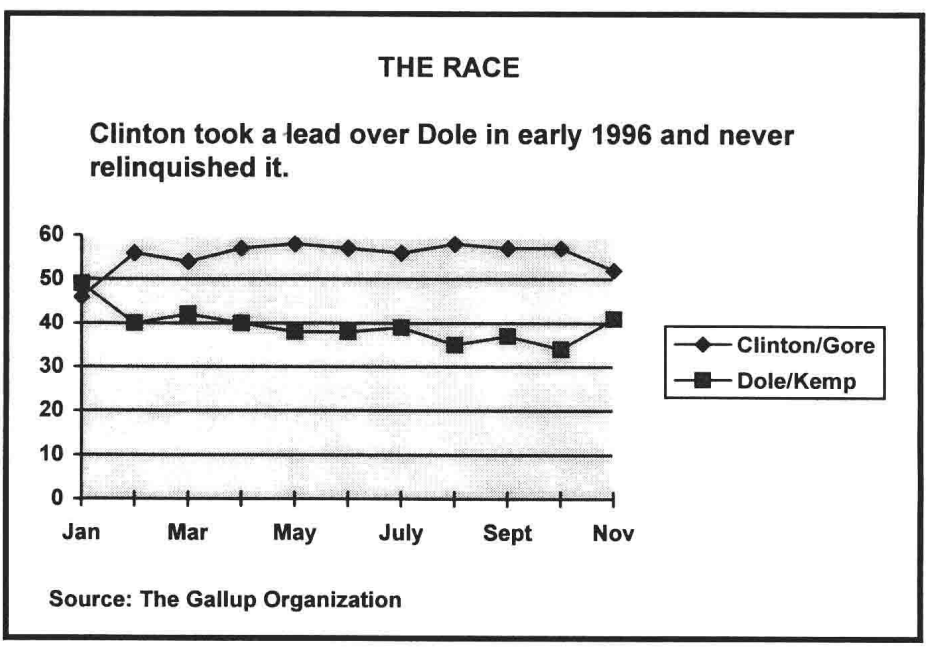
Party nominees typically receive a "bounce" in the polls from their party's convention, and Dole was no exception. But his bounce was relatively small and was soon snuffed out by the bounce that Clinton received from the Democratic convention. Like the GOP convention, it was made-for-television theater, which went according to script until the last day, when news broke of the resignation of Dick Morris, Clinton's top political strategist. Morris's relationship with a prostitute had been uncovered, and the revelation overshadowed the President's acceptance speech. But the Morris story had little impact on voters, perhaps because Morris had also served as a consultant to Republicans. Clinton left the Democratic convention with a lead in the polls that was nearly as large as it was before the Republican convention. It was a bad sign for the

Dole campaign. In the entire history of presidential polling, no incumbent with a post-convention lead the size of Clinton's had lost the November election.

The General Election: Declining Interest

Dole's situation in 1996 was not an enviable one. He was identified with a Congress that many believed had tried to take health care from senior citizens. As a result, Dole was in no position to pursue many of the policy themes that had worked so well for Republicans in 1994. Circumstance denied him the economic issue as well. The economy was far too strong to serve as a challenger's ticket to the White House.

In these ways, Dole's situation was similar to that of Walter Mondale in 1984. Mondale's image was marred by the failed policies of the Carter administration, which he had served as vice president. And like Dole, Mondale was trying to unseat an incumbent president at a time when the economy was growing. Try as he might, Mondale could not find an issue that would work against President Reagan. And the harder he tried, the more desperate he appeared, and the more negative his press coverage became. "He comes off as somehow 'weak' and a 'wimp,'" said the



Washington Post of Mondale in a September story.

So it was with Dole in 1996. Near the campaign's end, he would accuse the press of a liberal bias. But the press's real bias in election reporting is its tendency to depict candidates in ways that coincide with their positions in the race. Journalists start with the polls and then construct images of the candidates that fit the storyline.[5] Winning candidates get a better image. Losing candidates get a poorer one. The pattern of journalistic reasoning goes like this: if a candidate is far behind in the polls, he must by definition be doing something wrong. Why is Bob Dole losing? Reporters start with this question, and it defines their answer: Dole has deep flaws, and the public ought to know of them.

The fact that Dole's negative coverage was driven by journalistic bias rather than partisan bias did not make it any less damaging. The press also did not help Dole when it cut back on election coverage because the race was one-sided. According to the Center for Media and Public Affairs, news coverage of the general election declined by 40 percent in 1996 as compared with 1992. The dropoff contributed to the public's relative lack of interest in the campaign. Polls indicated that election interest was down significantly from its 1992 level.

Dole's efforts to create interest in his candidacy led him in July to propose a 15 percent across-the-board tax cut. He campaigned heavily on the issue during the general election, and his televised ads provided viewers a dollar-by-dollar account of the tax savings his plan would provide. The proposal did not, however, give Dole's candidacy much of a boost. It seemed to contradict his past record on tax cuts and also belied his promise of a balanced federal budget. Voters never quite accepted Dole's claim that they could have both a large tax break and a balanced budget, unless there were unacceptable cuts in domestic programs like Medicare and education.

In the campaign's final month, Dole switched from his tax proposal to "the character issue." He accused Clinton of tarnishing the presidency through abuses of power, which Dole warned would subject a second-term Clinton to ongoing investigations that could paralyze the government. These charges gained strength with revelations that the Democratic party had solicited hundreds of thousands of dollars in contributions from foreign nationals.

The character issue may have been a reason why the final vote, 49-41 percent in Clinton's favor, was substantially closer than the polls had predicted only a week before the election. Nevertheless, in exit polls taken the day of the election, a majority of Americans said the character

issue mattered less to them than how well a candidate represented their views on the issues. And by this standard, Clinton was rated more highly than Dole.

The candidate who likely gained the most from the character issue was Ross Perot. Largely ignored by the press after his party's convention, Perot had slipped below 5 percent in the polls. However, campaign finance was a near perfect issue for Perot. Campaign reform ("creating a level playing field," as Perot himself liked to say) was a central theme of his candidacy, just as it has been in 1992. And having refused to accept special-interest contributions, he appeared more credible on the issue than either Clinton or Dole. In the last ten days of the campaign, Perot received his heaviest sustained news coverage of the general election and finished with 8 percent of the vote.[6]

The campaign funds at issue in the closing days of the campaign were "soft money" contributions made to the Democratic party rather than directly to Clinton. Clinton, like Dole, funded his general election campaigns with a federal grant, which totaled $62 million. Minor-party or independent candidates get federal funding only if they had received at least 5 percent of the vote in the previous election. Moreover, they receive funds only in an amount equal to the ratio of their total vote to the average total vote of the two major-party candidates. In 1992, Perot, a billionaire, campaigned on his own money, which made him ineligible for public funding (a candidate loses eligibility if he or she spends more than $50,000 in personal funds on the general election campaign). However, since he received 19 percent of the vote in 1992, Perot was eligible for and accepted public funding in 1996. He got $29 million, or slightly less than half of what Clinton or Dole received, reflecting the

THE DEBATES

Viewers judged Clinton the winner of both of the televised presidential debates

	Clinton	Dole	Draw/No Opinion
Debate #1	50%	29%	22%
Debate #2	55%	28%	17%

Source: ABC News

fact that in 1992 Perot got slightly less than half of the average vote of the Republican and Democratic candidates.

If the campaign finance issue had not materialized in the 1996 election's final stage, Perot might have slipped below the 5 percent threshold for funding eligibility. Perot was also hurt by his exclusion from the televised presidential debates. The Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD), which organizes the debates, excluded him on the grounds that he had no realistic chance of winning the election. The decision was unpopular; polls indicated that more than 80 percent of Americans felt Perot should be allowed to participate. Nevertheless, a federal appeals court upheld his exclusion.

Dole was particularly adamant about keeping Perot out of the debates. Dole wanted a one-on-one confrontation with Clinton. However, Dole's attacks on Clinton during the debates were largely ineffective and may actually have hurt him, since debate viewers tend to respond unfavorably to negative arguments. After both debates, viewers judged Clinton the clear winner. The debates, like nearly every aspect of the 1996 campaign, failed to turn out the way Dole imagined they might.

Voting: The Gender Gap

Pundits described the 1994 midterm elections as the "Year of the Angry White Man." Exit polls suggested that affirmative action, gun control, and other issues had pushed many white male voters into the Republican column, making it possible for the GOP to take control of the Congress for the first time in four decades. The 1996 election, in contrast, has been described as the "Year of the Soccer Moms." Clinton's victory was propelled by the women's vote.

A few decades ago, men and women had virtually identical voting patterns. Today, there is a pronounced "gender gap." Women are much more likely than men to vote for Democratic candidates, and the tendency reached a new high in 1996. Bill Clinton's support was 16 percent higher among women than Dole's (54-38%) whereas he actually ran 1 percent behind Dole among men (44-45%). Studies indicate that the gender gap primarily reflects women's more liberal attitudes on social and economic issues, including government assistance for the poor, minorities, children, and the elderly.

In general, the 1996 vote divided along traditional lines, although Clinton was more successful than Dole in attracting self-described independent voters. Clinton ran strongest among African Americans,

THE 1996 VOTE, BY GROUP

	Clinton	Dole	Perot
Gender			
Men	44%	45%	9%
Women	54%	38%	7%
Race			
White	44%	46%	8%
Black	84%	12%	4%
Hispanic/Latino	70%	22%	6%
Asian	41%	49%	9%
Other	60%	23%	11%
Income			
<15K	60%	26%	11%
15-30K	54%	36%	8%
30-50K	49%	40%	9%
50-75K	46%	46%	6%
75-100K	44%	49%	6%
>100K	40%	54%	5%
Religion			
Protestant	41%	50%	8%
White Protestant	37%	52%	9%
Catholic	53%	38%	8%
Other Christian	49%	38%	12%
Jewish	80%	16%	3%
Other	62%	25%	7%
None	57%	26%	13%
Age			
18-29	53%	35%	10%
30-44	49%	41%	8%
45-59	47%	43%	8%
60+	50%	43%	6%
Ideology			
Liberal	78%	11%	7%
Moderate	57%	33%	9%
Conservative	20%	72%	7%
Party			
Democrat	84%	10%	5%
Republican	13%	81%	5%
Independent	43%	37%	16%

Source: ABC News