

RELEASE IN PART B6

**From:** sbwhoeop [redacted]  
**Sent:** Friday, November 13, 2009 9:32 AM  
**To:** H  
**Cc:** Doug Band  
**Subject:** For H. And Doug, for WJC to ponder. Sid

B6

Hillary: This is the most provocative and significant analysis to come out of the recent election. Its author is a right-wing Republican lawyer based in Richmond who also writes a column for Human Events. I disagree with the ideological and partisan undercurrent of the piece, especially his overemphasis of the deficit as an overriding political factor rather than the administration's lack of achievable results so far in improving the living standards of ordinary people. There is no reason why the deficit shouldn't become a merely abstract factor once there are actual benefits delivered. The pattern of the past is that the deficit, the talisman of Hoover Republicans, moves only partisan Republicans and that Democrats ascend if the economy is progressing, its gains are widely spread and new social programs have favorable universal impact. That is not happening now. This analysis, therefore, may be portentous. Worth reading. The electoral maps of VA don't show up in the email but they are described. Sid

[Return to the Article](#)

November 13, 2009

## Can the Clinton Coalition Survive Obama?

By Sean Trende

John Judis and Ruy Teixeira's well-regarded 2002 work *The Emerging Democratic Majority* begins with a vignette set in Virginia. They tell the story of a telecom executive named Mark Warner, who runs a moderate campaign that appeals to upper-middle class suburbanites and working class rural voters, and manages to put together a winning coalition that, if imitated in other states, might put the Democrats in power for decades to come.

Democrats *did* build coalitions similar to Warner's, and in fact had been doing so for the better part of a decade. Warner's coalition was essentially Bill Clinton's 1996 coalition. The coalition and brand that Clinton built was an extraordinarily successful one for Democrats, breaking the momentum of a resurgent GOP in 1996, and ultimately enabling the election of the most liberal President in American History last year.

Given this background, it's only appropriate that the first tangible sign that this coalition is coming unglued has come in Virginia. Republican Bob McDonnell won the governorship with almost 59% of the vote – the highest percentage (though not the highest victory margin) for *any* governor since 1961. The entire Republican ticket won by similar margins, and the GOP picked up six seats in the General Assembly. It could have been even worse – five Democrats won their Assembly races by fewer than 1,000 votes.

There are some superficial lessons to be drawn here. After last week's election, it's silly to argue that the GOP brand is too damaged for them to take advantage of Democratic weakness. And the Democrats' latest spin – that their weakness among Independents was simply a function of more Republicans calling themselves independents but retaining their Republican voting habits – puts the lie to the argument that Republicans' low self-identification is a salient factor in elections.

But the most important lesson is this: while there's little *predictive* value in off-year elections, they do provide snapshots of the mood of the electorate, and the present state of political coalitions. Given Virginia's primacy in the story of Democratic coalition building, it gives us a good snapshot of the state of that coalition. And it's not a pretty one for Democrats. The historical base of the Democratic Party for two centuries has long been what Jay Cost and I call Jacksonians: Culturally conservative, hawkish, and populist whites located throughout the South and Border states. They began

breaking away from Democrats in the 1950s and 1960s – their reaction to the Party's embrace of unions, blacks and liberals is a story so well known there's no need to rehash it here.

But this group remained at least in play for the Democrats. Clinton inherited a coalition consisting of minorities, liberals, urban voters, and a decent remnant of Jacksonian voters in the Ohio River Valley and the South, who still preferred a moderate-to-conservative Democrat to a Republican. This coalition became a majority coalition when Clinton used a combination of fiscal conservatism and social moderation to bring suburban voters on board. This was a huge innovation for Democrats; suburbs like Nassau County, NY, Orange County, CA and Fairfax County, VA had fueled the rise of the Republican parties in those states. Clinton moved them substantially toward his side. This coalition allowed him to win by eight points in 1996; absent Perot and a last-minute fundraising scandal, he probably would have won by more.

Clinton intuited that suburban voters are, generally speaking, culturally cosmopolitan – they don't like it when you call someone "macaca," and aren't crazy about the religious right. But they're generally not particularly socially liberal either, and are fans of "law and order." They like taxes low and appreciate economic growth, but like good schools and a clean environment. Having to balance a bunch of spending priorities with somewhat limited income in their daily lives, balanced budgets are the ultimate "good government" indicator for these voters.

Clinton delivered on all of these issues, keeping tax increases fairly small, and balancing the budget for much of his term. In so doing – and this is very important – he re-branded the Democrats as the party of fiscal responsibility, economic growth, moderate taxes, and smart government. In other words, he finally shed the "Carter" label for the Democrats. This, in turn, made it plausible for his much more liberal heirs to benefit from this presumption of competence for Democrats – one that they probably would not have enjoyed without him.

George W. Bush's presidency, in turn, was an upper-middle class suburbanite's nightmare. An aggressive social agenda, a fiscal trainwreck, two poorly-managed wars and a financial collapse later, these suburban voters trended even more heavily Democratic than they were in the Clinton era. By 2008, Democrats held most of the suburban districts around major metropolitan areas, and were threatening in the exurbs. The right Democratic candidate probably could have put together a massive 2008 Presidential majority, combining minorities, liberals, Jacksonians, Catholics, and suburbanites. The mood of the country was certainly right for a 1920/1932/1952/1980 result.

But the Democrats nominated Barack Obama. The party's grip among Jacksonians had weakened since Clinton left the stage, but they abandoned Obama completely. Jay Cost and I have detailed this [here](#). This movement is why Obama received 53% of the vote, instead of the 60% or so we might expect given the voters' attitude toward Bush's Presidency. Obama was able to win even without this branch of the Democratic party because he generated such intensity among the remaining portions of his base. In other words, while his base wasn't as broad as Clinton's, it was deeper. Faced with vanishing 401ks and home values, and disgust with Bush's presidency, suburbanites flocked to him. Liberals were enthralled to finally elect one of their own. And minorities turned out heavily for the opportunity to elect the first black President.

But this presents a problem. You only get to elect the first black President once, and governing a coalition of suburbanites, poor blacks, and upper class liberals isn't easy. It is hard to keep that enthusiasm up. And with the Jacksonian wing of the party gone, if that enthusiasm dissipates, or if one of the coalition groups becomes disgruntled and starts to shuffle out the door, the party isn't left with much.

We see a microcosm of this story in last Tuesday's elections, especially in Virginia. Let's backtrack to 2001, and look at the counties that Mark Warner won.

The coalition that Warner built was similar to Clinton's. To oversimplify some, it blended together rural Democrats in the mining counties in the west of the state, college voters around Charlottesville, and black voters combined with rural whites in the south central and southeastern portion of the state with suburban voters in the northeast. It was a diverse coalition, but it worked.

Now let's compare Warner's map with Obama's map in 2008:

The suburbs stayed in the Democrat's camp, for reasons discussed above. But look what happens in the west! That area becomes solidly Republican. Buchanan and Dickenson counties in the Virginia panhandle voted for Dukakis, Mondale, and Adlai Stevenson (twice). Obama became only the second Democrat to lose these counties since the UMW moved in during the 1920s.

As I said, this isn't a problem so long as (1) the Jacksonians show a willingness to come back for a candidate other than Obama and/or (2) the suburbs continue their love affair with the Democrats. But we see indications in Virginia that the Jacksonian divorce may, in fact, be permanent. Creigh Deeds was from the western section of the state, and seemed – at least on paper – capable of remaking the Mark Warner map. It didn't happen, obviously. Let's look at how Virginia changed from Bush's 2000 election to Deeds' loss last week:

The redder a county is, the more it moved toward the Republicans from 2000 to 2009; bluer counties moved toward Democrats.

We see that McDonnell did as well as Bush did in the suburbs – but no better. Those pockets of white are the DC suburbs in the northeast, the Hampton Roads area in the southeast, and Richmond just to the north and west of Hampton Roads. It's *rural Virginia* – which is still about 1/3 of the electorate – that made the difference between Bush's 54% in 2004 and McDonnell's 59% on Tuesday. *Even with Obama off the ticket, and a much less cosmopolitan figure atop the ticket, rural Virginia went solidly Republican.*

We can take another angle here. Deeds and McDonnell squared off in a very close Attorney General race in 2005. Let's compare Deeds' 2005 showing to his 2009 performance. [NOTE: In this map, we look at "relative movement." Because everything in the state moved toward McDonnell, a map just showing "movement" would be solid dark red, and not of much use. So instead, if something moved more than 9 points toward McDonnell, it is colored a shade of red, if it moved less than 9 points toward McDonnell, it is blue. Think of this as showing the change in the counties' PVI].

We see the same result. Just since 2005, rural Virginia has moved sharply against the Democrats. The suburbs haven't moved much at all, relative to the rest of the state, while the more heavily African American counties in the southern portion of the state have moved a few notches leftward (in absolute terms, they voted in 2009 as they had in 2005). This suggests lasting damage to the Democratic brand here that is not simply personal to Obama. Now let's look at how McDonnell did when compared to McCain in 2008. Again, because the movement here was so dramatic statewide, we need to isolate the biggest and smallest changes by looking only at "relative" shifts.

The western counties of the state didn't shift much from 2008, but that's because they were already giving Republicans around 70% of the vote – there wasn't much room for Republican growth (and remember, "blue" in a relative map still means slight movement toward the Republican since 2008)! The real Republican gains over the past year have come in the DC exurbs, in the I-95 corridor, and to a lesser extent in the Hampton Roads area.

In other words, the Jacksonians aren't returning to the Democrats, at least in Virginia. Deeds might still have been able to win without them, but the Democrats are *also* showing weakness in the Virginia suburbs. In other words, two pieces of the Clinton-Warner coalition are starting to break away.

This is a real problem for the Democrats. If the suburbanites *and* the Jacksonians move away from the party, there is very, very little left for them. And there's reason to think that the suburban weakness is real. Obama's fiscal policy, to make an understatement, hasn't been Clintonian. It may not be entirely his fault, but the \$787 billion stimulus, the trillion dollar healthcare bill, the automobile bailout, and the budget showing trillion dollar deficits extending for the next decade make suburbanites shudder. They don't much like debt, and they intuit this spending is going to have to be paid for at some point – probably by them. Voters still give Obama some benefit of the doubt, as they do most Presidents in their first year, but they are becoming very, very worried, and probably don't put much stock in Candidate Obama's promise to enact a net spending cut any more.

Democrats will doubtless chalk this up to Creigh Deeds' inept campaign. Deeds wasn't a great candidate, but when the mood of the country is starting to swing against your party, it is hard to run a good campaign. Jerry Kilgore found this out when he ran in a similar environment in 2005, and was reduced to attacking Tim Kaine for his religious views on the death penalty. And if you run the Deeds-McDonnell race in 2006 or 2008, I think it's hard to argue McDonnell would win by 18 points, even holding everything else equal.

The other problem with this explanation is that we saw similar results replicated around the country. Most of the seats in the House of Delegates that the Democrats lost in Virginia, or came close to losing, were suburban. The Philly suburbs voted Republican for the state Supreme Court. Bergen County New Jersey didn't give the Republican 60% of the vote like it did in 1984, but Chris Christie nearly carried it, and even though he is significantly more conservative than Christie Todd Whitman or Tom Kean, he won the largest margin for a first-term Republican Governor since 1969. Conservative Republicans won elections in Westchester County, New York, and Republicans picked up two City Council seats on the outskirts of Queens. Republicans won back the Nassau County legislature -- the Democrats' capture of that body figures prominently in the introduction to *Emerging Democratic Majority* -- and nearly defeated the Democratic County Executive there with an obscure, underfunded candidate. In other words, in places that have never heard of Creigh Deeds or seen his attack ads on McDonnell's thesis, the Democrats still lost suburban voters.

States with a Democratic base of liberals, urbanites, and minority voters -- like California and New York -- haven't moved much against Democrats. Obama's polling numbers, as well as those of Democratic candidates for Governor and Senator, in classic "Emerging Democratic Majority" states like Colorado and Nevada are not looking good at all. And of course in Jacksonian states like Kentucky, he's below 40%.

This doesn't mean that Democrats are doomed in 2010. An improved economy, Republican missteps, and a host of other factors could keep the band together for them. Maybe some of the more marginal voters that Obama brought to the polls to enact hope and change will return in 2010 to keep hope alive. But the personal nature of Obama's victory is starting to show its downside for downticket Democrats.

The Clinton coalition is looking creaky. If Obama doesn't improve and the coalition comes apart, Democrats could find themselves weaker than they were even in the 1980s and 1990s.

Sean Trende can be reached at [trende@realclearpolitics.com](mailto:trende@realclearpolitics.com).

**Page Printed from:**

**[http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/11/13/can\\_the\\_clinton\\_coalition\\_survive\\_the\\_age\\_of\\_obama\\_99046.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2009/11/13/can_the_clinton_coalition_survive_the_age_of_obama_99046.html) at November 13, 2009 - 08:19:49 AM CST**