

The Disintegration of the New Deal Coalition

Lawrence B. Goodheart

goodhear@uconnvm.uconn.edu

In the normal pattern of off-year elections in the United States since World War II, the president's party can expect to lose three or four Senate seats, as many as two dozen in the House of Representatives, and perhaps a few governorships. The usual explanation for these defeats is that the president's party does not have the benefit of riding into office on his coattails, since there is no national standard bearer in these elections. And in lieu of a parliamentary system, voter discontent with the incumbent executive can be expressed through voting for the opposition party in the Congress. What happened on November 8, 1994, however, is remarkable and defies conventional wisdom about off-year elections.

The Democratic Party suffered a historic defeat. Prior to the election of November 8, 1994, it had a significant legislative majority over the Republicans: in the Senate 56 seats to 44, and in the House 256 seats to 178. Thus in the national election of 1992 the Democrats had captured not only the executive branch but gained majorities in both chambers of the legislature. The 1994 pre-election polls indicated that they would suffer losses, perhaps important ones, but the outcome of the vote in the autumn of 1994 was an unanticipated debacle. In the Senate, the Republicans gained nine seats, outstripping their opponents by 53 positions to 47.

Robert Dole of Kansas, former minority leader of the Senate for eight years, replaced George Mitchell, the Democrat from Maine, as majority leader. Dole became now the senior spokesman of his party and well placed to gain the presidential candidacy of the Republicans in 1996. Two extreme conservatives, Jesse A. Helms of North Carolina and Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, will respectively chair the powerful Senate committees on foreign relations and armed services. And Senator Alphonse D'Amato of New York, the new chairman of the banking committee, has pledged to reopen the hearings on the Whitewater affair, the tangled finances of which can only further embarrass the Clintons.

Although Massachusetts voters returned Edward Kennedy to the Senate for his fifth term, it was his closest and most expensive race, costing his campaign almost 8

million dollars. The nearly 17 million dollars Oliver North spent in losing to Senator Charles Robb of Virginia (son-in-law of Lyndon B. Johnson) had less to do with the former colonel's conservative credentials than to the continuing contention between him and the ever popular Ronald Reagan over responsibility for the Iran-Contra affair. Nor did the 25 million dollars that Michael Huffington spent in the most expensive election contest enable him to defeat liberal Dianne Feinstein, although the contest was unexpectedly close. Feinstein expended almost 11 million dollars for the privilege of continuing to hold California's Senate seat.

The dimension of the Democratic defeat in the House, moreover, is extraordinary. The Democrats plunged from 256 seats to 204, losing 52 positions or 20.3% of their previous posts. In contrast, the Republicans leaped from 178 seats to 230, gaining 52 spots or 29.2% of their former slots. Whereas before the election the Democrats had a sizeable majority of 78 over their rivals, after the vote Republicans commanded a 26 member edge. (The sole independent, Bernard Sanders, was re-elected from Vermont). Indeed, not since the popularity of Dwight D. Eisenhower's presidency at the end of the Korean War in 1954, forty years ago, have Republicans held a majority in the House. And not since 1946, forty-eight years ago, in the post-World War II doldrums of Harry Truman's presidency in 1946, has the Grand Old Party had such numbers in the lower chamber.

Thomas Foley of Washington, the Speaker of the House, had the dubious distinction of being the first in that position to be voted out of office since 1862, 132 years ago. His outspoken Republican successor, Newt Gingrich of Georgia, has pledged within the first 100 days of the new Congress to enact a new "Contract with America," a right-wing reversal of liberal legislation.

The stunning upset in the House, on a scale not seen in almost a half a century, was accompanied by further repudiation of the Democratic Party. In the gubernatorial races Republicans gained eleven positions and now control the executive in eight of the nine most populous states, a decided advantage for the 1996 presidential election. Although in Florida Jeb Bush lost to Democratic governor Lawton Chiles, in Texas his brother George Bush, Jr., ousted Ann Richards, whose acerbic barbs had often been aimed at his father, the former president. Most significantly, George Pataki upset Mario Cuomo, who sought a fourth term as Democratic governor of New York. The relatively unknown Pataki, sponsored by Senator Alphonse D'Amato, may well have extinguished the political career of one of the liberals' leading lights. And in the critical state of California, Republican incumbent Pete Wilson denied Kathleen Brown the opportunity to be the third member of her family to gain the governorship. Wilson's conservative credentials included strong support for capital punishment and Proposition 187, which voters endorsed 59% to 41% and would deny many state benefits to illegal aliens.

The scale of the Republican triumph is further documented in the results for state legislature. The GOP won control of both houses in eighteen states; the Democrats

have similar dominance in nineteen states. In a dozen states both chambers are split. (Kansas has a nonpartisan, unicameral legislature). Not since the origins of the New Deal, sixty years ago, have Republicans achieved parity in the state legislatures. In addition, the havoc wreaked upon Democrats is evident in that for all 435 seats of the House of Representatives, one-third of the Senate slots and 36 of 50 gubernatorial spots, not a single sitting Republican was sacked.

What is the explanation for the Democratic debacle of 8 November 1994? In part opposition to the present administration and its policies was responsible. For example, 50% of voters cited disapproval of President Clinton's job and 24% credit opposition to Democratic programs as the reason for the Republican resurgence. Only 12% indicated that approval of the GOP's agenda accounted for the outcome. Alienated Americans voted more against the Democrats than for the Republicans. Indeed, only 38.7% of the eligible electorate cast ballots, but that has been the standard turnout in off-year elections for the last two decades. Apathy and cynicism have undoubtedly flourished over the last twenty years since the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Thus some 32% of voters regarded the outcome of this election as a new era, while fully 63% were resigned to more unsatisfactory politics as usual.

President Clinton's performance has been found wanting. Elected with 43% of the vote in the three-way race of 1992, he lacked a popular mandate to govern. He benefited from the discontent with the economic performance of the Bush administration, but in turn 57% of the electorate on November 8, 1994 still found the economy not to their liking and presumably voted accordingly. A centrist who valued compromise and consensus, Clinton appeared to lack conviction and wavered on many issues from his own draft record and gays in the military to foreign policy on Bosnia and Haiti. Like former president Jimmy Carter, Clinton was a relatively unknown governor of a southern state who lacked national experience and campaigned against big government. Once in the oval office, he appeared inept, if not adrift, at the national helm.

Nonetheless, Clinton achieved important legislation in reducing the budget deficit and on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). He can also take credit for progress in the Middle East with the rapprochement between Israel and Jordan and in at least temporarily defusing the crisis over nuclear weapons in North Korea. Yet, national health care, his top agenda item, was hopelessly tied up in the very legislative limbo and interest group intrigue, despite a Democratic Congress, that he had promised to unravel.

Clinton's personal image as the small town, fair haired boy who overcame a difficult family life to become a Rhodes scholar, marry his Yale sweetheart, and become president quickly became tarnished. The Whitewater hearings revealed old time political cronyism and dubious financial deals that implicated both Clintons, notably making his prominent wife, Hillary, appear manipulative and conniving.

Hillary Rodham Clinton's effort to transcend the passive role of First Lady has been received with similar resentment to that which greeted her New Deal counterpart, Eleanor Roosevelt. Nor did right-wing commentators, including Rush Limbaugh and the phenomenon of talk radio, relent in marking Clinton with a scarlet "A" for the alleged affairs with Jennifer Flowers and Paula Jones, even though Mrs. Clinton stood by her man. The caricature of Clinton as "Bubba," the southern yokel, took on the insidious quality of character assassination. The sensationalism and explicitness of the mass media today would have, for example, soon forestalled the public careers of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., for their extra-marital highjinks as happened when reporters snared an unwary Gary Hart with Donna Rice in a romantic tryst in the mid-1980s.

Yet, more than the performance, personality and policies of President Clinton account for the Democratic debacle of November 8, 1994. The fundamental explanation is historical and concerns the disintegration of the New Deal coalition. The national elections of 1980 and 1994 document devastating Democratic defeats. Ronald Reagan's tremendous victory in 1980 with 51% of the popular vote to 41% for Jimmy Carter and the remainder to John Anderson marked the supremacy of the conservative wing of the Republican Party as well as the rightward tilt of the nation. What an astonishing contrast with Lyndon B. Johnson's humiliation of Barry Goldwater and the repudiation of his conservative manifesto in 1964 in the worst defeat ever suffered by a major candidate up to that time. Johnson not only won 61% of the popular vote, but Democrats dominated the House of Representatives 295 to 140 and the Senate 68 to 32, preparing the way for the zenith of post-war liberalism, the Great Society.

The 1980 election was a benchmark in the political landscape. The Republicans emerged, just sixteen years after Goldwater's defeat, resurgent and right-wing. Purged of its northeastern liberals -- Nelson Rockefeller, Jacob Javits, Charles Goodell, and Edward Brooke -- the GOP was now an ideological party with a geographic base in the postwar sunbelt and suburbia. Not only did Reagan carry 44 states, but Republicans gained 12 Senate spots and defeated a host of liberal Democrats, including George McGovern, the party's left-wing standard bearer in 1972. The GOP enjoyed a 53 to 47 seat majority in the Senate, a margin not seen since 1928, and they narrowed the Democratic lead in the House by 33 seats.

The 1994 election revived the Reagan Revolution. In 1980 conservatives captured the executive and upper house; in 1994 they again won the Senate by the same 53-47 numbers. They also dominated the House, controlled governorships in the most important states, and achieved parity in the state legislatures. Not since the 1920s, before the era of Roosevelt, have Republicans been so dominant or a conservative agenda so popular.

In contrast, significant social changes have rendered the New Deal coalition obsolete. The extraordinary events of the Great Depression and World War II

provided President Franklin D. Roosevelt with the occasion to fashion the modern presidency and to forge a new political alignment. As principal policy planner, Roosevelt shaped a welfare state with his New Deal and after 1939 commanded a warfare state to fight aggressive dictatorships abroad. An energetic, engaging personality who effectively used the new mass media of radio, he made American politics into his image during an unprecedented period of four terms in office.

The Great Depression, the worst economic crisis in the republic's history, led to a popular rejection of the passive presidency and laissez-faire ideology associated with the Republican regime of the 1920s. Through pragmatic policies, Roosevelt brought inside the political establishment an uneasy alliance of former outsiders who benefited from the expanded social services of his domestic programs. They included organized labor, ethnic whites and the urban bosses, white Southerners and blacks.

The Wagner Labor Relations Act of 1935, which legalized the right of workers to collective bargaining, secured staunch support by grateful unions. The well-oiled political machines of the urban bosses and Democratic affinity for ethnic whites added Italians, Poles, Jews and the diverse diaspora of southern and eastern Europe to the Irish vote. Bitter memories of the Civil War and Reconstruction kept southern whites in the fold; their sympathy for state's rights was checked by abundant federal largesse such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, agricultural subsidies, and government job creation. African Americans in a historic transition abandoned the party of Abraham Lincoln and turned to the New Deal as the best hope to alleviate their plight.

Roosevelt's New Deal was echoed in Harry Truman's "Fair Deal," John F. Kennedy's "New Frontier," and Lyndon B. Johnson's "Great Society." Republican Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and Richard M. Nixon accepted the social welfare state, Keynesian economics, and the imperial presidency as facts of life. Even in his campaign against "big government," Ronald Reagan, a former Democrat, paid homage to Roosevelt's vision and political skill. For two-thirds of a century, Roosevelt's remarkable legacy shaped the presidency and politics itself.

The New Deal coalition, however, could not last. In the national election year of 1968 the quagmire of the Vietnam War made the vulnerability of the Democratic Party apparent. Eugene McCarthy, the enigmatic senator from Minnesota, led the dissent against President Johnson's leadership of the Vietnam War. In a moral crusade with enthusiastic backing on college campuses, the professorial McCarthy scored an unexpected victory in the New Hampshire primary that March by running even with the President, who subsequently dropped out of the race. Mounting a more conventional campaign, the charismatic Robert Kennedy, then senator from New York, won the California primary in June and seemed assured to win the presidential nod. The assassinations of Kennedy and Martin Luther King,

Jr., within two months of each other that summer, however, created a sense of public apprehension and brought confusion to the political process.

McCarthy's momentum faded. In a failed effort at party unity, he reluctantly endorsed Vice President Humbert H. Humphrey, a fellow Minnesotan and liberal, for president. The loquacious Humphrey was unable, however, to extricate himself from his former support for the Vietnam War. The riotous Democratic convention in August, with Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago directing the police to attack anti-war demonstrators in the street, revealed a fatal fragmentation among the party's liberals. Johnson dropped out, McCarthy became inactive, Kennedy was dead, and Humphrey was not credible, as Richard M. Nixon's phoenix-like comeback in 1968 showed. Four years later President Nixon delivered the *coup de grace* to Democratic liberals by crushing the idealistic George McGovern, senator from South Dakota, in an even worse manner than Johnson had beaten Goldwater. McGovern, champion of the counterculture, won only the seventeen electoral votes of Massachusetts and the District of Columbia, and garnered a meager 37.5% of the popular vote. Ever since, Democrats have scurried to the political center and beyond, afraid, as a cautious Michael Dukakis was in the 1988 campaign, to utter the "L" word --liberal.

The loss of liberal leadership was only one affliction for the New Deal coalition in 1968. A pugnacious George Wallace, the defiant segregationist governor of Alabama, exploited the white backlash against blacks to unglue the racial amalgam holding the Democrats together. Despite even Roosevelt's efforts, the alliance between southern Democrats and conservative Republicans was firmly anchored upon the shared values of states' rights, laissez faire, small town values, and the racial status quo. As early as 1948, the Dixiecrats (States'Rights Democratic Party), with then Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina at their head, declared secession from President Harry Truman's Fair Deal and its support of black civil rights.

Wallace's timing was better than the Dixiecrats. With the legal end of Jim Crow during the mid-1960s, many white southerners awoke from their historical nightmare of the Civil War to confront the new political realities of the Second Reconstruction. They cast off the Democratic Party, now the champion of black equality, to embrace the attractive conservatism of the Republicans, no longer the party of Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant. Former southern Democrats such as Strom Thurman himself joined the Republican party and gave new meaning to the term Solid South. After four long, hot summers of ghetto riots, many northern whites also expressed their own racial animosity as well as disdain for anti-war protesters by voting in large numbers for Wallace's American Independent Party in the primaries. In September 1968 Wallace's popularity in national polls stood at 21%, a mere 7% less than Humphrey's. Although crippled by an assassin's bullet at the height of his appeal, Wallace

showed that his blunt attack on liberal values extended beyond the borders of the old Confederacy.

The assimilation of ethnic whites into the mainstream of society weakened their support for the welfare state. Social mobility and suburbanization lessened Democratic loyalty among the descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants as well as Irish Americans. Mass movement from the city to the suburbs also eroded the urban political machines and weakened the clout of once powerful Democratic bosses. In the 1994 election, for example, Roman Catholics voted closely for both parties --52% for the Democrats and 48% for the Republicans. Opposition to abortion and homosexual rights joined Roman Catholics and orthodox Jews with Protestant fundamentalists in an alliance unthinkable a few decades ago. The term "Reagan Democrats" was coined to refer particularly to those ethnic whites who deserted their former allegiance to vote Republican in 1980 and 1984.

Jews remain overwhelmingly Democratic, voting 78% Democratic to 22% Republican in 1994, reflecting their suspicion of an antisemitic bias in the latter party. Jews were long the victim of restrictive quotas in education and employment in the United States. As late as 1960, for example, the medical school of Yale University still set a quota on the number of Jewish students. Nevertheless, Jews as well as Asian Americans now stand to suffer from affirmative action programs, especially in higher education. Numerous strains also trouble the traditional black-Jewish alliance for civil rights, which had joined the two groups in the Democratic party.

Furthermore, the current politics of identity based on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation have obscured class issues, frustrated economic reform, and fragmented progressive politics. The celebration of "multiculturalism" and the promotion of "politically correct" speech may not lead to the disuniting of America, as historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., fears, but it has divided Democrats. At the moment America's cultural wars have only provided common political ground for the opposition of neoconservatives. People whose ethnic background and economic agenda would have in an earlier era made them New Dealers now finds Patrick Buchanan, Alphonse D'Amato, Irving Kristol, and Norman Podhoretz pillars of neoconservatism.

African Americans remain the stalwarts of all Democrats, voting regularly at a 90% rate for the party. Of 38 blacks in Congress in 1994, only one, Gary Franks of Connecticut, is a Republican. Yet the black caucus, the most left-wing group in Congress, is alienated from white Democrats who have moved rightward. From the beginning of his presidential campaign, Bill Clinton has distanced himself from the Reverend Jesse Jackson and his impassioned advocacy on behalf of "The Rainbow Coalition," America's dispossessed. Clinton and the black caucus have been at odds over the death penalty, policy toward Haiti, and the President's revocation of Lani

Ganier's controversial appointment to a federal post. The popularity of Minister Louis Farrakhan of the Nation of Islam, the attractiveness of Afrocentrism, and the vocal black antisemitism of a Professor Leonard Jeffries and Khalid Abdul Muhammad indicate the rise of black separatism, a historical response within the African American community during times when the possibility for racial intergration appears dim. The publication of *The Bell Curve* (1994) by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein, a leading conservative theorist and a Harvard psychologist, with its argument by whites for the innate intellectual inferiority of blacks, is further indication of the intense racial polarization in the United States.

Another faction of the New Deal coalition, the labor vote, has become less influential, if not problematic. With the decline of smokestack industries in the Northeast and Midwest, the number of unionized workers as a percentage of the total labor force has shrunk from 25% in 1950 to 15% in 1994. Nor can the AFL-CIO always deliver the vote. After President Reagan broke the strike of Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) in his first term, organized labor made a concerted effort in 1984 to elect his Democratic challenger, former vice-president Walter Mondale, a Minnesota liberal. Not only did Reagan win an astounding 525 electoral votes, the most ever recorded, but 50% of union members voted for him. And the contention over the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) during 1992-1993 found the AFL-CIO in awkward opposition to a Democratic president who was supported by Republicans and "big business." Lane Kirkland, the union leader, promised retaliation. But how? Democrats now shy away from "big labor," and Republicans are as anti-union as they have ever been.

In conclusion, the elections of 1980 and 1994 taken together document the disintegration of the New Deal coalition. The desperate circumstances of the Great Depression and the attraction of the welfare state allowed Franklin D. Roosevelt to forge an uneasy union of former outsiders to the political order. Strom Thurmond in 1948, Barry Goldwater in 1964, and especially George Wallace in 1968, however, foreshadowed the new conservative majority of the 1980s and beyond. Significant change in the political culture occurred over the last sixty years and especially since 1968. Much of the white electorate became disaffected from its former allegiance to the New Deal and its social welfare policies. American voters currently identify themselves as: 45% moderate, 35% conservative, and only 15% liberal. Burdened with personal debt, frustrated with a decline in real earnings, frightened of job layoffs, fearful of crime in the streets, alarmed at black rage, confused about cultural change, cynical about politics, and confounded about the Vietnam War, more voters support a conservative agenda. A sense of resentment has pushed people rightward. A not dissimilar phenomenon has occurred recently in France, Germany, Italy, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.

The future of the once dominant Democratic party is unclear. Clinton's victory in 1992 appears aberrant; it was not the coming to power of a pragmatic, centrist party

with a new generation of leadership. The momentous Republican victory of 1994, particularly in the House, is all the more pivotal compared to President Reagan's landslide victory ten years earlier with 58.8% of the popular vote in which Democrats still retained 253 seats to the Republican's 182, a 71 member edge. A political cartoon sums up the current state of the Democratic party. A donkey reclines upon a psychoanalyst's couch and asks, "Who am I?" Time will tell.