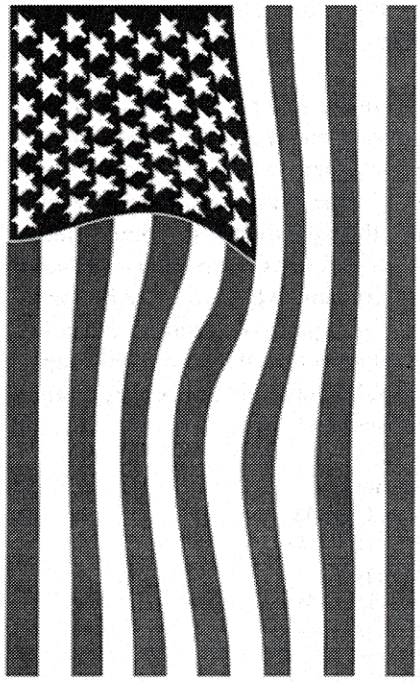

The Status-Quo Election: Introduction

By Everett C. Ladd

In the 35 pages that follow, we bring together a rich and diverse collection of information on Americans' voting decisions last November 5. The reader will find these data and commentary helpful, we hope, in reaching a fuller understanding of where the US now finds itself politically.

Since the balloting we have often been told that it was a "status-quo election." For once, the conventional wisdom is correct. But the extent to which there was continuity goes well beyond what is commonly understood.

It was obviously a status-quo election in that it left control of the government essentially unchanged. The Republicans retained their majorities in both the House and Senate—the first time they managed to do so for consecutive terms since 1928. They picked up two seats in the Senate, bringing their majority to 55-45, but lost House seats, leaving their margin in the lower chamber at 22 (with two Texas run-offs not concluded when we went to press). While this was happening, Mr. Clinton won re-election and did so by a margin similar to the one he gained four years earlier.

The election's status-quo character was reaffirmed more profoundly as the country stayed on course ideologically. Over the last two decades, the US has undergone a profound philosophical realignment, which centers around changing views of government. Over this span, Americans became more skeptical about government's efficacy, less inclined to agree when a politician approaches them saying, in effect, "We have a terrible problem, and this new federal program is what's needed." It's certainly true that many people continue to want government to do many things. This acknowledged, more government is a vastly harder sell now than it was from the Depression through the Great Society. The health care debate of 1993-94 evinced important elements of this shift. It began centering on one question: Do we have major problems, especially involving escalating costs and coverage? The emphatic answer was (and still is) yes. In the later stages, though, the debate focused on a different question: Do you favor extended governmental management of the health care system? And to this, the answer was no. The Democrats won the debate when it focused on the first question and lost when it shifted to the second.

There hasn't been, since 1994, any movement back toward a "more government" stance. I've examined a wide range of questions charting the public's assessment of government performance, and its preferences as to how much government it wants, asked in late 1994 and early 1995, and then again in 1996. And, I've been unable to find an instance where sentiment shifted significantly. For example, asked "Would you say you favor smaller government with fewer services, or larger government with many services?," 63 percent of respondents chose the smaller government option in a *Los Angeles Times* poll taken in January 1995, and the exact same proportion chose it in an ABC News/*Washington Post* poll of August 1996.

The surveys taken November 5 of voters leaving polling stations around the country showed them remaining in a generally conservative mood. Asked by Voter News Service (VNS) which was closer to their views, that government "should do more to solve problems," or that it is "doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals," respondents chose the latter by a 52-41 percent margin. Just 18 percent of those participating in the VNS exit poll said they thought the new federal welfare law cuts spending too deeply, while 39 percent said it doesn't cut deeply enough, and 37 percent thought it about right. President

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Clinton wound up signing the legislation, of course, but it's still striking that only 25 percent of those voting for him told VNS that the legislation cuts too much, while 27 percent of them said it doesn't trim enough.

Finally, the status-quo character of the November 5 balloting is evident in voters' judgments about Bill Clinton. They first elected him four years ago unenthusiastically, indeed with great doubts, and then re-elected him this year with much the same concerns and uncertainty. Asked in the VNS exit poll whether they considered Mr. Clinton "honest and trustworthy," respondents replied by a 54-41 percent margin that they did *not*. Twenty percent of those voting to re-elect him said they didn't consider him honest and trustworthy. By a margin of 60 to 33 percent, the exit poll respondents said they believed Mr. Clinton hadn't told the truth "in explaining Whitewater and other matters under investigation." The poll finding that most strikingly reflects the reluctance with which Americans re-elected the President is that 48 percent of all voters, and 23 percent of those giving Mr. Clinton their ballots, said they would have voted for Colin Powell had he been the Republican nominee; just 36 percent indicated they would have voted for Clinton had Powell been the Republican choice.

Many analysts have described the 1996 presidential vote as evidence of the economy, or issues, trumping character. Now it is true that 58 percent of those polled by VNS said that the candidates' "position on the issues" was the more important factor in their presidential decision, while just 38 percent indicated that "personal character and values" loomed larger. But one can't conclude from numbers like these that character mattered little.

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Having decided to vote for him, Mr. Clinton's backers more or less had to say that issues were more important than character in determining their vote—and they did say this by a margin of 82 to 14 percent. But many Clinton voters gave him only tepid support—because of their concerns about his character. And many others who might have voted to re-elect him—at a time when the economy was booming, and given the Republican nominee was unable to inspire—either voted reluctantly for Mr. Dole or stayed home. The end result—re-electing the President by a modest margin, while expressing grave reservations about him, and constraining him with a Republican majority in both houses of the Congress—may seem peculiar. But it makes considerable sense given the alternatives voters were presented.

One area where the 1996 story was *not* one of continuity is voter turnout. The number voting was *down* by an extraordinary 9 million—even though the number of people eligible to vote had increased substantially. It's likely that the 1996 turnout rate was the lowest since mass popular balloting was introduced in the 1830s. The 1924 election is technically the one with the lowest turnout, but it was the first contest following the introduction of women's sufferage—which doubled the voting age population. It took many women a little while to assume their new right—making the 1924 turnout an abberation. The magnitude of the 1996 drop-off (see the table) is in fact unprecedented. We return to the question of why voter turnout declined so much in 1996 in our coverage on page 49.