

THE THIRD WAY MIDDLE CLASS PROJECT



UNREQUITED LOVE:

Middle Class Voters Reject
Democrats at the Ballot Box

A Third Way Report

June 2005

**Unrequited Love:
Middle Class Voters Reject Democrats at the Ballot Box**

Executive Summary:

Judging by their rhetoric, Democrats perceive of themselves as the party of the middle class. This self-perception is bolstered by polls that show that Democrats win on middle class issues like jobs, education, and health care. Adding grist to the mill, surveys typically find that people believe Democrats are more in tune with middle class concerns.

Third Way conducted an in-depth analysis of the 2004 election results and found that this self-perception is really self-deception. Rather than being the party of the middle class, Democrats face a crisis with middle income voters. The 45% of voters who make up the middle class – those with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000 -- delivered healthy victories to George Bush and House Republicans in 2004. But even these solid Republican victories mask a greater underlying crisis for Democrats: among the largest middle class demographic groups in America, Democrats lose to Republicans by towering margins.

The following five key findings are described in greater detail in the body of the report.

Finding #1: White middle income voters (who constitute three-quarters of the middle class and one-third of the entire electorate), delivered landslide margins to Republicans. The economic tipping point – the income level at which whites were more likely to vote Republican than Democrat – was \$23,700, not far above the poverty level.

- George W. Bush defeated John Kerry by 22-points among middle class whites with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$75,000.
- House Republicans won middle class whites by 19-points.
- There is no difference in the preferences of white middle class and white wealthy class voters.
 - Bush won whites with over \$75,000 in household income by 23-points, a difference of 1-point over the white middle class.
 - House Republicans won whites with over \$75,000 in household income by 22-points, a difference of 3-points over the white middle class.

The economic tipping point — the household income level at which whites were more likely to vote for Republicans than Democrats — was \$23,700.

- The economic tipping point -- the household income level at which whites were more likely to vote for Republicans than Democrats -- was \$23,700. The tipping point is only \$5,000 above the poverty line for a family of four.

Finding #2: Contrary to other voters, blacks conferred overwhelming majorities to Democrats, regardless of income level.

- John Kerry and House Democrats defeated George Bush and House Republicans by 79-points among middle class blacks.
- Democrats' nine-to-one margin among middle class blacks masked the enormous deficit Democrats faced with other middle income demographic groups.

Finding #3: A rapidly growing Hispanic middle class is leaving the Democratic Party.

- Democrats' underperformance with Hispanics may have a direct correlation with Hispanics' strong performance in the economy, as the percentage of Hispanic voters with household incomes greater than \$50,000 jumped from 26.7% to 47.3% between 1996 and 2004.
- Kerry defeated Bush by 21-points among low income Hispanics (those with less than \$30,000 in household income), by 10-points among the Hispanic middle class, and by 0-points among wealthy Hispanics (those over \$75,000).
- House Democrats won by 30-points among low income Hispanics, 12-points among the Hispanic middle class, and 1-point among wealthy Hispanics.

Finding #4: With the exception of those with graduate degrees, education level does not predict voting behavior. Education level predicts income, which predicts voting behavior.

- Kerry won by 23-points among those with just a high school degree and low incomes (less than \$30,000 in household income), but Bush won by 19-points among those in the middle class with only a high school degree.
- House Democrats won by 21-points among those with a college degree and low incomes, but House Republicans won by 2-points among those in the middle class holding a college degree.

Finding #5: The entrance of married women into the middle class led to a dramatic increase in Republican support.

Kerry carried low income married women by 15-points, but lost middle income married women by 15-points.

- Kerry carried low income married women by 15-points, but lost middle class married women by 15-points.
- House Democrats carried low income married women by 17-points, but lost middle class married women by 12-points.
- Kerry and House Democrats won unmarried women across the board, but the margins decreased as income increased.

Unrequited Love: Middle Class Voters Reject Democrats at the Ballot Box

Introduction:

In 2004, George Bush defeated John Kerry by a margin of 51.1% to 48.6%.¹ In 435 House races last year, Republicans outpolled Democrats by a slim margin of 49.5% to 48.7%.² There has been much analysis about how people voted based on which category of issues they felt was most important (economic stability, national security, or moral values), on religious affiliation and frequency of church attendance, by gender, marital status, and age. Yet there has been very little analysis of the election results based on income, particularly middle class income.

Judging by their rhetoric, Democrats see themselves as the party of the middle class. In 2004, House Democrats stood with Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi to unveil their “New Partnership for America’s Future,” which featured “six core American values for a strong and secure middle class.” John Kerry spoke the words “middle class” five times in his acceptance speech at the Democratic convention, vowing to fight “on behalf of the middle class who deserve a champion” and decrying the “middle class squeeze.” 2004 Democratic Senate candidates, from Betty Castor of Florida to Tony Knowles of Alaska, campaigned on some variation on the themes of fighting for the middle class and working families.

This self-perception is reinforced by public opinion polls that routinely have Democrats beating Republicans on middle class issues like jobs, health care and education. A CNN analysis of post-election exit surveys showed Kerry trouncing Bush by 62-points among voters who chose the economy and jobs as their most important issues and 54-points by those who chose health care.³ As recently as April 2005, a poll released by the Democracy Corps found that by a 55-34% margin, voters associated the attribute “for the middle class” with Democrats over Republicans.⁴

Democrats perceive themselves as champions of the middle class, but do the middle class perceive of Democrats as their champions?

Democrats perceive themselves as champions of the middle class, but do the middle class perceive of Democrats as their champions? Ultimately, to be the party of the “middle class,” “working families,” and “parents who work 2 or 3 jobs,” that party must actually win the majority of votes among the large pool of middle income voters.

In this report, Third Way analyzes the 45% of the voting population who make between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income, disaggregates them by race, education, and gender, and makes five key findings that answer the question – In American politics today, who is the party of the middle class?⁵

¹ CNN.com – George W. Bush (62,040,606), John Kerry (59,028,109), and Ralph Nader (411,304)

² Exit polling data obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

³ CNN.com – election 2004 exit polls.

⁴ Democracy Corps poll by Stan Greenberg and James Carville, April 13-19, 2005, 1,058 likely voters.

⁵ The analysis uses exit poll surveys obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut of 13,718 voters in the 2004 presidential and congressional elections.

Key Findings:

While Democrats consider themselves to be the party of the middle class, the middle class voted otherwise. The median household income among 2004 voters was \$54,348. This middle class voter probably pulled the lever for George W. Bush and House and Senate Republicans.

George Bush scored a solid 6-point victory among the 45% of the voting population who lived in households with between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in income – the heart of the middle class. House Republicans trumped Democrats by 3-points among this group. At first blush, the Republican victories among the middle class seem to be by convincing – but not overwhelming -- margins. When race is disaggregated, however, the numbers reveal a different story.

Within most demographic groups, Democrats performed well only among very low income voters – those most likely to rely heavily on public assistance. As income levels rose, even to relatively modest middle class levels, support for Democrats quickly and precipitously dropped. In addition, voters who are solidly middle class had voting patterns nearly identical to those of wealthy voters, not low income voters, and they thereby gave large middle class electoral margins to Republican candidates.

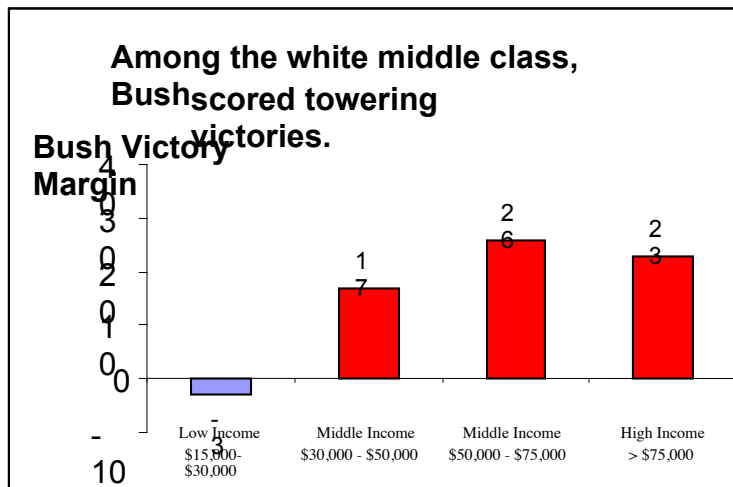
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The only exception was among black voters, who gave overwhelming margins to Democrats regardless of income. But this is likely the result of historical – not economic – reasons. Indeed, the massive support that Democrats enjoyed from black voters of all income levels masked an enormous deficit that Democrats faced with middle class voters of other ethnicities. Democrats were not competitive at all among the white middle class, which accounted for 3 out of 4 of middle income voters. They won by only a slim and dwindling margin among the Hispanic middle class – a group that is growing rapidly in size and changing quickly in voting behavior. Democrats wrung their hands over an alleged “Hispanic problem,” when their vote among Hispanics fell well short of expectations. But this may not be a Hispanic problem at all, but rather a middle class problem – an electoral phenomenon that seems to affect almost all voters except blacks.

Moreover, the trend for Democrats is ominous. As Americans become even modestly wealthier their affinity for Democrats apparently falls off. With middle income voters, it is Democrats – the self-described party of the middle class – who are running far behind Republicans, the oft-described party of the rich.

Finding #1: White middle income voters, by far the largest voting segment of the middle class, gave landslide margins to Republicans. The economic tipping point – the income level at which whites were more likely to vote Republican than Democrat – was \$23,700, barely above the poverty level.

Whites between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in income represented one-third of the entire voting population and three-fourths of the middle class. The party of the middle class should, presumably, win the majority of these voters. But among this segment of the middle class, Democrats were simply blown out. In fact, to be white and middle class and to be white and wealthy was to have identical voting patterns – and that combination conferred towering margins to Republican candidates. Democrats could only count on very low income whites for reliable support. While it may still be true that among the white middle class, Democrats scored better in public opinion surveys on issues like jobs, health care and the economy, it did not translate into support in the voting booth.



Bush vs. Kerry:

- Bush defeated Kerry by 17-points among white voters with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000. This was identical to the margin that Bush defeated Kerry among all white voters.
- Bush defeated Kerry by 26-points among white voters with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000.
- There was virtually no difference between the votes of the white middle class and the white wealthy. Bush scored a 22-point margin among voters between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income and a 23-point margin among those above \$75,000 in household income.

House Republicans vs. House Democrats

- House Republicans defeated House Democrats by 15-points among white voters with household incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000.
- House Republicans defeated House Democrats by 22-points among white voters with household incomes between \$50,000 and \$75,000.
- The margin of victory for House Republicans among middle class and wealthy white voters was nearly the same – 19-points among whites between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income and 22-points among whites above \$75,000 in household income.

The Tipping Point:

- In the Presidential race, the economic tipping point for white voters was \$23,300 – meaning that white voter households who made more than \$23,300 per year were more likely to support Bush than Kerry.⁶ That is only slightly above the \$18,400 poverty level for a family of four.⁷
- In House races, the economic tipping point for white voters was \$23,700 – white voters above \$23,700 in household income were more likely to support House Republicans than House Democrats.⁸

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Senate Example: Republican Richard Burr edged Democrat Erskine Bowles in a tight Senate race in North Carolina. According to exit polls, Bowles defeated Burr by 11-points among whites with less than \$30,000 in household income. But Burr defeated Bowles by 34-points among the white middle class – a swing of 45-points.⁹

⁶ The economic tipping point is an estimate based on voting outcomes within income cohorts. In making the calculation, we took into account two key statistics. First, the exit polling results within income cohorts that showed George Bush won the \$15,000 to \$30,000 white cohort by 2.7-points, lost the \$0 to \$15,000 white cohort by 14.5-points, and won the \$30,000 to \$50,000 white cohort by 16.7-points. Second, based on the number of voters in each income cohort, we determined that the median household income of white voters within the \$15,000 to \$30,000 group was \$23,570. This estimate may be overly optimistic for Democrats and John Kerry by several hundred dollars.

⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines for 2003.

⁸ See above.

⁹ Exit poll of 2,180 North Carolina voters obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

Finding #2: Contrary to other voters, blacks conferred overwhelming majorities to Democrats, regardless of income level.

Black voters between \$30,000 and \$75,000 represented 10.9% of the middle class and 4.9% of the electorate in the 2004 cycle. Compared to all other ethnic, educational, or gender groups, black voting patterns were far different. Whether middle class, wealthy or poor, nearly all black voters supported Kerry and congressional Democrats. This near-unanimous support kept Democrats competitive in national races, but masked the deficit they faced with the remaining middle class.

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These results indicate that blacks may vote for Democrats based on reasons having little to do with economic appeals. For the last 40 years, Democrats have been the champions for blacks in areas like voting rights, non-discrimination laws, and affirmative action. During that debate, Republicans have generally been perceived as absent for, or hostile to, that agenda. There are currently no black Republican members in the House or Senate, but over 40 black Democrats in Congress.

Bush vs. Kerry

- Kerry defeated Bush by 89.4-9.9% among black voters between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in income. This is virtually the same as his 88.3-10.8% margin among all black voters.
- Even among the 10% of black voters who had more than \$100,000 in household income, Kerry won by 78.3-21.0%.

House Republicans vs. House Democrats

- House Democrats defeated House Republicans by 89.3-9.9% among black voters between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in income. That's virtually the same as their 88.5-10.7% margin among all black voters.
- Even among the 10% of black voters who had more than \$100,000 in household income, House Democrats won by 79.4-20.6%

Senate Example: South Carolina Democrat Inez Tenenbaum scored a 69-point victory over Republican Jim DeMint among the 30% of South Carolina voters who are black. That was not enough to offset DeMint's 42-point margin among South Carolina whites.¹⁰

¹⁰ Exit poll of 1,808 South Carolina voters obtained from the Roper Center at University of Connecticut.

Finding #3: A rapidly growing Hispanic middle class is leaving the Democratic Party.

Between the 1996 and 2004 elections, the Hispanic share of the \$30,000 to \$75,000 voter segment doubled from 4.1% to 8.4%. The Hispanic middle class is now 3.8% of the total electorate, up from 1.7% in 1996.

A burgeoning Hispanic voting population was widely considered to be good for Democrats. But while the percentage of Hispanic voters nearly doubled between 1996 and 2004, Hispanic incomes grew at twice the rate of the rest of American voters. Between 1996 and 2004, the percentage of Hispanic voters living in households with more than \$50,000 in income nearly doubled, from 26.7% to 47.3%. Real dollar median wages among Hispanic voters increased by 18.8%, from \$40,631 to \$48,276. In the 1996 election, Hispanic median incomes were only slightly above those of blacks. By the 2004 election, Hispanic median incomes were at the midpoint between those of blacks and whites.

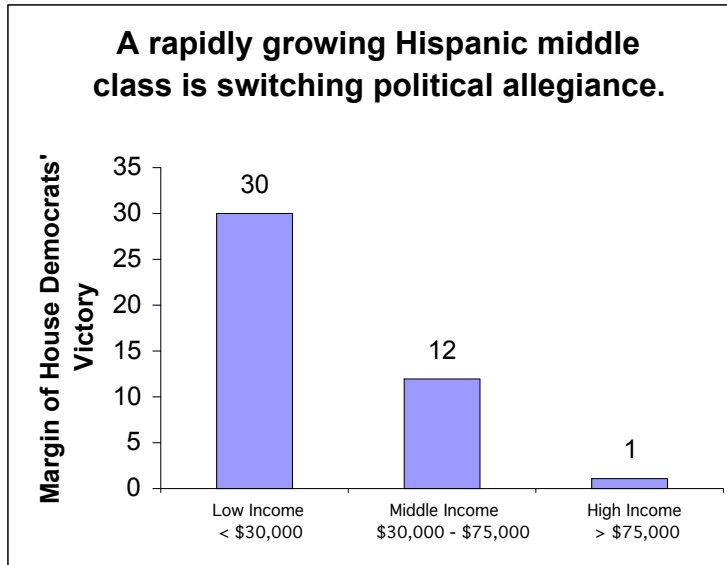
As with whites, rising Hispanic incomes meant falling fortunes for Democrats. Democrats still enjoyed strong, though declining, margins of victory among the very poor and the lower end of the Hispanic middle class. But they only broke even among Hispanics in the upper middle to high end of the income scale.

Finally, as Democratic presidential margins shrunk from 50-points to 24-points to 11-points between 1996 and 2004, the percentage of Hispanic voting households with more than \$50,000 in income jumped from 26.7% to 44.4% to 47.3%. To be sure, Democrats are not faring as well among Hispanics of all income levels compared to eight years ago. The fall off could, in part, be attributable to cultural issues (as was widely debated after the election). But Democrats' underperformance with Hispanics may have a lot to do with Hispanics' strong performance in the economy and with Hispanics becoming far more settled and entrenched in the middle class than they were eight years ago.

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Bush vs. Kerry

- Kerry defeated Bush by 21-points among low income Hispanics (those with less than \$30,000 in household income), by 10-points among the Hispanic middle class, and by 0-points among wealthy Hispanics (those over \$75,000).
- Kerry defeated Bush by only 2-points among the 47.3% of Hispanic voters with household incomes greater than \$50,000.
- Absent other changes, if Hispanic income levels had not changed between 1996 and 2004, Kerry would have had a net gain of 346,000 votes.



House Republicans vs. House Democrats (2004)

- House Democrats won by 30-points among low income Hispanics, 12-points among the Hispanic middle class, and by 1-point among wealthy Hispanics.
- Hispanics with less than \$50,000 in household income gave House Democrats a 30-point victory margin. Hispanics with more than \$50,000 in household income voted equally for House Democrats and House Republicans.

Senate Example: Florida Democrat Betty Castor defeated Hispanic Republican Mel Martinez by 27-points among low income Hispanics. But Martinez won the Hispanic middle class by 4-points and wealthy Hispanics by 31-points.¹¹

¹¹ Exit poll of 2,898 Florida voters obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

Finding #4: With the exception of those with graduate degrees, education level does not predict voting behavior. Education level predicts income, which predicts voting behavior.

4.2% of the electorate did not complete high school, 21.9% only earned a high school degree, 31.7% attended some college but did not earn a 4-year degree, 25.6% earned a college degree, and 16.5% earned a graduate degree.

Democrats fared well with those who lack a high school degree because these voters were more likely to be poor than other voters, not because Democrats appealed to people who were less educated. In fact, *within income levels* Democrats invariably did better among more educated voters. But because education is a predictor of economic success, as education went up, Democratic votes went down. The exception to this rule was among those with a graduate level education, who voted Democratic across the board.

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Bush vs. Kerry

- Kerry won by 5-points among those without a high school degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. Bush won by 3-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*8-point middle class swing.*)*
- Kerry won by 23-points among those with just a high school degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. Bush won by 19-points among those with just a high school degree and between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*42-point middle class swing.*)
- Kerry won by 24-points among those who attended but did not complete college and had less than \$30,000 in household income. Bush won by 16-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*40-point middle class swing.*)
- Kerry won by 14-points among those with a college degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. Bush and Kerry tied among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*14-point middle class swing.*)
- Only a post-graduate education predicts voting behavior. Kerry fared slightly better among those with less than \$30,000 in household income (30-point victory) than among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in income (26-point victory). (*4-point middle class swing.*)

House Republicans vs. House Democrats

* The sample size of non-high school graduates between \$30,000 and \$75,000 who voted in the presidential election is small – only 105 respondents.

- House Democrats won by 8-points among those without a high school degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. House Republicans won by 3-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*11-point middle class swing.*)**
- House Democrats won by 24-points among those with a high school degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. House Republicans won by 11-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*35-point middle class swing.*)
- House Democrats won by 25-points among those who attended but did not complete college and had less than \$30,000 in household income. House Republicans won by 9-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*34-point middle class swing.*)
- House Democrats won by 21-points among those with a college degree and less than \$30,000 in household income. House Republicans won by 2-points among those with a college degree and between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*23-point middle class swing.*)
- Once again, a post-graduate education was the exception to the rule, as House Democrats won by 20-points among those with less than \$30,000 in household income and by 23-points among those between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income. (*Minus 3-point middle class swing.*)

Senate Example: College graduates make up nearly 30% of the Colorado electorate. Democrat Ken Salazar defeated Peter Coors by 48-points among low income college grads and by 14-points among middle income college grads.¹²

** The sample size of non-high school graduates between \$30,000 and \$75,000 who voted in the last congressional election is small – 92 voters.

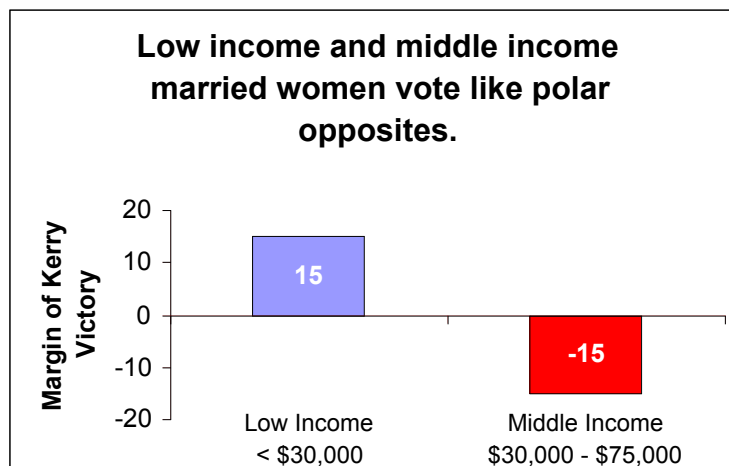
¹² Exit poll of 2,576 Colorado voters obtained from the Roper Center at the University of Connecticut.

Finding #5: Entrance of married women into the middle class led to a dramatic increase in Republican support.

63% of the female electorate is married and 37% is unmarried. Reflecting trends already familiar in the report, support for Democrats went down as income rose. This trend was much more pronounced for married women than unmarried women.

Both low income married and unmarried women gave strong majorities to Democrats. But married women were far wealthier than unmarried women. On a percentage basis, there were three times as many low income *unmarried* women voters as low income *married* women voters. Likewise, there were three times as many high income *married* women voters as high income *unmarried* women voters.

Unmarried women at higher income levels maintained their support for Democrats, but at reduced margins. Married women completely changed allegiance, going from strongly supporting Democrats to strongly supporting Republicans as income increased. In addition, Democrats fared the same or better with wealthy women compared to middle class women.



Married Women

- Kerry won by 15-points among low income married women (those with less than \$30,000 in household income), but lost by 15-points among middle income married women (those with between \$30,000 and \$75,000 in household income) – a swing of 30-points.
- Bush won middle class married women by the same 15-point margin that he carried wealthy married women (those above \$75,000).
- House Democrats won by 17-points among low income married women, but lost by 12-points among middle income married women – a swing of 29-points.
- House Republicans won middle class married women by the same 12-point margin that they carried wealthy married women.
- Over 40% of married women voters had household incomes over \$75,000, compared to less than 15% of unmarried women voters.

House Democrats fared worse among middle class unmarried women than wealthy unmarried women: 23-points to 27-points.

Unmarried Women

- Kerry won by 33-points among low income unmarried women, and won by 19-points among middle income married women – a swing of 14-points.
- Kerry fared worse among middle class unmarried women than wealthy unmarried women -- 19-points to 24-points.
- House Democrats won by 34-points among low income unmarried women, and won by 23-points among middle income unmarried women – a swing of 11-points.
- House Democrats fared worse among middle class unmarried women than wealthy unmarried women – 23-points to 27-points.
- Over 40% of unmarried women voters had household incomes less than \$30,000, compared to less than 15% of married women voters.

Senate Example: Low income women supported South Dakota Democrat Tom Daschle by 24-points, but middle income women supported Republican John Thune by 8-points¹³.

¹³ Exit poll of 1,567 South Dakota voters obtained from the Roper Center at the University of South Dakota.

Conclusion:

While Democrats may consider themselves the party of middle class, working America -- middle class, working America thinks otherwise. White middle class voters, in particular, vote in such low numbers for national Democrats that it may be more accurate to believe that they feel that Democrats are hostile to, not champions of, their interests. The heart of the white middle class (representing one-third of the entire electorate) exhibits strikingly similar voting patterns to those of wealthy whites – conferring landslide majorities to Republicans. The economic tipping point for white voters – the point at which they are more likely to vote Republican than Democrat – is less than \$24,000 in household income. Whether the reason is cultural, national security, or economic, it is fair to say that white voters above \$24,000 do not feel an allegiance to Democrats.

The Hispanic voting population has doubled since 1996 while becoming rapidly wealthier. This was supposed to be a boon for Democrats who, as recently as 1996, enjoyed a 50-point victory margin among Hispanic voters. But Hispanic voting behavior resembled less the behavior of black voters (who continue to confer near-unanimous majorities to Democrats), and more the behavior of white ethnic voters like Italians, Irish, and Poles who emigrated to America as poor outsiders, only to assimilate and become economically successful.

Married women voted Republican. It is possible marriage simply changed their ideological outlook, but it is certain it changed their economic outlook. It may be the case that unmarried women at all income levels support Democrats for cultural reasons, or it could be that compared to other segments of the economy, middle class and wealthy single women, widows, and divorcees feel more vulnerable to the economy.

The only middle class voters that Democrats can count on are blacks, unmarried women, and those with a graduate education – roughly one-third of the middle class electorate. This group of middle class voters kept Democrats within shouting distance of Republicans in the last election.

Democrats talk and legislate a great deal about issues that they believe are of concern to the middle class, such as better schools, affordable health care, and job security. This has not translated into middle class votes. Assuming these issues are truly important to middle class voters (and there is no reason to believe they are not), it could be that Democrats have a set of flawed messages that do not reach the middle class. Or, the middle class may simply believe that their schools will not be better, their health care will not be more affordable, and their jobs will not be more secure should Democrats run the Congress and control the White House. Whatever the reason, the self-described party of the middle class has a crisis with the middle class.

**The self-described party of the middle class
has a crisis with the middle class.**

This report was developed by *Third Way*
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