The FDR Coalition, 1936–2008

By William E. Leuchtenburg

On Election Night November 1936 Franklin Delano Roosevelt awaited the verdict on his first term as president in the family's ancestral estate at Hyde Park in the Hudson River valley. In the library, family and friends helped themselves to doughnuts and cider, while the New Dealer Tommy Corcoran played lilting tunes on his accordion. In an upstairs bedroom, excited Roosevelt grandchildren pressed their noses against windowpanes. It was an enchanting scene.

Yet a current of anxiety coursed through the house. For sixteen years the country had put its faith in polls conducted by the *Literary Digest*. The mazazine's polls had never been wrong. In 1932 they had called FDR's victory margin within 1 percent. And for months in 1936 they had been predicting that Roosevelt was going to lose—and lose badly—to his Republican opponent, Kansas governor Alf Landon. After its final poll of the campaign, the *Literary Digest* announced that Roosevelt would carry only two states outside the South. It was far from alone in forecasting defeat for FDR. One widely circulated David Lawrence column was headed "Landon to Win Pennsylvania by 250,000," and another "New York for Landon." The New York *Sun* announced "California Swings to Landon with Rest of West Coast," and the New York *Herald Tribune* asserted "Landon to Win 33 States, New Forecast Shows."

When, early in the evening, the President read the first returns, he leaned back in his chair, blew a large smoke ring, and said "Wow!" New Haven, Connecticut had given

him a huge margin of victory, the first indication of a landslide triumph. Hour after hour through the autumn night, teletype machines in the house chattered happy tidings—numbers even the President found hard to believe. His 28 million votes set a new record. Even more impressive was his electoral tally—the greatest margin since James Monroe ran in 1820 with no opposition, as FDR swept every state in the country save Maine and Vermont.

It had long been said that "as Maine goes, so goes the nation." Now it was said, as Maine goes, so goes Vermont. On a bridge over the Salmon Falls River where drivers cross from New Hampshire into Maine, a Roosevelt supporter hung a sign: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING THE UNITED STATES. The President was jubilant. "I knew," he said, "I should have gone to Maine and Vermont."

Chicago greeted the results with glee. (A Chicago essayist wrote, "If the outcome of this election hasn't taught you Republicans not to meddle in politics, I don't know what will.") During the campaign, the Chicago *Tribune* had attacked the President relentlessly—recklessly warning of the dangers that would befall America if he were re-elected. On Election Night crowds of Roosevelt supporters hurled eggs at the *Tribune* building, and set fire to a truckload of the *Tribune*'s first edition.

Nineteen-thirty-six was a milestone event. To be sure, Roosevelt had won in 1932, when he became the first Democrat to enter the White House with a popular majority—that is, at least 50 percent of the ballots—since Franklin Pierce 80 years before. But the 1932 outcome was seen less as an affirmation of FDR than a rejection of Herbert Hoover and the Republicans in the fourth year of the Great Depression.

Since taking office in March 1933, though, Roosevelt had introduced the country to the New Deal. His first term had given birth to banking reform, the SEC, farm subsidies, the Wagner Act, the Social Security law—and a host of other innovations. Consider what just one small agency meant to this city. The Chicago branch of the Federal Writers' Project sustained in the depths of the Great Depression the careers of Richard Wright and Alice Walker, of Studs Terkel and Saul Bellow. Consequently, FDR's overwhelming victory in 1936 was taken as an emphatic vote of approval of the New Deal.

The 1936 election is important for another—and more significant reason—one that has reverberations even today. Nineteen-thirty-six was the year it first became evident that Roosevelt had created under the Democratic banner a new constellation of political alliances—what historians have come to call the FDR coalition.

The core of this alignment was the allegiance of lower income, ethnic voters in the great cities. George Gallup, in his organization's first presidential poll, found that Roosevelt had received only 42 percent of upper income voters, but 76 percent of those who were hard up. At a World Series game in October, the men in the expensive box seats wore Landon sunflower buttons; those in the bleachers cheered Roosevelt lustily. Many in the working class were mobilized by the new industrial unions that had emerged in FDR's first term.

The commitment of lower-income voters to the FDR coalition took place primarily in the big cities. Roosevelt won New York City by well over a million votes; carried Detroit by better than 2–1; San Francisco by 3–1; Milwaukee by 4–1.

Sentiment in Chicago may be gauged by an account the columnist Marquis Childs wrote during the 1936 campaign:

> In the early evening the President rode for five miles in an open car through streets so crowded that only a narrow lane was left. In spite of protests of the Secret Service, people had been allowed to swarm off the curbs and it was all that the motorcycle police could do to force a way through for the presidential cavalcade.
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> This was King Crowd. They were out to have a large time and they had it. Every kind of band—bagpipers, … jazz, fife-and-drum, bugle corps—lined the narrow lane of humanity through which the presidential party passed. As the parade turned off Michigan … into West Madison Street the mass of people became denser and noisier. They shrieked from rooftops; they sang and danced; they leaned from tenement windows… to wave and shout. And all the time a rain of torn paper fluttered down, like gray snow in the half-lighted streets.

Roosevelt's success in the cities derived in large part from the support he received from ethnic groups. A Michigan Congressman told the President that in Hamtramck, "where the population is almost one hundred percent Polish you received almost one hundred per cent of the vote."

FDR also benefited from the traditional tendencies of the Irish. It had long been regarded as axiomatic that any good Irish Catholic was a Democrat:

"Have you heard the news? John Danaher has become a Republican."

"It can't be true. I saw him at mass just last Sunday."

Irish Catholics had frequently come into political and cultural conflicts with the pietistic Protestant cadre of the Republican party. In particular, they objected to the rigid imposition of puritanical values. Chicago's Finley Peter Dunne, who wrote Irish dialect pieces under the pen name of Mr. Dooley, once commented on the holiday of Thanksgiving: "Twas founded by the Puritans to give thanks for being preserved from the Indians, and we keep it to give thanks we are preserved from the Puritans." In the age of Roosevelt, the Democrats retained their Irish Catholic following and expanded their appeal to other ethnic groups. In 1936 one prominent Catholic clergyman reported that "everybody in California is for Roosevelt, especially the nuns," while another cleric reckoned that of the 106 bishops, 103 voted for the President.

The FDR coalition also counted upon increased support from Jews—who admired the President's liberal programs and his association with Brain Trust intellectuals. In later years that enthusiasm would become even more intense with Roosevelt's opposition to Hitler. In 1920, Jewish neighborhoods in Chicago had given the Democratic nominee only 15 percent of the vote. In 1936, FDR called Lawndale "the best Democratic ward in the country." That year, Lawndale favored him 24,000 to 700.

But of all the changes in 1936, none demonstrated so seismic a shift of allegiance as that of the black voter. Ever since the Civil War era, African Americans had been wedded to the party of Abraham Lincoln, the Great Emancipator. The distinguished black leader Frederick Douglass said: "The Republican Party is the ship; all else is the sea." As

late as the election of 1932, despite the fact that blacks suffered cruelly in the Great Depression with the Republicans in office, a sizeable majority of black voters supported Herbert Hoover. In FDR's first term, however, African Americans found the government exceptionally responsive. Though racial discrimination did not end, Roosevelt appointed an unprecedentedly large number of blacks to important posts—enough so that there was talk of a Black Cabinet—and they had ardent champions in the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, and in the Secretary of the Interior, Harold Ickes, who had been president of the Chicago NAACP. Still more important, under Roosevelt, African Americans received federal aid on a massive scale. Halfway through Roosevelt's first term, a prominent black publisher in Pennsylvania urged his readers: "Turn Lincoln's picture to the wall. That debt has been paid in full." And the 1936 election saw a historic transition. In response to Roosevelt's New Deal, African Americans shifted away from the party of Lincoln, and—for the first time ever in a national election—voted Democratic.

At the same time that Roosevelt was winning black voters to his party, he was, paradoxically, continuing to enjoy an advantage that Democrats had first established more than a half century before: the Solid South, which is to say the white South. The Solid South first emerged in 1880. After the last of the federal troops was withdrawn from the South, the Democratic presidential candidate carried every state of the former Confederacy, and for the next sixty years, with rare exceptions, the Democrats entered each national campaign with the electoral votes of the southern states as good as already chalked up in their column.

In the Deep South, the Republican party largely disappeared and national elections became a charade. On one occasion, Senator Blease of South Carolina, noting

that the miserable total of little more than a thousand votes had been cast for the Republican presidential candidate in the entire state of South Carolina, said: “I do not know where he got them. I was astonished to know they were cast and shocked to know they were counted.”

In 1928, however, a number of Southern states rejected the Democratic presidential candidate, Al Smith of New York—an Irish Catholic, an urbanite, and a foe of Prohibition—and bolted to the Republicans.

Southerners in 1932, though, flocked to Roosevelt. Because of his second home in Warm Springs, Georgia, they viewed him as an adopted southerner, and their affection for FDR grew in his first term, thanks to New Deal projects such as the Tennessee Valley Authority. A Mississippi editor said of Roosevelt: “Stick with him until hell freezes over. And then skate with him on the ice.”

In 1936, the governor of Mississippi had a wager with the governor of South Carolina on which state would run up the biggest percentage for Franklin Roosevelt on the Democratic ticket. The governor of Mississippi was delighted when his state gave FDR 98 percent of the vote. But he lost the bet. South Carolina gave Roosevelt almost 99 percent.

Nearly as impressive was Roosevelt’s showing west of the Mississippi. For decades, voters had hailed the Republicans as the party of the pioneers, the party of the transcontinental railroad, and in some areas the Democrats all but vanished. When in 1874, one Alferd Packer was convicted of killing five Colorado prospectors and eating them, the judge, in sentencing him, said: “There were only six Democrats in all of Hinsdale County and you ate five of them. I sentence you to hang—as a warning against

further reducing the Democratic population in this county." (As it happens, he escaped hanging and today the student cafeteria at the University of Colorado is called, in his honor, the Alferd E. Packer Grill.)

In the pre-Roosevelt era, Democrats had encountered trouble from the prairie to the Pacific. During the Progressive era, a United States senator from Iowa said, "Iowa will go Democrat when Hell goes Methodist," and in the 1920s—not long before FDR came to power—the Democratic presidential candidate received in California, unbelievably, only 20 percent of the vote.

But in 1936, Franklin Roosevelt swept the entire trans-Mississippi west—from Iowa to California.

This new Democratic majority was created in two ways. One was by the conversion of longtime Republicans to the Democratic Party—a process that had begun four years earlier. In 1928 one couple christened their newborn son "Herbert Hoover Jones." Four years later, they petitioned the court, "desiring to relieve the young man from the chagrin and mortification which he is suffering and will suffer," and asked that his name be changed to Franklin D. Roosevelt Jones. In that fashion, the FDR coalition gained recruits by tearing numbers of Republicans from their moorings. But it did even better by recruiting first-time voters, especially young voters—a phenomenon with resonance this year.

The 1930s mark the only national party realignment in the 20th Century. For generations, the Republicans had been regarded as the naturally ruling party in America. Mr. Dooley once observed, "History always vindicates the Democrats, but never in their lifetime. They see the truth first, but the trouble is that nothing is ever officially true till a

Republican sees it." With the FDR coalition, though, the Democrats became the country's majority party. From 1930 to 1994, the Republicans are able to win control of the House of Representatives only twice—for only four years in close to two-thirds of a century.

In 1940 Roosevelt put the FDR coalition to a severe test by seeking a third term. Commentators thought he was running a large risk in defying the taboo against more than two terms established inadvertently by George Washington in the 18th century. But Roosevelt swept to victory with 449 electoral votes to only 82 for his opponent—again thanks to the urban-ethnic-lower income coalition, combined with the Solid South. He took all but one large city, captured fourteen of fifteen key black wards, and drew especially well in low income precincts. "The New Deal," an election analyst wrote afterwards, "appears to have accomplished what the socialists, the I.W.W. and the Communists never could approach. It has drawn a class line across the map of American politics."

Roosevelt made out nearly as well four years later. In the first wartime presidential campaign since 1864, he defeated the Republican nominee with 432 electoral votes to only 99. His ethnic following proved remarkably loyal. Without the support of African Americans, he would have lost both Michigan and Maryland, and in the two most Jewish wards of Boston he polled better than nine out of every ten votes. In Jewish neighborhoods in Brooklyn that year, even Republican poll watchers voted for Roosevelt.

By 1944, many Americans could not remember when there had been anyone in the White House but Roosevelt, and they assumed without thinking about it that he would be there forever. In the 1944 campaign, a man said to a loyal Chicago Democrat who had

just become father of a baby boy, “Maybe he’ll grow up to be president.” “Why?” the man replied, “What’s the matter with Roosevelt?”

Six months later, President Roosevelt was gone, but the political combination he built lived long after him. A decade after his death, a Chicago Democrat observed: “Franklin Roosevelt was the greatest precinct captain we ever had. He elected everybody—governors, senators, mayors, sheriffs, aldermen.” And he went on electing them. Every four years, analysts would announce the demise of the FDR coalition, but every four years when the returns were sifted, it would be clear that the Roosevelt coalition was, however modified, still potent. It was strong enough to make possible Harry Truman’s surprise victory in 1948; to saddle Eisenhower with a Democratic Congress for six of his eight years; and to permit John F. Kennedy to win a narrow victory in 1960.

This FDR coalition continued to have a distinct class base. The poorer a person was, the more likely that person was to vote Democratic. So sharp were class cleavages, in a country that does not like to think it has classes, that in 1948 Harry Truman received a higher percentage of the ballots of those of low socio-economic status than any Socialist Party has ever been able to win from that group in Europe.

The FDR coalition reached its apogee in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson was opposed by Arizona senator Barry Goldwater, who made the mistake of challenging the fundamental assumptions of the New Deal. Bumper stickers said, “Sell TVA? We’d rather sell Arizona!”

That year, I wrote the presidential election night analysis at NBC—for Huntley and Brinkley. As the returns came in, state after state, on election night, we found that

Johnson, who had once said that Roosevelt "was a daddy to me always," was carrying all of the Northeast, all of the prairies and Great Plains, and all of the Pacific Coast, as the FDR coalition proved remarkably resilient.

Even in 1984, following the big Reagan victory, the *New York Times*, in its lead editorial, remarked: "The old New Deal coalition, though 50 years old, remains very much alive. Look at the exit poll data on voter blocs and observe the very few among which Walter Mondale triumphed. He won the black vote, 90 percent to 9 … the unemployed, 68–31 … Jews, 66–32 … Hispanic voters, 65–33 … big-city residents, 62–36 … union members, 57–41."

Yet, as you well know, despite the longevity of much of the FDR coalition, Fritz Mondale was trounced that year—as were other Democratic presidential nominees in this period.

In 1968, I again wrote the presidential election analysis for NBC, once more for Huntley and Brinkley, and the story that night was the defeat of Hubert Humphrey and the triumph of Richard Nixon.

Four years later, I returned to the NBC studios in the RCA building in Manhattan—this time to write for John Chancellor—and over the course of that evening watched Nixon take all but one of the 50 states. Again in 1984, Mondale was able to carry only a single state in the Republican rout.

What had gone wrong for the Democrats? A number of things. They no longer got the proportion of Catholic voters they once did. Union labor was not nearly as important as it had been in the 1930s. The mountain states of the West, resenting federal regulation, turned Republican.

But by far the biggest difficulty for the Democrats was the breakup of the Solid South. FDR carried every Southern state all four times he ran. But no Democrat has done it since, which is to say since 1944—almost two-thirds of a century ago. Indeed, more than once in recent years the South has been Solid—but solidly Republican.

The dissolution of the Democratic Solid South began in 1948. President Truman's civil rights message led that year to the creation of the Dixiecrats. The great watershed, though, came in 1964. Hours after the civil rights bill of 1964 was passed, Bill Moyers came in to see President Johnson, expecting to find him elated. Instead, he found him depressed. It was a great victory, Moyers said. "Yes," Johnson replied. "But it's going to cost us the South." It did not take long for Johnson's prophecy to be fulfilled. In November 1964, a few months after enactment of the civil rights law, the Republican candidate, Barry Goldwater, captured a number of Deep South states, as, for the first time ever, the South became the main electoral base for a Republican presidential candidate. Mississippi, which, you will recall, had given the GOP presidential nominee only 2 percent of the vote in 1936, gave Goldwater an astonishing 87 percent. As Walker Percy wrote, "It would not have mattered if Senator Goldwater had advocated the collectivization of plantations and open saloons in Jackson; he voted against the Civil Rights Bill and that was that."

Since 1964, no Democratic presidential candidate has been able to win a majority of the ballots of white Southerners—not even when the ticket was headed by an undeniably authentic white Southerner, a peanut farmer from Plains, Georgia. In 1980, Jimmy Carter lost every Southern state to Reagan, save his own Georgia. In 1984 Reagan took Georgia too, once more making the South solidly Republican. That year, Southern

whites backed Reagan 71 percent to 29 percent. One analyst reported "a literal white flight from the Democratic party all across the South," a flight that we have seen ever since, including George W. Bush's victories in 2000 and 2004.

That was the situation confronting Barack Obama at the outset of this year's campaign. The FDR coalition was still an important feature of the political landscape, but, despite it, no Democrat had been able to enter the White House with a popular majority since 1964—44 years ago, approaching half a century. The Solid South, which had been a major component of the FDR coalition, had disappeared 60 years ago. If Senator Obama did not crack the solidly Republican South (and it seemed unlikely that any Democrat, let alone an African American, could do that), he would have to win fully two-thirds of the electoral votes in all the rest of the country—a monumental task.

Yet—happily—Senator Obama did overcome those daunting obstacles, and won a resounding victory. He captured states in every section—the Northeast, the Midwest, the Mountain West, the Pacific Coast, and even broke the Republican hold on the Solid South by taking Florida (without the help of dangling chads) and, astonishingly, Virginia and North Carolina. Contrary to expectations of a "Bradley effect," Obama did better among white voters than a number of recent Democratic nominees, including Bill Clinton. He actually won a majority of white voters under the age of 30.

Obama also got impressive backing from women voters. As early as the 1980s, analysts had noted a gender gap in national elections. Women preferred Bill Clinton in 1992, it was said, because the first George Bush reminded women of their first husband. In fact, there were serious policy reasons that women—especially heads of families—gravitated to the Democrats. Though this gender gap has been apparent for some time,

Senator Obama ran more strongly among women than had Democratic candidates in the past eight presidential elections.

Obama also succeeded—magnificently—in arousing a new spirit of confidence in American democratic institutions. This was a big turnabout. The 1990s had seen virulent cynicism about the political system. One headline, stealing a line from Cole Porter, said, "They get no thrill from campaign," and a bumper sticker read, "If God had meant us to vote, He would have given us candidates." But Senator Obama gave the American people—especially young people, first-time voters—a sense that they had a stake in the outcome, that they could help bring needed change, that this was a country to take pride in.

We are only beginning to sort out what the election returns signify. To a degree, the 2008 results call to mind the FDR coalition of 1936. Like FDR, "Chicago's Barack Obama" made a powerful showing in cities. Communities of under 50,000 people gave McCain an eight-point advantage. Communities of more than half a million people favored Obama by an extraordinary 42 points. Obama ran well in urban areas even in red states. In strongly Republican Utah, he came close to carrying Salt Lake County, and in Texas he won Dallas County, which Bush had taken four years ago by a margin of 125,000 votes.

In a very perceptive article a few days ago in the *Chicago Tribune*, Tom Hundley expanded on this point by writing that Obama "is the first winning candidate in more than a century to openly adopt a Big City ethos." Hundley added: "Obama is nothing if not urban. He was … born and raised in Hawaii, but as an adult he chose to adopt Chicago as his identity and to embrace the rhythms, … cadences and culture of the American city."

An authentic urbanite, Obama, come January 20, will be the first incumbent of the White House with direct understanding of what it means to live in a project in an inner city.

Again like FDR's, Obama's combination had a decidedly ethnic dimension. That could, of course, be seen most vividly in the great outpouring of African Americans, first discernible in 1936. Four years ago, Kerry received 88 percent of ballots cast by African Americans. That ratio of almost 9–1 left Obama little room to improve, but he did go up 7 points to 95 percent—the highest proportion a presidential candidate has ever received from black voters.

During the campaign, Republicans repeatedly warned Jews that Barack Hussein Obama was no friend of Israel, but this year, as in 1936, Jewish voters gave conspicuous support to the Democratic candidate. Jews divided 78 percent for Obama, 21 percent for McCain—a huge 57 percent difference.

In some respects, however, the Obama coalition did not replicate the FDR coalition. Although Obama made a much better showing than recent Democratic candidates in the South, he did not sweep the South, as Roosevelt had. In contrast to 1936, McCain won a slight majority of white Catholics.

The Obama coalition also had a somewhat different class dimension. As could be anticipated for a Democratic nominee, he won a comfortable majority among voters with annual household incomes under $50,000. But, amazingly, and, unlike FDR or any other Democratic candidate in the past, he also got most of the ballots of those making over $200,000. Obama exceeded all expectations by capturing 50 percent of the suburbs. It was the robust backing he secured from highly educated white professionals—especially

women—in suburban counties such as Arapahoe in Colorado and Prince William in Virginia that made it possible for him to turn red states blue.

Obama differs from Roosevelt, too, in adding an important new component to his victory coalition. The historian Rodolfo Acuña has written that "most Chicanos have been nurtured to believe in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Sacred Heart, and the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt," but FDR's main influence on Hispanics in 1936 was to persuade migrants from Mexico to become naturalized and no longer think of themselves as temporary residents (*Mexicanos de afuera*). The contribution of Latinos to his vote totals in 1936 was negligible. But this year they played a large role in making it possible for Obama, who outpolled McCain among Hispanic voters 2–1, to capture Florida, Nevada, and especially New Mexico, where they comprise 41 percent of the electorate.

In all other respects, election data show the Obama coalition resembling the FDR coalition.

These figures are illuminating. But there are limits to how much one can learn from crunching numbers.

More important than the congruence of political coalitions, more important than the congruence of policies, what links FDR and Barack Obama, what links that lovely evening at Hyde Park in 1936 with that earthshaking night at Grant Park in 2008, is the audacity of hope.

Franklin Roosevelt, in the very first address of his presidency, his electrifying inaugural in 1933—75 years ago—inspirited the nation with a message of resolve and good cheer, and in the very last address he ever wrote—to be delivered on Jefferson Day in April 1945—FDR declared, "The only limit to our realization of tomorrow will be our

doubts of today. Let us move forward with strong and active faith." Roosevelt scoffed at the idea that the nation was the passive victim of economic laws. He believed that the country could lift itself out of the Depression by sheer willpower. In one of his fireside chats, he remarked :

> When Andrew Jackson, "Old Hickory," died, someone asked, "Will he go to Heaven?" and the answer was, "He will if he wants to." If I am asked whether the American people will pull themselves out of this depression, I answer, "They will if they want to."… I have no sympathy with the professional economists who insist that things must run their course and that human agencies can have no influence on economic ills.

No one caught FDR's spirit better than the University of Chicago professor T. V. Smith. "Roosevelt's voice," he said, "knew how to articulate only the everlasting Yea."

There are three words that I have no evidence Franklin Delano Roosevelt ever uttered that connect him with Barack Obama.

When FDR was crippled by polio and was told that he could never more aspire for national office, he responded, if not in these precise words, "Yes we can."

When the nation was paralyzed by the Great Depression and the American people were told we would never rise again, he responded, "Yes we can."

When we were informed that fascism was the wave of the future, and that American democracy could not hope to overcome it, he responded, "Yes we can."

That is the spirit that links the performance of FDR and the luminous promise of Barack Obama: Yes we can. Yes we can.