

The “New Democratic Party:” Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council’s Road to the Center

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Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, through a language of personal responsibility, centrist members of the Democratic National Party (DNC) overhauled the party in order to break the streak of Republican control in the White House. Beginning with the Nixon presidential campaign of 1968, the crucial support of the Middle American “Silent Majority” was pushed rightward to Republicans. Playing largely on fear and resentment, Republicans successfully conveyed liberal ideology as a threat to Middle American values to which the white, affluent suburban lifestyle was inextricably linked. Thus, the term “liberalism” was transformed into a “dirty” word in American politics while the party who stood for it became similarly viewed as an emblematic enemy of the suburban-based, hardworking, high-striving, and most of all, self-characterized average American family. The dismal showings of George McGovern in 1972 and Walter Mondale in 1984 spurred a schism in the Democratic Party with many seeking to reform both its image and platform in order to make it more appealing to that untapped middle majority. Although faring better at the polls, in 1988, Democrats continued to appear weak. Plagued by Republican attacks and a series of strategic missteps, Vice President George W. Bush soundly defeated then-Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis for the third consecutive Republican bid for the White House.

Following this defeat, a group of prominent Democrats sought to shift the focus and national reputation of their party. Thus, the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) was established. With future President Bill Clinton at the helm, the DLC promoted a more moderate and centrist

version of the Democratic Party. Focusing on messages of personal responsibility, individual choice, and equal opportunity, “New Democrats” effectively shifted their party’s image out-of-touch excessive liberalsⁱ to a party that could represent the Middle American with fiscal conservatism and moral openness. This winning combination of rhetoric and policy positions led to Clinton's ability to gain the center and win back the White House for Democrats in 1992 and 1996.

Though contention among Democrats had been building over the preceding decade, the Dukakis’ defeat in the 1988 presidential elections proved to be the terminus before which the Democratic Party faced its transformation. Riding the multi-tiered wave of Reagan popularity the ‘80s economic boom and the ending of the Cold War, circumstances aligned for Vice President and Republic nominee George H.W. Bush to portray himself as the rightful successor to ascend to the presidency. With all these components, Democrats had a hard case to make in an environment that was already fairly pro-Republican and hostile to Democrats. Utilizing such divisive issues as capital punishment, crime control, family values and personal character, through television commercials and harsh rhetoric, the Republican campaign effectively placed Democratic nominee Michael Dukakis on the unpopular side of just about everything.

Since the early 1970s, Democrats appeared exceedingly liberal, identified as such because of positions against harsh punishment for drug and criminal offenders, for soft diplomacy over a hard-lined military approach in foreign policy, and, perhaps most importantly, as crusaders of the welfare state. Thus, as advocates of said issues, many “average” Americans perceived the liberal Democrats as a threat to their own achievements as well as their physical and financial security.ⁱⁱ As Republicans promoted a *fair* deal to allow all citizens the chance to work hard and succeed, Dukakis said, “to every American, you are a full shareholder in our dream.”ⁱⁱⁱ This notion

subconsciously suggested that the American Dream was simply a given right, not a privilege contingently based upon a promise to work hard and contribute equally to your society.

Moreover, in a post-civil rights movement America, in which whites believed racial barriers had been banished, Dukakis' language acknowledged sustained white privilege that ran principally counter to the pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps ideology of the American middle.

Intertwined with controversial and long-resented programs like welfare, Democrats came to represent a devaluation of both the American dream and the ethos that proclaimed if one works hard and adheres to the rules of society, he is entitled to achieve happiness complete with nuclear family, green lawn, and, most importantly, economic stability. Notions of social welfare and government assistance threatened the values and traditions that were basic to white suburban exceptionalism, complemented, of course, by a high price tag that would be passed along to voters.

Beyond economics, crime served as another issue the Bush campaign used to strike at the hearts of the American public. Bush played the strong and tough "Daddy" role for the American people as Dukakis became the candidate for the rights of drug dealers and murders before those of the law-abiding citizenry and their vulnerable children. Powerful television advertising transmitted by Bush supporters effectively directed public thought by portraying Dukakis as hopelessly weak and "soft on crime." The "Willie Horton" ad, which played into fabricated stereotypes of African Americans as low-lives and criminals, "scared the living daylights" out of white suburban America.^{iv} "Every [white] suburban mother's fear," Horton was a convicted felon who participated in a prison furlough program, during which he kidnapped, raped, and assaulted a young couple. The program, which was meant as a form of criminal rehabilitation, gave convicted felons weekend passes to leave Massachusetts prisons on excursions.^v Although

enacted before his term, having rejected the opportunity to abolish the program, Dukakis was unable to separate himself from Willie Horton and the ad. Then, featuring stark images of prison inmates, the “Revolving Door” ad further exacerbated concerns of Democrats’ law and order positions, repeatedly noting Dukakis’ opposition to mandatory minimums for drug dealers and the death penalty. Ending with the harsh narration and explicit wording on screen “America can’t afford that risk,” Dukakis could not help but remain the “ineffective liberal who would gut the country’s defense system and let convicted murderers out of prison.”^{vi} As the chief representative of the Democratic Party, with this association, it is no wonder many understood Democrats to be unqualified to fulfill the most basic of tasks: protecting citizens.

To further drive a wedge between the Democrats and heartland American values, Republicans frequently attacked Dukakis for his stance against mandatory administration of the Pledge of Allegiance in public schools. Although deemed illegal by the Supreme Court, this issue provided an opening to question Dukakis’ patriotism and contribute to the false but frequently made negative associations of liberals and a lack of loyalty to the US. Patriotism is deep-seeded issue among the mainstream public and anything contrary played to the white middle class as a denigration of American pride and values (especially at the end of the Cold War when American patriotism was particularly visceral). Despite the fact that anyone legitimately interested in representing his country in its highest post would almost certainly have a deep love and respect for his country, Dukakis refused to respond to negative allegations until they were too entrenched in the minds of voters. On this issue, Dukakis could have shifted the conversation to imply that forcing any sort of ideology on anyone, let alone vulnerable school children, was tantamount to Fascism and that one who supported such a mandate was contrary to the very basic American right to freedom of speech and ideas.

The values conflict at play in the 1988 election reflects the critical failure of Dukakis and other pre-Clinton Democratic campaigns to reframe “liberal” and the ideological structure as a whole. Instead of fighting back with fierce rhetoric about how liberalism was at the heart of American history, guiding beloved leaders from Roosevelt to Kennedy, Democrats were at a loss to well-define themselves, and thus did not come together under a strong platform.^{vii} In 1988, as the George Bush crusade perpetuated the notion that the “L-word” of liberalism was some sort of socialist conspiracy of “un-American” ideals, Dukakis made little attempt to salvage liberalism as a force for progress and positive change. “Despite constant disparagement of liberalism, Democrats [were] somehow uninterested in educating or persuading the public;” rather their response was to renounce labels altogether and stand more so for themselves as individual candidates, not a strong party resonating much of anything at all.^{viii} Bill Clinton, however, forged a different path, one that would adapt to the contemporary political environs and fundamentally alter the Democratic Party.

In the aftermath of the 1988 election, disappointed Democrats, under the direction of Democratic Leadership Council founder, Al From, and Bill Clinton, launched concerted effort to present a restructured Democratic Party. Departing from the leftward influence that had permeated party policy since the 1960s, Clinton and his cohorts worked to throw off the liberal label in favor of moderation. As expressed by 1991 DLC manifesto, “The New American Choices Resolution,” the purpose of the DLC “is not to seek the middle road but to build a new road that leads beyond right and left to move America forward.”^{ix} This document well-reflects the DLC’s message and subsequent popularity, drawing on a language that seemed to go beyond traditional party politics. The politics of the previous twenty years were characterized by increasing ideological extremism and left the majority of middle of the road suburbanites to

either stew in the continued contention of a left-right debate or merely pick the lesser of two perceived evils.^x DLC “New Democrats” manifested a “third way,” thus transcending mere party identification in the modern age of American politics.^{xi} This discourse paved the way for the Democratic Party to achieve a broader base of appeal.

The broad appeal of new Democrats can be further traced to their reshaping the measure of success: from wins and losses to actually governing and building a discourse of solutions for real people with real problems. The value of hard work played a strong role in the DLC’s founding and its early campaigns. The message meant accepting challenges and understanding their difficulties, but through effort and innovation solutions could come and success would follow. The belief in this government can-do attitude^{xii} subconsciously informed the American public they too, as individuals, would be able to rise above challenges to achieve success, with that essential provision of hard work as its vehicle. The result of these early efforts was an impressive inroad to the suburbs and the heartland. Later, the Clinton campaign utilized these newly primed constituencies while working to retain the traditional base of unions, minorities, and others.

Running for President in 1992, Clinton connected well-chosen issues with core themes to produce a rhetoric that would change white voters’ perceptions of the Democratic Party. Personal responsibility, individual choice, the value of hard work, and family were among the most prominent motifs. These themes were woven into discussion of welfare reform, universal health care, tax relief for the middle class, children’s issues, and economic innovation. The way of the new Democratic Party was clearly to target to the vague but quietly powerful Middle American. Though the first President Bush was very popular in early 1991 and he seemed all but unbeatable in the 1992 elections, looming recession provided an opening for the Clinton camp to

poke through the Republican armor. Additionally, the DLC's "New Democrat" handbook blurred the traditional liberal Democrat versus conservative Republican bounds by co-opting basic Republican strategies, messages, and even policy positions.

Going far enough to the political center so as to genuinely anger the liberal wings of his party,^{xiii} Clinton's promise to "end welfare as we know it" is an example of his efforts to capture middle class voters. The dialogue on the welfare to workfare programs plugged into Clinton's "nothing-for-nothing," valuing hard work theme. The subtext of the "New Democrat" message that personal responsibility and individual choice are key to successfully achieving the American Dream, appealed to the white Middle American who felt proud of his country's foundation, but that its valuation of hard work and responsibility had fallen by the wayside. Given this, the Clinton-Gore platform "rejected the assumption that the government can provide a solution to every social problem." Not going so far as Reagan did calling government *the* problem, Clinton's moderate view asserted "hand-ups, not hand-outs." Voters heard this sound bite from the Convention repeatedly throughout the remainder of the campaign. Clinton went on to say "to those on welfare: You will have, and you deserve, the opportunity, through training and education, through childcare and medical coverage, to liberate *yourself*. But then, when you can, you must work." Thus, Clinton did not completely alienate the urban and stereotypically non-white base, framing welfare as an opportunity made possible by government to be independent and succeed on one's own.

Next, a series of economic proposals simultaneously retained unionized workers while attracting middle class families from the Rust and Sun Belts into the DNC fold. Salient aspects of his economic package included job creation and lower taxes for the middle class. Polling data revealed that the self-identified middle class felt they were working harder and longer for less

benefit.^{xiv} So, similar to how welfare reform mitigated the stigma of Reagan's so-called "welfare queens" who apparently got something-for-nothing, the idea of tax "breaks" implied meritocracy and reward for hard work.^{xv} Previously, as in the 1984 Mondale campaign, with its poor use of commercials and considerably effective Republican spin doctoring, lowering middle class taxes suggested government aid. Under Clinton, Democrats were not offering aid, but a break for those who deserved it, those quiet but powerful Middle Americans who followed the rules and worked hard for their American Dream. Additionally, derision of corporate practices that allowed executives to "get big raises unrelated to performance," highlighted President Bush's mishandling of the economy, an issue on which many people were worried and sought a sense of security. While the Bush Campaign received campaign contributions from big business on Wall Street, the Clinton camp spoke to the people on Main Street. Here, the promise "to create high-paying jobs so that parents can afford to raise their children today"^{xvi} spoke to workers who felt left behind by the fierce competition of the global economy and desired to continue to live as they knew how: getting up in the morning to work and continue being productive members of society. Job creation and investment in American industries served as the vehicle for Clinton to tie together dual themes of opportunity and personal choice. With this, and in a way adopting bedrock Republican credos, Clinton effectively touched millions of people when he called for "a new approach to government, [one] that offers more empowerment and less entitlement."^{xvii}

Finally, family values played an important role in the 1992 campaign. Early on, in his keynote address to the 1991 DLC Convention in Cleveland, Clinton plainly stated "family values will not feed a hungry child, but you cannot raise that hungry child without them. [America's children] need both."^{xviii} This straightforward line epitomizes the way of New Democrats to speak for Middle American families who felt the "kitchen table" burdens. The sentiment also

speaks to conservatives of the religious right whose actions are frequently motivated in the name of preserving a good, “wholesome” environment for children to grow up in. Therefore, unable to argue from any side, annoyed liberal Democrats and opposition Republicans had little to do but watch the gap between Republican and Democratic constituencies shrink. Next, at the Democratic National Convention, held in July 1992, a video titled *The Man from Hope* underscored Clinton’s role as a “softball dad” and loving husband.^{xix} Images of Clinton spending time with daughter Chelsea sopped up questions of his trustworthiness and position as a good family man. Then, a segment featuring Clinton and wife Hillary talking simply about how it felt to buy their first home together, virtually erased past infidelities to endear him to the public.

In combination with these visual aids, Clinton championed children’s issues and the Family Leave Act to show support for mothers concerned with their children’s futures.^{xx} Emphasizing fairness and justice for children through universal healthcare and improving public education was a way to once again forward a message of opportunity for all. This message is one that people of the working and lower classes may understand to be about their potential for upward mobility; however, the message also transcends class to connect with parent voters, many of whom described themselves as working *for* their children and hoping to give them better than they themselves had. Through these family-oriented issues, it is apparent how the Clinton campaign targeted and captured the newly recognized “soccer moms.” This demographic represents that middle of the road that is not particularly politically active, but whose votes may swing an election. Also attractive to women, Clinton’s belief that abortion was a difficult and emotional decision only the woman could make likewise helped wrangle female votes. Still, as a Southern Baptist, Clinton partially explained away this “liberal” stance by invoking a Bible

reading that said life began at birth, not conception, thus mitigating some conservative backlash.^{xxi} Women saw an attractive and sensible choice in Clinton. A voting block millions deep, with the physical and financial resources to mobilize, women, and especially suburban mothers, truly entered the American political scene at this juncture.

Culminating in the victory of the 1992 presidential election, Bill Clinton and the Democratic Leadership Council initiated significant political realignment within in the Democratic Party. Using a language of inclusion and melding successful Republican strategies with moderate policies, the Democratic Party shifted to hallmark centrism rather than liberalism. Bill Clinton's friendly demeanor, a perception that is interestingly tied to his Southern upbringing, can perhaps be seen as the glue between the multifaceted strategy of emotional language, salient issues, and demographic targeting. Charismatic by nature, Bill Clinton's ability to win the Presidency, overcoming liberal traditions and public scandals, is evidence of the New Democrat Movement's power and relevant ability to fill the moderate void in electoral politics. The early 1990s witnessed the resurgence of the Democratic Party as the party of the working class and American family again, as it had been in the pre-war era up through the mid-1960s. This campaign perfected suburban politics and set a new tone for American politics that continues to influence politics and policy almost twenty years later.

ⁱ Lassiter, Matthew D. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

ⁱⁱ Garry, Patrick M. *Liberalism and American Identity*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1992. pgs. 7-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Dukakis, Michael S. *A New Era of Greatness for America*. Democratic National Convention. Atlanta, GA. 21 July 1988. Nomination acceptance speech.

^{iv} The “Willie Horton” ad has since been identified as blatantly racialized, darkening the skin tone of Horton, apparently playing into white America’s stereotyping of African Americans as criminals.

^v “Weekend Passes/Willie Horton.” National Security Political Action Committee. 21 Sept 1988. Television Commercial. <<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988>>

^{vi} “Revolving Door.” Bush-Quayle 88. 5 Oct 1988. Television Commercial. <<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1988>>

^{vii} From, Al. “Waking the Dems: How the New Democrat movement made the party of Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy relevant again.” *Blueprint Magazine* 9 Feb 2006: Web <http://www.dlc.org/ndol_ci.cfm?contentid=253733&kaid=86&subid=84>

^{viii} Garry, Patrick M. *Liberalism and American Identity*, Kent: Kent State University Press, 1992. pg 104

^{ix} “The New American Choices Resolutions.” Democratic Leadership Council. 1 May 1991

^x Pear, Robert. “The 1992 Campaign: Platform; In a Final Draft, Democrats Rejected a Part of Their Past.” *New York Times* 26 June 1992: Print.

^{xi} Baer, Kenneth S. *Reinventing Democrats: the Politics of Liberalism from Reagan to Clinton*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2000. pgs. 196-208

^{xii} The can-do attitude served as a replacement to the tax-and-spend, can do all attitude that previously encapsulated Democratic liberalism.

^{xiii} Ifill, Gwen. “Primary Debaters Become Brawlers.” *New York Times* 8 Mar 1992: Print.

^{xiv} “Rebuild America.” Clinton-Gore 92. 30 Sept 1992. Television Commercial.

<<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/1992/federal-taxes>>

^{xv} Lassiter, Matthew D. *Week 12A: Swing Voters*. University of Michigan. 1202 School of Education Building, Ann Arbor, MI. 24 Nov 2009. Lecture.

^{xvi} Clinton, William J. *I Still Believe in a Place Called Hope*. Democratic National Convention. New York, NY. 15 July 1992. Nomination acceptance speech.

^{xvii} Clinton, William J. *I Still Believe in a Place Called Hope*. Democratic National Convention. New York, NY. 15 July 1992. Nomination acceptance speech.

^{xviii} Clinton, William J. *New American Choices*. Democratic Leadership Council Convention. Cleveland, OH. 6 May 1991. Keynote Address.

^{xix} Tuchman, Jeffrey, dir. *The Man from Hope*. Democratic National Committee. 1992. Film.

^{xx} Barrett, Laurence I. “A New Coalition for the 1990s,” *New York Times* 16 Nov 1992: Print.

^{xxi} Carlson, Margaret. “Bill Clinton: Front-Runner by Default.” *TIME Magazine* 30 Dec 1991. Print.