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It was the most expensive presidential campaign in American history as well as one of the longest. Close to 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. 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 after all of the months of campaigning and all of the money spent in a handful of battleground states, the outcome of the 2012 election closely reflected certain fundamental factors that were largely set long before Election Day. In this chapter I will examine those fundamental factors and explain how they shaped the 2012 presidential campaign and ultimately produced a fairly close but decisive victory for Barack Obama. I will also discuss some of the longer-term implications of the 2012 results for the future of electoral competition in the United States.

The Popular Vote and the Electoral Map

As of November 24, with some absentee and provisional ballots still remaining to be counted, mostly in California, Barack Obama had received 64.4 million votes or 50.8 percent of the total vote to 60.2 million votes or 47.5 percent of the total vote for Mitt Romney. Mr. Obama’s margin of 4.2 million votes or 3.3 percentage points was less than half the size of his seven point 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 margin of more than 10 percentage points since Ronald Reagan in 1984.

But while the president’s popular vote margin was relatively narrow, his electoral vote margin was quite impressive. Mr. Obama ended up carrying 26 states and the District of Columbia with a total of 332 electoral votes. Mr. 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 Mr. Obama by margins ranging from one point in the case of Florida to seven points in the case of Wisconsin.

[Figure 1 goes here]

What is perhaps most 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, 26 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.

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 22 points, New York with its 29 electoral votes by 27 points, and Illinois with its 20 electoral votes by 17 points. Meanwhile, Mr. 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. In 1960 and 1976, when John F. Kennedy and Jimmy Carter won close, hard fought battles for the White House, more than half of the states were battlegrounds. Moreover, in those elections every one of the nation’s most populous states was closely contested including California, New York, Illinois, and Texas.

Because there are so many deep red and blue states today, we can easily predict which party’s candidate will carry the large majority of states long before Election Day. A year before the 2012 presidential election, there was very little doubt about which party at least 35 states would end up supporting. 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.

[Figure 2 goes here]

The data displayed in Figure 2 show that there was an extremely close relationship between Barack Obama’s performance in 2012 and his performance in 2008 at the state level. In fact, the correlation between the results of the two elections was a remarkable .98, the strongest relationship between any two consecutive elections since World War II. Although 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, 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.

Only two states deviated noticeably from this pattern. Mr. Obama did somewhat better than expected in Alaska, despite losing there by a wide margin, and he did somewhat worse than expected in Utah. In both cases, of course, there were obvious explanations for the results. The fact that Sarah Palin was no longer on the Republican ticket undoubtedly helped Mr. Obama to improve his performance in her home state of Alaska and the fact that Mitt Romney was the first Mormon candidate for president clearly accounted for the sharp decline in the president’s vote share in Utah.
Explaining the Results: A Partisan and Polarized Electorate

The remarkable consistency between the results of the 2008 and 2012 elections and the large numbers 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. This partisan divide was clearly evident in the results of the 2012 election at the individual level as well as at the state level. Thus, according to the national exit poll, 93 percent of Republican voters supported Mitt Romney while 92 percent of Democratic voters supported Barack Obama. This was the highest level of party loyalty in any presidential election since the advent 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 percent of the electorate according to the national exit poll and they divided their votes relatively evenly—50 percent for Romney to 45 percent for Obama. But that 29 percent figure undoubtedly exaggerates the size of the independent voting bloc since the exit poll does not ask independents whether they usually lean toward one party or the other. Based on data from ANES and other surveys, 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.

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 percent of Obama voters supported a Democratic House candidate while 92 percent of Romney voters supported a Republican House candidate. Only six percent of Obama and Romney voters supported a House candidate from the opposite party as their presidential candidate. Similarly, state exit poll data showed that ticket splitting between presidential and Senate candidates was relatively rare with the exception of a few states such as Missouri and Indiana where Democratic Senate candidates ran far ahead of President Obama. In most states with competitive Senate races, close to 90 percent 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. Underlying this trend is the reality of an electorate in which the divide between supporters of the two major parties reflects the existence of deeper divisions in American society.

A close examination of the voting patterns in 2012 demonstrates the existence of three major divisions between Democrats and Republicans—a racial divide between a Democratic Party increasingly dependent on votes from nonwhites and an overwhelmingly white Republican Party, an ideological divide over the role and size of government and a cultural divide over values, morality and lifestyles.
The Racial Divide

Perhaps the most important of the three major divides for the political 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 including housing patterns, educational opportunities, economic opportunities and health care. And 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.

The nonwhite share of the American population has increased dramatically since the end of World War II as a result of higher birth rates among nonwhites and high levels of immigration from Latin America and Asia. That demographic shift has also affected 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, between 1992 and 2008, according to data from national exit polls, the nonwhite share of the electorate doubled, going from 13 percent to 26 percent. 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 28 percent of the electorate according to the national exit poll.

As the nonwhite share of the American electorate has grown in recent decades, the racial divide between the Democratic and Republican electoral coalitions has also increased dramatically. In the 1950s, nonwhites (at that time almost exclusively African-Americans) made up seven percent of Democratic voters and three percent of Republican voters according to data from ANES surveys. In 2012, nonwhites made up 44 percent of Democratic voters and 11 percent of Republican voters according to data from the national exit poll.

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.

The racial divide in voting in 2012 was one of the largest in the history of presidential elections. According to data from the national exit poll, Barack Obama lost the white vote by a margin of 20 percentage points, 59 percent to 39 percent. No Democratic candidate before Mr. 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 more than three percentage points by winning 80 percent of the nonwhite vote to only 18 percent for Mitt Romney. According to the exit poll, Mr. Obama defeated Mr. Romney by 93 percent to 6 percent among African-American voters, 71 percent to 27 percent among Hispanic voters and 73 percent to 26 percent 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 a sharp turn to the right by the GOP. This division 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.

The sharp partisan divide over the proper role and size of government was clearly evident in the American electorate as well. Thus, according to the national exit poll, 81 percent of those who wanted the government to do more to solve social problems voted for Barack Obama while 74 percent of those who felt that the government was doing too many things better left to individuals and private businesses voted for Mitt Romney. Along the same lines, 87 percent of those who wanted the health care law preserved or expanded voted for Mr. Obama while 83 percent of those who wanted the law partially or totally repealed voted for Mr. Romney.

The Cultural Divide

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 values and lifestyle choices. Building on a growing alliance with religious conservatives of all faiths and evangelical Christians 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.

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 health care law. And an increasing number of prominent Democrats, including 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 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 candidate, Mitt Romney.

The 2012 election was supposed to be all about jobs and the economy. And those certainly were the issues most 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 as a direct result of controversial comments about rape and abortion. 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. 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 percent 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 percent to 21 percent margin. On the other hand, those who described their religious affiliation as “something else” or “none” made up 19 percent of the electorate and they voted for Barack Obama over Mitt Romney by an almost equally overwhelming margin of 72 percent to 25 percent. And voters who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual made up five percent of the electorate and they supported Obama over Romney by 76 percent to 22 percent.

When it came to issues, pro-choice voters, those who wanted abortion to remain legal in all or most cases, favored Obama over Romney by 67 percent to 31 percent while pro-life voters, those who wanted abortion to be illegal in all or most cases, favored Romney over Obama by 77 percent to 21 percent. Similarly, voters who supported legalizing same-sex marriage favored Obama over Romney by 74 percent to 25 percent while voters who opposed legalizing same-sex marriage favored Romney over Obama by 76 percent to 22 percent.

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 national exit poll, 60 percent of married men and 53 percent of married women voted for Mitt Romney. On the other hand, 56 percent of unmarried men and 67 percent of unmarried women voted for Barack Obama. Similarly, 60 percent of those under the age of 30 voted for Obama while 56 percent of seniors voted for Romney. Of course there is a great deal of overlap between these groups since younger voters are much less likely to be married than older voters.
Why Obama Won

Based on a few fundamental factors that are known to influence the outcomes of presidential elections, by the summer of 2012 two things were fairly clear about this year’s presidential race—it was likely to be a close contest and President Obama was likely to be the winner. In late August, before either national convention, I predicted the outcome of the national popular vote using my Time for Change forecasting model: Obama 50.6 percent, Romney 49.4 percent.

The Time for Change forecast was based on three variables that have correctly predicted the winner of the popular vote in every presidential election since 1988: the incumbent president’s net approval rating in the Gallup Poll at the end of June (+2 percent), the estimated change in real GDP during the second quarter of the election year (+1.7 percent) and a first-term incumbency advantage which I estimated at about 2.5 percent in the current era of partisan polarization.

In the end, the Time for Change model predicted the correct winner, President Obama, but underestimated his share of the major party vote by about one percentage point. However, this was well within the margin of error of the forecast and closer to the actual outcome than some national polls that were conducted immediately before the election including the Gallup and Rasmussen tracking polls, both of which predicted a victory for Mitt Romney. It was also a much more accurate forecast than those made on the eve of the election by a large number of prominent conservative pundits and political strategists. These pundits and strategists including Dick Morris, Karl Rove, George Will, Michael Barone, Steve Lombardo, Jay Cost and Fred Barnes all confidently predicted that Mitt Romney would easily defeat Barack Obama.

Why did so many conservative pundits and strategists badly misread the mood of the electorate? In addition to wishful thinking, many of these individuals failed to recognize that despite a weak economic recovery and mediocre approval rating, President Obama had a significant advantage in 2012—the advantage of incumbency.

First term incumbents like Barack Obama in 2012 rarely lose. Since 1900 there have been 12 presidential elections involving an incumbent whose party has held the White House for only four years and only one of those incumbents, Jimmy Carter in 1980, was defeated. In the Time for Change forecasting model, first-term incumbents get an electoral boost beyond what would be expected based on their approval rating and economic conditions. Americans, it appears, are reluctant to throw and incumbent president out of office after his party has had only one term in the White House.

One indication of the advantage that being a first term incumbent gave to Barack Obama could be seen in voters’ responses to a question on the national exit poll about who was more responsible for the country’s economic problems in 2012—President Obama or his Republican predecessor George W. Bush. By a margin of 53 percent to 38 percent voters blamed former President Bush more than President Obama for the country’s economic problems. Fully 85 percent of those who believed that Bush was more to blame voted for Obama.
This incumbency advantage was almost certainly more politically significant than the impact of Hurricane Sandy which struck the northeastern U.S. just a week before the election. Polls showed that Americans generally gave the president high marks for his handling of the disaster. However, contrary to the claims of some Republican strategists and commentators, there is no evidence that Hurricane Sandy altered the trajectory of the 2012 election.

Nor is there any evidence that Mr. Obama’s victory was due to his campaign’s superior performance in the swing states based on its use of highly sophisticated data mining and voter targeting techniques. In fact, an analysis of the results of the election at the state level shows that the president’s performance in nine key swing states was almost exactly what one would have expected based on his performance in those states in 2008. In other words, Mr. Obama did no better and no worse in the swing states than he did in the other 41 states where there was little campaigning.

The fact that Mr. Obama ended up winning the election by a somewhat greater margin than expected based on the Time for Change model may have reflected modest improvement in economic conditions between August and Election Day. As a result, while the large majority of voters still rated economic conditions in the nation as “not so good” or “poor,” more voters felt that the economy was getting better than getting worse.

Declining unemployment, increasing consumer confidence and an improving housing market may have also contributed to an uptick in the president’s overall approval rating. In the national exit poll, Mr. Obama’s net approval rating was +9 (54 percent approval vs. 45 percent disapproval) compared with a net approval rating of +2 at the end of June. That increase in approval could easily account for the difference between a one point margin of victory and a three point margin.

**Longer Term Forces: A Changing Electorate**

Beyond the immediate causes of the president’s reelection—a positive net approval rating, a gradually improving economy and the advantage of being a first-term incumbent—there were also deeper forces at work in American society that helped to create the conditions that made his victory possible, especially changes in the racial and ethnic composition of the American electorate and in attitudes on social issues.

Between 1992 and 2008, the nonwhite share of the American electorate increased from 13 percent to 28 percent. Moreover, this trend is certain to continue for many years because nonwhites make up a much larger share of the youngest age cohorts in the population, those that will be entering the electorate over the next several election cycles, than of the oldest age cohorts, those that will be gradually leaving the electorate. As a result, the nonwhite share of the American population is expected to increase from about 37 percent now to about 53 percent in 2050 according to Census Bureau projections. 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 thirty or forty years to see the impact of shifting demographics 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. And in Florida the growing non-Cuban Hispanic vote was crucial to Barack Obama’s narrow victory in 2012.

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 percent 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 percent to 40 percent. This represented a significant shift from eight years earlier when those who wanted the government to promote traditional values outnumbered their opponents by 56 percent to 40 percent.

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 five years, going from 27 percent in 2006 to 53 percent in 2011.

The success of referenda legalizing same-sex marriage in three states in 2012 was no fluke. According to the 2012 exit poll, 49 percent of voters across the nation supported legal recognition of same-sex marriage in their own state compared with 46 percent 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 percent of voters favored keeping abortion legal either always or most of the time, up from 55 percent in the 2004 exit poll.

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 percent in 1970 to 36 percent in 2006 and 50 percent in 2012.

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 2011 Gallup Poll, 70 percent of Americans under the age of 35 favored legal recognition of same-sex marriage compared with only 39 percent of Americans over the age of 55. 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.

Conclusions: 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 demographic and economic trends in the United States were contributing to the emergence of a new Democratic electoral coalition that would dominate American politics for many years. 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?

Certainly there 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. It would be an exaggeration to say that the Democratic Party now has a lock on the Electoral College but there clearly are more electoral votes from states that almost always or usually favor Democratic candidates than there are from states that almost always or usually favor Republican presidential candidates. And that Democratic advantage in the Electoral College appears to be increasing. The growth of the Hispanic vote has shifted several states toward the Democratic Party since 2004 including New Mexico, Nevada, Colorado and one of the biggest prizes of all—Florida. In another decade or two the growth of the Hispanic vote could even turn Texas into a swing state.

Of course all is not lost for the GOP. Despite its poor showing in the 2012 presidential and Senate elections, the Party still retains a firm grip on the House of Representatives. But even the Republicans’ House majority may not be as secure as it appears. Democratic candidates across the country actually won more votes than Republican candidates in the 2012 House elections. Republicans maintained control of the House due to the heavy concentration of Democratic voters in big metropolitan areas and clever redrawing of district lines by Republican state legislatures and governors after the 2010 midterm election. Eventually the advantages conferred by redistricting are likely to erode due to demographic trends and population movement. Unless Republicans can expand their party’s appeal beyond its current base of older white conservatives it 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

R² Linear = 0.964

Source: Data compiled by author