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The Path to 270

Demographics versus Economics in the 2012 Presidential Election

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Introduction and summary

With a little under one year to go before the 2012 presidential election, next year's battle looks increasingly competitive, with ongoing economic distress and a highly energized Republican base potentially neutralizing the incumbency advantage that President Barack Obama would traditionally hold.

Obviously, much could change between now and then but at the outset of the election campaign it is clear that two large forces will ultimately determine the outcome: the shifting demographic balance of the American electorate, and the objective reality and voter perception of the economy in key battleground states. The central questions of the election are thus fairly straightforward. Will the rising electorate of communities of color, the Millennial generation, professionals, single women, and seculars that pushed Obama to victory in 2008 be sufficient and mobilized enough to ensure his re-election in 2012? Or will the Republican Party and its presidential nominee capitalize on a struggling economy and greater mobilization from a conservative base that holds the president in deep disdain?

Regardless of the outcome, it is likely that American politics will remain highly contested and polarized for years to come. The electoral volatility seen from 2006 to 2010 suggests that the biggest issues in American politics—the role of government, the balance of public and market forces, taxation, and social welfare policies—remain contested in partisan terms. The financial crisis and the Great Recession have severely clouded the electoral picture, making it clear that 2008 marked only the potential for a new progressive alignment in American elections, rather than its consolidation.

Given the job approval ratings of the president and economic indicators in key states (see Table 1 on next page), the 2012 election will likely be tighter than the 2008 election, perhaps more like 2004 or even the highly contested 2000 election.

TABLE 1

Obama job approval and unemployment rate by state

	Obama job approval (percent)	Unemployment rate (percent)		Obama job approval (percent)	Unemployment rate (percent)
D.C.	83	11.1	Nevada	44	13.4
Connecticut	60	8.9	Arizona	44	9.1
Maryland	59	7.4	Colorado	44	8.3
Delaware	59	8.1	Oregon	44	9.6
New York	57	8.0	South Carolina	43	11.0
Massachusetts	57	7.3	Louisiana	42	6.9
Hawaii	56	6.4	Indiana	42	8.9
Vermont	54	5.8	Missouri	42	8.7
Illinois	54	10.0	South Dakota	41	4.6
New Jersey	54	9.2	Texas	40	8.5
California	53	11.9	New Hampshire	40	5.4
Minnesota	52	6.9	Tennessee	40	9.8
Rhode Island	50	10.5	Alaska	39	7.6
Washington	50	9.1	Nebraska	39	4.2
Wisconsin	50	7.8	Kansas	38	6.7
Maine	50	7.5	Alabama	38	9.8
Michigan	50	11.1	North Dakota	37	3.5
Iowa	49	6.0	Kentucky	37	9.7
Pennsylvania	48	8.3	Montana	36	7.7
Georgia	48	10.3	Arkansas	33	8.3
Florida	47	10.6	West Virginia	33	8.2
North Carolina	46	10.5	Oklahoma	32	5.9
Virginia	46	6.5	Utah	32	7.4
New Mexico	46	6.6	Wyoming	32	5.8
Mississippi	45	10.6	Idaho	27	9.0
Ohio	44	9.1	US	47	9.1

Source: Gallup (Average Job Approval Jan-June 2011); BLS (Seasonally Adjusted, Unemployment Rate September 2011).

What strengths and weaknesses do President Obama and Democrats hold going into 2012?

As we've previously argued in other CAP reports (see "[New Progressive America](#)," "[State of American Political Ideology, 2009](#)" and "[Demographic Change and the Future of the Parties](#)"), the shifting demographic composition of the electorate—rising percentages of communities of color, single and highly educated women, Millennial generation voters, secular voters, and educated whites living in more urbanized states or more urbanized parts of states—clearly favors Democrats and has increased the relative strength of the party in national elections in recent years. In contrast, the Republican Party's coalition of older, whiter, more rural, and evangelical voters is shrinking and becoming more geographically concentrated and less important to the overall political landscape of the country.¹

These Democratic advantages emerged clearly in the 2008 presidential election. Barack Obama's 53 percent popular vote represented the largest share any presidential candidate received in 20 years. Obama won 365 electoral votes and he carried all 18 states, plus the District of Columbia, that John Kerry won in 2004 (as did Al Gore in 2000 and Bill Clinton in 1992 and 1996), plus nine states that Kerry lost: Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Iowa, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia. By region, this pattern of Democratic victories helped to reduce core GOP strength in presidential elections to the Upper Mountain West, Great Plains states, and the South.

Republicans also lost their political monopoly in the South as the three fast-growing "new south" states of Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida went Democratic in 2008. The Northeast, the Midwest (with the exception of Missouri), the Southwest (with the exception of Arizona), and the West were solidly controlled by the Democrats. Moreover, the states the GOP carried tended to be rural and lightly populated. Sixteen out of 28 states Obama carried had 10 or more electoral votes while just 4 of the 21 that John McCain carried had that many electoral votes. Obama also carried seven of the eight most populous states: California, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan. Only one of the eight most populous states—Texas—went for McCain.²

Even with these long-term demographic strengths, Democratic weaknesses are manifest. Continuing economic distress among large segments of the American public, coupled with the perceived inability of the Obama administration's policies to spark real recovery, has coalesced into serious doubts about Democratic stewardship of the economy. In August 2011, Gallup reported record low public approval of President Obama's handling of the economy, with barely one-quarter (26 percent) approving of the president's performance on this key indicator.³ No president in the past 50 years

has been re-elected with unemployment as high as it is today. Historically, administrations with unemployment problems have seen them mitigated with significant employment change ahead of an election.

But given that the Congressional Budget Office is currently projecting unemployment to average 8.7 percent in 2012,⁴ that does not appear to be in the offing—unless of course there are new measures to stimulate jobs and growth. Such measures face difficult prospects given the stated position of House Republicans.

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Republicans going into 2012?

As the 2010 election highlights, Republicans continue to hold strong advantages when the voting electorate is older, more conservative, and less diverse than the overall population. Democrats suffered one of the largest electoral defeats on record last year, ceding control of the House of Representatives to the Republican Party after regaining the majority just four years earlier. Republicans gained 63 House seats in the 2010 election, overperforming by about 10 seats what would have been expected on the basis of the popular vote split—approximately 52 percent Republican to 45 percent Democratic.

The Republican vote was efficiently distributed to produce Republican victories, especially in the Rust Belt states and in contested southern states such as Virginia and Florida. The Republican gain of 63 seats was the best post-World War II seat gain by either party in a midterm election, and only the third time a party gained more than 50 seats since then.

Exit-poll data from 2010 showed that independent voters,⁵ white working-class voters, seniors, and men broke heavily against the Democrats due to the economy. Similarly, turnout levels were also unusually low in communities of color and among young voters, and unusually high among seniors, whites, and conservatives, thus contributing to a more skewed midterm electorate.

The desire to unseat President Obama will likely produce a strong surge of Republican base voters in 2012. If this enthusiasm gap translates into a noticeably more conservative, GOP-leaning electorate than is typical in presidential elections, Republicans may be able to capture several of President Obama's states from 2008.

Republicans maintain ongoing weaknesses that will need to be addressed in order to maximize their chances in 2012. The party's increasing alignment with its most

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conservative wing and the rising power of Tea Party values and positions within the GOP camp does not translate well to the larger electorate. Thus, the GOP's ability to capitalize politically on the poor economy will be significantly reduced if their eventual presidential nominee is too closely associated with an extreme anti-statist platform that is hostile to aspects of government that Americans support or a social and cultural agenda outside of the mainstream of public opinion. And even with a possible advantage in voter enthusiasm, the base mobilization strategy employed successfully by President Bush's campaign in 2004 will be difficult to replicate given demographic shifts since that election and concerns about GOP extremism among more moderate, independent, and nonideological Americans.

Heading into 2012, the primary strategic questions will be: Will President Obama withstand continued doubts about the economy and his approach to recovery? Will the president hold sufficient support among communities of color, educated whites, Millennials, single women, and seculars and avoid a catastrophic meltdown among white working-class voters? Conversely, will Republicans capture voter disenchantment on the economy and offer a credible economic alternative to the president? Will they nominate a candidate who can appeal beyond their older, more conservative, white, evangelical base? Will Democratic apathy and Republican energy make the electorate much more conservative leaning than its underlying demographics would suggest?

The remainder of this paper explores these questions in more detail by first examining the demographic and geographic trends that will matter most in 2012 and then exploring what implications these trends might have in terms of Democratic and Republican strategy for next year's campaign. In brief, here are our key findings.

On the national level, given solid, but not exceptional, performance among minority voters, Obama's re-election depends on either holding his 2008 white college-graduate support, in which case he can survive a landslide defeat of 2010 proportions among white working-class voters, or holding his slippage among both groups to around 2004 levels, in which case he can still squeak out a victory. Conversely, if Republicans can cut significantly into Obama's white college-graduate support and then replicate the landslide margins they achieved among white working-class voters in 2010, then they are likely to emerge victorious.

On the state level, Obama and the Republicans start the election campaign with 186 and 191 electoral votes respectively from their core states. With the exception of New Hampshire, the additional states Obama and the Republicans need can

come from three broad geographic areas: the Midwest/Rust Belt, the Southwest, and the New South. They are all states that were carried by Obama in 2008.

The six Midwest/Rust Belt swing states (Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) are all marked by slow growth and by a relatively small and slow-growing percentage of voters from communities of color. These states are projected to average around 15 percent minority voters in 2012, ranging from a low of 10 percent in Iowa to a high of 21 percent in Pennsylvania. But this relatively small base of minority voters is supplemented for Democrats by fairly strong support among these states' growing white college-graduate populations, who gave Obama an average 5-point advantage in 2008. This coalition of the ascendant has produced increased Democratic support in growing areas of these states.

Moreover, the weight of that coalition should be larger in these states in 2012 than in 2008, with an average 3-point increase in the percent of white college graduates and minorities among voters, and a 3-point decline in the percent of white working-class voters. In addition, Obama should also benefit from the fact that Midwestern and Rust Belt white working-class voters tend to be more supportive than in other competitive states, averaging only a 2-point Democratic deficit in 2008.

The poor economic situation, however, weighs heavily on that relative friendliness and it is likely to reduce enthusiasm for Obama among his coalition of the ascendant. That will give Republicans an opening in these states, especially in Ohio. McCain lost the state by only 5 points in 2008, the white working class was notably sympathetic to the GOP even then (McCain carried them by 10 points), and except for Michigan, the economic situation is worse than in the rest of these states. A strong GOP mobilization effort could take the state, especially if there is no significant economic improvement between now and the election.

GOP chances in the other five states are not as good, though Pennsylvania, with the most friendly white working class, and Michigan, with the worst economy, provide serious opportunities. For Obama's part, his ability to keep his coalition of the ascendant together and avoid catastrophic losses among the white working class in all five states will be heavily dependent on whether and how much the economy improves as we near the election.

The three Southwest swing states (Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico) are all marked by fast growth and by relatively high and growing percentages of minority, chiefly

Obama's ability to keep his coalition of the ascendant together and avoid catastrophic losses among the white working class will be heavily dependent on whether and how much the economy improves.

Hispanic, voters. These states are projected to average around 36 percent minority voters in 2012, ranging from a low of 21 percent in Colorado to a high of 52 percent in New Mexico. And the 3-point advantage the growing white college-graduate population gives Obama supplements this solid base of minority voters for Democrats.

This coalition of the ascendant has produced increased Democratic support in most growing areas of these states. Moreover, the weight of that coalition should be larger in these states in 2012 than in 2008, with an average 4-point increase in the percent of white college graduates and minorities among voters, and a 4-point decline in the percent of white working-class voters. Yet compared to the Midwestern and Rust Belt swing states, white working-class voters in the Southwest are quite a bit more friendly to the GOP, averaging a 17-point Republican advantage in 2008.

The difficult economic situation, especially in Nevada and Colorado, is likely to enhance their receptiveness to the GOP, even as it is likely to reduce enthusiasm for Obama among white college graduates and, most worrisome for his campaign, among minorities, where support and turnout among Hispanics could fall significantly. Therefore, even though Obama has the demographic wind at his back, so to speak, the Republicans will have a serious shot at these states. And at least in Nevada and Colorado, without significant economic improvement, even hard mobilization work by the Obama campaign may not be enough to keep them out of GOP hands.

The three New South swing states (Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia) are all marked by fast growth, driven by their burgeoning minority populations. These states are projected to average around 31 percent minority voters in 2012. These voters, with their relatively high concentrations of black voters, gave Obama an average of 82 percent support in 2008, significantly higher than the Southwest swing states' average of 71 percent.

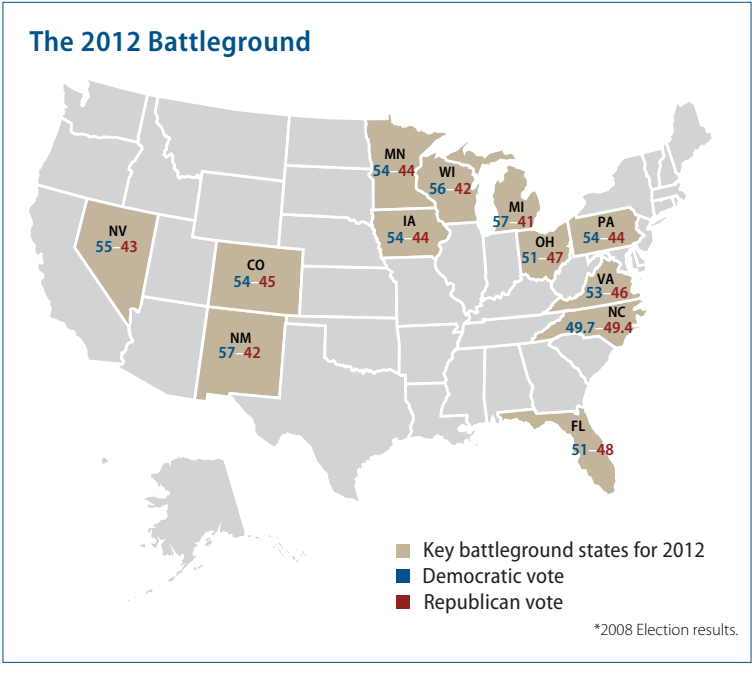
But in contrast to the Southwest states, white college-graduate voters are significantly more supportive of the GOP, giving McCain an average 16-point advantage in 2008. And white working-class voters in the New South swing states, though they are declining rapidly, are even more pro-GOP than in the Southwest, giving McCain an average 28-point advantage. So the level and strength of the minority vote looms especially large to Obama's chances in these states.

The difficult economic situations in North Carolina and above all Florida could, however, undercut the minority vote, even as it alienates white college-graduate voters and moves white working-class voters closer to the GOP. Such a scenario

would be a recipe for Republican success and the GOP nominee will work hard to make it a reality in 2012. Virginia is more promising for the Obama campaign, with a solid minority vote, a relatively friendly white college-graduate population, a tight link between growing areas and increasing sympathy for the Democrats, and a fairly decent economic situation. A strong effort by Obama in 2012 should have a good chance of keeping this state in his column.

Given the findings in this paper, Obama’s recent steps to define the election on more progressive terms through a commitment to a new jobs and growth program and a deficit reduction plan based on “shared sacrifice” will likely aid the president politically. Public polling over the past year suggests that a sustained posture of defending the middle class, supporting popular government programs, and calling for a more equitable tax distribution will be popular among many key demographic groups necessary to win in the 12 battleground states analyzed here.

The findings in the paper also indicate that Republicans can maximize their chances of victory by focusing almost exclusively on the economy. But they will need to downplay their more divisive positions on religion, social issues,



	D--2008	R--2008	Projected Share Change, 2008-12
Minorities	80	20	2
White college graduates	47	51	1
White working class	40	58	-3

immigration, and the more extreme Tea Party positions on popular government programs such as Social Security and Medicare.

The stage is set for a showdown of demographics versus economics in the 2012 election. Each side has clear strengths but also very serious weaknesses as they move into this showdown. Victory will likely go to the side most willing to acknowledge their weaknesses and attack them boldly. This will be no election for the faint-hearted.

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