21 Reasons for Obama's victory and Romney's defeat

By Tom Bevan and Carl M. Cannon - November 7, 2012

Barack Obama's re-election to another four-year term as the 44th president of the United States was no surprise, at least to Democrats and denizens of liberal news organizations. But for a solid month -- both nationally and in the highly contested battleground states -- the race was virtually tied.

It didn't end in a tie, however. Despite the closeness of the national popular vote, Obama and Joe Biden eked out victories over Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan in the hotly contested states of New Hampshire, Virginia, Ohio, Iowa, Colorado and (though not yet officially) Florida, giving Democrats a 100-vote cushion in the Electoral College. In the end, after both sides waged the most expensive campaign in U.S. history, all Romney did was flip two states, Indiana and North Carolina, from Obama's 2008 column into his own.

It wasn't nearly enough, but the Republican ticket's razor-thin losses in those battleground states indicate that this outcome was not foreordained. And as Al Gore and George W. Bush learned in 2000, if you win -- or lose -- a race this close, there are a hundred pivot points that explain the result.

Here are 21 of them:

1. "Waiting on the World to Change" -- Still. It was February 2007, but it seemed like the 1960s at George Mason University's Johnson Center, where students swayed to John Mayer's generational anthem and students called out "I love you!" to freshman Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois.

Five-and-a-half years later, Mitt Romney visited the same Northern Virginia campus, drawing a large and enthusiastic crowd. Yet when the votes were counted Tuesday night, the Democratic ticket of Barack Obama and Joe Biden again piled up historically large majorities among under-30 voters. The margin among millennials wasn't as large as in 2008, but his edge of 60-36 percent, according to exit polls, was big enough to put the president over the top. It also bodes well for Democrats -- and poorly for Republicans -- in the future.

2. Amigos de Obama: Early in the Republican primary season, Romney proffered "self-deportation"
as a partial policy prescription for the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in this country. Romney’s rhetoric was aimed at Rick Perry, who had signed legislation granting in-state college tuition to young people brought to Texas as children.

This line of argumentation hurt Perry, but Newt Gingrich criticized Romney for it, as did the president. Obama, by contrast, embraced the DREAM Act, which would grant a path to citizenship for young immigrants, even those in the country illegally, who enlisted in the armed forces or attended college.

After Romney was nominated, the president signed an executive order barring the deportation of illegal minors. It was mostly symbolic (and perhaps not even legal), but it was politically savvy, and Latino voters noticed. Nationally, Obama received a whopping 69 percent of the Hispanic vote -- an even higher percentage than in 2008 -- and, with it, the swing states of Florida, Colorado, and Nevada.

Even more ominous for Republicans: George W. Bush won 40 percent of the Hispanic vote in 2004; McCain won 31 percent in 2008; Romney garnered only 27 percent this year, even as their share of the electorate has grown from 8 to 10 percent.

3. The Auto Bailout: The Obama administration’s move to bolster Chrysler and General Motors with multibillion-dollar government loans and guarantees set several things in motion. For starters, it made carrying Michigan, Romney’s home state, problematic for Republicans.

In the end, it also provided a layer of asbestos to Obama’s firewall in Ohio, which held up against Romney and Ryan’s desperate charge in the Buckeye State over the final weeks of the campaign.

Romney’s father was a popular governor of Michigan, a 1968 presidential candidate, and the CEO of a car company. But with even Ford Motor Company’s president supporting the bailout of his competitors (he was worried about Ford’s own suppliers), Romney’s connection to the state seemed weaker than Obama’s. In 2011 and 2012, Chrysler ran evocative Super Bowl ads emphasizing the comeback narrative. The 2011 edition was set to music by Eminem. This year’s was narrated by Clint Eastwood.

“The people of Detroit know a little something about this,” says the gravelly voiced film star. “They almost lost everything. But we all pulled together. Now Motor City is fighting again.”

Obama is not referenced directly in the ad, but he doesn’t have to be. After talking about problems caused by “the fog of division, discord and blame,” Eastwood adds: “We find a way through tough times, and if we can’t find a way, then we’ll make one. Detroit’s showing us it can be done.”

4. Romney’s Take on the Auto Bailout: In a 2008 op-ed for the New York Times that Romney’s staff swears the ex-governor wrote himself, Romney advocated a “managed bankruptcy” for the troubled car maker, with the federal government assuring “guarantees for post-bankruptcy financing” as the companies emerged from Chapter 11. Romney also called for management “as is” to be replaced.

All of this was subsequently done -- even down to replacing the troubled car companies’ executives: The task force appointed by Obama replaced the troubled automakers’ management. So why the
perception that Romney opposed the president?

Three reasons, mostly. First, while Romney wanted to use bankruptcy to rein in the United Auto Workers, Obama used the process to reward the unions, and strengthen them. Second, instead of embracing what the president and he had in common, Romney harped on the differences in their approach. The third was . . .

5. The New York Times' Take on Romney's Take on the Bailout: The problem here was the headline, which read simply, “Let Detroit Go Bankrupt.” That wasn't inaccurate, exactly, but it was very nearly the opposite of the piece's tenor.

“I love cars, American cars,” Romney wrote. “I was born in Detroit, the son of an auto chief executive. In 1954, my dad, George Romney, was tapped to run American Motors when its president suddenly died. The company itself was on life support -- banks were threatening to deal it a death blow. The stock collapsed. I watched Dad work to turn the company around -- and years later at business school, they were still talking about it.”

Romney would reprise this theme in his third debate with Obama, only to be met with eye rolls and interruptions from the president, who took to the hustings the next day to accuse his opponent of having “Stage 3 Romnesia.”

There is some evidence that this line of attack was effective. Romney never seriously competed for Michigan -- he probably would have been better served setting up his headquarters there -- and the ripple effects in Ohio were evident: Exit polls showed that by a 59-36 percent margin voters approved of the auto bailout, and by implication, disapproved of their perception of Romney's stance. The upshot was that Romney failed to carry either his native Michigan or his adopted home state of Massachusetts, and no presidential nominee has ever won without carrying his home base.

6. Killing Osama bin Laden: It happened way back in May 2011, when the Republican presidential field was still forming, but its ramifications became clear as the consulate in Libya lay smoldering 16 months later.

As the news broke that night, Americans just gravitated toward the White House. The president's poll ratings didn't dramatically spike upward (as they would for an attack on our soil), but after that night it was hard for Republicans to make the case that Barack Obama was soft on terrorism.

Matt Bissonnette, the ex-Navy SEAL who went on the raid into Pakistan and wrote a book about it, describes how the members of the attack team joked with each other about how the president would take all the credit for it, which he did. But these hard cases in the Special Forces come across as pretty sharp about political realities. “We just got this guy re-elected,” one of them says after the mission is complete. Replies Bissonnette: “Well, would you rather not have done this?”

The question answers itself, but that was one of the Republicans' problems, too.

7. No Help From His Running Mate: Romney’s selection of Paul Ryan cheered fiscal and social conservatives within the Republican Party and provided a much needed shot in the arm for Romney’s campaign, but in terms of its demographic and geographic effect, the choice was a net zero.
It did not help Romney in Wisconsin, where Ryan had never even run statewide. And by choosing Ryan, Romney passed over the more qualified Rob Portman, Ohio’s Republican senator who could have helped in the Buckeye State.

Ryan’s presence on the ticket might have actually hurt marginally in Florida, where his ideas about reforming Medicare were used, unfairly, to scare the bejesus out of seniors. Charismatic young Florida Sen. Marco Rubio would almost certainly have delivered the Sunshine State to Republicans -- an absolute must win state in any conceivable path for Romney to reach 270 -- and help attract Latino support in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada, three mountain states won by Obama.

Choosing a woman could have dulled the 12-percent gender gap Romney suffered on Election Day. Despite the likelihood of drawing unflattering comparisons to McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin in 2008, it might have been worth the risk, especially given the Democrats’ “war on women” attacks and the injurious gaffes about rape by two GOP Senate hopefuls.

8. “Obamneycare”: That’s the word former Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty coined early in the Republican primary season to remind voters that the inspiration for the Affordable Care Act targeted by conservatives was inspired by a Massachusetts statute championed by Romney and signed into law by him -- and which contains the “individual mandate” so loathed by conservatives.

In a debate before he dropped out of the race, Pawlenty refused to reprise his “Obamneycare” dig. But former Pennsylvania Sen. Rick Santorum -- the last challenger standing other than Romney in the GOP primaries -- termed his rival “the worst” possible standard bearer the Republicans could nominate to press this issue against the president. Santorum may have been right.

9. Op-ed II: Romney’s frequent defense to conservative voters during the Republican primaries was that the law he signed in Massachusetts was a state solution that should not be applied nationally. While perhaps too nuanced for today’s politics, this was a proper expression of federalism, which involves managing the relationship between Washington and the states.

The problem is that it wasn’t even true. In other op-ed, this one written for USA Today in July 2009, Romney urged Washington to look to Massachusetts as a model.

“Health care cannot be handled the same way as the stimulus and cap-and-trade bills,” he wrote. “Health care is simply too important to the economy, to employment and to America's families to be larded up and rushed through on an artificial deadline. There's a better way. And the lessons we learned in Massachusetts could help Washington find it.”

The old USA Today piece was unearthed by the website BuzzFeed just in time to be used as fodder by both Republicans and Democrats who accused Romney of having “no core.”

10. Contraception: Rick Santorum’s forays into the social issues that were his calling card when he served as a Pennsylvania senator did the eventual nominee no favors. In October 2011, when he was a blip in the polls and trying to gin up support among Iowa’s Christian conservatives, Santorum gave an interview with an evangelical blog called Caffeinated Thoughts, in which he asserted his view that he is “not okay” with contraception. Taking aim at a little-discussed aspect of Obamacare, Santorum vowed that as president he’d “get rid of any idea that you have to have abortion coverage or contraceptive coverage.”
11. A Fluke and a Rush to Judgment: In early March, Democrats on the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee told panel Chairman Darrell Issa, a California Republican, that they wanted prominent liberal Barry Lynn to testify at a hearing on the contraception provisions of Obamacare. Instead, they asked at the last minute to hear from an obscure, third-year Georgetown University law student named Sandra Fluke.

Issa declined to let Fluke testify before the committee, but Democrats went ahead and had Fluke speak to them. She cited the case of a lesbian classmate who said she needs the estrogen in birth control bills to stave off ovarian cysts. Fluke turned out to be a 30-year-old seasoned activist and her example seemed dubious: Why couldn’t the woman in question get a prescription for her condition?

But right-wing radio provocateur Rush Limbaugh didn’t impeach her argument on that basis.

Instead, he called Fluke a “slut” and “a prostitute” (“What does it say about the college co-ed Sandra Fluke,” he said, “who goes before a congressional committee and essentially says that she must be paid to have sex? What does that make her?”)

This was the last kind of conversation that Mitt Romney wanted to be having this year, and it fit into the Democrats’ “war on women” narrative, which was trumpeted in thousands of Democratic Party attack ads aimed at convincing suburban women in swing states that Republicans were antediluvian.

12. Gay Marriage: Santorum also spent a surprising portion of his time debating college students -- and sometimes even high school students -- in support of traditional marriage. This, too, was not an issue that Romney particularly cared about or wanted to be front-and-center.

The same was true of the president, who was dragged reluctantly into the fray on this issue (by his own vice president, actually). But the way it played out actually helped Obama, as it became clear at the Democrats’ nominating convention in Charlotte that the party’s more liberal wing was prepared to challenge the status quo on this issue. Obama’s grudging embrace of same-sex marriage avoided all that.

13. The Thurston Howell III Factor: On more than one occasion, when it came to matters of wealth, Romney found himself with a silver shoe in his mouth.

Throughout the campaign, he agreed to release only recent tax returns, leading to speculation that he had something to hide. In January, Romney said he received some income from speaking fees, though he again termed it “not very much.” It turns out that the “not very much” he referred to totaled $374,327.62 -- nearly seven times the average annual household income.

Later in the primary, in an attempt to appeal to Michigan voters, Romney told a crowd that he drove a Mustang and a Chevy pickup truck before adding, “Ann drives a couple of Cadillacs, actually.” Asked if he was a fan of NASCAR, Romney demurred before adding inexplicably that he was friends with NASCAR owners.

All of that might have been forgotten had it not been for a single stream-of-consciousness riff at a March fundraiser in Boca Raton, Fla., where he asserted that 47 percent of Americans will support Obama’s re-election no matter what, presumably because they rely on big government while paying
no income taxes themselves -- and refusing to “take personal responsibility and care for their lives.”

This was a sentiment not easily explained away as a gaffe, and it played perfectly into the Democrats’ narrative about Romney: that he didn’t care about the middle class.

14. Romney’s National Lampoon Vacation: That was how MSNBC characterized Romney’s summer trip to Europe. And while that characterization was unfair -- his gaffes abroad, such as wondering aloud whether Britain was ready to host the Olympics -- were minor, it contrasted starkly with Obama’s triumphant trip to Europe as a candidate four years ago. In the process, it reminded voters of one of the original rationales for Obama’s unlikely 2008 run for the presidency: restoring the United States’ image abroad.

Romney, and not for the last time, had himself changed the national conversation at a time when it was working in Republicans’ favor, most specifically exploiting the president’s “You didn’t build that” verbal miscue.

15. Blitzkrieg: “Political campaigns sometimes seem small, even silly,” the newly re-elected president said in his late-night victory speech in Chicago after Tuesday night had morphed into Wednesday morning. Obama blamed unnamed “cynics” for this unhappy state of affairs, but he might more properly look in the mirror -- or at his own longtime Chicago-based political operatives.

Beginning last summer, Obama and his surrogates embarked on an ambitious plan to erode Romney’s image and reputation with a series of relentless personal attacks. This asymmetrical warfare -- Romney criticized Obama’s record while Obama savaged Romney’s character -- cost Democrats more than $100 million in eight battleground states. But it worked.

One negative TV spot portrayed Romney as a heartless corporate raider responsible for killing a steelworkers’ wife while running Bain Capital. When questioned about these claims, an Obama spokeswoman said she didn’t know the former steelworker at all. Actually, the same Obama press aide had put him on a campaign conference call with reporters where he pitched the same story -- one that turned out to be false in most of its particulars.

This kind of thing continued apace, whether it was the president’s aides attacking Romney over his tax returns; the family dog’s accommodations on a long-ago family vacation (the roof of the station wagon); attacking Ann Romney as a woman who does not work; also attacking her, a breast cancer survivor who also has MS, for having an Olympics-ready dressage horse; and in the waning days of the campaign surreptitiously trying to slime the Mormon faith.

To a measurable degree, this strategy succeeded in its goal, which was to make Romney an unacceptable alternative to a president who evidently didn’t believe he could run on his own record in the Oval Office.

16. Dueling Conventions: As a consequence, the Romney’s team decided that the highest and best use of their time at their Tampa nominating convention was to make the candidate seem more appealing on a personal level. And so they did, especially in a speech by Ann Romney. The problem is that when he spoke, Romney himself did not sufficiently communicate to his fellow Americans how his election would help their lives.
One opportunity was clearly squandered, too. In a country where movie stars and the most popular musicians are almost all liberal Democrats, Clint Eastwood asked to speak on Romney’s behalf. No montage of Eastwood’s kick-ass roles appeared on screen, and he didn’t do what the crowd expected, which was to reprise his Detroit ad with a Mitt Romney overlay. In lieu of that, he didn’t really engage the crowd in a “Make my day!” call-and-response, which would have brought down the house (although he did let the crowd shout it once -- but only once -- itself). Instead, Eastwood spent most of his time speaking in a rambling, unrehearsed ad-lib to an empty chair on stage, one meant to be Obama.

Big historic convention “bounces” no longer occur, but even so, the 2012 Republican convention in Tampa earned a dubious distinction: Romney’s approval didn’t rise at all. And by getting him to play defense, and address the “likeability” gap between the two candidates, Obama’s forces set themselves up for a successful convention of their own.

Democrats took advantage, too, particularly in assigning Bill Clinton a prime-time role, which he milked nearly to perfection. Heading into the final phase of the campaign, Obama’s lead was nearly five points. He seemed a shoo-in.

17. The First Debate: With a five-point lead and just a month before Election Day, the president showed up in Denver for his first debate with Romney on Oct. 3 cocky and in command -- right up until he sleepwalked through the 90-minute session.

The public and the punditry were in agreement this time: Romney had cleaned Obama’s clock. In hindsight, Obama wasn’t really that bad, and Romney wasn’t that outstanding. Part of the president’s problem was that his summer blitzkrieg had done its job too well. When Americans saw Romney for the first time (and some 70 million watched on TV), he looked and sounded smart, committed, and decent. Suddenly the race was a dead heat again.

18. The Other Debates: Galvanized out of complacency, Joe Biden (Oct. 11), Obama (Oct. 16), and Obama again (Oct. 22) set about trying to “win” the next three debates, which according to the instant polls and most of the commentary is what happened. And though Biden’s histrionics and occasional rudeness during his debate with Paul Ryan opened the vice president up to criticism, it also served its purpose inside the campaign: It lit a fire under Obama.

“"You don’t need to bring a baseball bat,” one aide told the president. “But these are debates, not policy forums. You need to get after the guy.” Obama didn’t really need to be told. In the next two debates he was aggressive and relentless. Gone were any doubts about whether he really wanted a second term or was taking the competition too lightly.

And in a campaign where both sides had essentially said to hell with fact-checkers, the incumbent seized the advantage mainly by being quicker on his feet that the challenger.

19. September Surprise: Obama had righted his ship and pulled back to where he’d been most of the summer -- nearly neck-and-neck with Romney, who could never quite catch up either in the national polling average or the battleground state polling.

Then, on Sept. 11, the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, riots broke out at the U.S Embassy in
Cairo and at the consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Not knowing quite what was going on, the Romney campaign issued a press release chiding the administration for its supposedly obsequious response to the Cairo rioters. When it was clear that four Americans, including the ambassador to Libya, were murdered in Benghazi, the president deflected any second-guessing of his actions with a preemptive attack on Romney for allegedly politicizing a tragedy.

This became a talking point for Obama, who used it to parry virtually any question about the administration’s policies in Libya, which is exactly what he did to Romney during the second debate at Hofstra University. It was perhaps the single moment in the debates that helped the president most. The exchange went this way:

CNN’s Candy Crowley, moderating a town-hall format debate, called on a man named Kerry Ladka, who asked the president: “We were sitting around talking about Libya, and we were reading and became aware of reports that the State Department refused extra security for our embassy in Benghazi, Libya, prior to the attacks that killed four Americans. Who was it that denied enhanced security and why?”

In response, Obama launched into a filibuster that was mostly an attack on Romney for holding a press conference on the subject -- a press conference, incidentally, during which he was lambasted by the attending reporters.

Taken aback by Obama’s answer, Romney gave a long-winded reply of his own, culminating in the assertion that it took 14 days for the president to call the Libya violence a terrorist attack. This was untrue, and Crowley corrected him. Conservatives fumed afterward that she had decided rather late in the game to be an activist moderator. They wondered why she didn’t demand that the president answer the question about protecting the diplomats, a query that has still gone unaddressed at the White House.

But here, it might be said that the “Michael Dukakis rule” was kicking in: You can’t help a candidate who won’t help himself. Certainly there was nothing preventing Romney from saying that he’d like the man’s question answered -- and that any president who thinks he only has to answer tough questions after the election is a pretty sketchy commander-in-chief. But Romney said nothing of the sort, and it might have been his last chance to dent Obama’s armor.

20. October-November Surprise: Tropical storms washed away the outdoor portion of the Democrats’ Charlotte soirée and the first day of the Republican convention in Tampa -- so that was a draw. But Mother Nature hadn’t delivered her last word on the 2012 campaign season.

At 11 a.m. on Oct. 22, the National Weather Service issued a bulletin inauspiciously headlined, “Tropical Depression Eighteen.” It began this way: “Satellite images and surface observations indicate that the low pressure system over the southwestern Caribbean Sea has acquired sufficient organization to be classified as a tropical depression.”

In the next 10 days, that system would become Tropical Storm Sandy, Hurricane Sandy, and Superstorm Sandy. She was, in combination with a weather system that came down from Canada, the “perfect storm,” residents on the East Coast were told. What she really turned into was a dragon that threatened Americans from Florida to New England, closed transit systems, and workplaces all along the Eastern seaboard, then slammed into New Jersey and New York with enough forces to kill dozens
and destroy whole towns.

The crisis temporarily stopped the campaign in its tracks, along with any residual momentum Romney still had. It also afforded Obama the opportunity of acting like a president, which he did effectively, just as the electorate realized how sick and tired it had grown with attack ads and empty rhetoric. On Election Day, some 40 percent of Americans told exit pollsters that Obama’s response to the storm was an important factor in their vote -- and most of those who said so pulled the lever for the incumbent.

21. Aftermath: After calling the president to congratulate him, a spent and disappointed -- but nevertheless smiling -- Mitt Romney made a brief speech to his supporters in Boston. Afterward, numerous pundits noted that his remarks were uncommonly gracious. But Democratic consultant Paul Begala and former Republican White House press secretary Ari Fleischer also found the speech notable for what was not in it:

There was no list of issues and causes that he’ll fight for in the future, no real discussion of the specifics choices Americans will have to make in the future. It was simply not, Fleischer and Begala observed, a concession speech from a movement leader.

This shouldn’t have been a surprise. Romney’s critics on both the right and the left often accused him of lacking “a core,” but those who are close him believe this misses the essence of the man utterly. “Core” values to Romney are his church and family, and to them he is a consistently devoted servant.

Mark McKinnon, a confidant of George W. Bush, describes Romney as a good man whose values run deep, but whose politics are “transactional.” That’s hardly a sin, given that the two party’s politics are transactional as well. Democratic officeholders recently opposed to gay marriage now favor it. Not coincidentally, so do a plurality of the voters. In 2002, Romneycare was considered a conservative market-based solution to coerce Americans into purchasing private health insurance. By 2012, Obamcare is a socialist scheme designed as the first step of a government takeover of the nation’s health care system.

To liberal writer Ezra Klein, Romney’s problem -- in terms of how he’s perceived -- is that what he most values is empirical data, which he thinks complement his natural management skills.

“A lifetime of data has proven to him that he’s extraordinarily, even uniquely, good at managing and leading organizations, projects and people,” Klein writes. “It’s those skills, rather than specific policy ideas, that he sees as his unique contribution. That has been the case everywhere else he has worked, and he assumes it will be the case in the White House, too.”

But he won’t get the chance to prove that theory now. The American people, albeit by the narrowest of margins, didn’t choose a manager. For better or worse, they chose a leader, and it’s a measure of Romney’s core that when he said he’d be praying for him to succeed, the people who know him best believe him.

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