



January 4, 2013



Reuters

## **The 2012 Election: What Happened, What Changed, What it Means**

William A. Galston



**William A. Galston** holds the Ezra Zilkha Chair in the Brookings Institution's Governance Studies Program, where he serves as a senior fellow.

In the fall of 2011, Barack Obama's prospects for reelection did not appear bright. After the failure of his "grand bargain" talks with House Speaker John Boehner, his approval rating plunged to a new low. Economic growth was mediocre, unemployment remained stubbornly high, and the public's confidence in the future was waning. The president seemed unable to find a credible narrative to explain his plans; worse, he seemed to have lost the connection with the people that had fueled his remarkable victory in 2008.

What followed—between Labor Day of 2011 and Election Day in 2012—was one of the more noteworthy political comebacks in recent American history. The backdrop was an economy that recovered just enough to bring unemployment down below 8 percent, still high by historical standards, but a lot better than the 10 percent reached during the depths of the Great Recession.

In isolation, this modest improvement might not have sufficed; the president and his senior political advisors certainly did not think so. Instead, they planned and executed one of the best-run reelection campaigns ever. They decided on a theme—fairness—and a strategy—using policies and events to mobilize key constituencies. And they waged a near-flawless tactical battle, including the decision to spend the summer—and much of their war-chest—characterizing Mitt Romney as a heartless plutocrat. Through the fall, economic optimism rose, as did the enthusiasm of the president's core supporters.

On November 6, 2012, Barack Obama concluded his reelection campaign with a somewhat more comfortable margin than many had been predicting even a week earlier. Not only did much of his 2008 coalition remain intact, but also he gave back only two of the nine states he had snatched from the Republicans in 2008. Surveying this victory, won in the face of economic stress and the continuing unpopularity of the president's signature domestic achievement—the Affordable Care Act—some analysts proclaimed the dawning of a new progressive era.<sup>1</sup>

Other aspects of the election results might have tempered their enthusiasm. Unlike his predecessor in 2004 (and nearly all other reelected presidents), Obama did not exceed, or even match, his initial victory. He received 65.6 million votes, down from 69.5 million in 2008. His margin of victory was 4.7 million (3.68 percent), down from 9.6 million (7.27 percent) four years earlier. His share of the popular vote was 50.96 percent, down from 52.87. He won 332 electoral votes, a comfortable margin, but down from the 365 he won during his first race.

Overall, 128.7 million votes were cast, down from 131.5 million in 2008. And because the pool of eligible voters expanded by more than 10 million during that period, turnout fell sharply, from 62.3 percent of eligible citizens in 2008 to only 58.8 percent in 2012, below the 60.6 percent recorded in the 2004 contest between George W. Bush and John Kerry.

---

In the congressional races, Democrats gained two Senate seats, for a total of 55 (counting two independents who will caucus with them), while Republicans maintained their majority in the House of Representatives, losing a net of only 8 seats despite receiving 1.3 million fewer votes overall than did the Democrats. (Democrats received 59.6 million—49.2 percent—versus the Republicans’ 58.3 million— 48.0 percent.) Redistricting helped the Republicans, but so did the fact that so many Democrats live in urban areas, forming natural super-majority districts that end up distributing their votes inefficiently. One rough measure of this phenomenon: In 2012, 106 candidates won election to the House with vote shares of 70 percent or more. Of these super-majority winners, 74 were Democrats, versus only 32 Republicans.

At the presidential level in 2012, there was a distinction, perhaps sharper than ever before, between safe and contested (“swing”) states. The latter received the lion’s share of resources for advertising, field offices, and get-out-the-vote efforts, as well as nearly all the time the candidates spent campaigning. The Obama campaign’s focus on these states was especially notable. Nonetheless, his vote total in these states declined by 2.3 percent, from 19.3 million in 2008 to 18.9 million in 2012, and his share of their vote declined from 53.2 percent to 51.4 percent.

Compared to 2008, Obama received fewer votes in seven out of ten swing states. By contrast, Romney improved over McCain’s performance in nine out of those ten states. In Ohio, the arena of what was probably the most intense contest in the entire country, Obama’s vote total declined from 2.94 million in 2008 to 2.83 million in 2012. It was also the only state in which Romney lost ground relative to McCain, suggesting that the candidates were more effective in making the case against one another than for themselves.

Table 1: The vote in swing states, 2008 and 2012 (in thousands of votes cast)

	2012		2008		Romney	Obama '12
	Obama	Romney	Obama	McCain	v. McCain	v. Obama '08
CO	1,323	1,185	1,288	1,074	111	35
FL	4,238	4,163	4,282	4,046	115	(44)
IA	823	731	829	682	49	(6)
NV	531	464	534	413	51	(3)
NH	370	330	385	317	13	(15)
NC	2,178	2,270	2,143	2,128	142	(35)
OH	2,828	2,661	2,940	2,678	(17)	(112)
PA	2,990	2,860	3,276	2,656	204	(286)
VA	1,972	1,823	1,960	1,725	98	12
WI	1,621	1,411	1,677	1,262	149	(56)
All Swing States	18,874	17,898	19,314	16,981	917	(440)
Non-Swing States	46,794	42,943	50,185	42,969	(26)	(3,481)

As Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin have argued, the coalition that swept Obama to victory in 2008 remained largely intact in 2012. African Americans cast about as many votes for Obama as they did four years earlier. Both the Latino share of the total vote and Obama's share of the Latino vote rose significantly, nationally and in key swing states, as was also the case for Asian Americans. Despite indications of diminished interest and enthusiasm among young adults until late in the campaign, they again turned out in large numbers and gave Obama 60 percent of their votes—down from 66 percent in 2008 but enough to be decisive in four swing states—Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia—that Obama lost to Romney among voters over age 30.<sup>2</sup>

That said, Obama's base of support was significantly narrower than it was four years ago. His share of the white vote fell from 43 to 39 percent. He was supported by 56 percent of moderates, down from 60 percent, and by 45 percent of Independents, down from 52 percent. While he broke even with McCain among men, he lost them to Romney by seven points, 45 to 52 percent. (The gender gap widened from 12 points in 2008 to 18 points this year.) And while the president's share of the vote from households making \$50,000 or less held steady at 60 percent, his support among middle income households (\$50-100,000) fell from 49 to 46 percent, and among households making more than \$100,000, from 49 to 44 percent.

As has been widely noted, the white share of the electorate continued its long-term decline, from 80 percent in 2000 to 74 percent in 2008 and 72 percent in 2012. Much of this reflects the tectonics of demographic forces, as the immigration wave of the past four decades reshapes American politics and society. But some of

it represents shorter-term factors. While we won't know for sure until the Census Bureau releases its results, a rough calculation suggests that five million fewer white Americans voted in 2012 than in 2008. As Sean Trende has observed, demographic shifts can't explain this: "although whites are declining as a share of the voting-age population, their raw numbers are not."<sup>3</sup> Most of the white voters who participated in 2008 are still alive, and those who aren't have been more than replaced by new white entrants into the electorate. Incomplete evidence suggests that most of the white dropouts are working class voters who saw little to choose between an African American president they regarded as unacceptably liberal and a rich white venture capitalist who notoriously wrote many of them off as part of the "47 percent" content to receive government handouts.

---

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

---

### **Long-term trends favoring Democrats**

Several long-term trends are working in favor of the Democratic Party, beginning with the much discussed demographic shifts. In May, 2012, the Census Bureau reported that white births are no longer the majority in the United States. Non-Hispanic whites represented 49.6 percent of all births in the twelve months ending July 2011; minorities—principally African Americans, Asians, Latinos, and those of mixed race made up the rest.<sup>4</sup>

This report is a harbinger of the country's demographic future. Immigration will make a difference, of course. There is no guarantee that the public policies and economic forces that have brought more than 40 million immigrants to the United States during the past four decades will continue. But even assuming much lower rates of immigration in the new four decades, the non-Hispanic white share of the population would drop to 52 percent. The age and fertility profiles of the people now here guarantee the continuing growth of the non-white share of the population. Already in 2012, only 58 percent of voters age 18 to 29 identified as non-Hispanic whites (down from 74 percent in 2000, 68 percent in 2004, and 62 percent in 2008), while Hispanics were 18 percent and African Americans, 17 percent.<sup>5</sup>

This matters because most minority groups strongly favor Democrats over Republicans. Initiated during the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, the massive shift of African Americans toward the Democratic Party seems likely to persist as long as Democrats continued to champion programs and policies to which the African American community is committed—especially if Republicans continue to oppose them for fiscal or ideological reasons.

While Latinos have long leaned toward the Democratic Party, George W. Bush demonstrated that a sympathetic Republican could win 40 percent or more of their vote. But the defeat of the Bush administration's push for comprehensive

immigration reform and the shift of the Republican Party toward a harder-edged stance sent Latino support for the party's candidates into free fall. John McCain, who felt impelled to back away from his pro-immigration posture during the 2008 Republican primaries, received only 31 percent of the Latino vote. And Mitt Romney, who adopted what was arguably the most extreme stance of any candidate during the 2012 primaries, did even worse—a miserable 27 percent.

It is possible, of course, that a different candidate and a change of orientation by the Republican Party could restore the balance that prevailed during much of the Bush administration. But time is short, and memories are long. When Latinos in California perceived Republican governor Pete Wilson's programs and rhetoric during the mid-1990s as not only anti-immigrant but also anti-Latino, their reaction reshaped the state's politics for the next two decades. If national Republicans cannot find a way make amends during the next four years, they could find themselves on the wrong side of a demographic tsunami for a very long time.

Few attitudes are permanent, and groups can shift their allegiances as generations and issues change. For half a century after Fidel Castro marched into Havana, anti-Castro Cuban immigrants have staunchly supported the Republican Party. This year, remarkably, Barack Obama got 49 percent of their vote. The refugees' grandchildren have new concerns and are open to new arguments. Still, fifty years is an eternity in politics, and few Republicans would willingly cede the emerging Latino vote to the Democrats for even one-tenth that long. The question is whether the base of the party will allow the necessary policy shifts to occur.

Young adults (AKA "millennials") are another key building-block of the Democratic coalition. This is a recent development. Between 1976 and 2000, voters age 18 to 29 were, on average, only 2 points more supportive of Democratic presidential candidates than were voters 30 and older. In 2004, that modest gap rose to 7 points. It surged to 16 points and remained high—12 points—in the most recent election.<sup>6</sup>

This is no accident. Numerous surveys have shown that today's 18 to 29-year old voters are more likely than others to identify as Democrats and liberals and that they are far more supportive of the public sector. By large margins, they want to maintain or expand Obamacare; unlike their elders, they favor a larger government offering more services, and by a margin of 22 points (59 to 37) they want government to do more to solve problems. (Among voters over 45, by contrast, sentiment is just the reverse: 57 percent think that government is already doing too much, and only 37 percent want it to do more.)<sup>7</sup> Young adults are strong environmentalists and are very liberal on most social issues, especially gay marriage. They are skeptical about military action overseas and are open to substantial cuts in the defense budget.

To a considerable extent, young adult attitudes reflect the racial and ethnic composition of this cohort, which is—as we’ve seen—dominated by liberal-leaning minorities. But not entirely: while Obama received only 39 percent of the overall white vote, he did significantly better—44 percent—among white voters age 18 to 29.

Political scientists point to key experiences that shape the political identity and outlook of young adults for their entire civic lives. Voters in their late twenties spent their teen years in Bill Clinton’s peaceful and prosperous second term, while those in their late teens and early twenties were shaped more by the war-torn Bush years. After the invasion of Iraq and the controversies over coercive interrogations of prisoners, Guantanamo, and what turned out to be non-existent weapons of mass destruction, young voters (who had divided evenly between Bush and Al Gore in 2000), shifted to John Kerry in 2004 and then to Obama, who had opposed the Iraq war outright and promised to close Guantanamo. Many young adults have voted for Obama twice, and a fair number have voted three consecutive times for the Democratic candidate. Based on studies of past cohorts, it is reasonable to conclude that these voters are approaching the point at which their early experiences and commitments become an indelible dye.

Highly educated, mostly white professionals formed the final key building-block for Democrats. Members of this group tend to be liberal (especially on social issues), religiously unaffiliated, suspicious of religious influence on politics, and strongly in favor of activist government. (They favored the auto bailout more than any other group.) By almost every measure, their support for the president and his program was sweeping. Some of the evidence: 62 percent of upscale professionals think that the country is moving in the right direction. Sixty percent think that Obama has a plan to get the economy moving. Seventy-one percent think that the president understands the problems of poor Americans, while 68 percent think he cares about people like themselves. Huge majorities think that they wealthy and corporations are under-taxed. And they were the only demographic group that gave majority support to cuts in defense spending. Sixty-five percent of these upscale professionals voted for Obama, and most of them had already decided to do so before the general election began. And more than any other group, they tend to take their children with them to the polling booth. This suggests that they are likely to pass on their propensity to vote to the next generation . . . and probably their political attitudes as well.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to demography, the terrain of social issues has shifted to the Democrats’ advantage. For the better part of four decades, these issues threw Democrats on the defensive. Key blocks of swing voters wondered whether Democrats were sufficiently patriotic, religious, and committed to mainstream values on issues such as crime, welfare, and the family. Legislation enacted during the Clinton administration took some of these issues off the table. The

conservative evangelical movement reached high tide and began to recede. The ambiguities of the Iraq invasion and of the struggle against terrorism widened the space of permissible dissent; opposing torture and preventive war did not guarantee political marginalization. And opinion shifted with remarkable rapidity on same-sex marriage, a dispute that many conservatives regarded as a sure-fire new wedge issue. Instead, young adults embraced it, and many older adults found themselves shifting their stance. By the time Barack Obama got off the fence in the spring of 2012 and announced his personal support, it had become a non-issue.

Finally, the Tea Party-led takeover of the Republican Party worked to the advantage of Democrats. These insurgents' antipathy to compromise eventually led the American people to regard them, not President Obama, as the source of gridlock in the political system. Their demand for policy purity shifted the party toward a brand of conservatism that more and more Americans saw as outside the mainstream. During the Republican nominating contest, their total rejection of tax increases led every candidate to spurn a hypothetical budget deal tilted ten to one in favor of spending cuts. Even after the November election, their obduracy thwarted the efforts of Republican leaders to enact an alternative to Obama's fiscal proposals. While the people are far from approving the Democratic Party, their attitude toward Republicans is even (and significantly) more negative. It is likely to remain there until Republican reformers find a way to reorient their party, as some insurgent Democrats did in the late 1980s and early 1990s after three consecutive presidential defeats.

### **The risk of over-interpretation**

These structural factors newly favoring the Democrats are real and significant. Nonetheless, political analysis always risks over-interpreting what may turn out to be singular and transitory events. Several considerations underscore the need for caution.

First, it is not easy to defeat an incumbent president. Challengers managed this feat five times in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: 1912, when Theodore Roosevelt bolted the Republican Party and ran under the Bull Moose flag, allowing Wilson to slip in with less than 42 percent of the popular vote; 1932, when three grinding years of the Great Depression had thoroughly discredited the Hoover administration; 1976, when Gerald Ford's decision to pardon Richard Nixon hamstrung his effort to put Watergate behind him while Ronald Reagan's stiff primary challenge weakened his general election prospects; 1980, when a beleaguered Jimmy Carter faced the Great Inflation, the Iranian hostage crisis, and an equally grueling primary challenge from Ted Kennedy; and 1992, when George H. W. Bush's violation of his "No new taxes" pledge split his party and opened the door to Pat Buchanan's insurgency. By contrast, while the weaker-than-expected economic recovery made



Obama's reelection an uphill battle, he faced no outright crisis and enjoyed the luxury of a unified party.

Second, while Mitt Romney was certainly the pick of an undistinguished Republican primary field, he was nonetheless an unusually weak general election candidate. His approval rating rarely rose above 50 percent and stood at only 47 percent on election day.<sup>9</sup> The electorate perceived him as remote and lacking empathy: among the 21 percent who said that "cares about people like me" was the most important quality in a presidential candidate, Obama prevailed by the remarkable margin of 81 to 18 percent. In a year when the pressures on the middle class grabbed the center of public discourse, 53 percent of the voters said that Romney's policies would favor the rich.<sup>10</sup> And in a time of rising concern about income inequality and sky-high ire toward the financial community, Romney's nomination must be regarded as spectacularly ill-timed. It is hard to believe that the Republican Party will repeat this mistake in four years, or that the field of candidates from which it chooses will be as lackluster.

Third, Obama's team out-organized and out-campaigned the Republicans, making breakthrough use of information technology and statistical targeting techniques to bolster a granular ground game. There is no reason to believe that this organization gap will persist indefinitely. Indeed, recent history suggests that when one party leapfrogs the other, the loser goes to school on the winner and usually catches up in time for the next round of competition.

Fourth, it is unclear how much of the enthusiasm that Obama aroused among young adults and minorities will prove transferable to more traditional—that is, older white—candidates. No doubt some of this enthusiasm reflects approval of Obama's policies in areas ranging from student loans and immigration to same-sex marriage, issues that subsequent candidates could embrace. But much of it rest on a more visceral sense of identification that will be hard to replicate—unless a young, charismatic minority candidate emerges to pick up Obama's mantle.

Fifth, the white working class remains a wild card. Post-election surveys documented huge differences between this group of Americans and whites with a college education or more. 40 percent of the white working class identifies as Republican, and 51 percent as conservative, versus 32 and 39 percent, respectively, for more highly educated white. They are twice as likely to identify themselves as evangelicals and Christian conservatives and to believe that the Bible is the literal word of God. Unlike college-educated whites, they prefer a smaller government with lower taxes and spending. Nonetheless, by a margin of 79 to 19 percent, they reject cuts in military spending. Not surprisingly, the members of the white working class who showed up at the polls gave 65 percent of their vote to Mitt Romney (60 percent in the hotly contested Midwest).<sup>11</sup>

There is evidence, however, that the white working class embraces a more populist brand of conservatism than they were offered in 2012. When asked about the principal causes of the slow economic recovery, for example, 48 percent blamed off-shoring, versus only 27 percent of white college educated voters. Despite their belief that government is providing too many social services, 54 percent think that government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor. And when they directly experience government action that benefits them, they often support it; a majority of white working class voters in the Midwest (but not nationally) favored the auto bailout.

Prior to the 2012 presidential nominating contest, some conservative intellectuals were urging a turn toward populist conservatism and wanted to nominate a candidate who would be a credible messenger for that creed. Such a move might well have helped among white working class voters, especially in the Midwest. It is not clear, however, whether populist positions—for example, the rejection of off-shoring—would have been acceptable to the business-oriented portion of the Republican Party.

Finally, it is not clear that Obama's reelection definitively resolved the central question facing the country and dividing the parties—the role of government in our economic and social life. For many quadrennial elections, exit polls have asked a version of the following question:

“Which is closer to your view: government should do more to solve problems; or, government is doing too many things better left to businesses and individuals?”

In November of 2008, as economic catastrophe loomed, a majority of the voters—51 percent—thought that government should do more, while 43 percent disagreed. But in 2012, after four years of high-pitched controversy over the role of government, the public's center of gravity shifted: only 43 percent continued to endorse the proposition that government should be more active, while 51 percent inclined toward the smaller government view.<sup>12</sup>

Compare this to other elections that signaled enduring shifts in American party politics. 1936 represented, not just an electoral triumph for FDR, but also an endorsement of the activist liberalism he had championed. 1984 was the mirror image: the vindication of Ronald Reagan's conservative outlook against an intelligent and honorable liberal who ran as the last standard-bearer of the New Deal coalition.

Some quantitative indicators add precision to this point. Political scientists often point to three pairs of elections as “realignments” of the electorate and party system. The election of 1900 confirmed the 1896 repudiation of William Jennings Bryan's brand of rural populism and ushered in a period of Republican dominance

that lasted until 1932. The election of 1936 confirmed the public's repudiation of Republican small government localism and cemented a liberal coalition that endured until the mid-1960s. The election of 1984 confirmed the results of 1980 and propelled Reagan's brand of conservatism to the high ground of American politics, which it held until the economic crisis reopened the door for a more aggressively activist federal government.

In each of these "confirming" elections—1900, 1936, and 1984—turnout rose over the prior election, and the victor received both a higher vote total and a higher share of the popular vote. None of these things happened in 2012. As we have seen, turnout fell by 3.5 percentage points, Obama's vote total fell 3.9 million short of its 2008 peak, and his share of the vote declined by almost two points. This doesn't prove that Obama's presidency won't turn out to be the harbinger of a new political order, as were those of McKinley, FDR, and Reagan. But it does warrant some analytical caution.

Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin may be right: Obama's reelection may signal the emergency of a new "progressive coalition" comprising "African Americans, Latinos, women, young people, professionals, and economically populist blue-collar whites," a nascent new majority that pushes "an activist government agenda to expand economic opportunities and personal freedoms for all people."<sup>13</sup> But it's too early to tell. We cannot rule out the possibility that a new brand of reformist conservatism will take shape—a conservatism that is honest about the challenges we face, more tolerant on social issues, more open to immigration and diversity, less doctrinaire on fiscal issues, less aggressively laissez-faire in its policy orientation, and more devoted to public/private partnerships and regulated markets as vehicles for solving public problems. Progressives should not be confident that they have seized the high ground until they have defeated, not the worst of what their adversaries have to offer, but the best.

### **Mandate for what?**

Many political analysts expressed dissatisfaction with the 2012 campaign, citing the candidates' failure to engage substantively on many key issues. The people agree: a post-election Pew survey found that only 38 percent believe that the campaign offered more discussion of the issues than usual, while 51 percent thought less than usual. (In 2008, by contrast, 57 percent of the people thought that there had been more discussion than usual of the issue; only 34 percent disagreed.)<sup>14</sup>

While these judgments may well be accurate, it would be an exaggeration to say that the campaign produced few substantive results and little guidance for elected officials. First, some significant areas of agreement did emerge. More than sixty percent of the people ended up favoring tax increases on households with annual incomes of \$250,000 or more; almost that many wanted to limit tax deductions for large corporations. More than 70 percent favored reducing the

federal budget deficit through a combination of tax increases and spending cuts, versus small minorities for either a taxes-only or spending-only approach. Smaller majorities would support capping the aggregate deductions taxpayers can claim from their gross income and raising taxes on investment income. (By contrast, only 41 percent support a limit on the home mortgage deduction.) Fifty-one percent would support reduced Medicare and Social Security benefits for higher income seniors. (On the other hand, only 42 percent favor increasing the minimum age for receiving Social Security, and only 41 percent do for Medicare. There is even less support for increasing individual contributions to Medicare.)

Second, Americans rejected most proposals for reducing discretionary spending. Cuts in defense spending garnered only 43 percent support, and even smaller shares of the public supported reductions in research, K-12 education, college student loans, transportation, and assistance to the poor. Whatever their merits as fiscal policy, the cuts in defense and domestic spending mandated under “sequestration” probably would prove unpopular if allowed to go into effect.

There are, finally, areas of confusion, division, outright contradiction—questions on which the people have been unable to reach even a rough conclusion. The country is split down the middle on whether we should pursue growth through tax and spending cuts or, conversely, through tax increases and additional public investments. The people believe that government should do more to close the gap between rich and poor . . . *and* that government is providing too many social services better left to private charities. When asked to identify the single most important value or principle that should guide budget decisions, 48 percent cited either living within our means or promoting individual responsibility, versus only 29 percent who preferred investing in the future or protecting the poor and vulnerable. Here, as elsewhere, the question is whether people’s policy preferences are consistent with their broader outlook. Americans are inclined to lean toward conservative principles, but they often have trouble when faced with the concrete consequences—for themselves, and even for others.

## WHAT THE 2012 ELECTION DID NOT CHANGE: POLARIZATION AND THE THREAT OF POLICY GRIDLOCK

### **Partisan and ideological polarization**

A Pew Research Center survey conducted a month after the 2012 election asked whether the United States is “more politically divided than in the past.” 80 percent said yes—the highest percentage ever recorded. And polarization is a personal experience, not just an impression gleaned from the national news. When the same survey asked whether “the people you know” are more divided, 60 percent replied in the affirmative, and only 35 percent disagreed.

The evidence suggests that they are right. Consider the results of a Public Religion Research Institute survey conducted just ten days after the election, which show exceptionally sharp divides between Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives on a host of issues:

Table 2: Partisan and ideological issue polarization (percent that agrees)

	Dem.	Rep.	Lib.	Con.
Government is providing too many social services	22	83	18	75
Government should do more to reduce rich/poor gap	81	30	81	46
Government has paid too much attention to minorities	16	48	17	46
Government was right to bail out auto industry	91	26	89	33
Taxes for people making more than \$250K are too low	77	24	77	34
We should raise taxes for people making more than \$250K	87	32	86	41
Lower taxes and spending are best for economic growth	18	82	18	71
Higher taxes and investment are best for economic growth	77	15	75	24
We should cut military spending to reduce the deficit	47	6	56	11
We don't pay enough attention to religious leaders	28	56	15	57
Religious liberty in America is being threatened	31	77	23	74
The Bible is the literal word of God	27	45	20	49
The Bible is <i>not</i> the literal word of God	38	12	53	12

(Source: Public Religion Research Institute)

In addition to sharp splits between liberals and conservatives, Democrats and Republicans, partisanship and ideology are more closely aligned than ever before.

In the first place, most conservatives are Republicans, most liberals are Democrats; most moderates are split between Democrats and independents.

Table 3: Ideological identification by party (in percent)

	Conservative	Liberal	Moderate
Republican	54	5	17
Democrat	17	63	39
Independent	27	31	41
TOTAL	98	99	97

(Source: Public Religion Research Institute)

Second, conservatives are a super-majority of Republicans; liberals are a plurality of Democrats for the first time in decades; independents are mostly divided between conservatives and moderates.

Table 4: Partisan identification by ideology (in percent)

	Republican	Democrat	Independent
Conservative	77	20	36
Moderate	17	35	40
Liberal	4	43	23
Total	98	98	99

(Source: Public Religion Research Institute)

Of the two main swing groups in the electorate, independents normally tilt towards the Republican Party while moderates lean Democratic. That's what happened in 2012: Romney carried independents, 50 to 45, while Obama prevailed among moderates by a larger margin, 56 to 41. And moderates constituted fully 41 percent of the electorate, versus only 29 percent for independents.

The remainder of the electorate was highly polarized. 92 percent of Democrats supported Obama; 93 percent of Republicans supported Romney. Obama prevailed among liberals by 86 to 11 percent, Romney among conservatives by 82 to 17 percent. In an electorate made up only of Democrats and Republicans, Obama would have won by a large margin, because Democrats outnumber Republicans. In an electorate made up only of conservatives and liberals, Romney would have won, because conservatives outnumber liberals. But despite the 10-point conservative edge in the electorate, Obama won because of his 15-point margin among moderates.

According to post-election interviews, Romney's managers assumed that they would win the election if they carried independent voters. If so, that was a

fateful analytical error. Given the partisan composition of the electorate, they needed a margin of 18 points among independents, more than triple what they got.

Ideology is an important indicator of likely political preferences, but it is not always decisive. A post-election analysis found many of the expected patterns. Democrats placed themselves on the ideological spectrum about where they placed Obama, and Republicans did the same for Romney. Liberals placed themselves to the left of Obama; conservatives, to the right of Romney. Independents stood between Democrats and Republicans, but closer to the latter; moderates were also between Democrats and Republicans, but closer to the former.

All these assessments correspond to observed voting patterns. But when we turn to the electorate as a whole, we encounter an anomaly: while the voters saw themselves as being twice as far from Obama as from Romney on the ideological spectrum, they nonetheless preferred Obama. One possible explanation lies in the famous maxim that Americans are more conservative ideologically than they are operationally: for example, they support the general idea of a smaller government that costs less while rejecting the programmatic changes needed to bring that about. Another possibility is that Romney's personal weaknesses as a candidate trumped his ideological appeal. A third possibility is that highly salient controversies during the campaign—such as higher taxes on the rich—decisively shaped the preferences of persuadable voters.<sup>15</sup>

### **The institutionalization of polarization**

Political polarization is more than national statistics. It manifests itself in the composition and functioning of our political institutions—at the national level, but also throughout the federal system. The consequence is a political system that finds it very difficult to address the country's most fundamental challenges; problem-solving regularly gives way to temporizing and cosmetic responses. The minimal response to the fiscal cliff is the latest example. It will not be the last.

The Senate's difficulties are well-known. Using the filibuster and other procedural tactics, a determined minority of 41 or more can thwart the will of the majority. This would be acceptable if it led to serious negotiations. In the context of deep divisions on fundamentals, it too often yields mutual recriminations and policy gridlock. The current minority's use of the filibuster as a routine legislative tool has brought the Senate to a virtual standstill.

The problems confronting the House are subtler but deeper. First, because Republican voters are distributed more efficiently than Democrats, the Republican Party enjoys a structural advantage estimated at five percentage points: Democrats must win the aggregate national House vote by at least that margin to reclaim a majority of House seats. Despite receiving 1.3 million more votes than Republicans in 2012, Democrats won only 201 seats, versus 234 for the Republican majority.

---

Electoral incentives for cooperation in the House across party lines have virtually collapsed. As recently as 1992, 103 members were elected from “swing districts” with margins within five percentage points of the national vote. By 2012, the number of such seats had declined by two-thirds, to only 35. By contrast, the number of “landslide” districts—those with House margins diverging by 20 points or more from the national vote—doubled from 123 to 242. Members who face no serious electoral opposition from the other party now dominate each party’s caucus, reshaping the House into a quasi-parliamentary institution with the “majority of the majority” as the locus of decision-making.<sup>16</sup>

Similar processes are underway at the state level. In the election of 1960, John F. Kennedy’s share of the vote was within five percentage points of his national share in 34 states. The corresponding number for George H. W. Bush in 1988 was 26; for his son in 2000, 21. By 2012, Barack Obama’s share of the vote was within five points of his national share in only 14 states. The red states are redder than they once were, the blue states bluer, and there are far more of each.

This has stark consequences for governance. Following the 2012 election, there are more states (37) with unified government—the governor’s office and both houses of the legislature under the control of the same party—than in any year since 1952.<sup>17</sup> Differences among states on key economic and social issues are likely to become more pronounced, as red states enact increasingly conservative agendas while blue states do the reverse. In just the past two years, we have seen successful attacks on collective bargaining in long-unionized states such as Wisconsin and Michigan . . . and the legalization of marijuana and endorsement of same-sex marriage in a number of blue states, mostly on the two coasts. Blue states are cooperating with the federal government in implementing Obamacare, while many red states continue to resist it.

## CONCLUSION

---

**W**hile a diverse coalition of minorities, young adults, unmarried women, and upscale professionals achieved its second straight presidential majority in 2012, the United States remains both closely divided and deeply divided. These divisions manifest themselves both in national statistics and in specific institutions at the national and state level. In Washington, D.C., partisan and ideological polarization will continue to complicate the efforts of elected officials to reach agreement on major issues. In the states, we are likely to see an increasingly diverse policy patchwork, which can become problematic when the implementation of policy requires cooperation between the federal government and state governments.

To break the logjam at the national level, the American people would have to shift decisively in one direction or another—enough to produce unified



government with large majorities that are sustained for a number of consecutive elections. As long as the people remain so narrowly divided—and often torn between conservative ideological leanings and liberal policy preferences as well—the political balance is likely to shift back and forth too rapidly to permit stable solutions to the mounting policy challenges we confront.

## APPENDIX: WHAT HAPPENED IN OHIO

**A**s in prior years, the 2012 electorate in Ohio included smaller shares of African American and Latino voters than was true for the country as a whole. Nonetheless, Obama’s share of the popular vote in Ohio was almost identical to his national share. He achieved this result by doing better among white voters in Ohio than he did nationally—especially working class voters.

Evaluations of the state’s condition played an important role. While only 40 percent of Ohioans thought that the country was headed in the right direction, 51 percent felt that way about their state, including 47 percent of the white working class. The auto bailout was an important piece of their overall assessment. 59 percent of Ohio voters favored that step, the same as voters nationally. But 60 percent of Ohio’s white working class voters supported it, compared to only 48 percent nationally.

Other issues leaned in the same direction. Forty-four percent of Ohio’s white working class voters saw off-shoring as “very responsible” for the country’s economic problems, compared to only 33 percent of those with college degrees. Sixty-two percent of white working class voters favored raising taxes on people making more than \$250 thousand per year; 51 percent supported the Dream Act; 60 percent thought that the government should do more to reduce the gap between rich and poor; 50 percent believed that increasing taxes to pay for public investments was a better path to growth than was the lower taxes/smaller government alternative.

Attitudes toward Obama tracked these views on issues. Fifty-one percent of Ohio’s white working class voters had a favorable opinion of the president overall. 58 percent thought that Obama better understood the problems of poor America; 50 percent thought that Obama cared more about people like them, versus only 37 percent for Romney.

Nationally, Obama fared worse among voters older than 50 than he did among younger voters, receiving only 46 percent of their vote, compared to Romney’s 53 percent. This makes Obama’s support among Ohio’s white working class, 56 percent of whom are over age 50, all the more remarkable. In the end, Romney received only 46 percent of the white working class vote in Ohio, far short of his 65 percent nationally, and edging Obama by only two points. Because this group of voters constituted fully 40 percent of the Ohio electorate, Romney’s

failure to run up a larger margin in this key demographic left him poorly positioned to withstand Obama's showing both in longstanding Democratic strongholds such as Cuyahoga County (Cleveland) and in areas such as Hamilton County (Cincinnati) that he wrested from the Republicans in 2008 and successfully defended in 2012. <sup>18</sup>

**Governance Studies**

The Brookings Institution  
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
Tel: 202.797.6090  
Fax: 202.797.6144  
[www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx)

**Editor**

Christine Jacobs  
Raffaella Wakeman

**Production & Layout**

Raffaella Wakeman

**Email your comments to  
[gsccomments@brookings.edu](mailto:gsccomments@brookings.edu)**

*This paper is distributed in the expectation that it may elicit useful comments and is subject to subsequent revision. The views expressed in this piece are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of the Brookings Institution.*

---

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, “The Obama Coalition in the 2012 Election and Beyond” (Center for American Progress, December 2012). Taking the other side, thoughtful conservatives argued that 2012 was a status quo election: George F. Will, “And the winner is: The status quo,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 2012; James Ceaser, “A Stalemate, Not a Mandate,” *Real Clear Politics*, November 13, 2012. The leading centrist Democratic think tank, Third Way, weighed in with a survey analysis arguing that “the Obama Coalition is far more moderate than people may suspect” (Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson Hatalsky, “Obama’s Center-Out Coalition,” December 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “Young Voters Supported Obama Less, But May Have Mattered More,” November 26, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Sean Trende, “The Case of the Missing White Voters,” *Real Clear Politics*, November 8, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, “Whites Account for Under Half of Births in U.S.,” *New York Times*, May 17 2012, A1.

<sup>5</sup> Pew Research Center, “Changing Face of America Helps Assure Obama Victory,” November 7 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Pew, “Young Voters.”

<sup>7</sup> Pew, “Young Voters.”

<sup>8</sup> These statistics are derived from the cross-tabulations of a post-election survey conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). A copy is on file with the author.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Kohut, “Misreading Election 2012,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2012.

<sup>10</sup> Statistics in the preceding two sentences are from the 2012 presidential exit poll.

<sup>11</sup> PRRI, cross-tabulations.

<sup>12</sup> 2008 and 2012 presidential exit polls.

<sup>13</sup> Teixeira and Halpin, “The Obama Electoral Coalition.”

<sup>14</sup> Pew Research Center, “Low Marks for the 2012 Election,” November 15, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> For the preceding two paragraphs, see Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, “The Post-election American Values Survey,” Public Religion Research Institute, November 16, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Nate Silver, “As Swing Districts Dwindle, Can a Divided House Stand?” *New York Times*, December 27, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Charles M. Blow, “Lincoln, Liberty and Two Americas,” *New York Times*, November 24, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> All statistics from Ohio are derived from the cross-tabulations of a post-election survey conducted by PRRI. A copy is on file with the author.