

# Stability in Vote Choice Characterizes the 1996 American Voter

by Kenneth Dautrich and Jennifer Dineen

Many observers of the 1996 presidential campaign continue to debate the question of volatility in voter intentions during the race. The tracking poll data summarized on pp. 58-59, show that while Clinton led Dole throughout the campaign, changes in the "gap" or "margin" between them often varied from one day to the next. A focus on changes in the horse-race margin often led commentators, pollsters, and pundits to characterize the 1996 American voter as unsettled and undecided about vote choices.

“ *It appears that there was no real roller-coaster ride in vote intentions, as many observers of this election have argued. The volatility was more an artifact of sampling error, than an indication of vote choice instability. Most voters made candidate choices early on, and, for the most part, stuck with those choices.* ”

In fact, we are hard-pressed to find any significant change in vote intentions from October 1 through election day based on tracking poll data. In examining the daily estimates for the horse race within each of four tracking polls (Gallup, Reuters, Hotline, and ABC), we find, at the 95% confidence level, few significant differences in the levels of Clinton's, Dole's, or Perot's support. While we agree that to the eye there is daily fluctuation, a comparative assessment of the tracking polls shows that the direction and magnitude of daily movement in vote choice appears to vary quite randomly from one tracking poll to the next.

For example, in early October when the Gallup margin narrowed, the Reuters gap grew. At mid-month when Gallup showed a closing of the gap, Reuters saw the gap widening. Also in mid-October, the Hotline's widening gap is offset by the ABC News poll's closing of the margin. One would logically expect real changes in the electorate to produce consistent changes across the tracking polls. This lack of consistency seriously weakens the volatility argument.

## A Panel Study Approach

An alternative method of measuring voter volatility is a panel design where the same voters are reinterviewed at different points in time. Panel studies are better able to track change since the responses of the same individual may be compared over time. If an individual changes, we are certain that the change is real rather than an artifact of sampling!<sup>1</sup>

The findings of a national voter panel study conducted by the Media Studies Center and the Roper Center during the 1996 campaign helped us assess volatility in vote choice from the pre-New Hampshire primary period through election day. The study contacted registered voters at four time-points in 1996: early February before the New Hampshire primary, early September after the Democratic convention, mid-October after the last presidential debate, and early November right after the presidential election.

A total of 512 voters were interviewed at each of these four points in time. At each point, voters were asked about their presidential vote choices. Respondents at the last three time-points were also asked about their voting intentions in their local congressional races. These data allowed us to trace individual-level changes in presidential and congressional vote choice, and split-ticket vote intentions, throughout the 1996 campaign.

## Presidential Vote Choice

As shown in Table 1, panel respondents exhibited remarkable overall stability in vote intentions for Clinton and Dole from early September to election day. Forty-nine percent supported Clinton at all three points, while Dole's support very modestly improved (36%, 38%, and 39%). From February to September, one sees only the expected reduction in the undecided vote and increased support for both Clinton and Dole.

Furthermore, over the longer time span—from February to election day—individual-level change in presidential vote choice for the two major candidates was also found to be minimal. While a clear and expected pattern of "firming up" support for Clinton and Dole occurred between the primaries and the national party conventions, early sup-

**Table 1**  
**Presidential Vote Choice:**  
**No Change in Overall Distributions in**  
**Campaign's Closing Months**

Vote Choice	February	September	October	November
Clinton	34%	49%	49%	49%
Dole	27%	36%	38%	39%
Perot	15%	7%	6%	7%
Other	3%	1%	1%	2%
Undecided	20%	7%	6%	4%
(N)	(512)	(512)	(512)	(512)

porters of the two main candidates remained decisively loyal.

Table 2 shows that voters who supported either Clinton or Dole at an ear-

## Polls and the Election

lier time point were very likely to continue to support that candidate later on. For example, 90% of February Clinton supporters and 89% of February Dole backers said they wound up voting for their candidates on election day. During the last three weeks of the campaign (mid-October to election day) fully 93% of both Clinton and Dole supporters remained loyal to their candidate.

Table 2 also shows the smaller group of Perot voters to be much less consistent. Only 21% of February Perot voters actually voted for him on election day, while fully 70% of his October supporters did so. These results invite a totally different kind of analysis, not attempted here.

**Table 2**  
**Clinton and Dole Backers Stayed With Their Man**

Interview Points	(N)	% Staying with Vote Choice of...		
		Clinton	Dole	Perot
February/Election Day	(512)	90%	89%	21%
February/September	(512)	88%	83%	23%
September/October	(512)	92%	90%	50%
October/Election Day	(512)	93%	93%	70%

### Congressional Vote Choice

The higher visibility of the presidential candidates may well have contributed to the greater stability observed in vote choice for president as compared to that of congressional candidates. Indeed, Table 3 shows that House candidate selection did in fact occur later in the campaign than presidential selection. In early September, the generic congressional vote intention stood at 36% for the Republican candidate and 35% for the Democratic candidate, with 28% undecided. Actual voting on election day, as reported by each Party's panel supporters, stood at 46% for Democratic candidates and 46% for Republican candidates.

**Table 3**  
**Some Late Congressional Vote Choice Decisions**

Vote Choice	September	October	November
Democratic candidate	35%	38%	46%
Republican candidate	36%	38%	46%
Undecided/Not vote	28%	22%	6%
Other	1%	2%	2%
(N)	(512)	(512)	(512)

Table 4, however, shows that the vast majority of voters who selected a party's Congressional candidate at one point in time stayed with that candidate through election day. Approximately 4-in-5 voters who picked either the Republican or the Democratic

**Table 4**  
**Still, Overall Stability in Congressional Vote Choice**

Interview Points	(N)	% Staying with Vote Choice of...	
		Democratic	Republican
September/November	(512)	83%	86%
September/October	(512)	81%	81%
October/November	(512)	85%	90%

candidate back in early September told us they voted for that party's candidate on November 5. Close to 9-in-10 exhibited the same consistency from mid-October through election day.

### Stability in Party Identification

Party identification has been described as an independent, stable force in American voting behavior.<sup>2</sup> Many observers have used party ID not only to explain long-term stability in the electoral system, but also to discover broader attitudes which can result in a significant influence on the vote.<sup>3</sup> Decade-long shifts in party allegiance have often indicated system realignments to scholars. The stability of this measure has even led some election pollsters to adjust ("weight") scientific samples to reflect pre-determined considerations of the partisan composition of the electorate. Party ID is thus considered a good benchmark from which to assess vote intentions during a campaign.

Tables 5 and 6 show, however, that during the 1996 campaign, party identification in the national voter panel was, in fact, found to be less stable than vote intentions. That is, voters were more likely to remain allegiant to either Clinton or Dole than they were to either the Democratic or Republican parties—a remarkable finding given the conventional wisdom about partisan support.

For example, while 93% of both Clinton and Dole supporters stayed with their candidates from mid-October through election day, only about 85% of self-described Democrats and Republicans remained loyal to their party in the same time frame. Even in the longer term (February through election day), stability in candidate support for Clinton (90%) and Dole (89%) outpaced stability in partisan support for the Democratic (84%) and Republican (88%) parties.

The fact that vote intentions during the 1996 campaign remained more stable than partisan attitudes suggests a need for reexamination of the causal relationship between party identity and candidate choice in contemporary electoral behavior.

**Table 5**  
**Stability in Overall Party Preferences**

Party Identification	February	September	October	November
Democrat	37%	34%	39%	37%
Republican	35%	35%	38%	37%
Independent	24%	29%	17%	23%
Other/DK	4%	2%	6%	3%
(N)	(512)	(512)	(512)	(512)

**Table 6**  
**But Considerable Instability in Individuals' Partisan Identification**

Interview Points	(N)	% Continuing to Identify as a...		
		Democrat	Republican	Independent
February/Election Day	(512)	84%	88%	56%
February/September	(512)	76%	83%	65%
September/October	(512)	85%	86%	47%
October/Election Day	(512)	85%	86%	71%

**Conclusion**

Despite the introduction of Jack Kemp to the Republican ticket, the national conventions, two presidential debates, a vice-presidential debate, the Dick Morris debacle, the 96-hour Dole blitz, significant attention to campaign finance improprieties on the part of the Democrats, a 15% tax cut proposal, and millions of dollars in political advertisements, neither the tracking poll data nor the Media Studies Center/Roper Center panel data showed any significant volatility in vote choice for either the presidential or congressional candidates during the course of the 1996 campaign.

It appears that there was no real roller-coaster ride in vote intentions, as many observers of this election have argued. The volatility was more an artifact of sampling error, than an indication of vote choice instability. Most voters made candidate choices early on, and, for the most part, stuck with those choices. The desire for a good story about changes in the electorate might in some instances have overshadowed good judgment in the evaluation of tracking polls.

**Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> D.T. Campbell and J.C. Stanley, *Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963).
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Warren E. Miller and J. Merrill Shanks, *The New American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
- <sup>3</sup> Morris P. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981).



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