

## REELECTION 1996: HOW AMERICANS VOTED

Steffensmeier, who would easily be reelected, and our families, who inspire us to work hard and play hard.

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## I

### Reelection:

### The 1996 U.S. Election

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REELECTION provides the rhythm of democracy. The usual discussion of the "electoral cycle" misses the large extent to which reelection drives the system. Incumbents must face the electorate again if they want to keep their positions. Voters are given the opportunity to decide whether they want to keep the incumbents in place or give the other team a chance. Campaigns are often fought along these lines, giving the voters a choice between two slogans: "Don't change horses in midstream" and "Throw the bums out."

Presidential incumbents and their designated successors are familiar to voters, who are able to judge their performance in office. The opposition party must try to convince the public either that the incumbent party has mismanaged the country (especially its economy) or that the opposition party's leaders are better suited to be president. Neither of these claims has been an easy argument to sell to the public in the twentieth century. The typical result has been reelection, with Bill Clinton's success in 1996 replicating the successes of Ronald Reagan in 1984, Richard Nixon in 1972, Dwight Eisenhower in 1956, Franklin Roosevelt in 1944, 1940, and 1936, Woodrow Wilson in 1916, and William McKinley in 1900. The few exceptions were George Bush's defeat in 1992, Jimmy Carter's failure in 1980, Herbert Hoover's in 1932, and William Taft's in 1912. Overall, reelection should be considered democracy's steady beat.<sup>1</sup>

Why do some reelection attempts succeed and others fail? In part, the reasons have to do with the public's limited attention span for politics. Just as the stockholders of a successful company are usually willing to reelect the board of directors without examining the details of the company's financial

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statement very closely, American voters are usually willing to vote for the reelection of a president (or a retiring president's designated successor) if the country seems to be running smoothly. If the general picture is positive, details rarely matter. If the public recognizes that the country and the economy are doing well, it is hard to hold the public's attention long enough to dislodge a sitting president. Only when the country and the economy are doing poorly does the public focus on politics enough to want to change leadership teams.

This argument is both correct and overly facile. It is correct in part because strong potential candidates decide whether or not to run for the presidency based on their perception of their chances. Strong candidates often decide not to run against an incumbent when the economy is doing well, whereas they are more likely to run when there is no incumbent and when the economy is doing poorly. Yet this argument is overly facile because elections are decided on the margin. One mistake by an advantaged incumbent might be enough to allow the challenger to win. And a challenger can always try to shift the nature of the debate away from a prospering economy toward other issues, especially if the challenger has a more appealing personal story than does the incumbent. From this perspective, reelection still provides the steady, underlying rhythm of democracy, but other notes can arise to offset that rhythm.

Our theoretical understanding of American presidential elections should be modified to give greater emphasis to the reelection theme. These elections are generally not occasions on which the electorate weighs the relative merits of two competing candidates as if they have just emerged in presidential politics. In nearly every presidential election of the twentieth century there was either an incumbent or an heir apparent running for the presidency, and this should be taken into account more explicitly in our voting models.<sup>2</sup> In this book, we consider the 1996 presidential election from this perspective, using the National Election Study surveys to examine the determinants of Bill Clinton's reelection, particularly in contrast to George Bush's failure to be reelected four years earlier.

*The National Election Study Surveys*

The National Election Study (NES) mission "is to produce high quality survey data on voting, public opinion, and political participation" (<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/>, 6 March 1998). The surveys are conducted in both presidential and midterm election years, in time series dating back to 1948. The continuity of questions is a prominent feature of the surveys because it allows for comparisons and contrasts to be drawn across elections. This aspect is central to the examination of reelection in this book.

Headquartered at the University of Michigan, the NES has been funded since 1977 by the National Science Foundation. Prior to that time, scholars at the University of Michigan were responsible for running and conducting the surveys. The Board of Overseers obtains a wide range of input from the research community and consults with the principal investigators, the NES staff, and planning committees. Although continuity is emphasized in the NES surveys, specific themes are also highlighted to gauge the significance of political changes. For example, major substantive themes in the 1996 study included an evaluation of the performance of the first Republican Congress elected in 1994 in four decades and an evaluation of President Clinton.

The 1996 study, like previous presidential-election-year studies, consisted of preelection and postelection interviews. Both pre- and postelection surveys were seventy minutes long, with a national sample of 1,750 and 1,490 respondents, respectively. In the past, NES interviews were conducted in person. The 1996 postelection survey, however, included an experiment where half the interviews were conducted in the homes of respondents and the other half were done by telephone. The intent was to reduce the cost of the surveys. It was deemed a success, and plans are for the vast majority of interviews to be conducted by telephone in the future (<http://www.umich.edu/~nes/overview/spprocs.htm>, 2 October 1998). The 1996 survey was part of a panel design, which means that some of the respondents were interviewed in previous years as well. The panel part of the survey has not been released as of this writing, but this study design will allow for even greater leverage on questions of continuity across the 1992, 1994, and 1996 elections.

As Weisberg points out, the number of interviews has implications for statistical generalizations (1995, 7). Specifically, sampling error occurs because we have surveyed a sample rather than the entire population. This error affects the confidence we have in our conclusions, which are based on the statistical results. In the 1996 survey, the maximum sampling error is estimated to be 3.25 percent for a full sample (see Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen 1996 for the formula for the margin of error and the 1996 NES codebook for details relating to the specific sampling design used in 1996). Also keep in mind that when analyses are conducted on only part of a sample, the sampling error increases.

An analysis of the NES data is necessarily highly statistical. The authors of the following chapters report on a series of topics from the study, giving results for 1996, drawing comparisons with 1992, and often showing trends since the 1950s or 1960s. Their analysis usually begins by presenting "marginal distributions" showing what percentages of the respondents fall into each category on the variables they are examining, followed by "bivariate" (two-variable) analysis that indicates how this variable directly affected the vote. Voting, however, is a complicated topic to study, with many causes op-

erating simultaneously. Therefore, it is necessary to move to "multivariate" analysis to estimate properly the effects of each presumed cause while taking into account the other likely causes. Regression analysis is the classic procedure for such analysis when the variable being analyzed (the "dependent variable") is numeric. The main dependent variables in the study of voting are instead just categories—such as voting Republican or Democrat, or voting versus not voting on election day. The authors of several chapters in this book use special procedures for dealing with such two-category dependent variables, generally logit or probit analysis (which are actually similar techniques). The basic logic behind this procedure is explained most thoroughly in chapter 4.

The NES surveys are much longer than the typical short phone polls that the media take before elections. This permits a thoroughness that cannot be obtained when looking at media polls. Yet, it is never possible to include questions on all possible topics in a survey. The 1996 NES questionnaire does cover most of the important issues raised in the campaign, but inevitably it does not touch every base.

The NES studies are unique in a world of an increasing number of surveys because of the depth of questions focusing on enduring facets of elections, public opinion, and political participation over time. This feature of the NES surveys makes them particularly valuable for scholarly analysis. In contrast, media polls, while conducted more often, tend to focus on topical, "headline news" issues. The overall format of the NES surveys is also unique in the number of open-ended questions. Open-ended questions, which are more difficult to analyze, allow respondents to answer as they choose instead of being limited to the response categories provided by the interviewer. In chapter 5, Kessel and Weisberg contrast closed-ended and open-ended approaches and explore the similarities and differences in results found in chapters 3 and 4. The content of the NES voting surveys reflects a social-psychological emphasis on attitudes, which is the primary framework used by scholars to examine voting behavior in the United States.

### *The Framework for Studying Voting*

The two dominant theoretical approaches to the study of voting behavior are social-psychological and rational choice (see Niemi and Weisberg 1993b, esp. chap. 1, for more details). The social-psychological approach of the Michigan School attributes electoral outcomes to voters' political attitudes and identifications. The classic study in this tradition is *The American Voter* (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). In contrast, rational choice emphasizes self-interest and was introduced by Anthony Downs in *An Eco-*

The NES surveys were begun by scholars of the University of Michigan and retain much of the original focus on the social-psychological theoretical framework.<sup>3</sup> Three primary attitudes are emphasized as explanatory variables for determining the vote by this framework: partisanship, candidates, and issues (Niemi and Weisberg 1993a, 8). The current literature views partisanship as a long-term attachment and candidate and issue attitudes as more short-term. It is also common to ask which factors are important given particular circumstances. This question is particularly useful for drawing comparisons across elections, as is done in each of the chapters here. The current literature also focuses on how these attitudes affect voting instead of asking whether issue or candidate attitudes affect voting.

The literature gives remarkably little attention to reelection at the presidential level. This minimal attention to reelection as a separate concept in the presidential election literature is in marked contrast to the congressional election literature, which gives considerable emphasis to incumbency effects. As an attempt to examine the bases of reelection more, the chapters in this volume on the presidential election compare the 1996 election with the 1992 election.

The central question in voting behavior is what determines the vote. Most often, this question is asked in the study of presidential voting. Weisberg and Mockabee in chapter 3 and Smith, Radcliffe, and Kessel in chapter 4 provide sophisticated analyses of the NES data to answer the question of who reelected Clinton. Weisberg and Mockabee find that partisanship aided the Democrats in 1996 as did the economy (though less so than in 1992), while the perception of Clinton as caring for people offset any perceived defects in his character. Using responses to open-ended questions, Smith, Radcliffe, and Kessel also show that candidate attributes were important factors and that partisanship, ideology, and the economy affected presidential voting in 1996. In contrast to 1992, they find that instead of the economy playing the dominant role in Clinton's reelection, a combination of lifestyle issues, social benefits, and economics prevailed. Kessel and Weisberg compare the methods and conclusions of chapters 3 and 4 and highlight the nuances of the election that can be learned using the NES data.

Mughan and Burden examine a new attitudinal influence on voting: feelings about the candidates' wives. They show that in both 1992 and 1996 Hillary Clinton had a greater impact on the vote than either Barbara Bush or Elizabeth Dole. Short-term issue factors are central to the studies of Asher and Tomlinson and of Lacy and Grant. Asher and Tomlinson conclude that the Clinton campaign team made 1996 a repeat of 1992 by their success in defining the campaign issues and setting the agenda. The single most prominent issue studied in the literature is the role of economics in elections (Fiorina 1981; Lewis-Beck 1988). Lacy and Grant continue in this tradition, showing that the economy affects presidential candidate choice and extend-

ing the literature by demonstrating that economic perceptions also affect voter turnout.

The study of voting decisions is clearly paramount, but prior to the decision of which candidate to vote for comes the decision whether to vote in the first place. The study of voter turnout is an area of active scholarly debate. Specifically, the parallel trends of decreasing turnout and increasing education levels are labeled as a puzzle of participation (Niemi and Weisberg 1993b, 14; Brody 1978). Nichols, Kimball, and Beck examine turnout in 1996 and ask whether the increase in turnout in 1992 was a turning point in American electoral participation.

Which groups support which party is an enduring topic in voting behavior. The shifting alliances of groups have had a large impact on the U.S. political system in the past (Key 1955; Burnham 1970; Sundquist 1973; Beck 1979) and are of vital importance to our current understanding of present and future politics. Stanley and Niemi find evidence that processes begun in the past several decades are continuing, such as the movement of native southern whites from the Democratic Party. Several watershed changes have also occurred recently, such as Hispanics becoming a substantial fraction of the Democratic coalition. Stanley and Niemi's conclusions highlight what the implications of the data trends are for the parties. Norrander concentrates on gender differences, documenting the development of the current gender gap in partisanship, issue positions, and presidential candidate choice. She argues that the gender gap developed as the changing preferences of men led them to desert the Democratic Party for the Republican Party. The 1994 journalist label "Year of the Angry White Male" is more accurate than the 1992 slogan "Year of the Woman" or 1996's "Year of the Soccer Mom."

The 1996 election was the first election since the 1920s in which a Republican-controlled Congress was retained by voters. Mondak, McCurley, and Millman sort out the differential impact of parties, candidates, and issues. They extend the debate in voting behavior between those who assert the dominance of national factors (Tuft 1975; A. Campbell 1960; J. Campbell 1987) and those who place more weight on local factors (Ragsdale 1980; Erikson 1990) with their innovative measure of candidate quality. Specifically, they bring new insights into the classic topic of "attitudes toward the candidates."

Patterson and Monson also study the reelection of the Republican Congress. Consistent with the thesis of the social-psychological approach, they find that partisanship has a powerful influence on both congressional voting and congressional performance evaluations. Their discussion of institutional performance reflects a growing concern in the literature about institutional elections. Their work highlights the stark contrasts among the 1992, 1994, and

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### *The 1996 Election*

Reelection provided the dominant rhythm of the 1996 U.S. election. Bill Clinton was easily reelected president, while the Republicans maintained their majorities in both houses of Congress. Reelection was so much the theme of the year that continued Democratic control of the White House was rarely in doubt throughout the campaign period. Poll after poll showed Clinton well ahead of his Republican challenger, Bob Dole. Whenever an occasional poll seemed to show that Clinton's lead was diminishing, the numbers returned to prior levels within a few days. All the usual trappings of presidential election campaigns were present in 1996, from contested primaries at the beginning of the year to national nominating conventions in the summer and televised debates in the fall, but the country seemed to pay little attention. Reelection was the dominant theme in the presidential contest, and the Republicans could not stop that.

#### THE PRESIDENT

It would be a mistake to assume that Bill Clinton's reelection was preordained from the start of his presidency. Indeed, his administration started off in an unusually rocky fashion. He had been elected with only 43 percent of the popular vote (to 38 percent for George Bush and a surprising 19 percent for H. Ross Perot). His first actions as president were attacked as ultra-liberal, especially his changing the policy against gays in the military. His early cabinet appointments hit trouble. Clinton's top legislative priority was passage of a health-care-reform plan developed by a special task force headed by his wife, Hillary, but this plan died in the Democratic Congress. Republican attacks on the Clintons' ethics over the Whitewater real estate deal and related matters further eroded the president's position. The low point was reached when Republicans stunned political experts by winning control of both houses of Congress in November 1994, for the first time since 1946. There was little reason, at that point, to expect that Clinton could be reelected in 1996.

Yet, as often happens, public sympathies soon began to swing again, this time toward the president. The new Republican 104th Congress started off on a collision course with the Democratic president (Weisberg and Patterson 1998). House Speaker Newt Gingrich behaved as though he were the country's leader. The House passed most of the Republican Contract with America in its first 100 days. The initial impression of Republican invulnerability began to fade when parts of the Contract were slowed down and/or defeated in the Senate. More serious problems developed when the president and Congress sparred on a deficit-reduction package. Finally, the federal government was shut down twice in November and December 1995 because of an impasse between Clinton and Congress on appropriations

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talk-show host Alan Keyes, conservative Republican congressman Bob Dornan, and millionaire businessman Morry Taylor) who seemed to specialize in trying to hurt the chances of the Republican front-runners.

THE REPUBLICAN PRIMARY SEASON

The 1996 Republican primary season moved quickly. Bob Dole was seen as the early front-runner. He had raised much more money than the other candidates had, and his campaign was much better organized. The early nomination events were not favorable to Dole, but his main competitors peaked too early.

The 1996 primary season differed from earlier years in that the primaries were "front-loaded." That is, many states moved their primaries earlier so that they could affect the race. In 1996 the primary season functionally was only five to six weeks long. This is a more compact time than in recent years and much shorter than a generation ago. Also, many primaries were held on the same dates, such as "Junior Tuesday" (5 March), "Super Tuesday" (12 March), and "Big Ten Tuesday" (19 March). The Iowa caucuses and New Hampshire primary were still the first main events in February, but many other primaries followed quickly in March. This put a premium on organization, since a candidate had to spend a lot of time in Iowa and New Hampshire and then could not spend much time in the remaining states. Also, most Republican primaries, after the first few, were winner-take-all, so that a candidate who could win 25-30 percent of the vote in all these states would win no delegates from these states if the race had boiled down to two contenders.

A possible complication was that every major candidate receiving public funding (which meant everyone but billionaire Forbes) was limited in total campaign expenditures. Buchanan and Alexander did not spend much money in the early primaries because they had not raised much, which meant that they would be permitted to spend large amounts of money in later primaries if they could stay in the race that long. Dole, in contrast, spent a lot of money in the initial campaign events, so this limitation would have hurt him badly had he not put a lock on the nomination early.

There was considerable early attention to Steve Forbes and his flat-tax idea. But this attention peaked a couple of weeks before the primaries and resulted in a consensus that the flat tax would not be fair and that Forbes was a one-issue candidate. Forbes's negative television blitz also backfired. He had relied on an expensive advertising campaign instead of developing a presnet organization in the early states and personally campaigning heavily in those states. As a result of these factors, Forbes faded by the Iowa caucuses and the New Hampshire primary. He won the Delaware primary on 24 February and the Arizona one on 27 February, but those were to be his

bills. The president won the resultant public relations battle, with the country blaming the Republican Congress for closing down the government. Meanwhile, Clinton was getting high marks for his leadership in the aftermath of the summer 1995 terrorist bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building. As 1996 began, the president's approval ratings climbed and his chances for reelection soared.

THE CHALLENGERS

The structure of the presidential campaign became defined as various possible challengers decided whether or not to enter the race. No Democratic opponent to President Clinton emerged. Incumbent presidents generally have no difficulty winning renomination by their parties. Some have been so bloodied in divisive primaries, however, that they either dropped out of the race or were too weakened to win the general election. Clinton escaped this potential problem when his improved poll standings and his success in raising a large campaign war chest deterred an intraparty challenge. Also, while many liberal Democrats might have preferred a candidate other than the moderate Clinton, they did not want to risk hurting their party's chances to keep the presidency.

Clinton also benefited from the lack of a new minor-party challenger. Several potential independent candidates were mentioned—including Jesse Jackson, former Democratic senator Bill Bradley (N.J.), and former Republican senator and governor Lowell Weicker (Conn.)—but they ultimately decided against running. Ralph Nader did run on a Green Party ticket, but he attracted little notice outside California. Ross Perot ran again, receiving the nomination of his Reform Party over former governor Richard Lamm (Colo.) in a manner that struck many as heavy-handed. Perot, however, was unable to rekindle the spark of his 1992 campaign.

Several potentially strong Republican candidates also decided against running in 1996, including many who had participated in the Reagan and/or Bush administrations—former vice-president Dan Quayle, former secretary of state James Baker, former secretary of defense Richard Cheney, former education secretary William Bennett, former HUD secretary Jack Kemp, and most notably former chairman of the joint chiefs of staff Colin Powell—as well as moderate Massachusetts governor William Weld and House Speaker Newt Gingrich (Ga.). California governor Pete Wilson joined the race but had to drop out before the primary season even began. Several senators did run for the nomination, including Bob Dole, a long-time Washington insider and the Republican Senate majority leader, plus conservative Phil Gramm (Tex.), Richard Lugar (Ind.), and Arlen Specter (Pa.). The other active Republican candidates were conservative commentator Pat Buchanan, billionaire publishing magnate Steve Forbes, former Tennessee governor and education publishing magnate Steve Forbes, former Tennessee governor and education publishing magnate Steve Forbes, and a few lesser-known contenders (radio

TABLE I.I. 1996 REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY RESULTS

<i>Event</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>State</i>	<i>Winner</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>Second place</i>	<i>Percent</i>	
Early primaries	20 Feb.	New Hampshire	Buchanan	27	Dole	26	
		Delaware	Forbes	33	Dole	27	
	24 Feb.	Arizona	Forbes	33	Dole	30	
		North Dakota	Dole	42	Forbes	20	
	27 Feb.	South Dakota	Dole	45	Buchanan	29	
Junior Tuesday	2 Mar.	South Carolina	Dole	98	Buchanan	22	
		Puerto Rico	Dole	44	Forbes	20	
	3 Mar.	Colorado	Dole	54	Buchanan	29	
		Connecticut	Dole	41	Buchanan	25	
	5 Mar.	Georgia	Dole	46	Buchanan	21	
		Maine	Dole	53	Buchanan	25	
		Maryland	Dole	48	Alexander	19	
		Masachusetts	Dole	64	Buchanan	17	
		Rhode Island	Dole	40	Buchanan	20	
		Vermont	Dole	57	Buchanan	33	
		7 Mar.	New York <sup>a</sup>	Dole	48	Buchanan	26
		Super Tuesday	12 Mar.	Florida	Dole	60	Buchanan
Louisiana	Dole			59	Buchanan	21	
Mississippi	Dole		51	Buchanan	25		
Oklahoma	Dole		51	Buchanan	21		
Oregon	Dole		56	Buchanan	23		
Tennessee	Dole		51	Buchanan	34		
Texas	Dole		56	Buchanan	22		
Big Ten Tuesday	19 Mar.	Illinois	Dole	65	Buchanan	23	
		Michigan	Dole	51	Buchanan	22	
		Ohio	Dole	66	Buchanan	34	
		Wisconsin	Dole	52	Buchanan	18	
Pacific Tuesday	26 Mar.	California	Dole	66	Forbes	19	
		Nevada	Dole	52	Buchanan	21	
		Washington	Dole	63	Buchanan	18	
Late primaries	23 Apr.	Pennsylvania	Dole	64	Buchanan	10	
		District of Columbia	Dole	76	Buchanan	19	
	7 May	Indiana	Dole	71	Buchanan	13	
		North Carolina	Dole	71	Buchanan	10	
		Nebraska	Dole	76	Buchanan	16	
	14 May	West Virginia	Dole	69	Buchanan	24	
		Arkansas	Dole	76	Buchanan	22	
	21 May	Idaho	Dole	62	Buchanan	8	
		Kentucky	Dole	74	Buchanan	16	
	28 May	Alabama	Dole	75	Buchanan	24	
		Montana	Dole	61	Buchanan	11	
		New Jersey	Dole	82	Buchanan	8	
		New Mexico	Dole	75	Buchanan		

SOURCE: "Guide to the 1996 Republican National Convention," *Congressional Quarterly*, 3 August 1996, 63.

a. New York primary was for election of delegates only.

last hurrahs. Forbes withdrew a couple of days after Super Tuesday and endorsed Dole for the nomination.

Pat Buchanan did well in the early campaign events. He beat Phil Gramm in a pre-season event in Louisiana to become the main conservative candidate. He then finished second in the Iowa caucuses and won the New Hampshire primary (see the listings of caucus and primary results in tables 1.1 [pp. 10-11], 1.2, and 1.3). This led to front-cover treatment by the news-magazines, but greater attention to Buchanan painted him as an extremist. After winning the New Hampshire primary, he faded quickly. Dole had the support of party leaders and Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition in South Carolina, and he defeated Buchanan there on 2 March. Next, Buchanan lost to Dole on all the Junior Tuesday (5 March), Super Tuesday (12 March), and Big Ten Tuesday (19 March) states, with Buchanan's only victory being in the Missouri caucuses on 9 March. Buchanan generally was limited to 25-30 percent of the vote, a percentage that put him near the top when there were nine candidates in the race but that brought him little notice when the race became essentially a Dole-Buchanan contest.

Lamar Alexander, by finishing a strong third to Dole and Buchanan in the Iowa precinct caucuses and the New Hampshire primary, positioned himself to be the mainstream candidate if Dole faltered. But the party establishment backed Dole over Alexander after Buchanan won New Hampshire, and Dole was then able to consolidate his position. Alexander had hoped to do well in southern primaries, but he finished fourth in South Carolina and only third in Georgia and had to drop out of the race.

TABLE 1.2  
1996 REPUBLICAN PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARY TOTALS

Candidate	Percentage of vote	Best showing	
		State	Percentage of vote
Dole	59.1	New Jersey	82.3
Buchanan	21.3	Michigan	33.9
Forbes	10.1	Arizona	33.4
Alexander	3.5	New Hampshire	22.6
Keyes	3.2	New Jersey	6.7
Lugar	.9	Vermont	13.6
Gramm	.5	North Dakota	9.4
Dornan	.3	New Mexico	1.2
Taylor	.1	New Hampshire	1.4
Other	1.0		

SOURCE: "Guide to the 1996 Republican National Convention," *Congressional Quarterly*, 3 August 1996, 64.

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TABLE 1.3  
1996 REPUBLICAN CAUCUS RESULTS

Date	State	Winner	Percent- age	Second place	Percent- age
12 Feb.	Iowa	Dole	26	Buchanan	23
2 Mar.	Wyoming	Dole	40	Buchanan	20
5 Mar.	Minnesota	Dole	41	Buchanan	33
9 Mar.	Missouri	Buchanan	36	Dole	28

SOURCE: *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, various issues, 1996.

Dole was only third in the delegate count at the end of February, with 27 delegates won versus 31 for Buchanan and 57 for Forbes (using figures from *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, 2 March 1996, 577). His victories in South Carolina and in the Wyoming caucuses on 2 March plus the Puerto Rico primary on 3 March started his forward movement. He won in all eight primaries and the Minnesota caucus on 5 March, all seven primaries on 12 March (including delegate-rich Florida and Texas), and all four primaries on 19 March. Victory in California on 26 March guaranteed him enough delegates to be nominated. Dole had been able to use his greater funding in the unusually front-loaded presidential primaries to secure the nomination by the end of March. Yet he had been bloodied in the early primaries, he was nearly broke, and his nomination victory with near-record speed did not signal a united party.

Further perspective on the Republican contenders can be gained by looking at their popularity ratings. In particular, it is useful to compare the "thermometer ratings" of those who fought for the Republican nomination in 1996 or at least considered running. The NES survey asks respondents to rate these candidates on a 0-100 thermometer scale according to how cold or warm they feel toward the candidates. Some candidates were not very well known, and potential candidates would likely have lost some of their popularity had they faced the other candidates and media in the primaries, but the comparisons are still telling.

Table 1.4 (p. 14) shows the preference rankings of ten prominent Republicans based on these thermometer scores.<sup>4</sup> The left half of the table shows results for the full sample, while the right half of the table includes only those respondents who were able to place all ten people on the feeling thermometer scale so that comparisons are guaranteed to be for the same respondents. Colin Powell clearly emerges as the most popular figure, with a mean rating more than 10 points above that of Clinton and 15 points above that of Dole. Indeed, Bob Dole finishes a distant fourth among the Republicans. In fact, Senator Dole may not have been the strongest candidate from the Dole household; Elizabeth Dole ranks a strong second to Powell. Of

course, if Powell or Elizabeth Dole or Kemp had run in the primaries, each would have been subjected to the same kind of negative advertising assault that Bob Dole faced from the Alexander, Buchanan, Forbes, and Clinton forces. Yet it is clear from table 1.4 that the two party nominees were not as exciting to the public as were some other political personalities and, especially, that there were Republicans who were more popular than Bob Dole.

TABLE 1.4  
1996 PREFERENCE RANKINGS (BASED ON THERMOMETER  
MEANS) OF PROMINENT REPUBLICANS AND  
OTHER POLITICAL LEADERS

	Including all respondents' answers			Including answers only of respondents who placed all ten Republicans on the feeling thermometer		
	Mean	Standard deviation	N	Mean	Standard deviation	N
Colin Powell	69.85	19.07	1573	71.74	18.67	705
Elizabeth Dole	60.18	21.18	1567	64.22	21.54	705
Jack Kemp	56.95	20.02	1450	60.63	20.91	705
Bob Dole	52.15	23.38	1682	55.60	23.83	705
Lamar Alexander	50.81	17.27	940	50.47	16.83	705
Steve Forbes	50.35	17.64	1296	51.75	18.44	705
Phil Gramm	49.29	19.16	1123	48.30	20.24	705
Pat Robertson	44.82	22.85	1293	42.19	23.34	705
Pat Buchanan	44.29	21.94	1545	41.14	23.55	705
Newt Gingrich	39.58	26.34	1526	41.40	29.09	705
Bill Clinton	58.82	29.61	1707			
Al Gore	57.67	24.67	1641			
Hillary Clinton	52.27	29.92	1692			
Ross Perot	39.99	23.73	1660			

SOURCE: 1996 National Election Study.

The ratings in table 1.4 are obviously confounded by partisanship. What the table does not show is that Bob Dole was popular only among Republicans. Colin Powell received a higher average rating than did Dole across all three categories of party identification and higher than Clinton among Republicans and Independents. He even posts a strong 68 rating among Democrats—a figure close to Dole's rating among Republicans.

Wrapping up the Republican nomination by the end of March meant that Dole's candidacy received less attention at a point in the campaign when Clinton was ahead in the polls. In addition, Dole was essentially out of prenomination funds by 1 April, yet he had to make it to August before

receiving more money. This time frame was longer than usual because of the front-loaded primaries and the later convention date brought on by the Olympics. Regaining attention would require dramatic moves by Dole—particularly three free publicity moves. First, he surprised everyone in May by announcing that he would step down as Senate majority leader and resign his Senate seat in June. That move brought many public accolades, as leaders praised him for his distinguished career of public service. It also took him out of the line of fire in the Senate, where business had bogged down; the Democrats had not wanted to assist the Dole campaign by helping him build a record of success in legislative output. But resigning from the Senate also took away Dole's public platform. Second, he came out in favor of a 15 percent income tax cut in a manner that was reminiscent of Reagan's support for a tax cut in the 1980 campaign. Dole's stance, however, was seen as overtly polarical because he had not previously been a strong advocate of tax cuts and because the public was still concerned about the budget deficit. Third, Dole surprised everyone by choosing Jack Kemp as his running mate. This move again momentarily energized the Dole campaign, at least until commentators began to point out how the two men had differed on important issues over the years. Meanwhile, Clinton had virtually all of his pre-nomination money available, and he used it on ads and campaigning that cemented his lead in the polls.

The Republican convention came first in 1996 and provided the usual "bump" in the polls in favor of the party. The television networks gave the conventions less coverage than usual, however, because of the lack of surprises. The Democratic convention a few weeks later was equally uneventful, but it gave the Democrats enough publicity to regain the full edge they had in the polls prior to the Republican convention.

#### THE GENERAL ELECTION

The setting of the fall election campaign was a strong economy and no serious crises either domestic or foreign. The Republican campaign mostly emphasized the "character issue," the accumulated charges against Bill Clinton as a person of questionable integrity whose word could not be trusted—charges which continued to plague Clinton in his second term, especially regarding whether he committed perjury in his testimony about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky. By contrast, Dole was depicted as a World War II hero who had proved his leadership in the Senate. Yet Dole's age was a disadvantage (see chapter 4); had he been elected, he would have been the oldest person to take the presidential oath of office (Knox 1996). The Clinton staff targeted married people and women voters, and a combination of the two that became known as "soccer moms," with a series of campaign initiatives regarding "family issues" (Weisberg and Kelly 1997).

Televised presidential debates took place in October between Clinton



TABLE I.5. PRESIDENTIAL VOTES BY STATE, 1996 AND 1992

	1996 Electoral vote		1996 Percentage of popular vote			1992 Percentage of popular vote			Change in Clinton's margin <sup>a</sup>
	Clinton (Dem)	Dole (Rep)	Clinton (Dem)	Dole (Rep)	Perot (Indep)	Clinton (Dem)	Bush (Rep)	Perot (Indep)	
Alabama		9	43	50	6	41	48	11	0
Alaska		3	33	51	11	32	41	27	-9
Arizona	8		47	44	8	37	39	24	5
Arkansas	6		54	37	8	54	36	11	-1
California	54		51	38	7	47	32	21	-2
Colorado		8	44	46	7	40	36	23	-6
Connecticut	8		53	35	10	42	36	22	12
Delaware	3		52	37	10	44	36	21	7
District of Columbia	3		85	9	3	86	9	4	-1
Florida	25		48	42	9	39	41	20	8
Georgia		13	46	47	6	44	43	13	-2
Hawaii	4		57	32	8	49	37	14	13
Idaho		4	34	52	13	29	43	28	-4
Illinois	22		54	37	8	48	35	17	4
Indiana		12	42	47	11	37	43	20	1
Iowa	7		50	40	9	44	38	19	4
Kansas		6	36	54	9	34	39	27	-13
Kentucky	8		46	45	9	45	42	14	-2
Louisiana	9		52	40	7	46	42	12	8
Maine	4		52	31	14	39	31	30	13
Maryland	10		54	38	7	50	36	14	2
Massachusetts	12		51	28	9	48	29	23	4
Michigan	18		52	38	9	44	37	19	7
Minnesota	10		51	35	12	44	32	24	4
Mississippi		7	44	49	6	41	50	9	4
Missouri	11		48	41	10	44	34	22	-3
Montana		3	41	44	14	38	36	26	-5
Nebraska		5	35	54	11	30	47	24	-2
Nevada	4		44	43	9	38	35	27	-2
New Hampshire	4		49	39	10	39	38	23	9
New Jersey	15		54	36	9	43	41	16	16
New Mexico	5		49	42	6	46	38	16	-1
New York	33		59	31	8	50	34	16	12
North Carolina		14	44	49	7	43	44	14	-4
North Dakota		3	40	47	12	32	44	23	5
Ohio	21		47	41	11	40	39	21	5
Oklahoma		8	40	48	11	34	43	23	1
Oregon	7		47	39	9	43	32	25	-3
Pennsylvania	23		49	40	10	45	36	18	0
Rhode Island	4		60	27	11	48	29	23	14
South Carolina		8	44	50	6	40	48	12	2
South Dakota		3	43	46	10	37	41	22	1
Tennessee	11		48	46	6	47	43	10	-2
Texas		32	44	49	7	37	40	22	-2
Utah		5	33	54	10	26	46	29	-1
Vermont	3		53	31	12	46	31	23	7
Virginia		13	45	47	7	41	45	14	2
Washington	11		50	37	9	44	31	24	0
West Virginia	5		52	37	11	49	36	16	2
Wisconsin	11		49	38	10	41	37	22	7
Wyoming		3	37	50	12	34	40	26	-7
Total	379	159	49	41	8	43	38	19	3

a. Values = (1996 Clinton vote - 1996 Dole vote) - (1992 Clinton vote - 1992 Bush vote).

and Dole, after the usual preliminary skirmishes about the inclusion of third-party candidates, timing, and other ground rules. The first debate followed the usual moderator format, the second one involved the two vice-presidential candidates, and the final one used a town-meeting format with questions from the audience. Clinton and Gore did well in the debates and held on to their advantage in the polls.

There was talk of an "October surprise," but the two changes in the campaign in October were different from what that phrase was intended to suggest. First, Republicans began to air campaign commercials that emphasized the importance of retaining a Republican Congress as a check on the Clinton White House, as if they were conceding the presidential race. Second, a scandal broke out about the Clinton campaign's accepting money from foreign contributors (which, if true, would be illegal), and the result was a slight erosion of support for Clinton in the polls. Clinton could still win handily, but not with the landslide required to pull in a Democratic Congress—particularly as the Republican ads played up the need for a Republican Congress.

In the end, Bill Clinton won reelection by a fairly solid margin. He won only 49 percent of the popular vote, but that compared to just 41 percent for Dole and 8 percent for Perot, with the remaining 2 percent split between other minor candidates. As usual, the victor's margin was exaggerated in the Electoral College totals, which broke 379 to 159 for Clinton over Dole (see table 1.5, pp. 16–17).

On the one hand, Clinton's 8 percent margin over the other major-party nominee could be viewed as solid, only a couple of points below the 10-point lead that would usually be considered a landslide, and his 49 percent of the popular vote was well above the 43 percent that he obtained in his 1992 victory. On the other hand, 49 percent is still less than a majority. This "on the one hand, on the other hand" victory margin turns out to be replicated in the individual-level analysis of the vote in the following chapters. The Clinton victory is apparent in every aspect of the analysis, but often with a lack of decisiveness. Clinton may have led in virtually every preelection poll, but there is no indication in the data of true depth to his victory. Furthermore, this weak victory made his situation particularly vulnerable when the Monica Lewinsky affair became public knowledge in 1998.

Clinton was reelected, but Republicans managed to keep down his victory margin enough to maintain their control of Congress. On the Senate side, Republicans increased their majority from 53–47 at the beginning of the 104th Congress to 55–45 at the beginning of the 105th, a solid majority but not filibuster-proof. On the House side, the Republicans lost nine seats, with their majority falling from a 230–204 margin to a 227–207 margin, a majority so slim as to be vulnerable to factional tensions. The Republicans

edged the Democrats in the national congressional vote by a slight 48.9 percent to 48.5 percent margin. This was to be a reelection victory without being a mandate election, confirming the status quo of divided government.

Winning the presidency requires more than deterring strong challengers and maintaining a lead. It requires assembling a strong support coalition. This moves our focus to how reelection plays through at the level of the mass public. How did Clinton appeal successfully to individual voters? And what accounts for the changes since 1992, when an incumbent president was defeated? What is the impact of national forces, such as the reelection of the president, on congressional elections and congressional approval? The chapters that follow explore these important questions.

### Conclusion

Reelection provides the rhythm of democracy, but it is not based on notes from a single instrument. Partisanship, ideology and issues, and candidate factors all share in the orchestration. The continuities and nuances of the reelection of President Clinton and the Republican Congress are discussed in the following chapters, with particular emphasis on comparisons with 1992. The ability of Clinton to get reelected in 1996 regardless of Republican television advertising attacks on his character, stands in marked contrast to Bush's failure to be reelected in 1992 even after his success in the Gulf War. Thus, this is an important comparison of elections if we are to understand the bases of presidential reelection.

At the same time, Clinton's reelection in 1996 was very different from other recent presidential reelections. Ronald Reagan was reelected in 1984 in a landslide over Walter Mondale, as was Richard Nixon in 1972 over George McGovern and Dwight Eisenhower in 1956 over Adlai Stevenson. Most of those elections were marked by popular incumbents, weak challengers, and healthy economies. Although the economy was very healthy in 1996, and the challenger did not prove to be strong, the incumbent was not as popular as a Reagan, a Nixon, or an Eisenhower. The result was reelection but without a majority of the vote.

Overall, we see continued emphasis on the volatility of the electorate and candidate-centered campaigns amid the continuity of reelection. Volatility is tied to disengagement of a large part of the electorate, as shown by decreasing turnout (see Nichols, Kimball, and Beck, chap. 2 in this volume), the loosening of traditional ties to the parties (see Norrander, chap. 9; Stanley and Niemi, chap. 10), and decreasing approval and increasing cynicism in government institutions (see Patterson and Monson, chap. 11). The influence of the media (see Asher and Tomlinson, chap. 8), candidate-centered campaigns, and emphasis on candidate traits in elections for both Congress

(see Mondak, McCurley, and Millman, chap. 12) and the presidency (see Weisberg and Mockabee, chap. 3; Smith, Radcliffe, and Kessel, chap. 4; Mughan and Burden, chap. 7) virtually assure us of volatility in the future. John DiIulio's (1997) argument that the 1996 elections moved even more toward valence politics—politics based on symbols that almost all voters would approve of, such as a strong defense, economic prosperity, decisive leadership, or family values—suggests that our electoral setting is becoming more volatile, rather than less (see also Stokes and DiIulio 1993).

What could reverse the trend of an increasingly volatile electorate, a theme of voting behavior research for the last several decades? Clearly, voter realignment between the two major parties or the introduction of a new party could do the trick, leading to increased turnout, strengthened ties to the newly constituted parties, and renewed confidence in governing institutions. Electoral changes that fundamentally alter candidate-centered campaigns or that are aimed at reducing the high levels of cynicism toward politics may also reverse the trend. Perhaps campaign finance reforms and media innovations could have such an impact, but these possibilities are all for the future.

Along with the volatility of the electorate and the potential for valence issues to result in wide public opinion swings in 1996 came reelection—reelection of Democratic president Bill Clinton and reelection of the Republican Congress. Regardless of the tempo, reelection still provides the steady rhythm of American democracy. The chapters that follow examine in greater detail the themes that combined to produce the reelections of 1996.

## PART I

### The Presidential Election Outcome