

The Emerging Democratic Presidential Majority: Lessons of Obama's Victory

Alan Abramowitz
Alben W. Barkley Professor of Political Science
Emory University
Atlanta, Georgia 30322
E-mail: polsaa@emory.edu

Abstract

In this paper I examine the fundamental factors that shaped the 2012 presidential campaign and ultimately produced a fairly close but decisive victory for Barack Obama. I argue that the voting patterns seen in 2012 both at the state level and at the individual level reflected an increasingly partisan and polarized electorate. The paper also discusses some of the long-term trends within the American electorate that contributed to Obama's victory including growing racial and ethnic diversity and increasing liberalism on social issues. I argue that the 2012 results may signal the emergence, at least in presidential elections, of the long-term Democratic majority predicted a decade ago by John Judis and Ruy Teixeira.

Prepared for delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, Hotel Peabody, Orlando Florida, January 3-5, 2013

It was the most expensive presidential campaign in American history as well as one of the longest. Well over two billion dollars was spent by the candidates, the political parties and outside groups including hundreds of millions by mostly pro-Republican Super-PACs created in the aftermath of the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizen's United decision.¹ The general election campaign really began in the spring, as soon as Mitt Romney had clinched the Republican nomination and long before the national party conventions. Yet despite months of campaigning and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on television advertising in a small number of battleground states, the outcome of the contest between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney was highly predictable based on voters' evaluations of the incumbent's performance and the standing of the candidates in national and state polls several months before the election.²

The results of the 2012 election reflected intense partisan polarization within the American electorate. Evidence from the national exit poll shows that Democratic and Republican voters were deeply divided along racial, ideological and cultural lines. They were also deeply divided by geography. Despite the closeness of the national popular vote, the vast majority of states, including some of the most populous states, were decided by landslide or near-landslide margins. Only four states were decided by a margin of less than five points, the smallest number in recent history.

President Obama's relatively easy victory in 2012 shocked conservative pundits and Republican strategists. Many of them had expected a much closer contest or even a Romney victory. And their optimism was understandable. No incumbent president in the postwar era had

¹ Data on campaign spending by the candidates, parties and outside groups in the presidential election is summarized by the Center for Responsive Politics on their website: <http://www.opensecrets.org/pres12/index.php?q13#out>.

² See for example the forecasting model developed by Drew Linzer of Emory University: <http://votamatic.org/>. Linzer's model showed a large and stable Obama advantage in the Electoral College from July through Election Day.

won reelection under such difficult economic circumstances.³ The U.S. economy was growing, but at a painfully slow rate. Although unemployment was declining, it remained far above acceptable levels and perceptions of the economy were still decidedly negative. The president's party had suffered major setbacks in the midterm elections two years earlier and many of his supporters seemed less enthusiastic about his candidacy than they had been in 2008 when Mr. Obama was trying to become the country's first African-American president. And Mr. Obama could no longer count on a substantial fundraising advantage over his Republican opponent.

The political environment of 2012 was, in many ways, much less favorable for Obama than the political environment of 2008. And that is why his victory in 2012 may have greater long-term significance. To an even greater extent than his win four years earlier, Obama's 2012 victory reflected the impact of demographic and cultural trends that are transforming the American electorate and the American party system. These trends that have been developing for decades and that are almost certain to continue for many election cycles to come. Barack Obama was the first Democratic president to clearly benefit from those trends but he almost certainly will not be the last one. Until the Republican Party adopts more moderate positions on economic and social issues, there is little chance that it will be able to attract significantly more votes from nonwhites or socially liberal white voters. But such a shift seems highly unlikely in the foreseeable future given the conservatism of the current Republican base and the fact that the large majority of Republicans in the House and Senate represent solidly Republican districts and states.

³ For an overview of the role of the economy in the 2012 campaign, see the summary prepared by the Council on Foreign Relations: <http://www.cfr.org/us-election-2012/candidates-economy/p26829>.

The Popular Vote and the Electoral Map

According to nearly final results, Barack Obama received about 65.6 million votes in the 2012 presidential election or almost 51% of the total. Mitt Romney received about 60.9 million votes or just over 47% of the total and minor party candidates received about 2.2 million votes or almost 2% of the total.⁴ Overall turnout was close to 59% of eligible voters, down somewhat from 62% in 2008 and 60% in 2004 but higher than the average of 56% for all presidential elections since 18 to 20 year-olds were added to the electorate in 1972.⁵

Obama's margin of approximately 4.7 million votes or 3.7 percentage points was about half the size of his margin in 2008. Nevertheless, it was larger than the popular vote margin in two of the previous three presidential elections. In terms of the national popular vote, the 2012 results continued the recent trend of relatively close presidential elections. No presidential candidate has won the popular vote by a double-digit margin since Ronald Reagan in 1984.

While the president's popular vote margin was relatively narrow, his electoral vote margin was quite impressive. Barack Obama ended up carrying 26 states and the District of Columbia with a total of 332 electoral votes while Mitt Romney carried 24 states with a total of 206 electoral votes. Of the nine states that were generally seen as key battlegrounds in the final stages of the campaign, the president carried eight—all but North Carolina which he lost by two points. Florida, Virginia, Colorado, Nevada, New Hampshire, Iowa, Ohio and Wisconsin all gave their electoral votes to Obama by margins ranging from one point in the case of Florida to seven points in the case of Wisconsin.

⁴ Election results can be found at www.uselectionatlas.org.

⁵ For voter turnout data on 2012 and other recent presidential elections, see the excellent information compiled by Michael McDonald of George Mason University at http://elections.gmu.edu/voter_turnout.htm.

What is striking about the results of the 2012 presidential election at the state level is that despite the closeness of the national popular vote, there were very few closely contested states. Figure 1 displays the distribution of the winning candidate's margin in the 50 states and the District of Columbia in 2012. Only four states were decided by a margin of less than five percentage points—Florida, Ohio, Virginia, and North Carolina. In 2008, six states were decided by that small a margin. On the other hand, 27 states as well as the District of Columbia were decided by a margin of at least 15 percentage points. In 2008, 25 states and the District were decided by such a decisive margin. Mitt Romney actually carried more states by landslide and near-landslide margins than Barack Obama but the states that Obama carried had far more electoral votes than the ones that Romney carried.

[Figure 1 goes here}

The 2012 results continued the recent pattern of presidential elections that are decided by a narrow margin at the national level but by a landslide or near-landslide margin in many states. And that included some of the most populous and electoral vote-rich states in the country. Thus, President Obama carried California with its 55 electoral votes by a margin of 23 points, New York with its 29 electoral votes by 27 points, and Illinois with its 20 electoral votes by 17 points. Meanwhile, Mitt Romney won Texas's 38 electoral votes by a margin of 16 points.

This pattern of many deep red and blue states including several of the nation's most populous states represents a dramatic change from the pattern of electoral competition seen in close presidential elections during the 1960s and 1970s.⁶ In 1960 and 1976, when John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter won close, hard fought battles for the White House, 20 states were

⁶ See Alan Abramowitz, *The Polarized Public* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2013), chapter 5.

decided by a margin by less than five percentage points. Moreover, in those elections every one of the nation's most populous states was closely contested including California, New York, Illinois, and Texas. In 1976, states decided by less than five points accounted for 299 electoral votes while states decided by 15 points or more accounted for only 66 electoral votes. In 2012, in contrast, states decided by less than five points accounted for only 75 electoral votes while states decided by 15 points or more accounted for 289 electoral votes.

Because there are so many deep red and blue states today, it is easy to predict which party's candidate will carry the large majority of states long before Election Day. A year before the 2012 presidential election, long before the Republican candidate was known, there was very little doubt about how at least 35 states would cast their electoral votes. That is because there is a very high degree of consistency in voting patterns at the state level from election to election. In the end, 48 of 50 states along with the District of Columbia supported the same party in 2012 as in 2008. Only Indiana and North Carolina switched sides, with both going from the Democratic column to the Republican column.

Voting patterns in recent presidential elections have been characterized by a very high degree of stability. This is clearly evident in Figure 2 which displays the relationship between Barack Obama's performance in 2008 and his performance in 2012 at the state level. This figure shows that there was an extraordinarily close relationship between the outcomes of these two elections. The correlation between the Obama vote in 2008 and the Obama vote in 2012 was a remarkable .98, the strongest relationship between any two consecutive elections since World War II. Obama's share of the vote in 2012 was a few points less than his share of the vote in

2008 in almost every state but he did his best in the same states in 2012 as in 2008 and he did his worst in the same states in 2012 as in 2008.

[Figure 2 goes here]

A Partisan and Polarized Electorate

The remarkable consistency between the results of the 2008 and 2012 elections and the large number of deep blue and deep red states in these elections can both be explained by the fact that the American electorate today is sharply divided along party lines. The results of both elections closely reflected the underlying strength of the parties in the states and the fact that the large majority of states now clearly favor one party or the other. As a result, the outcomes of presidential elections are determined by a few swing states in which the outcome is in doubt—a group of states whose number has been steadily decreasing.

The partisan divide was clearly evident in the results of the 2012 election at the individual level as well as at the state level.⁷ Thus, according to the national exit poll, 93% of Republican identifiers voted for Mitt Romney while 92% of Democratic identifiers voted for Barack Obama. This was the highest level of party loyalty in any presidential election since the beginning of exit polls in 1972. Going back even farther, based on data from American National Election Study (ANES) surveys, this was the highest level of party loyalty in any presidential election since 1952.

Independents made up 29% of the electorate according to the national exit poll and they divided their votes relatively evenly—50% for Romney to 45% for Obama. But that 29% figure undoubtedly exaggerates the significance of the independent voting bloc since the exit poll does

⁷ Exit poll results can be found at <http://elections.nbcnews.com/ns/politics/2012/all/president/>.

not ask independents whether they usually lean toward one party or the other. Based on data from the ANES and other surveys, however, we know that the large majority of self-identified independents lean toward a party and that these leaning independents vote very similarly to regular partisans. In the 2008 ANES, for example, 91% of independent Democrats voted for Obama and 82% of independent Republicans voted for McCain.

Another sign of the strength of party loyalties in the American electorate can be seen in the extraordinarily high level of straight ticket voting in 2012. According to the national exit poll, 92% of Obama voters supported a Democratic House candidate while 92% of Romney voters supported a Republican House candidate. Only 6% of Obama and Romney voters split their tickets by voting for a House candidate from the opposite party as their presidential candidate. Similarly, data from state exit polls showed that in most states with competitive Senate races, close to 90% of voters supported presidential and Senate candidates from the same party.

The high levels of party loyalty and straight ticket voting in 2012 extended a trend that has been evident in American elections for some time. Recent elections have seen consistently higher levels of party loyalty and straight ticket voting than elections from the 1970s and 1980s. This increase in party loyalty within the electorate reflects the fact that over the past several decades, the partisan divide has become increasingly associated with deeper divisions in American society: a racial divide between a declining white majority and a rapidly growing nonwhite minority, an ideological divide over the proper role and size of government and a cultural divide over values, morality and lifestyles.⁸

⁸ See Abramowitz, *The Polarized Public*, chapters 2-4. For an analysis of the changing bases of partisanship in the American electorate, see Joseph Bafumi and Robert Y. Shapiro, "A New Partisan Voter," *Journal of Politics*, 71 (January 2009), pp. 1-24. This article can also be found at http://ftp.columbia.edu/cu/alliance/documents/EDF/Monday/Shapiro_Bafumi_reading.pdf.

The Racial Divide

Perhaps the most important of these three divides for the American party system is the racial divide. It is so important because despite dramatic progress in race relations in recent decades, race and ethnicity continue to powerfully influence many aspects of American society from housing patterns and educational opportunities to jobs and health care. And over the past thirty years, the impact of the racial divide on the American party system and elections has been increasing due to the growing racial and ethnic diversity of American society.⁹

The nonwhite share of the American population has increased dramatically since the 1980s as a result of higher birth rates among nonwhites and high levels of immigration from Latin America and Asia. The data displayed in Figure 3 show that this demographic shift has also altered the racial composition of the American electorate although at a slower rate due to lower levels of citizenship, voter registration and turnout among nonwhites. Nevertheless, the data in Figure 3 show that between 1992 and 2008, the nonwhite share of the electorate doubled, going from 13% to 26%. And contrary to the expectations of some conservative pundits and Republican strategists, that trend continued in 2012 with nonwhites, including African-Americans, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and other nonwhites making up a record 28% of the electorate according to the national exit poll.

[Figure 3 goes here]

⁹ For in-depth analyses of the role of race and racial attitudes in the 2008 election, see Michael Tesler and David O. Sears, *Obama's Race: The 2008 Election and the Dream of a Post-Racial America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) and Donald Kinder, *The End of Race? Obama, 2008, and Racial Politics in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). A general analysis of the influence of ethnocentrism on American public opinion in an era of growing racial and ethnic diversity can be found in Donald R. Kinder and Cindy D. Kam, *Us Against Them: Ethnocentric Foundations of American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

As the nonwhite share of the American electorate has grown in recent decades, the racial divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions has steadily increased. According to national exit poll data, between 1992 and 2012, the nonwhite share of Republican voters increased from 6% to 11% while the nonwhite share of Democratic voters increased from 21% to 45%. And this deep racial divide between the party coalitions was not confined to presidential voters. The racial divide was just as large among voters in the 2012 U.S. House elections.

The growing dependence of the Democratic Party on nonwhite voters has contributed to the flight of racially and economically conservative white voters to the GOP thereby further increasing the size of the racial divide between the party coalitions. The effects of this trend were clearly evident in voting patterns in 2012. Among white voters, according to data from the national exit poll, the 2012 presidential election was a Romney landslide: Barack Obama lost the white vote by a margin of 20 percentage points, 59% to 39%. No Democratic candidate before Obama had ever won the presidency while losing the white vote by anything close to this large a margin. Yet despite this enormous deficit among white voters, Obama won the national popular vote by a margin of almost four percentage points. He did this by winning 80% of the nonwhite vote to only 18% for Mitt Romney. According to the exit poll, Obama defeated Romney by 93% to 6% among African-American voters, 71% to 27% among Hispanic voters and 73% to 26% among Asian-American voters.

The Ideological Divide

The growing dependence of the Democratic Party on nonwhite voters and the resulting flight of conservative whites to the Republican Party have also contributed to a growing

ideological divide between the parties. Since at least the New Deal era, Democrats and Republicans have differed on the question of the proper role and size of government. In recent years, however, that ideological divide has widened due mainly to the rightward drift of the GOP.¹⁰

The sharp divide between the parties over the proper role and size of government was clearly evident during the 2012 campaign with Republicans, including the party's presidential nominee Mitt Romney advocating cuts in taxes on upper income households and corporations, sharp reductions in spending on a variety of social programs, elimination of many health, safety and environmental regulations and repeal of the health care reform law passed by Congress in 2010. On the other side, Democrats, including President Obama, were calling for tougher regulation of financial institutions and corporate polluters, increases in taxes on upper income Americans to ensure adequate funding of federal programs and full implementation of the health care reform law.

[Table 1 goes here]

The sharp partisan divide over the proper role and size of government was very evident in the 2012 electorate as can be seen in the data from the national exit poll displayed in Table 1. Thus, 74% of Obama voters favored a more active role for the government in solving societal problems while 84% of Romney voters felt that the government was already doing too many things that should be the responsibility of private individuals or businesses. Along the same lines, 84% of Obama voters wanted the recently passed health care law to be preserved or

¹⁰ For evidence that the widening ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans in Washington is due largely to the increasing conservatism of Republicans in Congress, see Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein, *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

expanded while 89% of Romney voters wanted it to be partially or completely repealed. Finally, 83% of Obama voters favored increasing taxes on households with incomes of greater than 250 thousand dollars compared with only 42% of Romney voters.

The Cultural Divide

Economic issues weren't the only ones that divided Democrats and Republicans in 2012. Since the 1970s, a new set of issues have emerged in American politics alongside the older issues of spending, taxation and regulation—issues such as gay marriage and abortion that reflect deeply felt moral and religious beliefs and lifestyle choices. Building on a growing alliance with religious conservatives of all faiths and evangelical Protestants in particular, the Republican Party has become increasingly associated with policies supportive of traditional values and lifestyles including restrictions on access to abortion and opposition to same sex marriage and other legal rights for homosexuals. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party has gradually shifted to the left on these issues with President Obama himself finally announcing his support for legalization of same sex marriage in 2012.

Today, the vast majority of Democratic candidates and elected officials, including President Obama, support a woman's fundamental right to choose whether to terminate a pregnancy as well as access to contraceptives under the new health care law. And an increasing number of prominent Democrats along with the president now support the right of same sex couples to marry along with protection from job discrimination and other legal rights for gays and lesbians. Certainly one of the most dramatic actions taken by President Obama during his first term was his decision to end the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy and allow gays and lesbians to serve openly in the armed forces. It was a decision that was strongly opposed by

most Republican leaders including the party's 2008 presidential candidate, John McCain, and its 2012 standard bearer, Mitt Romney.

The 2012 election was supposed to be all about jobs and the economy. And those certainly were the top issues on the minds of voters as they went to the polls. Nevertheless, cultural issues played a significant role in the 2012 elections. At least two Republican Senate candidates, Todd Akin in Missouri and Richard Mourdock in Indiana, lost their races largely as a result of controversial comments about rape and abortion.¹¹ Meanwhile, voters in three states—Maine, Maryland and Washington—passed referenda legalizing same sex marriage. It was the first time that same sex marriage had become law as a result of a vote of the people. In Florida, voters decisively defeated a proposed amendment to the state constitution aimed at restricting abortion rights and in Washington state and Colorado, voters for the first time passed referenda legalizing the sale and use of marijuana despite intense opposition by many conservative and religious groups.

The cultural divide was also clearly evident in the results of the 2012 presidential election. According to the national exit poll, white born-again or evangelical Christians made up 26% of the electorate and despite any reservations they may have had about supporting a Mormon, they voted for Mitt Romney over Barack Obama by an overwhelming 78% to 21% margin. On the other hand, those who described their religious affiliation as “something else” or “none” made up a record 19% of the electorate and they voted for Barack Obama over Mitt Romney by an almost equally overwhelming margin of 72% to 25%. And voters who identified themselves as gay,

¹¹ See Greg Jaffe, “GOP’s Akin, Mourdock Lose Senate Elections,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2012: http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2012-11-07/politics/35504534_1_republican-richard-mourdock-senate-seat-akin.

lesbian or bisexual made up 5% of the electorate and they supported Obama over Romney by 76% to 22%.

The results in Table 1 show that on cultural issues, just as on economic issues, there was a sharp divide between Obama and Romney voters. Fully 84% of Obama voters wanted abortion to remain legal under all or most conditions while 60% of Romney voters wanted abortion to be illegal under all or most conditions. Similarly, 76% of Obama voters favored legalizing same sex marriage in their own state compared with only 26% of Romney voters.

Even as support for same sex marriage has increased in the American public in recent years, data from the Gallup Poll shows that the divide between supporters of the two parties on this issue has remained very wide. While support for same sex marriage has grown considerably among Democrats and independents, there has been little or no increase in support among Republicans. Thus, in a May, 2012 poll, Gallup found that 65% of Democrats and 57% of independents but only 22% of Republicans supported making same sex marriage legal.¹² This is not surprising and not likely to change soon since white evangelicals make up well over 40% of Republican voters across the nation and the overwhelming majority of these evangelical voters view same sex marriage as contrary to fundamental religious beliefs.

Cultural issues also contributed to two other striking voting patterns in 2012—the marriage gap and the generation gap. Unmarried voters and younger voters generally have more liberal views on cultural issues than married voters and older voters. This helps to explain why there was a large gap in candidate preference between married and unmarried voters regardless of sex and a large gap between voters under the age of 30 and those 65 or older. According to the

¹² <http://www.gallup.com/poll/154529/Half-Americans-Support-Legal-Gay-Marriage.aspx>.

national exit poll, 60% of married men and 53% of married women voted for Mitt Romney. On the other hand, 56% of unmarried men and 67% of unmarried women voted for Barack Obama. Similarly, 60% of those under the age of 30 voted for Obama while 56% of those 65 or older voted for Romney.

Why Obama Won

When an incumbent is running for reelection, a presidential election is largely a referendum on that incumbent's performance in office. That is why by the middle of the year two predictions about the 2012 presidential election seemed fairly safe—the popular vote was likely to be close and President Obama was likely to be reelected. Those two predictions seemed fairly safe because, despite continuing high unemployment and relatively slow economic growth, Mr. Obama had a net positive approval rating.

Figure 4 displays the relationship between the net approval rating (the difference between approval and disapproval) of incumbent presidents in the Gallup Poll at the end of June and the share of the major party vote received by those incumbents in the 11 elections since World War II in which an incumbent president was running for reelection. The data in this figure show that there is a very strong relationship between the incumbent's approval rating in the middle of the election year and the outcome of the election. Moreover, the results of the 2012 election were exactly what would be expected based on President Obama's net approval rating of +2 (48% approval vs. 46% disapproval) in the final Gallup Poll in June of 2012.

[Figure 4 goes here]

Two other postwar presidents with midyear approval ratings similar to that of President Obama in 2012, Harry Truman in 1948 and George W. Bush in 2004, were both reelected. The

only incumbent president with a net positive approval rating at midyear who was defeated was Gerald Ford in 1976 and the explanation for this exception is fairly clear—Ford’s approval rating fell precipitously after he pardoned former President Nixon in August. The other two incumbents who lost their races, Jimmy Carter in 1980 and George H.W. Bush in 1992, had net approval ratings far below zero at midyear.

The results presented in Figure 4 indicate that Barack Obama’s victory was highly predictable based on his approval rating more than four months before the 2012 election. Indeed, forecasting models based on state and national polls generally showed Obama with a consistent advantage over Mitt Romney from the start of the 2012 campaign to the finish. Contrary to the claims of some political commentators, Hurricane Sandy, which struck the northeastern United States a week before the election, had little or no impact on the outcome of the presidential election.¹³ Nor can the president’s victory be attributed to his campaign’s superior field organization or its use of highly sophisticated data mining and voter targeting techniques to boost turnout of Obama supporters in the swing states.

Table 2 presents the results of a regression analysis of the 2012 presidential election results at the state level. The dependent variable in this analysis is Obama’s 2012 margin in each state. The independent variables are Obama’s 2008 margin in each state, a dummy variable for the nine swing states and a variable measuring the difference between the number of Obama field offices and the number of Romney field offices in each of the swing states.

¹³ Harry Enten conducted a systematic comparison of national and state polls on the presidential contest before and after Hurricane Sandy and found little or no evidence of any improvement in Obama’s standing. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2012/dec/04/hurricane-sandy-won-president-obama>. See also the analysis of Nate Silver on this point at <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/05/nov-4-did-hurricane-sandy-blow-romney-off-course/>.

[Table 2 goes here]

The Obama campaign did have a substantial advantage in 2012 when it came to the ground game in the nine swing states. According to data compiled by John Avlon and Michael Keller for the Daily Beast website, the Obama campaign had far more field offices than the Romney campaign in every one of these states.¹⁴ Across all nine swing states, the Obama campaign had an average of 63 field offices compared with an average of only 24 field offices for the Romney campaign. However, the evidence presented in Table 2 shows that after controlling for Obama's 2008 margin, neither the field office variable nor the swing state dummy variable had any effect on Obama's 2012 margin at the state level. The estimated coefficients for the field office variable and the swing state dummy variable are both very small and statistically insignificant. These results indicate that the relative number of Obama and Romney field offices had little or no influence on level of support for Obama in the swing states and that Obama did no better in the swing states than he did in the other 41 states where there was little campaigning. Whatever impact the Obama campaign's efforts had in the swing states was apparently offset by the impact of the Romney campaign's efforts in those states.

The key to Barack Obama's successful reelection campaign was his ability to keep his approval rating in positive territory from the end of June until Election Day. That was far more important than anything that happened during the presidential campaign including the millions of dollars spent on advertising in the swing states, the presidential debates and the response to Hurricane Sandy. But this raises an important question. How was the president able to keep his

¹⁴ Their findings and an explanation of their methodology can be found at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/10/19/ground-game-obama-opens-up-big-lead-in-state-headquarters.html>.

approval rating in positive territory during a time of continuing high unemployment, slow economic growth and widespread economic discontent?¹⁵

Part of the answer to this question involves the advantage of being a first-term incumbent and the fact that more Americans still blamed Mr. Obama's Republican predecessor than him for the country's economic problems. According to the 2012 national exit poll, 53% of voters felt that George W. Bush was more to blame for the country's economic problems while only 38% felt that President Obama was more to blame and those who blamed Bush voted for Obama over his Republican challenger by a better than four-to-one margin. Part of the answer also involves the fact that economic conditions did appear to be improving modestly during the second half of 2012 with the official unemployment rate finally falling below 8% for the first time during Obama's presidency just a few weeks before the election. By Election Day, according to the national exit poll, 39% of voters felt that economic conditions were getting better while only 30% felt that they were getting worse.

Beyond the advantage of incumbency and modest improvement in economic conditions, however, a key factor explaining Barack Obama's surprisingly strong approval ratings during 2012 was the powerful influence of partisanship on those evaluations. Almost from the beginning of Obama's presidency, Americans' opinions of his performance have been sharply divided along party lines. In his personal style, Barack Obama was very different from his predecessor, George W. Bush. But in terms of how Americans evaluated his performance in

¹⁵ According to an analysis of President Obama's approval ratings by political scientists John Sides and Lynn Vavreck, the president's approval ratings were consistently higher during 2012 than would have been expected based on economic indicators and other factors that have been found to predict presidential approval. For an explanation of this study and its findings, see <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/02/is-obama-more-popular-than-he-should-be/>.

office, Obama, like Bush, was clearly “a divider, not a uniter.”¹⁶ According to the Gallup Poll, during the week of the presidential election, 51% of Americans approved of the president’s performance—a number almost identical to his share of the popular vote. But there was a huge partisan divide in those evaluations—91% of Democrats approved of Mr. Obama’s performance compared with only 7% of Republicans.¹⁷ Not coincidentally, these numbers were almost identical to the percentages of Democrats and Republicans who voted for the president.

A Changing Electorate

It was Barack Obama’s overwhelming support from his own party’s voters that allowed him to maintain a net positive approval rating and ultimately to win a second term in the White House. Beyond the immediate causes of the president’s victory, however, the results of the 2012 election also indicate that there are deeper forces at work in American society that are gradually transforming the American electorate. These forces were crucial to Obama’s victory and they are likely to affect elections for many years to come.¹⁸

Over time, the American electorate is gradually becoming more racially diverse and more liberal in its attitudes on social issues. These trends contributed to Obama’s victory by boosting Democratic identification and evaluations of the president’s performance in office. Nonwhites and socially liberal voters were much more likely to identify with the Democratic Party than whites and socially conservative voters. As a result, they were also much more likely to approve of the president’s job performance and to vote for him. For example, according to the Gallup

¹⁶ The definitive study of public opinion toward George W. Bush is Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman 2007).

¹⁷ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.

¹⁸ For an overview of the impact of demographic changes on the 2012 presidential election, see Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, “The Obama Coalition in the 2012 Election and Beyond,” Center for American Progress, December 2012, available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/ObamaCoalition-5.pdf>.

tracking poll, during the week of the 2012 presidential election, 78% of nonwhites approved of President Obama's job performance compared with only 40% of whites.¹⁹ These numbers almost perfectly matched the share of the vote that Mr. Obama received from these two groups.

Beyond 2012, the growing diversity and social liberalism of the American electorate represent a long-term threat to the viability of an overwhelmingly white and socially conservative Republican Party, especially in presidential elections. We have seen that between 1992 and 2012, the nonwhite share of the American electorate increased from 13% to 28% and this trend is certain to continue for many years because nonwhites make up a much larger share of the age cohorts that will be entering the electorate over the next several election cycles than of the oldest age cohorts that will gradually be leaving the electorate. It is very likely, therefore, that the nonwhite share of the electorate will continue to increase at an average rate of about two percentage points every four years for the next several decades.

But we do not have to wait 20 or 30 years to see the impact of growing racial and ethnic diversity on American elections. We can see its effects clearly over the last few election cycles. Hispanics are now the fastest growing racial or ethnic group in the United States and the growing Hispanic vote has already had profound consequences for presidential elections. Since 2004, New Mexico, which has the largest proportion of Hispanics in its population of any state, has shifted from a swing state to a solidly Democratic state while Colorado and Nevada have shifted from leaning Republican states to leaning Democratic states. In Florida the growing non-Cuban Hispanic vote was crucial to Barack Obama's narrow victory in 2012 and Florida could become a Democratic-leaning state before long.

¹⁹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.

In addition to these demographic changes, the results of the 2012 elections clearly reflected another important trend in American society—the emergence of an increasingly secular and socially liberal electorate. Thus, when it comes to religious affiliation, the fastest growing group in the American electorate consists of voters who classify themselves as “something else” or “none.” These two groups comprised 19% of the electorate in 2012 according to the national exit poll. And according to the Gallup Poll, in 2012, for the first time, Americans who wanted the government to “promote traditional values” were outnumbered by those who thought the government “should not favor any particular set of values” by 52% to 40%. This represented a significant shift from eight years earlier when those who wanted the government to promote traditional values outnumbered their opponents by 56% to 40%.²⁰

The decline in support for traditional values was reflected in changing attitudes on a variety of cultural issues. And on issues involving the rights of gay, lesbian and bisexual Americans, the changes have been rapid and quite dramatic. According to Gallup, the percentage of American adults supporting legal recognition of same sex marriage nearly doubled in six years, going from 27% in 2006 to 53% in 2012.²¹

The success of referenda legalizing same-sex marriage in three states in 2012 was no fluke. According to the 2012 exit poll, 49% of voters across the nation supported legal recognition of same-sex marriage in their own state compared with 46% who were opposed. And the 2012 exit poll also found strong support among voters for preserving the right to legal abortion guaranteed by the Supreme Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision: 59% of voters favored keeping abortion legal either always or most of the time, up from 55% in the 2004 exit poll. Given these results, it

²⁰ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/157958/americans-say-gov-not-favor-set-values.aspx>.

²¹ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/147662/First-Time-Majority-Americans-Favor-Legal-Gay-Marriage.aspx>.

is not surprising that voters in the swing state of Florida decisively rejected a proposed constitutional amendment to restrict access to abortion.²²

The growing cultural liberalism of the electorate was also evident on the issue of marijuana legalization. As with the passage of referenda legalizing same-sex marriage, the votes to legalize marijuana use in Colorado and Washington appeared to reflect long-term shifts in national sentiment. According to Gallup, the percentage of American adults supporting legalization of marijuana use increased from only 12% in 1970 to 36% in 2006 and 50% in 2012.²³

One of the most striking patterns in public opinion on cultural issues is the tendency of younger Americans regardless of race or ethnicity to hold more liberal attitudes than older Americans. This is especially true when it comes to the issue of same-sex marriage. Thus, in a November, 2012 Gallup Poll, 73% of Americans under the age of 30 favored legal recognition of same-sex marriage compared with only 39% of Americans over the age of 65.²⁴ And younger Americans today are also much less likely to attend religious services regularly and much more likely to describe their religious affiliation as “something else” or “none.” Based on these generational differences in attitudes and behavior, the trend toward a more secular and socially liberal electorate seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Has the Emerging Democratic Majority Finally Emerged?

In their 2002 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, John Judis and Ruy Teixeira famously predicted that long-term economic, demographic and cultural trends in the United States would lead to the emergence of a new Democratic electoral coalition that would dominate

²² <http://thehill.com/blogs/healthwatch/abortion/266377-florida-voters-defeat-measure-limiting-abortion-rights>.

²³ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/150149/Record-High-Americans-Favor-Legalizing-Marijuana.aspx>.

²⁴ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/159089/religion-major-factor-americans-opposed-sex-marriage.aspx>.

American politics for many years.²⁵ Two years later, George W. Bush was reelected and Republicans solidified their control of both chambers of Congress. But based on the results of the 2012 election, can we now say that the Democratic majority envisioned by Judis and Teixeira has finally emerged?

There clearly are good reasons for Republican leaders and strategists to be worried. Democratic candidates have now won the popular vote in five of the last six presidential elections and no Republican candidate since 1988 has won as many electoral votes as the 332 garnered by Barack Obama in 2012. Democratic candidates can now count on a substantially larger number of electoral votes from states that have consistently favored their party in recent elections than Republican candidates. Since 2000, Democratic candidates have carried 19 states with a total of 242 electoral votes in all four presidential elections while Republicans have carried 21 states with 177 electoral votes in all four elections.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the Democratic Party now has a lock on the Electoral College but the data displayed in Table 3 comparing the results of the 2000 and 2012 presidential elections indicate that Democrats have gained ground during these twelve years. Although there was only a modest increase in the Democratic share of the popular vote between 2000 and 2012, the number of states classified as leaning or strongly Democratic increased from 15 to 24 and the number of electoral votes in those states increased from 204 to 272. That is more than the 270 electoral votes needed for victory. At the same time, the number of evenly balanced states where the margin in the presidential race was less than five points fell from twelve to four and in the number of electoral votes from those states dropped from 139 to 75.

²⁵ John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

[Table 3 goes here]

Some of the most dramatic changes since 2000 have been a direct result of the rapid increase in the size of the Hispanic vote. In just twelve years, New Mexico has gone from a swing state to a fairly safe Democratic state while Colorado and Nevada have gone from Republican-leaning states to Democratic-leaning states. In 2000, these three states were an average of 4.5 points less Democratic in terms of margin than the nation. In 2012 they were an average of 3.7 points more Democratic than the nation.

In some ways, Barack Obama's victory in 2012 was more significant than his seemingly more impressive win in 2008. In 2008, Obama had a number of important short-term advantages that were specific to that year including the presence of an extraordinarily unpopular Republican president in the White House, an economy descending rapidly into the worst recession since World War II and the excitement of millions of African-American voters and young voters of all races about the possibility of electing the nation's first African-American president. In addition, based largely on his unprecedented success in raising money online from small donors, Obama was able to outspend his Republican opponent, John McCain, by a wide margin.²⁶

In 2012, President Obama no longer enjoyed any of these advantages. After four years of dealing with the after-effects of the worst financial crisis and recession since the 1930s, Obama had to run for a second term at a time of continued high unemployment and slow economic growth. Throughout 2012, numerous polls found that majorities of Americans had a negative view of economic conditions and felt that the country was moving in the wrong direction. In the national exit poll, 73% of voters rated economic conditions as either "not good" or "poor" and

²⁶ <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=anLDS9WWPQW8>.

52% indicated that the country was “seriously off on the wrong track.” Obama’s Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, was clearly the most electable of the candidates who sought the GOP nomination and, with the help of the Republican National Committee and pro-Republican Super-PACs, he was eventually able to outspend Barack Obama and his allies.²⁷

The vastly different circumstances of 2012 compared with 2008 convinced many Republican strategists and pundits that Mitt Romney had an excellent chance of winning the presidential election. Indeed, on the eve of the election several prominent pundits and strategists including Dick Morris, Karl Rove, Fred Barnes, and George Will predicted not just a win but a decisive win for Romney—a popular vote majority along with a wide margin in the Electoral College.²⁸ They firmly believed that Barack Obama’s victory in 2008 was a unique event, that Republican voters in 2012 were much more motivated to turn out to defeat the president than Democratic voters were to turn out to reelect him and that Obama would not be able to turn out young people, African-Americans and Latinos in nearly the same numbers in 2012 as four years earlier. Indeed, Republican pollsters believed that the 2012 electorate would be significantly older and whiter and therefore significantly more Republican than the 2008 electorate.²⁹

We now know that these Republican pundits and pollsters were wrong about every one of these expectations. Obama won the popular vote by a decisive margin and swept to an easy victory in the Electoral College. While overall turnout did decline slightly, young people, African-Americans and Latinos turned out in large numbers just as they had four years earlier.

²⁷ See the summary prepared by the Center for Responsive Politics for comparative spending data by the Republican and Democratic presidential campaigns: <http://www.opensecrets.org/pres12/index.php>.

²⁸ For a summary of many of these erroneous predictions by conservative pundits, see the post by John Cassidy on his Rational Irrationality blog: <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/johncassidy/2012/11/cassidys-count-could-romney-still-win.html>.

²⁹ <http://www.politico.com/blogs/burns-haberman/2012/11/republicans-worst-cycle-ever-for-polling-149229.html>.

According to the national exit poll, the proportion of voters under the age of 30 increased from 18% in 2008 to 19% in 2012 and the proportion of nonwhites increased from 26% in 2008 to 28% in 2012. Most importantly given the powerful influence of partisanship on vote choice, Democrats outnumbered Republicans by 38% to 32%, almost the same margin as in 2008.

In the absence of the short-term advantages that he enjoyed in 2008, Barack Obama's decisive victory in 2012 clearly depended to a much greater extent on impact of the long-term trends that are gradually transforming the American electorate. And those trends, especially the growing racial and ethnic diversity of American society and the growing social liberalism of the electorate, should continue to benefit Democratic presidential candidates after Obama unless the Republican Party moderates its positions on issues ranging from taxes and immigration to abortion and gay marriage in order to expand its appeal to nonwhites and socially liberal voters. But such a shift seems unlikely in the near future given the deep conservatism of the current Republican base and the fact that the large majority of current GOP office-holders represent solidly Republican constituencies—constituencies in which the party's conservative positions are quite popular. Any move toward the center by these Republican office-holders could put them in danger of facing a primary challenge from a hard-line conservative.

Of course the gradual transformation of the American electorate does not guarantee a Democratic victory in 2016. The outcome of the 2016 presidential election will depend on short-term factors such as the state of the economy, the popularity of President Obama and the results of the Democratic and Republican nomination contests as well as long-term trends affecting the makeup of the electorate. Moreover, in 2016 Democrats will lose the advantage of having a first-term incumbent in the race. Still, based on the long-term trends affecting the racial

composition and social attitudes of the American electorate, the electoral map should tilt slightly more in favor of the Democratic candidate than in 2012. By 2016, the nonwhite share of electorate could reach 30% and the growth of the Hispanic vote could shift several states further toward the Democrats. And like Mitt Romney in 2012, whoever wins the Republican nomination in 2016 will have to take positions on economic and social issues that are conservative enough to appeal to Republican primary voters—positions that will make it very difficult for that candidate to appeal to nonwhites and socially liberal voters in the general election, as Mitt Romney discovered.

The Republican Advantage in House and Senate Elections

Despite the long-term trends that are producing a more diverse and socially liberal electorate, however, all is not lost for the GOP. 2014 could be a good year for Republicans. The president's party almost always loses seats in Congress in midterm elections and the midterm electorate tends to be older and whiter than the presidential electorate. The fact that the large majority of state governors are now chosen in midterm elections should help Republicans to retain their current majority of the nation's statehouses. And despite their poor showing in the 2012 presidential and Senate elections, Republicans appear to have a firm grip on the House of Representatives. The GOP suffered a net loss of only eight House seats in 2012 even though Democratic House candidates received more votes than Republican House candidates.

The ability of Republicans to retain the large majority of their House seats despite a large Democratic swing in the national popular vote reflected an important structural advantage that Republicans enjoy in House elections: Democratic voters are heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of overwhelmingly Democratic urban districts. Thus, in 2012, there were

approximately 66 House districts in which Barack Obama won 70% or more of the major party vote compared with only approximately 23 districts in which Mitt Romney won 70% or more of the major party vote.³⁰ This means that from an electoral standpoint Democratic voters were much less efficiently distributed than Republican voters and far more Democratic votes were “wasted” in overwhelmingly Democratic districts.

Even before redistricting, the distribution of voters across House districts clearly favored the GOP. In 2010, there were 232 Republican-leaning districts, those in which Obama’s performance was weaker than his overall national performance, compared with only 203 Democratic-leaning districts, those in which his performance was stronger than his overall national performance. By 2012, this Republican advantage was even greater as a result of partisan gerrymandering by Republican legislatures and governors following the 2010 midterm elections. After redistricting, there were 241 Republican-leaning districts compared with only 194 Democratic-leaning districts. Republican candidates won 223 of these Republican-leaning districts compared with only 11 Democratic-leaning districts.

The growing dependence of Democrats on nonwhites and other groups such as gays and lesbians and young professionals whose members are heavily concentrated in urban districts means that the Republican advantage in House elections is likely to continue for some time. Moreover, with the growing influence of partisanship on voting in House elections, this advantage is more significant than in the past. There is a much stronger relationship now than in earlier years between the partisan makeup of House districts and the outcomes of House elections. In 2012, the correlation between Obama’s 2008 vote percentage in House districts and

³⁰ These numbers are estimates because 2012 presidential vote results were not available for all House districts at the time of writing.

the vote percentage for the Democratic House candidate was .94. This was the strongest correlation between the presidential and House vote in any election in at least 40 years according to Gary Jacobson.³¹

Republicans also enjoy important advantages in Senate elections due to the over-representation of sparsely populated rural states and under-representation of heavily populated urban states in the upper chamber. The 20 least populous states have a smaller combined population than California but these states elect 40 U.S. senators to California's two. And of those 20 states, 11 are either solidly Republican or lean Republican in presidential elections while only five are either solidly Democratic or lean Democratic.

Democrats have done surprisingly well in recent Senate elections but the current Democratic majority appears to be rather fragile due to the large number of Democrats who represent solidly Republican states. Of the 20 Democratic seats that will be up for election in 2014, six are in states that gave Mitt Romney a double-digit margin over Barack Obama: Alaska, Arkansas, Louisiana, Montana, South Dakota and West Virginia. In contrast, of the 13 GOP seats up for election in 2014, only one is in a state that gave Barack Obama a double-digit margin over Mitt Romney—the Maine seat held by Susan Collins.

Conclusions: The Future of Electoral Competition in a Polarized Era

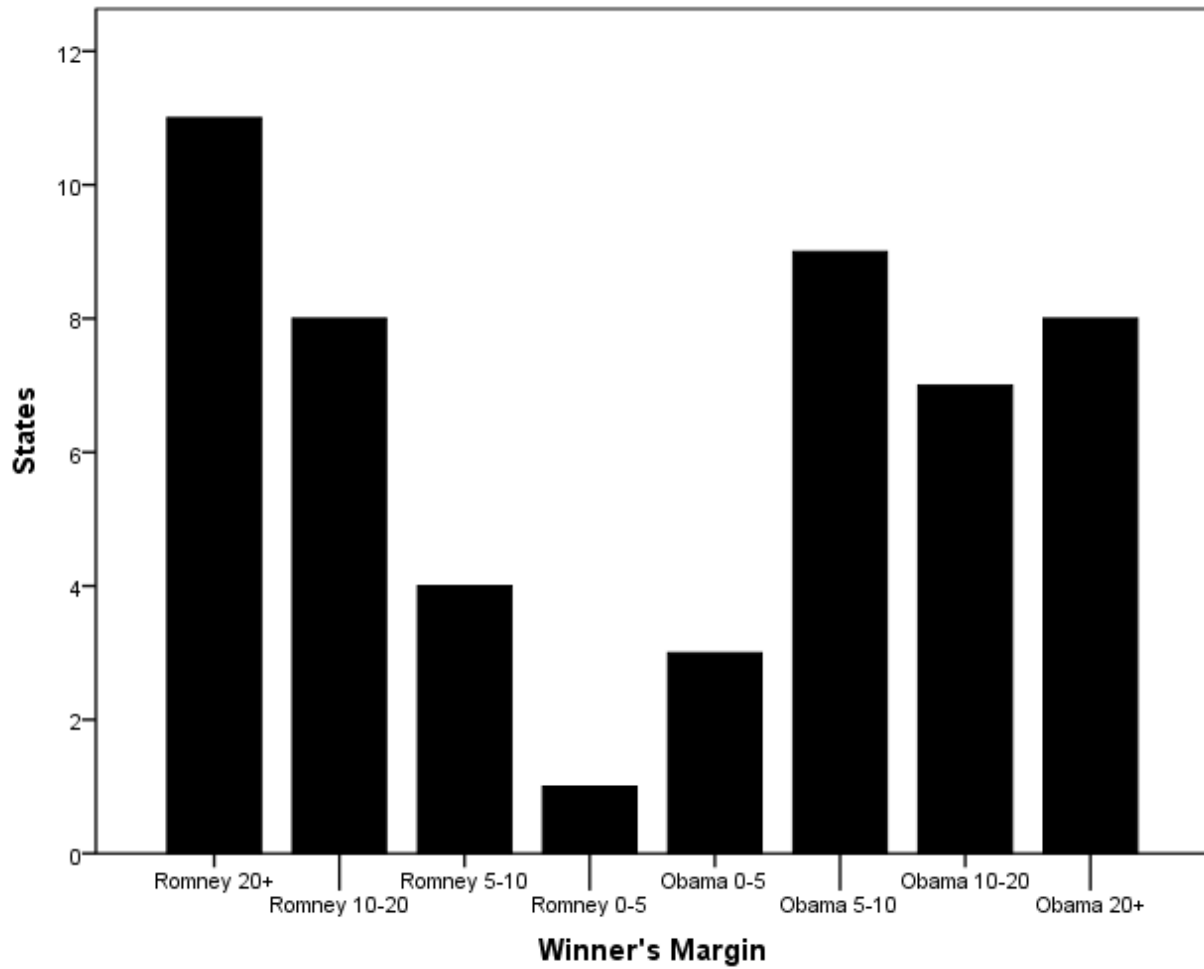
The structural advantages that Republicans enjoy in House and Senate elections would appear to guarantee the party's continued competitiveness in congressional elections for several more election cycles. As a result, divided government will probably be a persistent feature of American politics for some time. And at the state level, Republicans are likely to remain the

³¹ Gary C. Jacobson, "The Economy and Partisanship in the 2012 Presidential and Congressional Elections," draft prepared for publication in *Political Science Quarterly*, December 2012, p. 28.

dominant party in most of the South as well as a number of sparsely populated, predominantly rural states that are relatively insulated from the demographic and cultural trends affecting the rest of the country. Republicans should also have success in midterm elections, especially as long as Democrats maintain control of the White House.

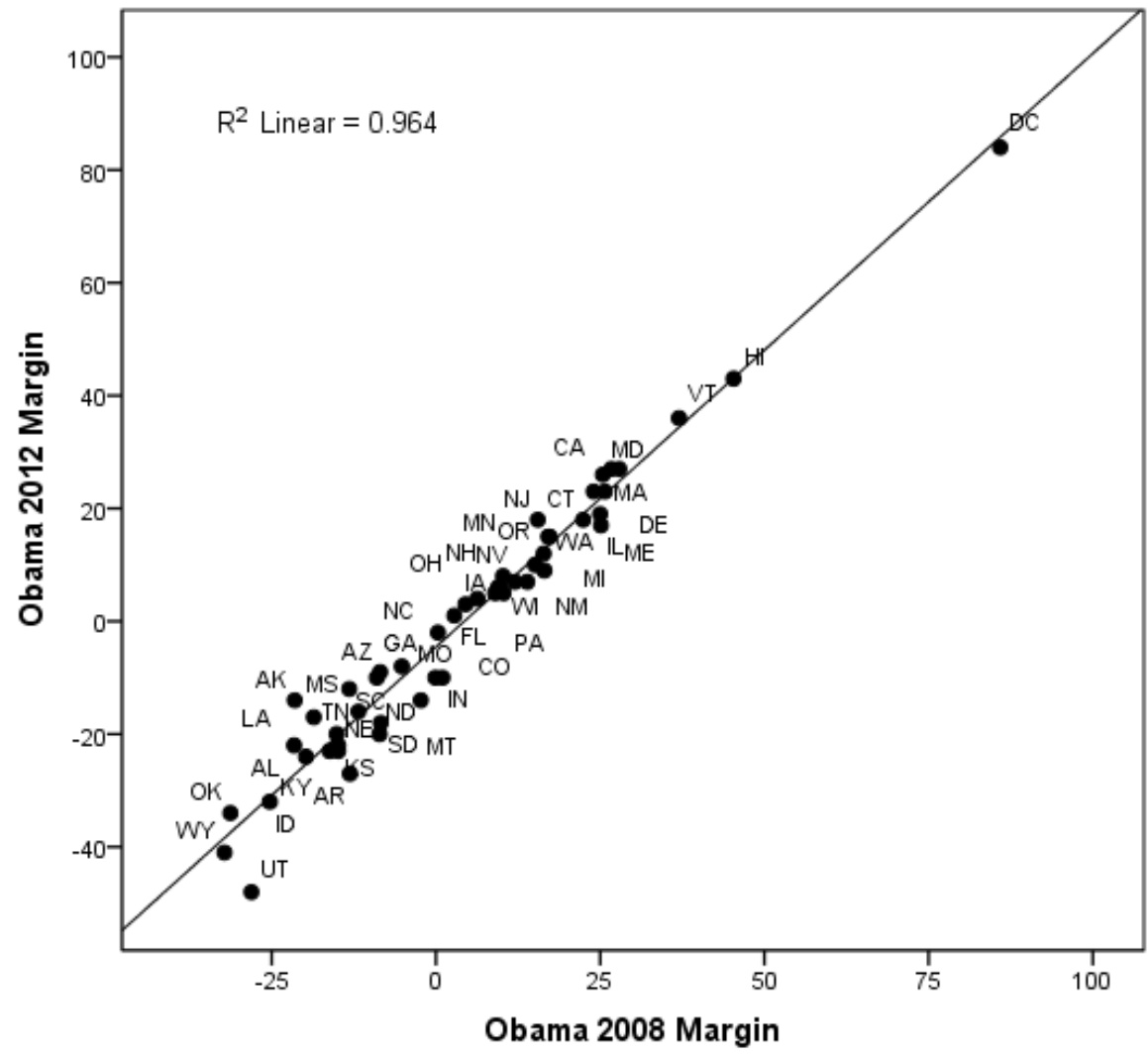
In presidential elections, however, the demographic and cultural trends that contributed to Barack Obama's surprisingly easy victory in 2012 are likely to increase the current Democratic advantage in both the national popular vote and the Electoral College. And over time the effects of growing racial diversity and social liberalism will be felt in House and Senate elections as well as presidential elections. Unless Republican leaders and strategists can find a way to expand their party's appeal beyond its shrinking base of older white conservative voters, the GOP is likely to experience a continued decline in its electoral fortunes in a nation that is becoming increasingly diverse and socially liberal.

Figure 1
Winning Candidate's Margin in the States



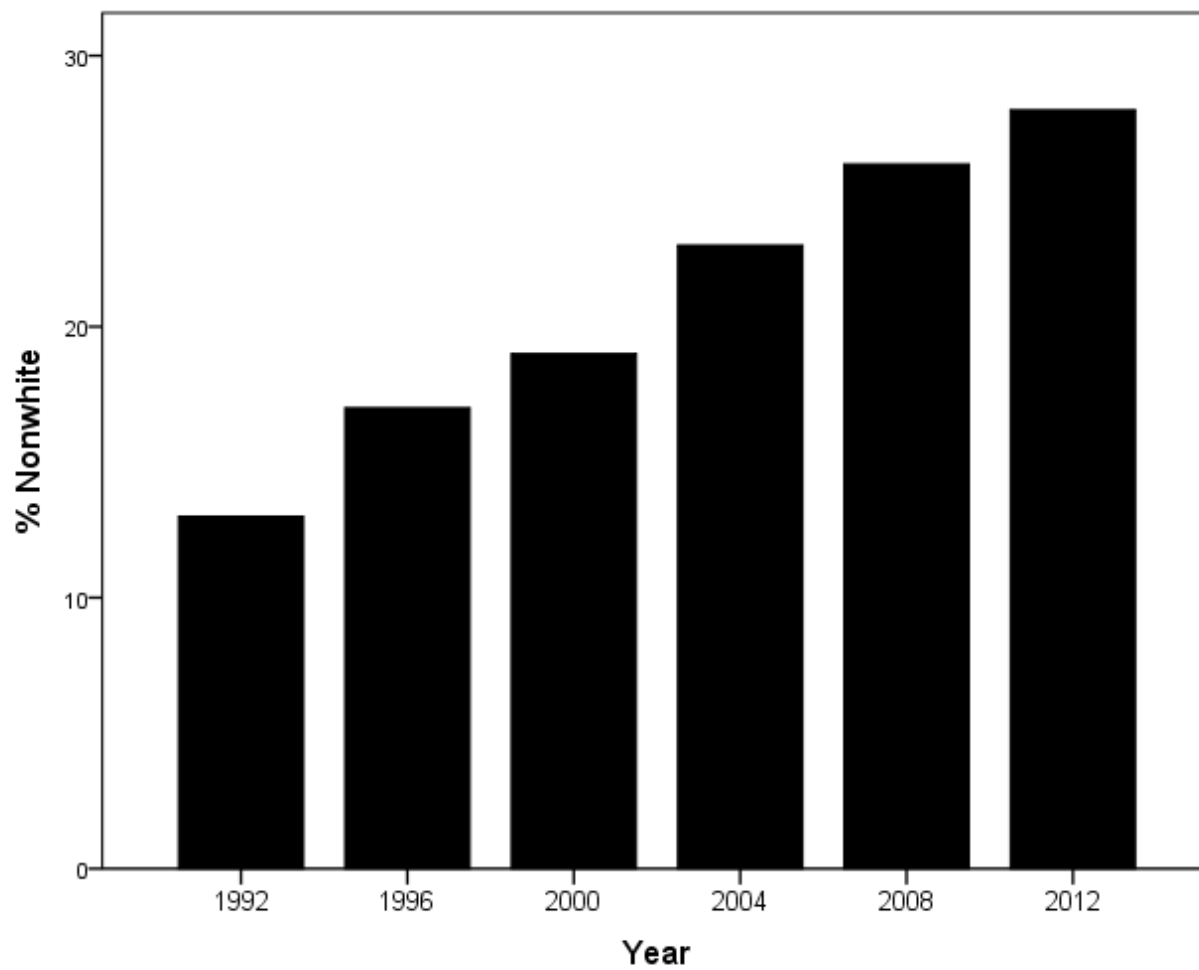
Source: Data compiled by author

Figure 2
Obama 2012 State Margin by Obama 2008 State Margin



Source: Data compiled by author

Figure 3
Nonwhite Share of U.S. Electorate, 1992-2012



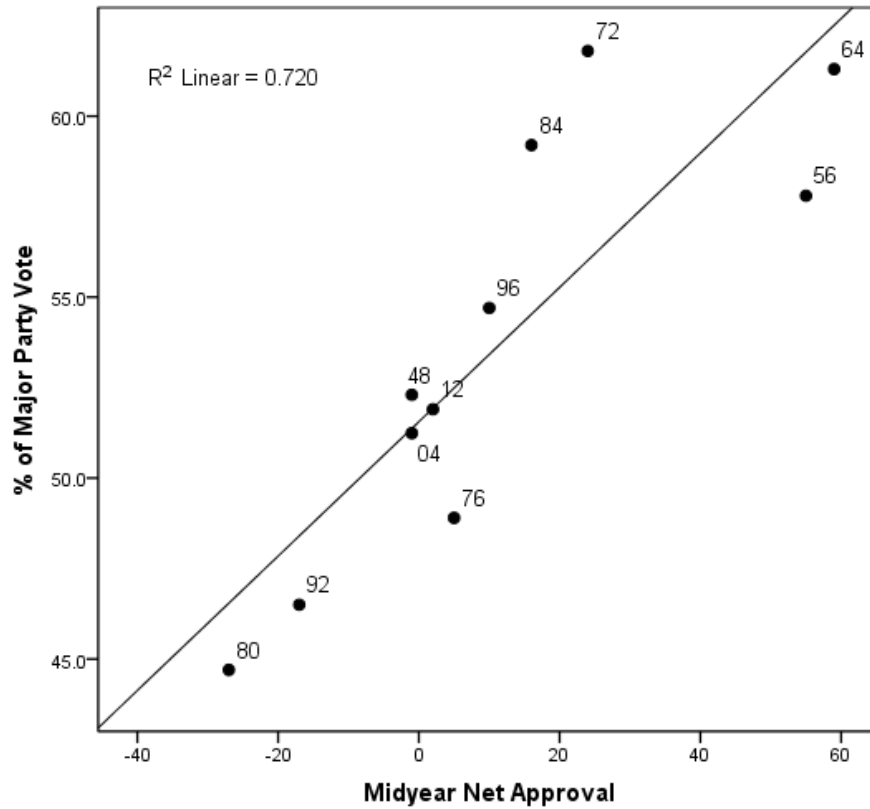
Source: National Exit Polls

Table 1
 Liberalism of Obama and Romney Voters on Issues

Issue	Obama Voters	Romney Voters	Difference
Role of Government	74%	16%	58%
Health Care Law	84%	11%	73%
Taxes	83%	42%	41%
Abortion	84%	40%	44%
Same Sex Marriage	76%	26%	50%
Average Liberalism	80%	27%	53%

Source: 2012 National Exit Poll

Figure 4
Incumbent President's Vote Share by Net Approval
Rating in Middle of Election Year



Source: Data compiled by author

Table 2
Results of Regression Analysis of 2012 Obama Margin in the States

Independent Variable	B	Std. Error	t-ratio	Sig.
2008 Margin	1.05	.03	35.9	.001
Swing State	- .08	3.22	- 0.0	.979
Swing State Field Offices	.02	.07	0.3	.729
Constant	- 4.68			
Adjusted R2	.96			

Source: Data compiled by author

Table 3
The Changing Electoral College Balance of Power

	2000 Election		2012 Election	
	States	Electoral Votes	States	Electoral Votes
Strong Democratic	11	168	15	186
Lean Democratic	4	36	9	86
Evenly Balanced	12	139	4	75
Lean Republican	6	49	3	37
Strong Republican	18	146	20	154

Source: www.uselectionatlas.org

Note: Strong Democratic states were carried by Democratic candidate by 10 points or more, Lean Democratic states were carried by Democratic candidate by 5-10 points, Evenly Balanced states were decided by less than 5 points, Lean Republican states were carried by Republican candidate by 5-10 points, Strong Republican states were carried by Republican candidate by 10 points or more.