

THE THIRD WAY MIDDLE CLASS PROJECT



**LOOKING RED, VOTING BLUE:
An Analysis of the 2006 Election**

A Third Way Report

by

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About the Authors/Acknowledgements

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Looking Red, Voting Blue: An Analysis of the 2006 Election

In June 2005, Third Way released a report entitled *Unrequited Love*, which analyzed the 2004 election results to show that Democrats—the self-described party of the middle class—were habitually losing the middle class. This report found that in 2004, congressional Democrats lost middle income voters by 3-points and white middle income voters by 19-points. The economic tipping point at which white voters were more likely to vote Republican than Democratic was \$23,700 in household income.

This paper analyzes the 2006 congressional races using the recently released National Exit Poll raw data and reaches the following two conclusions:

1. The Electorate Looked More Republican But Voted Democratic

Compared to 2004, the 2006 electorate was higher in income and whiter, and more religious, male, married and rural.

The median voter was 13.4% wealthier than in 2004; the share of the electorate with household incomes greater than \$75,000 increased from 32.3% to 38.3%. The share of whites grew from 77.0% to 79.0%, while the share of African-Americans and Hispanics fell by 1.9-points and 0.3-points respectively. The share of males went from 46.3% to 48.3%, and the share of married voters stepped up from 63.3% to 68.1%. Turn out among regular churchgoers (up 2.7-points), Evangelicals (up 0.5-points), and rural voters (up 2.8-points) all increased.

One would expect that these demographic shifts would have helped congressional Republicans. Yet not only did Democrats win, they picked up nearly all of their new votes among those who fall into the typical Republican profile of voters.

Millions of voters from constituencies that had given up on Democrats in the past—whites, men, couples, those with higher incomes, rural Americans, and yes, even the middle class—switched sides in 2006. And relative to the rest of the electorate, Democrats received fewer votes from among much of their traditional base—African-Americans, unmarried people, and the poor.

When you “normalize” the results (a standard statistical technique to make the overall vote count between elections the same in order to make an apples-to-apples comparison¹), Democrats gained 4.7 million new votes over 2004—a huge surge. 3.2 million of those votes—or 67% of Democrats’ new votes—came from voters in households with more than \$100,000 in income.

¹ See “Methodology” later in this report.

Comparison of Congressional Votes with Turnout Normalized

	2004	2006	Gain/(Loss)
Democrats	37,752,000	42,452,000	4,700,000
Republicans	40,434,000	35,734,000	(4,700,000)
Total	78,186,000 (normalized)	78,186,000 (actual)	

2. It's Not the Economy, Stupid: Iraq, Bush and Corruption Drove the Democratic Surge

For the first time since at least before 1994, Democrats won middle class voters, this time by 7.4-points (Democrats still lost the white middle class by 5.8-points).² But contrary to the conventional wisdom, economic anxiety seemed to play only a small role in the Democratic victory.

Between 2004 and 2006, Democrats actually received fewer votes from those who felt *negative* about the economy and gained 6.1 million votes from those who felt *good* about the economy. By contrast, Democrats gained 7.6 million votes from voters who went from approval to disapproval of the war in Iraq and gained 6.7 million votes from voters who newly disapproved of President Bush.

Conclusion:

This election did not turn on the failure of traditionally Republican voters to turn out, but on their decision to turn against the GOP. The question is whether the 2006 election signals a realignment, like the 1994, 1980, and 1974 elections, or is just a temporary blip.

Based on these data, we are not prepared to say. But of this we can be certain: the 4.7 million new voters—based on their demographic profile—are not necessarily Democrats for life. The issues that drove them away from the Republican Party—Iraq, President Bush, and corruption—also have limited shelf lives. President Bush will no longer occupy the White House. Iraq may one day become the Democrats' problem. Corruption can be a twin-edged sword. And the belief by some Democrats that a new strain of economic neopopulism is galvanizing the electorate may be illusory.

Voters have kicked the tires. Future elections will show whether Democrats have made the sale.

² For this paper and *Unrequited Love*, middle class refers to voters with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000.

Finding #1: The Electorate Looked More Republican But Voted Democratic

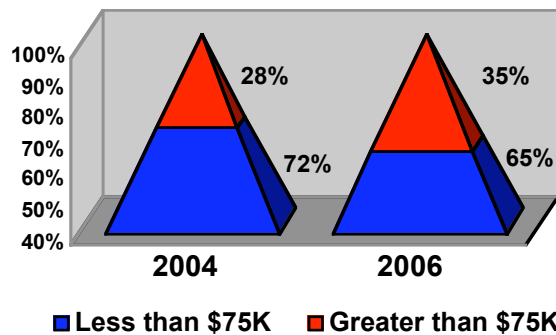
Wealth & Voting: Democrats Picked Up Higher Income Voters

Voters were far wealthier than in 2004, and Democrats made their gains among those at the higher end of the income scale.

- **Democratic gains came exclusively from relatively better-off voters.**

All of the net Democratic gains came from voters with at least \$75,000 in household income, and two-thirds came from those with more than \$100,000. In addition, the median household income of voters was approximately \$61,700 in the last election, or 13.4% wealthier than the 2004 median of \$54,300. Between 2004 and 2006, based on normalized vote totals,

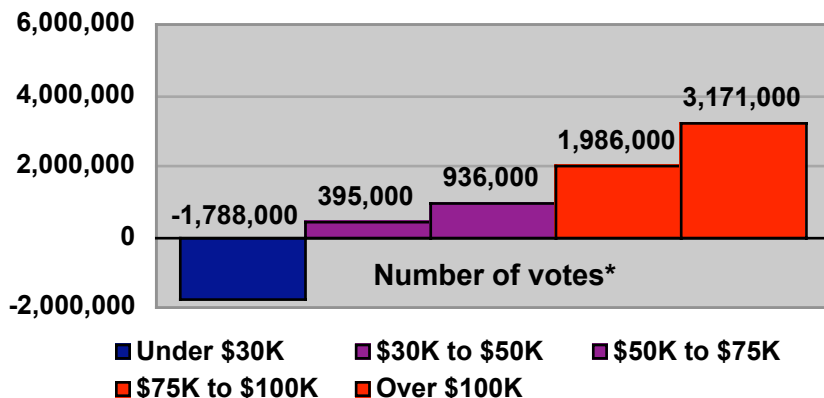
Breakdown of Democratic Vote by Income



Democrats gained 5.2 million new votes from voters with household incomes greater than \$75,000, and they actually received 458,000 fewer votes among those with less than \$75,000 in household income.³ Democrats narrowed their deficit from 13.2-points

to 1.0-point among households with incomes greater than \$75,000.

Change in Democratic Votes Received, 2004-2006, by Income



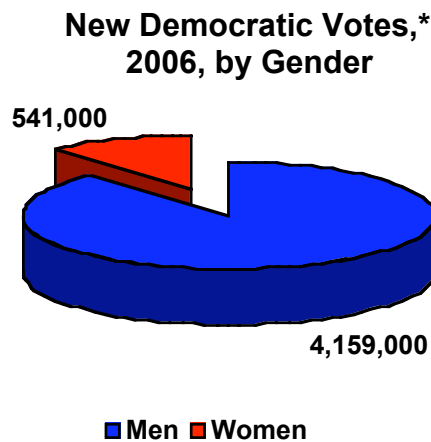
³ Because exit poll survey respondents sometimes answer questions by saying “don’t know, neither, both” or simply refuse to answer certain questions, the numbers will not always add up to 4.7 million.

Gender & Marital Status: Men and Married Couples Defected From the GOP

In previous elections, the movement of married Americans away from Democrats was one of the most profound tidal shifts in the electorate. The 2006 election saw a sea change in the other direction. The gender and marriage gaps narrowed significantly, with Democrats turning an 8.8-point loss among men in 2004 to a 3.4-point victory two years later. Democrats narrowed a 13.2-point deficit among married voters in 2004 to a 3.4-point deficit.

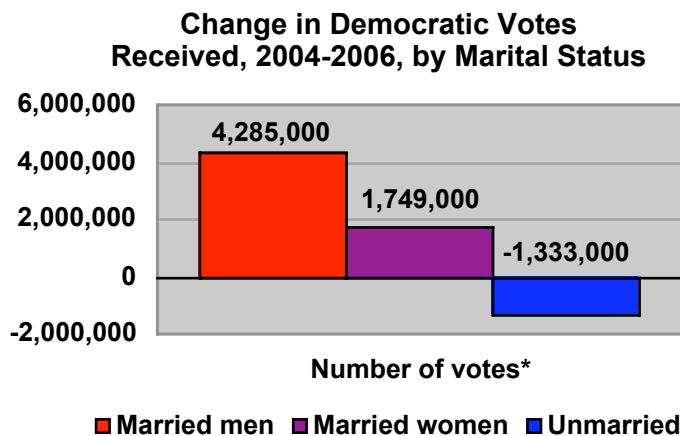
- ***Nearly every new Democratic vote was male.***

88.5% of the new votes that Democrats picked up in 2006 were men. In 2004, 42.6% of the Democrats' total vote was made up of men; that rose to 46.3% in 2006.



- ***All Democratic gains came from married voters.***

In 2004, 55.4% of Democrats' total vote was made up of married men and women; it rose to 61.3% in 2006.

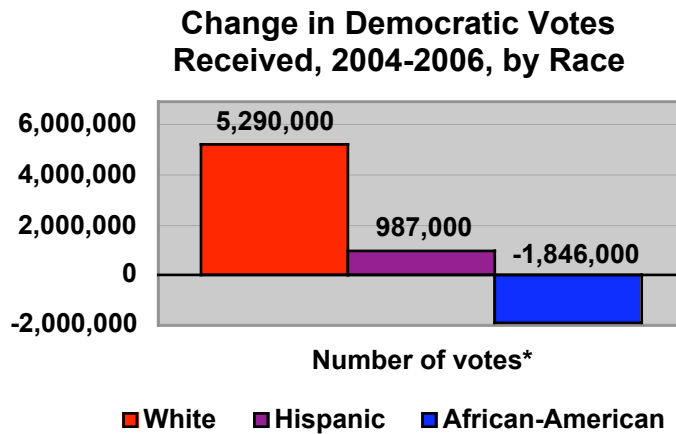


Race & Income: Whites Led the Democratic Surge

In 2004, congressional Democrats lost white voters by a 15.2-point margin and the white middle class by 19.0-points. In 2006, Democrats became competitive again with whites of all income levels, narrowing their overall deficit to 5.0-points. Democrats continued to win African-Americans by a nearly 10-to-1 margin, but black turnout fell rather substantially from 11.8% to 9.9% of the electorate.

- **Whites account for most of the Democratic gains.**

Five out of six new Democratic voters were white. In 2004, 65.9% of Democrats' total vote was made up of whites; it rose to 69.7% in 2006. In 2004, 9.4% of Democrats' total vote was made up of Hispanics; it rose to 10.3% in 2006. In 2004, 21.4% of Democrats' total vote was made up of African-Americans; it fell to 16.5% in 2006.

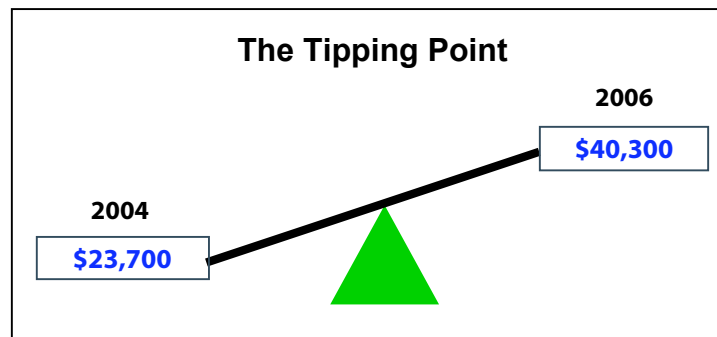


- **Democrats narrow losses among the white middle class.**

In 2004, Democrats lost by 19.0-points among white voters with between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income; they lost by only 5.8-points in 2006.

- **The economic tipping point for white voters bolted up.**

The economic tipping point—the household income at which a white person was more likely to vote for a Republican—increased dramatically in 2006, although it remained significantly below the median household income of white voters as a whole (\$65,200).



Residence & Religiosity: Democrats Gained Rural and Religious Voters

Issues like guns, abortion, and gay rights failed to ignite culturally conservative and rural voters in the 2006 cycle. In 2006, Democrats received more total votes from people who lived in the country than from people who lived in large cities. And over 60% of new Democratic votes came from regular church attendees.

- **Republicans hemorrhaged rural votes.**

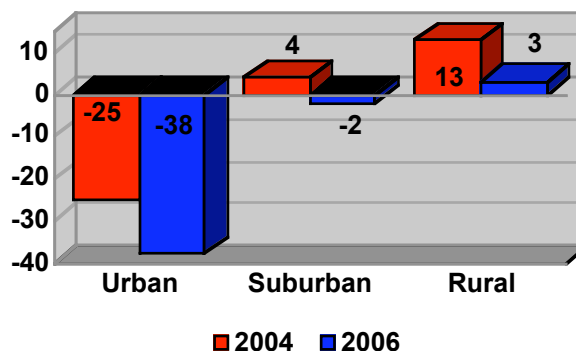
Democrats gained 2.3 million votes, or nearly half of their new votes, from rural

Americans. In 2004, Republicans won rural America by 13.0-points; in 2006, their advantage dwindled to 2.8-points.

16.6% of the total Democratic vote came from rural voters, compared to 12.4% from those who lived

in cities with populations greater than 500,000. Democratic margins increased from 25.0-points to 38.0-points in large cities, but urban turnout fell by 22.8%.

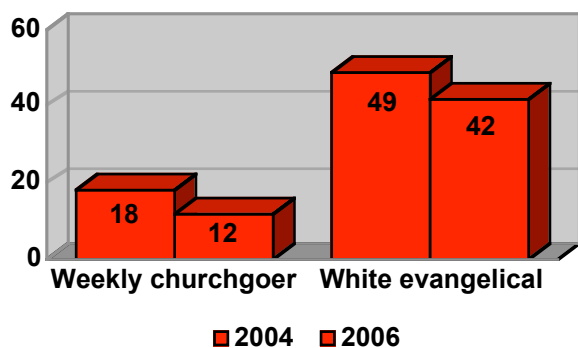
Republican Margins in Congressional Races, by Geography



- **Churchgoers gave Democrats a second chance.**

Based on normalized vote totals, 2.9 million new Democratic votes came from those who attended religious services at least once a week. Republicans still hold a commanding advantage among religious voters, but their lead narrowed even as the share of religious voters increased.

Republican Margins in Congressional Races, by Religiosity



Finding #2: It's Not the Economy, Stupid: Iraq, Bush and Corruption Drove the Democratic Surge

Voters felt better about the economy and their own finances, but they felt far worse about Iraq, corruption in Congress and President Bush. Their strong dissatisfaction with Iraq, the President, and corruption trumped their modest satisfaction with the economy. Democrats won on national security for the first time in probably 40 years.

Issues & Opinions: Iraq, Bush, Corruption Propelled Democrats

- ***Every new Democratic vote disapproved of the Iraq War.***

Disapproval of the war in Iraq rocketed between 2004 and 2006, from 46.2% of voters to 56.6%. Every voter who switched from Republican to Democrat in the 2006 congressional races disapproved of the war. Democrats gained 7.6 million votes among those who disapproved of the Iraq War (and all of them from those who strongly disapproved). They received 2.9 million fewer votes among those who approved of the Iraq War (a declining share of the population).

Increase in voters who disapprove of Iraq war	Number of new Democratic voters who disapprove of war	Net Democratic gain, 2004-2006
7,584,000*	7,553,000*	4,700,000

- ***Every new Democratic vote believed Iraq did not enhance American security.***

The share of voters who believe the war in Iraq did not enhance American security was identical for both 2004 and 2006 at 78.2%. In 2006, however, Americans voted on it. Democrats gained 6.4 million votes from voters who believe Iraq did not enhance American security, and they received 1.7 million fewer votes from those who did.

- ***Every new Democratic vote opposed George Bush.***

The President was marginally popular in 2004, with a 46.2% disapproval rating; he was very unpopular in 2006, with a 56.7% disapproval rating. Democrats actually won a smaller share of those who disapproved of President Bush, but Republicans were swamped by the President's sheer unpopularity. Democrats picked up 6.7 million new votes from voters who disapproved of the job President Bush was doing.

Increase in voters who disapprove of President Bush	Number of new Democratic voters who disapprove of President Bush	Net Democratic gain, 2004-2006
8,131,000*	6,716,000*	4,700,000

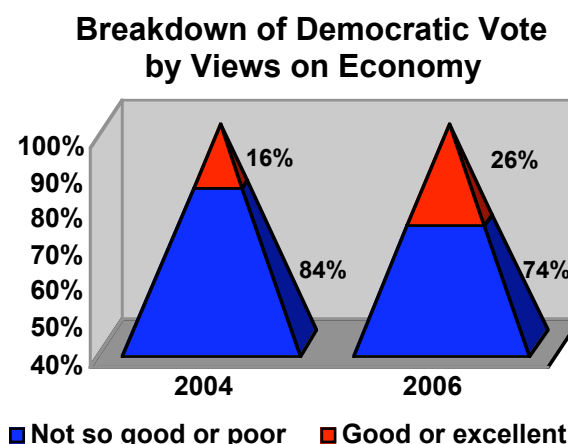
- **Corruption was a new factor helping Democrats.**

The national exit survey did not ask a corruption question in 2004 because few scandals made it on to the national radar, although this question was asked in 2006. Therefore, we cannot compare the change in voting based on this subject. However, it must be noted that in 2006, 74% of voters rated corruption as extremely or very important to their vote, and of these voters, Democrats beat Republicans by a 56.5% to 43.5% margin. And of the 53% of voters who disapproved of the handling of the House Page scandal, Democrats prevailed by 48-points.

Issues and Opinions: The Economy Was a Non-factor

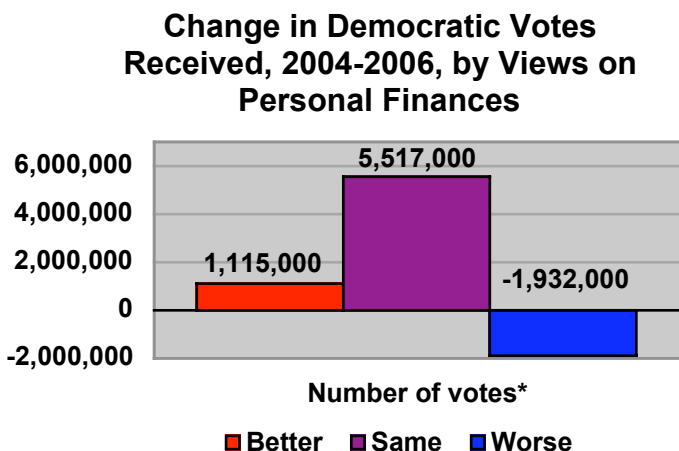
- **New Democratic voters felt good about the economy.**

Democrats gained 6.1 million votes among those who rated the economy excellent or good and received 1.3 million fewer votes among those who rated it not so good or poor. Moreover, the share of the electorate who rated the economy excellent or good increased by 2-points (from 47% to 49%). The Democratic message of economic anxiety probably helped to hold their base of economically dissatisfied Americans, but it did not appear to attract new voters.



- **New Democratic voters tended to feel steady or better about their personal finances.**

In 2004, a plurality of Democratic voters felt negatively about their personal finances; in 2006, a plurality felt neutral about it. The share of the Democratic vote that came from voters who said their personal financial situation had worsened fell from 44.7% to 37.2% between 2004 and 2006.



The share of the Democratic vote that came from voters who said their personal financial situation had worsened fell from 44.7% to 37.2% between 2004 and 2006. The share of the Democratic vote made up of those who said their situation was better (14.9% to 15.6%) or the same (40.4% to 47.2%) increased. Overall, the share of the electorate who felt

that their personal financial situation had improved increased by 2 percentage points, the share who felt they were worse off declined by 3 percentage points, and the share who felt things were the same rose by 5 percentage points.

Conclusion: A Possible Realignment?

In 1994, many Democrats consoled themselves with the notion that if 50,000 votes had changed, Democrats would have remained in the majority. And Democrats proclaimed that if turnout in 1994 had been normal, they would have retained power. They spent the next six election cycles convincing themselves that they were just one election away from taking back the majority. But the 1994 election wasn't about the failure of 50,000 voters to turn out. It was about millions of voters defecting from the Democratic Party.

In 2006, 50,000 or so well selected votes could have preserved the Republican majority in the House. But just as Democrats were kidding themselves in 1994, Republicans would be mistaken to think this election was about small numbers of votes. Democrats picked up millions of new votes—nearly all of them from among demographics that tended to look Republican.

In 2008, all things being equal, turnout should benefit Democrats. The lower share of the electorate in 2006 among traditionally Democratic-leaning constituencies was not a failure of the Democratic turnout machine. It was because 2006 was a midterm election, which attracts fewer voters to the polls. In fact, the make-up of the 2006 electorate looked a lot like that of 2002—an election of dashed hopes for Democrats. In 2008, more African-Americans, more young voters, more urbanites, and more low income voters will come out to vote. Theoretically, this should help Democrats retain their majority.

But that is not to say that Democrats have sealed the deal with these new voters. The early months of 2007 show Democrats successful in their efforts to build a consensus on Iraq, but it is possible that at some point, Iraq could become the Democrats' problem. President Bush is remarkably unpopular, but his presence in the Oval Office is time-limited and will eventually cease to help Democrats. Corruption holds no party allegiance. And, of course, no one knows who will be on top of either ticket and how that will affect turnout and performance for either party.

If Democrats are going to keep these new voters around for a while, they need to remember who they really are.

Methodology

Working with economist Stephen Rose, we used the National Exit Poll surveys from the 2004 and 2006 elections and then employed a standard statistical technique to “normalize” the results so that the overall turnout was the same in 2004 as it was in 2006. This technique would be like taking two baseball players—one who played in 145 games and another who played in 125 games—and then comparing the number of hits, home runs, RBI, doubles, strikeouts, walks, and stolen bases they would have had if each had played in the same number of games. For this analysis, we adjusted the 2004 voter numbers to equal the total turnout in 2006 and then compared Democratic performance based on gender, race, income, educational attainment, perception of the economy and other factors.

The National Exit Poll surveyed 13,718 voters in 2004 and 13,643 voters in 2006.

* Based on a normalized comparison of 2004 and 2006 vote totals. See “Methodology.”