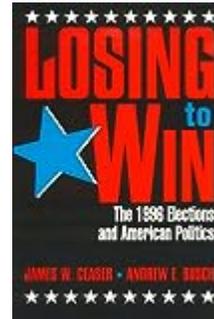




James W. Ceaser, Andrew E. Busch. *Losing to Win: The 1996 Elections and American Politics*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997. ix + 186 pp. \$22.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8476-8406-9; \$83.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8405-2.



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Clinton, Dole, and 1996: Instant Replay

Some years ago—it must have been in 1984—this reviewer attended a plenary session at the Organization of American Historians annual meeting devoted to a consideration of the current presidential campaign and featuring the impressive scholarly expertise of people like James MacGregor Burns and Robert Dallek. Since it was already clear that Walter Mondale was facing a stiff uphill battle in his effort to deny Ronald Reagan a second term, the question-and-answer period afforded an opportunity to ask a question I had already been pondering for some years: if one is likely to lose anyway, is there sometimes a long-term advantage to losing an election while promoting some good cause (in that instance choosing a woman for the vice-presidential spot on the ticket) rather than playing it safe and going down to defeat anyway? As I recall, the session's scheduled participants were less than taken with the question, but I had long wondered how the country's political history in the twentieth century might have been affected had Al Smith, by some miracle, defeated Herbert Hoover in 1928. Surely the odds on the stock market crashing would have been just as great, and one wonders if Smith would have had any clearer idea what to do about the slide into a Great Depression

than did Mr. Hoover. In that scenario, the Democrats would surely have been blamed for the “hard times” of the 1930s, allowing the Republicans to reclaim the White House, the Congress, and undisputed title as the majority party after 1932.

That is why I looked forward with some eagerness to James Ceaser's and Andrew Busch's study *Losing to Win*, a marvelous recapitulation and analysis of the 1996 elections, both presidential and congressional—and a book with an intriguing thesis. Following up on their 1993 offering, *Upside Down and Inside Out: The 1992 Elections and American Politics*, from the same publisher, the authors acknowledge the popular image of the 1996 campaign as one that “did not seem to matter” and in which “nothing much in fact happened” (p. 22), but argue that there were some highly significant changes in the process taking place. Most provocative is the notion, attributed to a somewhat facetious remark by Thomas Mann in 1991, that, as Ceaser and Busch paraphrase it, “big party victories in American politics are only possible when a single party is clearly in control and when things go poorly on its watch.” Regarding William Jefferson Clinton's pres-

idency between 1993 and 1996 as, in fact, two separate “terms,” divided by the remarkable congressional elections of 1994, Ceaser and Busch justify their title by contending that “Republicans won Congress in 1994 by losing the presidency in 1992; Clinton won the presidency in 1996 by losing Congress in 1994; Republicans retained control of Congress in 1996 largely by losing the presidency again; and Clinton continued to win in his struggle to transform the Democratic Party because an alternative power source in Congress was defeated both in 1994 and 1996” (p. 145).

On their way to fleshing out their thesis, the authors provide an intensive examination of “The Two Clinton Presidencies” (1993-94 and 1995-96); the Republican Party’s pre-convention contest in 1995-96; the “interregnum” (cutely entitled “In the Doledrums”) between the time Bob Dole clinched the presidential nomination in March and the GOP national convention in August when he formally launched his drive for the White House; the congressional elections, proceeding along their own curiously-connected track; and, finally, the August-November race toward the general election. The fabric of the story is tightly woven and amazingly comprehensive in its coverage for a book of modest length; this reviewer was unable to think of any major incidents or themes in the 1996 campaign that Ceaser and Busch had omitted. People in Utah’s second congressional district may miss the saga/soap opera of Representative Enid Greene Waldholtz and her now-ex-husband Joe, but one would hope that their situation was atypical enough to justify exclusion from this kind of analysis of larger trends. Others might regard the failure to discuss the impact of talk radio, the Rush Limbaugh phenomenon, as a defect. But most readers will be reminded repeatedly of people and things already consigned in the public’s memory to the dustbin of history.

The authors, of course, are political scientists from the academy rather than the reincarnation of Theodore White, but they write with a good deal of verve and even occasional touches of sarcasm: “Clinton was in the 1990s driving over a bridge to the next century in an Acura Legend, while Bob Dole was driving a 1946 Packard to a Brooklyn Dodgers game” (p. 166). This is clearly a work based on a broad understanding of the current literature and debates in the field, but at least by the standards of political junkies it is anything but stuffy. While the authors’ personal biases are difficult to discern, their analysis and commentary is often pointed and there is something in this account to offend true-believing partisans of all stripes. It is also exemplary in its organizational

scheme and the lucid presentation of three or four points to support every theme will no doubt lend itself to easy “borrowing” by lecturers in dozens of college classrooms.

Still, for all that this book has to recommend it, Ceaser and Busch operate on the basis of their own underlying assumptions and their principal thesis merits close examination. At the foundation of *Losing to Win* is the perception of an American electorate profoundly suspicious of politics and politicians and, in its present mood, unwilling to allow too much power to reside either at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue or on Capitol Hill. Thus, when Bill Clinton, having been elected in 1992 as a conservative-to-moderate “New Democrat,” begins his first term with an ambitious program including broad-gauge health care reform that may involve the expansion of the federal government and its powers, he is slapped down by the election of a Republican House and Senate in 1994. Reveling in their new-found power and serious about enacting their “Contract with America,” the forces of House Speaker Newt Gingrich manage to frighten enough voters during the budget battles (and government shutdowns) of 1995-96 to help revive the President’s prospects for reelection. With that basic story-line, I have very little problem.

Less persuasive is the authors’ apparent assumption that America’s politics in the 1990s is overwhelmingly conservative (while tempered with what they describe as “operational liberalism” and voter ambivalence) and Bill Clinton’s big mistake during his first two years as President was to seek common cause with generally liberal Democrats in Congress. Ceaser and Busch are far from simplistic in their consideration of such elusive terms as “conservative” and “liberal,” but it is still fair to wonder how many voters cast their ballots on clearly ideological/philosophical grounds; ever since publication of *The American Voter* in the 1950s, it has been clear that millions of ordinary citizens do not think about politics and issues in the same way that political scientists and political historians (and, for that matter, partisan insiders) think about them. Accordingly, one quibble with *Losing to Win* is the relatively light weight accorded to the force of personality in a political campaign. In the Age of Television, voters unquestionably feel they “know” a President through almost continuous exposure. That may cause some to develop a visceral contempt, as in the case of the Clinton-haters (somewhat reminiscent of the Nixon-haters a generation ago). Or it may cause others to feel that he is just a “really friendly guy” (even before any of us had heard of Monica Lewinsky) who makes mistakes but has his heart in the right place. The point is that

the decision-making process remains, at a certain level, subjective, not easily quantifiable (even with reference to five “personal qualities”), and surely less than ideological. Who is to say how many Americans may have made up their minds early in the 1996 campaign simply because they thought Bill Clinton seemed more likeable than Bob Dole?

Then there is the central idea of “losing to win.” The sequence of events described does establish a plausible case for the proposition that excesses following successes on both sides have led to subsequent failures, but any number of criminal statutes require proof of intent for a conviction. Can we actually imagine some Democratic Party guru advocating the loss of the party’s control of Congress in 1994 so that President Clinton could be re-elected two years later? Does anyone suppose that Senator Dole quietly concluded that he should go in the tank in 1996 so that the Republicans could retain their majorities in the House and Senate? Obviously Professors Ceaser and Busch know that, and they say explicitly that “Losing to win is an observation of political science, not a recommendation for conducting campaigns” (p. 7). They are far more concerned with trying to explain what has happened in recent elections and why than they are in mapping strategy for future contests, and in that sense the 1984 selection of Geraldine Ferraro for the vice-presidential spot on a Democratic ticket that was going nowhere (except down to defeat) may have helped foster the persistent “gender gap” that continues into the last years of the century. Whether the elections of 1996

will be regarded half a century from now as more important than they often felt to those who lived through them, and whose enthusiasm was reflected in the lowest voter turnout with no noticeable enthusiasm, remains to be seen.

In any event, *Losing to Win* is a tour de force analysis of contemporary American politics and the logical place to begin any retrospective consideration of the 1996 elections. It is a “must” read for professionals interested in the republic’s latest exercises in democracy and should command a wider audience as well.

P.S. As a kind of afterthought, it occurs to me to say that in 1990 I had the privilege of serving at the annual meeting of the Western History Association on a panel with another twentieth-century American political historian and two political scientists, endeavoring to answer the question: “Historians and Political Scientists: What Can They Learn From Each Other?” In view of the general divergence of the two disciplines over a period of the preceding thirty years, the audience could have been excused for concluding at the end of our presentation that the short answer to the question was “not much.” Fortunately, James Ceaser and Andrew Busch have provided a much better answer.

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