



The Path to 270 Revisited

The Role of Demographics, Economics, and Ideology
in the 2012 Presidential Election

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Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

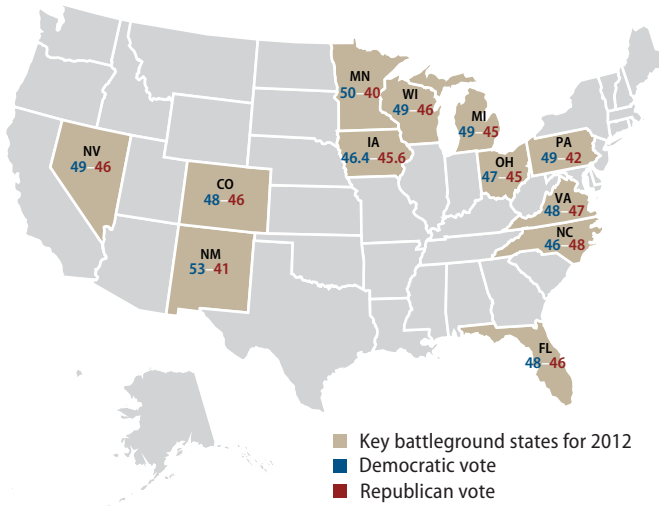
With less than two months to go until the presidential election of 2012, the contours of the campaign thus far have been remarkably similar to the ones outlined in our paper from the fall of 2011, “The Path to 270.”¹ In that paper we argued that the election would boil down to the relative balance between two fundamental forces nationally and across the most important battleground states: demographic change—favoring President Barack Obama and the Democrats—and the lingering impact of an economy not yet fully recovered from the depths of the Great Recession—favoring the Republican candidate (now former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney) and his party.

Throughout the Republican nomination period and the summer campaign, this basic formula persisted. President Obama and the Democrats concentrated their campaign efforts and messaging to maximize support among key demographic groups and raise doubts about Gov. Romney’s business career and commitment to economic fairness. In turn, Gov. Romney and the Republicans focused (or at least tried to focus) almost exclusively on the president’s perceived failures on the economy and how his spending and social plans will affect more traditional white working-class voters.

Our paper argued that if President Obama could rebuild most but not all of his historic 2008 coalition, and keep his deficits among white working class voters from ballooning out of control, he could achieve victory. Conversely, we posited that if the Republicans could capitalize on overall skepticism of the economy among these voters and deep disdain for President Obama among the conservative base, the Republicans could shift the electorate toward a 2010 configuration and also achieve victory.

Since then the race settled into a fairly stable pattern, with President Obama leading narrowly nationwide and in most of the key battleground states.

The 2012 Battleground



*Pollster.com average, September 12, 2012

	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	80	20	3
White college graduates	47	51	0
White working class	40	58	-3

The recent addition of Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI) to the Republican ticket as the vice presidential candidate adds an important third dimension to the race left out of the forefront of our analysis last year: ideology. Although vice presidential candidates rarely make a large impact on the overall outcome of a presidential election, the selection of Rep. Ryan—the acknowledged intellectual and policy leader of the contemporary conservative movement and author of the House Republicans’ far-reaching budget proposals—has the potential to influence the basic formula of demographics versus economics in important ways.

With this pick Gov. Romney and the Republicans ensure that the race is no longer exclusively a referendum on President Obama’s stewardship of the economy. It is now a choice between two competing visions of American society and governance—one that promotes an active role for government in advancing individual opportunity, economic security, and national prosperity, and one that embraces personal responsibility, market forces, and limited government as a means for

achieving growth and greater freedom. The Romney-Ryan and Obama budget blueprints serve as clear markers for strong ideological divisions in America over how best to grow the economy and jobs, the proper size and scope of government, who should pay for and benefit most from government services, and where limited resources should be concentrated over the next decade.

This ideological debate presents interesting demographic questions as well, most importantly in the debate over the future of Medicare. Gov. Romney and Rep. Ryan promote a “premium support” plan that exempts those age 55 or older from changes to Medicare while offering those 54 years or younger a choice of a government subsidy for private insurance or traditional Medicare in their elder years.

President Obama and the Democrats oppose these plans and promote instead a series of cost-containment ideas in Medicare and the new Affordable Care Act. Will older voters see this as a threat to their own retirement plans or as a chance to preserve their health care benefits amid steadily rising costs? Will younger voters see the plan as bad deal where they must pay into the system fully during their working years and receive more limited benefits and meet older eligibility requirements later in life? Or will they see it as a plausible way to keep down costs and preserve the system? Will voters give the Republicans credit and votes for tackling entitlement reforms and seeking to extend the life of these programs? Or will they favor Democrats for seeking to preserve the guaranteed benefits of Medicare and focusing on the high costs of health care?

Similarly, competing ideological visions of federal spending priorities intersect with demographic divisions. President Obama and the Democrats seek to increase taxes on the wealthiest Americans and cut defense spending while continuing to invest in education, research, and critical infrastructure and preserving the social safety net.

Gov. Romney and the Republicans want to cut nondefense discretionary spending (particularly social welfare programs), increase military spending, and further reduce taxes. Although both sides claim to be taking steps to strengthen the broad middle class and grow the economy and jobs, President Obama’s plans ostensibly focus more on younger, less affluent, and more diverse and urban voters, while Gov. Romney’s plans seem geared toward older, more upscale, and rural and ex-urban voters.

While the basic formula of demographics versus economics remains the most important frame for our analysis, the introduction of a strong and clear ideological debate to the campaign certainly adds a layer of complexity to how these two forces will play out among voters across divergent states.

The demography of the path to 270 revisited

In our earlier report, our national analysis broke down the electorate into three key groups—minorities, college-educated whites, and non-college or working-class whites. Using these three groups, we discussed various scenarios that might result in a victory for President Obama or Gov. Romney. We found, in brief, that President Obama should be significantly advantaged in 2012 by demographic change, especially a projected increase in minority voters and decrease in white working-class voters. We further found that if the president's minority support holds up in 2012, with the level of Hispanic support being the biggest question mark, he could absorb quite a lot of falloff in his support among white working-class voters and still win the election. The latter is especially the case if President Obama's support also holds up among white college-educated voters.

Below we revisit this assessment, based on polling and demographic data that are now available. In particular, we look at the following:

- How much demographic change can we expect to see in the 2012 election?
- Will President Obama's minority support be as high as it was in 2008?
- Will President Obama's support among college-educated whites hold up in 2012?
- Will Gov. Romney's advantage among white working-class voters be large enough to win?

How much demographic change can we expect to see in the 2012 election?

Since our original report in November 2011, better data on demographic changes nationally and in battleground states have become available. Based on analysis of the most up-to-date information about eligible voters from the Current Population Survey,² the overall minority composition of the electorate increased by three points since 2008, while the percentage of white working-class voters declined by an equal amount (see data below preceding map). White college graduates increased also, but only very slightly—about two-tenths of a percentage point.

This is fairly similar to our projection based on exit poll and 2000-2010 Census data. The differences are that our projection had the minority voter share going up only two points and the white college-graduate voter share going up only one point. But keep in mind that these new figures are based on changes in the composition of eligible voters, which may or may not be fully reflected in the composition of actual voters, depending on turnout patterns. Given that minorities' turnout tends to be relatively low, while white college graduates' turnout is relatively high, the shifts we see in 2012 may still wind up close to our original projection.

Will President Obama's minority support be as high as it was in 2008?

The minority vote in the polls continues to look rock solid for President Obama as we head toward November's election, coming very close to the 80 percent support level he received in 2008.

Part of this, of course, is due to overwhelming backing from black voters. But it was more or less expected that African American voters would continue to support the first African American president by very lopsided margins. It was less expected that Latinos would be as strong as they have been so far for President Obama. Indeed, in 11 national polls of Hispanics conducted from December of last year through August 2012,³ Latino voters have favored President Obama over Gov. Romney by an average of 43 percentage points, substantially higher than the margin of 36 points they gave President Obama in 2008.

It therefore seems that, barring a significant meltdown in his Hispanic support, President Obama should, in fact, come close to his 2008 level of minority support in 2012.

Will President Obama's support among college-educated whites hold up in 2012?

Polling persistently shows President Obama doing as well as or better than his performance in 2008 among white college graduates. In Pew polls,⁴ for example, this group is averaging around a two-point deficit for President Obama, compared to 4 points in 2008.

Will Gov. Romney's advantage among white working-class voters be large enough to win?

The developments just summarized give President Obama a considerable buffer against expected weakness among white noncollege voters. Indeed, if the minority and white college-educated vote hold up as well in November as they have in recent polling, Gov. Romney needs to generate a huge margin among white working-class voters to have a decent chance of winning—closer to the 30 points congressional Republicans won this group by in 2010 than the 18-point margin received by Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) in 2008.

In fact, if President Obama replicates his 2008 performance among minorities and white college graduates, then Gov. Romney would need to carry white working-class voters by *double* Sen. McCain's margin (36 points), even if the minority vote does not grow at all. And if the minority vote does grow as expected, he would need north of a 40-point margin among the white working-class to prevail. That's how steep a climb Gov. Romney will face if President Obama holds steady among minorities and white college grads.

But Gov. Romney has not been remotely close to that level of support among white working-class voters. He's been averaging around the same margin Sen. McCain received in 2008 with occasional readings as high as 23 points.⁵ Even the latter margin is far from what he will need to win, given the size and leanings of the rest of the electorate. Thus, to be successful in November's election, Gov. Romney needs to greatly exceed his currently observed upper bound of support among white working-class voters. That may be difficult given that the Republican candidate himself, by dint of both his awkward personality and background as a private equity tycoon, is a less than ideal messenger to these voters. He had trouble connecting to white working-class voters within the Republican primary electorate, and those difficulties have apparently carried over to the general election context.

The geography of the path to 270 revisited

In the original “Path to 270” paper, we presented analyses of 12 battleground states in three broad geographic areas: the Midwest/Rust Belt, the Southwest, and the New South.⁶ These analyses included, for each state, a projection of demographic shifts in the voting electorate relative to 2008, and an assessment of the path within that state for President Obama to hold it in 2012 as he did in 2008 or for the state to flip to the Republican Party. Below we update our analyses of these states, using the new eligible voter numbers, as well as polling data available through the time of writing.

The Midwest/Rust Belt

The Midwest/Rust Belt states we analyzed are:

- Iowa (6 electoral votes)
- Michigan (16 electoral votes)
- Minnesota (10 electoral votes)
- Ohio (18 electoral votes)
- Pennsylvania (20 electoral votes)
- Wisconsin (10 electoral votes)

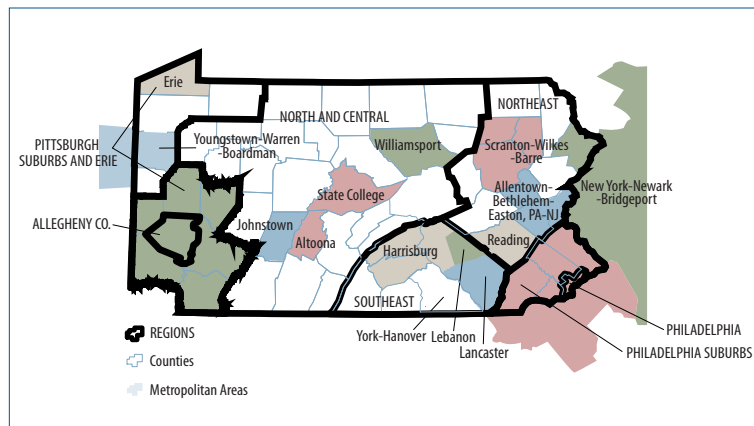
The Republicans appear likely to pick up Indiana (11 electoral votes), even though the Democrats carried it in 2008, as well as keep Missouri (10 electoral votes), where then-Sen. Obama lost in 2008 by only one-eighth of a percentage point. All together, the six Midwest/Rust Belt states have 80 electoral votes and would get President Obama very close to the 270 threshold when combined with his core states (California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington, plus the District of Columbia). And if President Obama carries New Hampshire (4 electoral votes) in addition to the six Midwest/Rust Belt states, that would put him at exactly 270 without any of the Southwest or New South states in play.

Conversely, if Republicans can pick up several states in this region—they have little chance of taking them all—they will have a lighter lift in the Southwest and New South. If Republicans carry Ohio and Pennsylvania that would provide almost half the electoral votes they need to add to their core states. Florida and any other New South state could provide the rest.

The six Midwest/Rust Belt states are all slow growing, with an average population growth rate (3.7 percent between 2000 and 2010)⁷ well below the national average of 9.7 percent. Consistent with this slow overall growth, these states’ minority population share grew relatively slowly—a 3.8 percentage point shift over the 2000-2010 time period—compared to 5.4 points for the nation as a whole. Thus, not only are these states whiter than the national average (an average of 82 percent vs. 64 percent for the nation), their race-ethnic composition is shifting more slowly, creating a more favorable dynamic for the GOP than in the two other swing regions.

Below we discuss these states⁸ in descending order of electoral votes.

Pennsylvania—20 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	86	13	2
White college graduates	52	47	0
White working class	42	57	-2

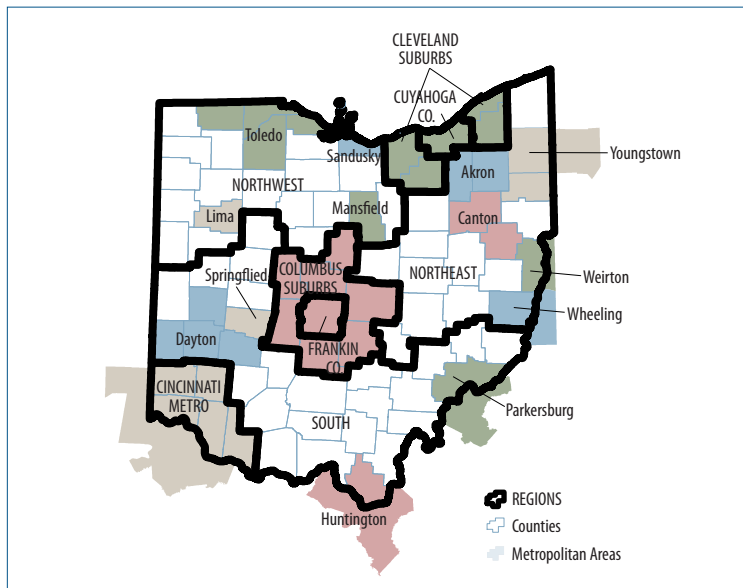
Democratic presidential candidates have won this state five straight times going back to 1992. Then-Sen. Obama won the state by 10 points in 2008, a considerable improvement over previous Democratic contenders: the three-point win by Sen. John Kerry (D-MA) in 2004 and the four-point victory by Vice President Al Gore in 2000. The 2008 Obama victory came despite an exceptionally strong effort by Sen. McCain to flip the state.

In our earlier analysis we projected that the minority share of Pennsylvania's 2012 voters would increase by two points, the white college-graduate share would increase by three points, and the white working-class share would decline by five points. The eligible voter data show less change overall, though the minority share did increase by two points. White college graduates, however, have remained stable as a share of eligible voters, while white working-class eligible voters are down only two points, not five.

Turnout patterns, of course, could make the final result closer to our original projections among whites, as well as somewhat lower among minorities, depending on the effect of Pennsylvania's voter ID law. But for now, an approximate two-point rise in the minority share of voters and an equal drop in the white working-class share seems the safest guess for November.

So far, polling has consistently shown President Obama ahead in this state. The September 12, 2012 Pollster.com average put his lead at seven points (49 percent to 42 percent) and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog, which models each state with both polling and underlying structural/historical data, put his probability of carrying the state at a very strong 94 percent on the same day.⁹ [Subsequent data for other states are taken from the same sites on the same day.] These positive results for the president reflect the fact that none of the vulnerabilities we identified in our original report have really come to pass for him in Pennsylvania. He is running just as strongly as in 2008 among blacks, he is continuing to get solid support from white college graduates and, critically, he is not suffering the big erosion in white working-class support that is Gov. Romney's best bet for carrying the state. Indeed, according to the *New York Times/Quinnipiac* poll,¹⁰ Gov. Romney is running no better than Sen. McCain did among this demographic. This pattern, if it persists, will make it difficult, if not impossible, for Gov. Romney to carry the state.

Ohio—18 electoral votes



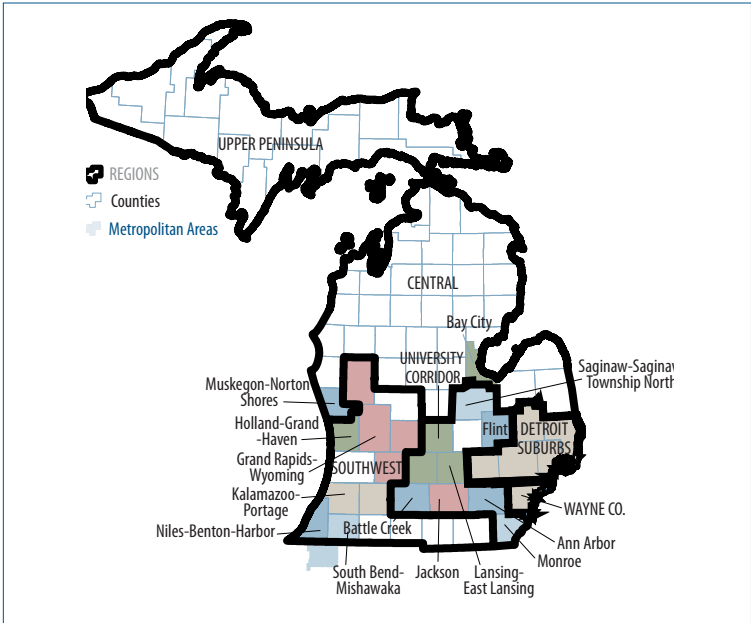
	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	83	16	0
White college graduates	49	50	-1
White working class	44	54	1

Then-Sen. Obama won the state by five points in 2008, a Democratic breakthrough after the Republican Party’s two-point victory in 2004 and four-point victory in 2000.

Our earlier projection, based on exit poll trends and 2000–2010 Census data, estimated that the minority share of Ohio’s 2012 voters would increase by a point, while the white working-class share would decline by three points and the white college-graduate share would go up two points. While turnout patterns could still produce an electorate that matches that projection, the 2008–2012 eligible voter data tell a different story. These data show minorities going up negligibly as a share of voters—just three-tenths of a percentage point (rounded down to zero in our table)—while the white working-class share of eligible voters actually rose a point, and the white college-graduate share declined a point. Thus, at least in terms of eligible voter trends, Ohio is one of the few states where demographic change actually favors Gov. Romney not President Obama.

As in Pennsylvania, polling consistently has President Obama ahead in Ohio, though his margin is much smaller. The Pollster.com average puts his lead at two points (47 percent to 45 percent) and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at 77 percent. President Obama's lead reflects, above all, Gov. Romney's failure to generate a big white working-class margin in state. The latest *New York Times/Quinnipiac* poll of the state shows a 13-point margin within this demographic for Gov. Romney, one just a bit better than Sen. McCain's in 2008 (10 points).¹¹ And Gov. Romney shows no progress with white college graduates in the state, managing only a tie with President Obama in this poll. This is actually a little worse than Sen. McCain did in 2008, when he carried these voters by a point.

Michigan—16 electoral votes



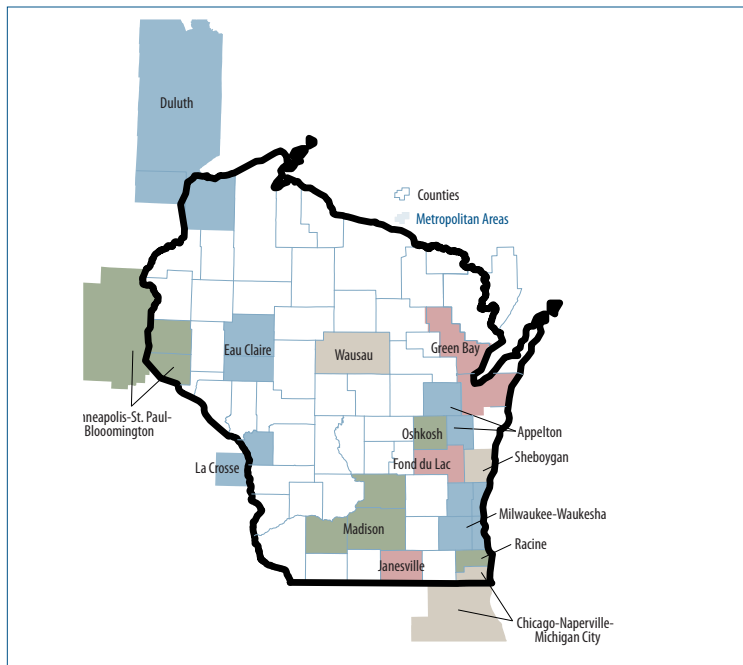
	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	85	14	2
White college graduates	48	49	1
White working class	52	46	-2

Then-Sen. Obama won Michigan quite easily in 2008 (16-point margin), and Democrats have won the state five straight times since 1992. But in 2004 and 2000, the Republican candidates came within three points and five points respectively, so the state can be very competitive.

Our original projection estimated that the minority share of voters in Michigan would go up by just a point among 2012 voters, the white working-class share would decline by a point, and the white college-graduate share would be unchanged. The 2008–2012 eligible voter data indicate somewhat more demographic change than in our projection: Minority eligible voters are up two points, white working-class eligible voters are down two points, and white college-graduate eligible voters are up about a point. If translated into actual voters on Election Day, these changes could mean a bit more of a demographic boost for President Obama.

President Obama has consistently led in this state, though by less than many expected: The Pollster.com average puts his lead at a decent but hardly spectacular four points (49 percent to 45 percent). But *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog still puts his probability of carrying the state at a very high 96 percent. Gov. Romney's chances of taking the state depend primarily on turning President Obama's small 2008 lead among white working-class voters into a massive deficit. Gov. Romney has probably made some progress in this direction (we lack data to evaluate his performance among these voters directly), but apparently not yet enough to tip the state into his column. This possibly reflects the mitigating effects of President Obama's successful auto bailout (over Romney's opposition) countering the drag of the poor economy on his support.

Wisconsin—10 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	80	19	3
White college graduates	56	44	4
White working class	52	47	-7

Then-Sen. Obama won Wisconsin with a 14-point margin in 2008, and Democrats have dominated the state, with six straight wins going back to 1988. Democrats' victories in 2000 and 2004 were razor thin, however—0.2 points and 0.4 points respectively—so the state can be vigorously contested by Republicans.

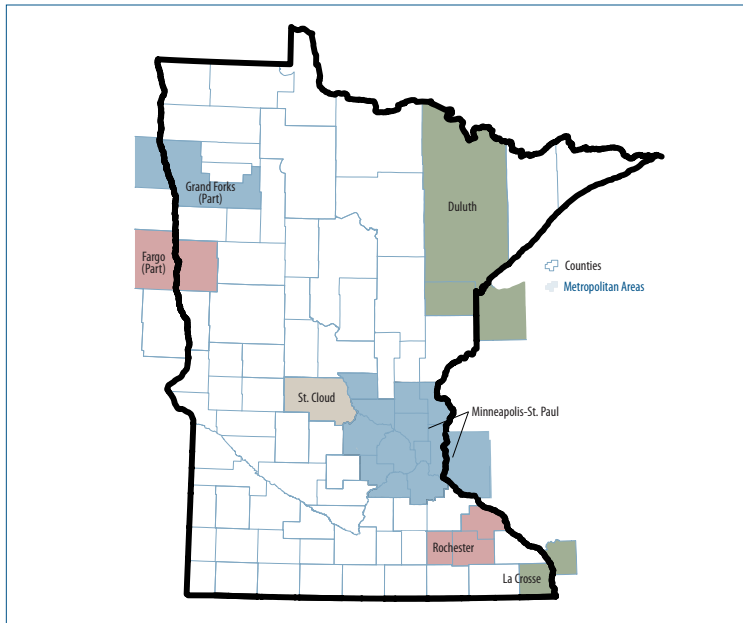
Our earlier projection had both the minority and white college-graduate shares of Wisconsin's 2012 voters going up by a point and the white working-class share declining by two points. The 2008–2012 eligible voter data, however, suggest a significantly higher level of demographic change. These data show the share of eligible minority voters increasing by three points and white college-educated eligible voters by four points. White working-class eligible voters declined by a very steep seven points. These shifts should be a big boost to President Obama

in November if—a big if—they are fully reflected in the voting electorate on Election Day. But if turnout patterns produce an outcome that merely follows long-term trends—as in our original projection—the benefit to President Obama will be more modest.

President Obama has consistently led in Wisconsin, though his margin has narrowed of late, presumably reflecting Gov. Romney's choice of Wisconsin Rep. Ryan as his running mate. The Pollster.com average puts his lead at three points (49 percent to 46 percent), and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at 84 percent. President Obama's persistent lead reflects his ability to keep white working-class losses in check and to maintain fairly strong support among white college graduates. In the latest *New York Times/Quinnipiac* poll of the state, the president does have a deficit among white working-class voters, but only one of eight points, and he carries white college graduates by seven points.¹²

It's worth noting, though, that that eight-point advantage Gov. Romney has among white working-class voters does represent some significant improvement relative to Sen. McCain, who lost these voters by five points in 2008. But Gov. Romney needs a bigger advantage than that to carry the state (not to mention more progress among white college graduates, who may loom especially large in this election, judging from their rapid growth among eligible voters).

Minnesota—10 electoral votes



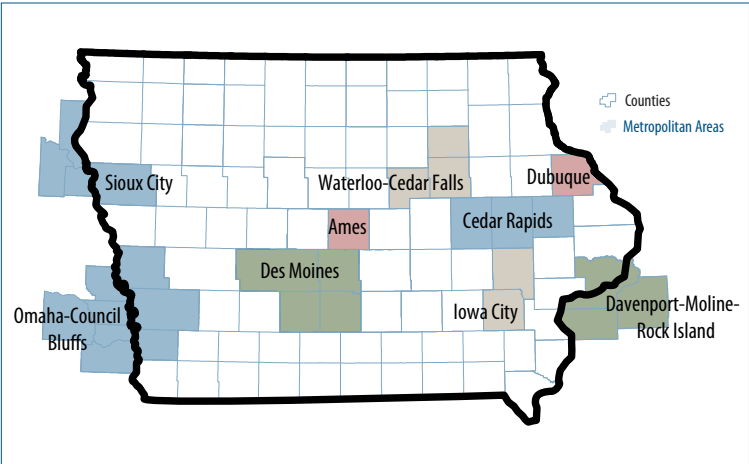
	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	71	27	1
White college graduates	56	43	2
White working class	49	48	-3

Then-Sen. Obama won Minnesota with a 10-point margin in 2008, the ninth straight time Democrats have claimed victory in the state. The last time the Democrats lost the state in a presidential election, Richard Nixon wiped out George McGovern in 1972. The Democrats' margins were so small in 2004 and 2000 (three points and two points, respectively), however, that the state had the possibility of being in play despite the Democrats' current winning streak.

Our original projection estimated that the minority share of voters in Minnesota would go up by a point and the white college-graduate share would go up by two points, while the white working-class share would decline by three points. The 2008–2012 eligible voter data show exactly this level of demographic change in the 2012 potential electorate.

President Obama’s lead in this state has been solid throughout the campaign. The latest Pollster.com average, based on sparse polling, puts his lead at 10 points (50 percent to 40 percent), and *The New York Times’s* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at an overwhelming 97 percent. Gov. Romney’s chances of taking the state appear slim at this point, though a late surge in his direction among white working-class voters remains a theoretical possibility.

Iowa—6 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	73	25	0
White college graduates	50	49	-1
White working class	52	46	1

Then-Sen. Obama won Iowa by a 10-point margin in 2008, and Democrats have won the state in five of the last six presidential elections. The two presidential elections immediately preceding 2008, however, featured a narrow Republican win (by 0.7 points in 2004) and a very narrow loss (by 0.3 points in 2000), so it was anticipated that the state might be very close in this election.

Our earlier projection estimated that the minority share of Iowa’s 2012 voters would increase by a point, while the white working-class share would decline by three points and the white college-graduate share would go up two points. But

the 2008–2012 eligible voter data tell a very different story. As in Ohio these data show minorities flat as a share of voters, with the white working-class share of eligible voters actually rising a point and the white college-graduate share declining a point. In Iowa in 2008, however, white college graduates were actually a better group for the Republicans than white working-class voters, so it is not clear that this pattern of change actually helps Gov. Romney much. Indeed, the more striking thing about these changes is how small they are in magnitude rather than how helpful they are to either side.

Iowa, as anticipated, has been extremely close this year. The Pollster.com average is about tied (President Obama has a tiny 0.8-percentage-point lead). *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog does, however, put his probability of carrying the state at a solid 76 percent. Gov. Romney's chances here probably reside in severely undercutting President Obama's support among white working-class voters, which was particularly high in 2008. But we lack data to evaluate how successful Gov. Romney has been so far in doing so.

Midwest/Rust Belt summary

President Obama currently leads in all six of these states. If he maintains his leads through Election Day and carries all six plus his core states, he would be only four electoral votes short of re-election.

Of these six states Gov. Romney's best chances are in the two where there has been the least amount of demographic change: Iowa and Ohio. Of the two, Iowa's tight race presents the best opportunity. Unfortunately for Gov. Romney, Iowa also has the least electoral votes—just six.

In Ohio, a far more consequential state, Gov. Romney faces a situation where President Obama is holding his support among minorities and white college graduates. This means that Gov. Romney cannot carry the state without a very large expansion in the Republican margin among white working-class voters. So far, Gov. Romney has failed to expand his margin as much as needed.

A possible victory for Gov. Romney could also happen in Wisconsin, aided somewhat by his selection of Rep. Ryan as running mate. But here, too, the Obama coalition of minorities and college-educated whites—enhanced in this case by ongoing demographic change—is holding firm, and Gov. Romney's margin among white working-class voters is not large enough to compensate.

Gov. Romney's prospects in the three other states—Michigan, Minnesota, and Pennsylvania—seem poor. There is even more ground to make up and much the same problem: stable support for President Obama among minorities and white college graduates and no signs of an anti-Obama meltdown among noncollege whites.

The Southwest

The Southwest includes three states that are generally considered competitive between President Obama and Gov. Romney:

- Colorado (9 electoral votes)
- Nevada (6 electoral votes)
- New Mexico (5 electoral votes)

The Obama campaign is not seriously contesting Montana (3 electoral votes), even though President Obama lost it by only two points in 2008. Nor does Arizona (11 electoral votes) appear to be shaping up as a true contest, though the extraordinarily rapid rate of demographic change in the state will likely put it in play in the near future, perhaps by 2016.¹³ Together the three southwestern target states listed above have 20 electoral votes and could, for example, more than make up for an Obama loss of Ohio and its 18 electoral votes. Added to President Obama's core states and the other five competitive Midwestern/Rust Belt states carried by him last time, these states would leave the president only two electoral votes short of victory.

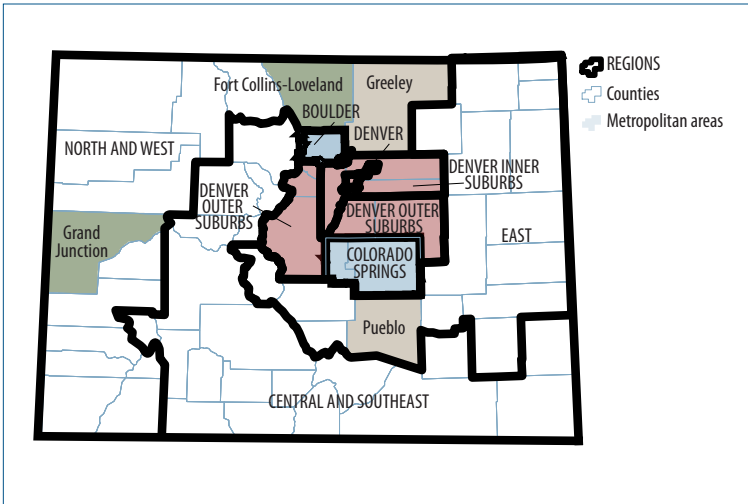
The Republican strategy will focus on adding several southwestern states to any states they're able to pick off in the Midwest/Rust Belt, thus setting themselves up to claim victory by success in the New South. If the Republicans carry Ohio and any southwestern state, for example, they can win the presidency by carrying the three swing New South states (Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia).

Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico are all fast-growing relative to the national average, though New Mexico's 13.2 percent growth rate and Colorado's 16.9 percent growth rate are dwarfed relative to that of Nevada at 35.1 percent, which easily makes it the fastest-growing state in the country.¹⁴ Nevada's growth in minority population share—an 11.1 percentage-point shift over the last decade—far outpaces that of Colorado, at 4.5 percent, and New Mexico, at 4.2 percent.

Nevada’s overall minority population share of 45.9 percent, however, still lags far behind that of New Mexico at 59.5 percent, but it remains considerably higher than Colorado’s 30 percent.

Despite these differences, these three southwestern states present overall a demographic profile and growth dynamic more favorable for President Obama than in the Midwest/Rust Belt swing region, where the heavily white populations and slow pace of demographic change are relatively advantageous to Republicans. We now provide a detailed discussion of these states in descending order of electoral votes.

Colorado—9 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	64	34	3
White college graduates	56	42	0
White working class	42	57	-3

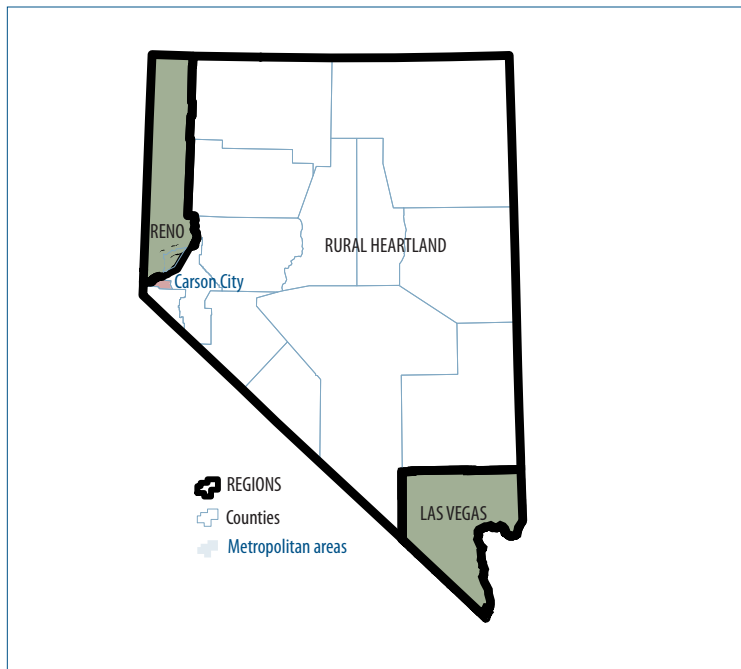
Then-Sen. Obama won the state by nine points in 2008, a Democratic breakthrough after five-point and eight-point losses in 2004 and 2000, respectively.

In our earlier analysis, we projected that the minority share of Colorado's 2012 voters would increase by two points, while the white college-graduate share would increase by two points and the white working-class share would decline by four points. The eligible voter data show more change for minorities, whose share of potential voters has increased by three points, entirely due to Hispanic growth. White college graduates, however, remained stable as a share of eligible voters, while white working-class eligible voters decreased three points, not four. Turnout patterns, of course, could make the final result closer to our original projections, but for now the possibility of a greater-than-anticipated increase in the minority vote should be taken seriously.

President Obama has consistently held a small lead in Colorado this year. The Pollster.com average shows Obama ahead by two percentage points (48 percent to 46 percent), and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at a solid 76 percent. Gov. Romney's path to carrying the state here, as elsewhere, depends on a large margin among the white working class. But the white working class is relatively small in Colorado so, lacking any progress among minorities, Gov. Romney will probably need to add a large shift in his direction among white college graduates, who loom unusually large as an electoral group in Colorado.

The latest *New York Times/Quinnipiac* poll, one of the few Colorado polls to have Gov. Romney ahead, demonstrates this dynamic. In that poll, where Gov. Romney led by five points, not only did he have a healthy margin among white noncollege voters (19 points),¹⁵ he also held a slight lead (three points) among white college voters, a group that Obama carried by 14 points in 2008. Gov. Romney, however, did poorly among Hispanics in that poll, losing them by 40 points¹⁶ compared to Sen. McCain's 23-point deficit in 2008.

Nevada—6 electoral votes



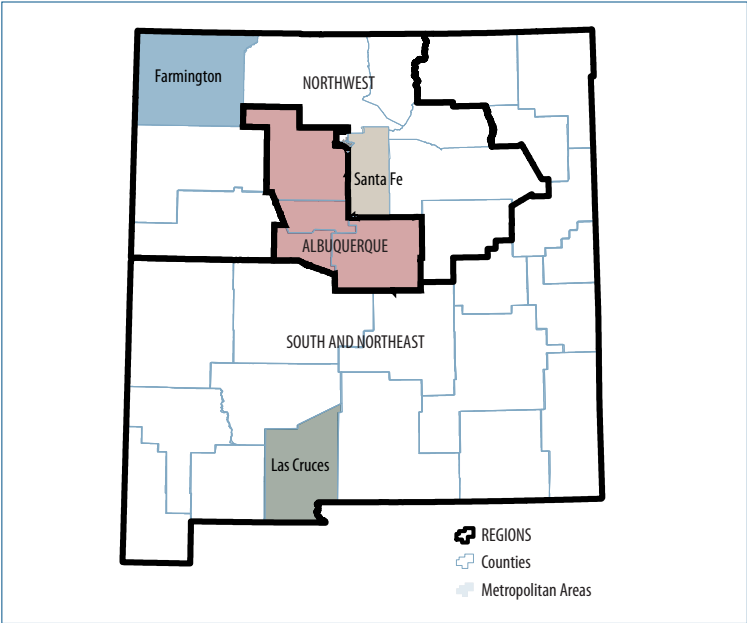
	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	79	20	9
White college graduates	47	51	-3
White working class	43	54	-5

Then-Sen. Obama earned an impressive 12-point victory in Nevada in 2012, turning around Democratic fortunes after a narrow three-point loss in 2004 and four-point loss in 2000.

Our earlier projection had the minority share of Nevada’s 2012 voters increasing by four points, white college-graduate share by a single point, and the white working-class share declining by five points. As strong as this prediction was, the eligible voter data indicate an even higher level of demographic change. According to these data the minority share of eligible voters increased an astonishing nine points, while the white working-class and white college-graduate shares of eligible voters decreased five and three points respectively. Turnout patterns may moderate the effect of these shifts on the voting electorate, but it certainly appears that President Obama will benefit massively from demographic change in this state.

President Obama has held a moderate lead throughout the year in Nevada. The Pollster.com average shows President Obama ahead by three points (49 percent to 46 percent), but *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at a strong 86 percent. For Gov. Romney to carry the state he needs to generate a much larger lead than Sen. McCain had (11 points) among the rapidly declining white working class, as well as enlarge President Obama's deficit among white college graduates (4 points in 2008).

New Mexico—5 electoral votes



	D--2008	R--2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	71	28	1
White college graduates	49	49	-3
White working class	36	62	2

Then-Sen. Obama earned a strong 15-point victory in New Mexico in 2008, a result whose magnitude contrasts sharply with the two previous elections, which saw razor-thin victories for President George Bush (.79 percentage points in 2004) and Vice President Al Gore (.06 points in 2000).

In our earlier analysis we projected that the minority share of New Mexico's 2012 voters would increase by two points, the white college-graduate share would increase by a point, and the white working-class share would decline by three points. The eligible voter data show a more modest level of demographic change, with a pattern mildly favorable to Gov. Romney. White college-graduate eligible voters are down three points, while white non-college eligible voters are, unusually, up two points and minorities up a point.

But this pattern does not seem to be turning the tide for Gov. Romney in New Mexico. President Obama has maintained a large lead all year--53 percent to 41 percent in the Pollster.com average—and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at a very high 96 percent. It is difficult to see Gov. Romney carrying this state without a meltdown in President Obama's support among Hispanics (42 percent of eligible voters), and so far there is no sign of this happening.

Southwest summary

President Obama is currently leading in all three of the Southwest swing states. If he maintains his leads through Election Day and carries all three, he can replace the loss of Ohio in the Midwest and still be only two votes short of re-election (assuming he carries his core states). Or he could replace the loss of both Iowa and Wisconsin and secure his re-election.

Gov. Romney's best chance to carry one of these states clearly lies in Colorado, due to its tight race and low levels of demographic change compared to Nevada. He will need a stellar performance among not only the white working class but also among white college graduates to flip Colorado into the Republican column.

New Mexico seems like a hopeless cause for Gov. Romney. Barring huge movement toward the Republicans among Hispanics—something we're simply not seeing this year anywhere—the state is probably out of reach.

The New South

The South includes three states that are seriously in play between President Obama and Gov. Romney:

- Florida (29 electoral votes)
- North Carolina (15 electoral votes)
- Virginia (13 electoral votes)

Earlier this year the Obama campaign made noise about contesting Georgia (16 electoral votes), which then-Sen. Obama lost by only five points in 2008. But this does not seem to have happened—no surprise given the state’s conservative proclivities, which have been accentuated by the current political environment. Yet Georgia’s rapid rate of demographic change (the minority population increased 6.7 percentage points over the last decade and now accounts for 44.1 percent of the Georgia population) indicates that it will be a legitimate target state in the near future.

If President Obama sweeps Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia—and wins their combined 57 electoral votes—it would allow him to lose up to four Midwest/Rust Belt target states and all of the Southwest and still be re-elected. And if the president does hold the four Midwestern/Rust Belt target states Democrats have carried since 1992 (Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin), he could be re-elected by carrying only Florida, even if he loses Ohio, Iowa, and all of the Southwestern states.

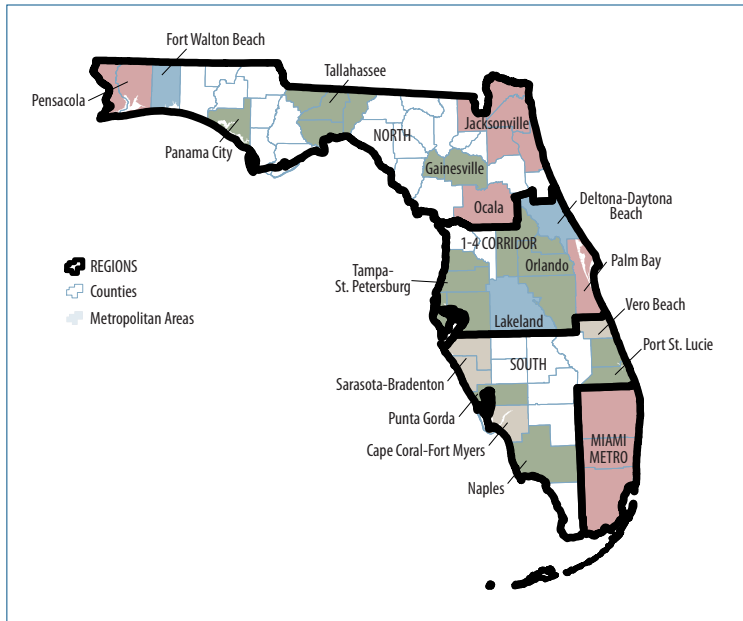
But if Gov. Romney carries all three of these states—which the Republicans did in 2004—as well as Ohio and their core states, they would be only four electoral votes short of victory. New Hampshire could provide those electoral votes or, of course, any of the other contested states. So success in the New South clearly looms very large in the Republican path to 270.

These three New South states are all fast growing relative to the national average. North Carolina is the fastest growing at 18.6 percent growth over the last decade, followed by Florida with 17.6 percent growth, and Virginia with 13 percent growth.¹⁷ Florida, however, grew the most in terms of minority population share—7.5 percentage points over the decade—followed by Virginia with 5.4 points and North Carolina with 4.9 points.

In terms of overall minority population share, Florida also leads with 42.1 percent, followed by Virginia and North Carolina, which are very close, at 35.2 percent and

34.7 percent respectively. As with the Southwestern target states, these New South states present an overall demographic profile and growth dynamic more favorable for President Obama than in the Midwest/Rust Belt swing region. We now provide a detailed discussion of these states in descending order of electoral votes.

Florida—29 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	74	25	4
White college graduates	43	56	-1
White working class	41	58	-3

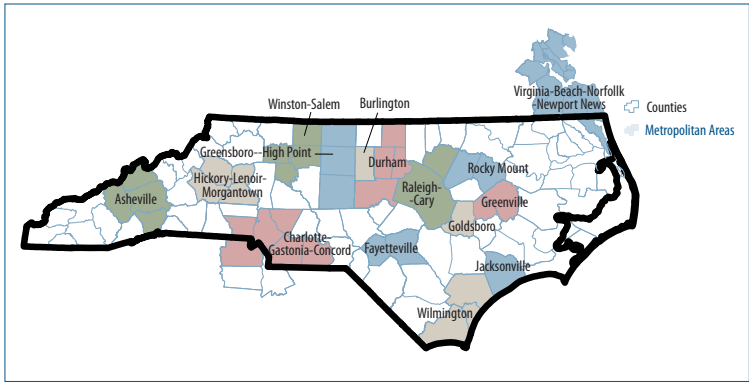
Then-Sen. Obama won Florida by three points in 2008, a Democratic breakthrough after their five-point loss in 2004 and their heartbreakingly close .01-point loss in 2000.

Our earlier projection had the minority share of Florida's 2012 voters increasing by two points, the white college-graduate share by a single point, and the white working-class share declining by three points. The eligible voter data indicate a somewhat higher level of demographic change. According to these data the minor-

ity share of eligible voters is up a strong four points (including two points from Hispanics and, unusually, a point from blacks), while the white working-class and white college-graduate shares of eligible voters are down three and one points respectively. Turnout patterns may moderate the effect of the large minority shift on the voting electorate, but President Obama can potentially generate big gains from demographic change in this state.

President Obama has averaged a small lead throughout the year in Florida’s tight race. The Pollster.com average shows the president leading by two points (48 percent to 46 percent), and *The New York Times’s* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at a solid 67 percent. President Obama’s narrow lead reflects his ability to perform well among minority voters—especially Hispanics—and keep his deficit with white college graduates stable, while keeping his losses among white working-class voters in check. In the latest *New York Times/Quinnipiac* poll of the state, Gov. Romney had a 20-point advantage among white working-class voters,¹⁸ only slightly better than Sen. McCain’s performance in 2008. He will likely need to widen that gap to carry the state. Gov. Romney is also doing worse than Sen. McCain among Hispanics, losing them by 30 points,¹⁹ compared to Sen. McCain’s 2008 deficit of 15 points. That too needs improvement.

North Carolina—15 electoral votes



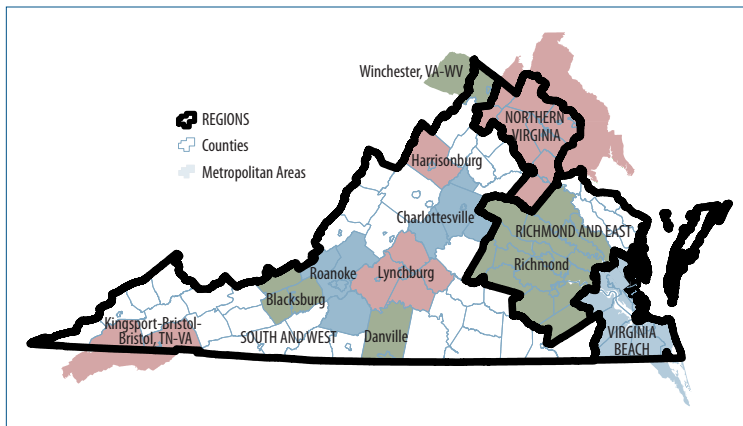
	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	88	12	4
White college graduates	38	61	-2
White working class	33	67	-2

Then-Sen. Obama won North Carolina in 2008, though he did so by a very narrow margin of a third of a percentage point. But this was a huge breakthrough for the Democrats after losing the state by 12 points in 2004 and 13 points in 2000.

In our earlier analysis we projected, based on a conservative reading of exit poll data, that the minority share of North Carolina's 2012 voters would increase by 1 point, with no change in the white college-graduate share and a one point decline in the white working-class share. The eligible voter data suggest considerably more demographic change in the state. According to these data minorities are up four points as a share of eligible voters, with white college-graduate and white non-college eligible voters down two points. This level of change, if realized at the ballot box, would be a huge help to President Obama in 2012.

And he will need all the help he can get. Since the spring Gov. Romney has led in North Carolina, albeit by small margins. The latest Pollster.com average shows Romney ahead by two points (48 percent to 46 percent), and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at 67 percent. Gov. Romney's lead is likely based on maintaining the strong margins among both white college grads and white working-class voters that Sen. McCain had in 2008 and possibly improving them somewhat. President Obama's chances in the state probably hinge on his ability to mobilize a huge minority turnout to neutralize Gov. Romney's strength among these demographics. But so far we've seen no evidence of such a surge.

Virginia—13 electoral votes



	D-2008	R-2008	Change in share of eligible voters, 2008-12
Minorities	83	16	1
White college graduates	44	55	1
White working class	32	66	-2

Then-Sen. Obama won Virginia by six points in 2008, an impressive breakthrough for the Democrats after losing the state by eight points in 2004 and 2000. It marked the first time Democrats carried the state since 1964.

Our earlier projection had the minority share of Virginia’s 2012 voters going up by two points, the white college-graduate share going up by three points, and the white working-class share declining by five points. The eligible voter data suggest a much lower rate of demographic change, if still quite favorable to President Obama, in 2012. According to these data, the shares of both minority and white college eligible voters are up a point, while the white working-class share of eligible voters is down by two points. Turnout patterns may yet produce more change in the actual voting electorate in November, but these figures suggest a more conservative assessment.

President Obama has led most of the year in this state, though very recently the race has tightened significantly. The Pollster.com average has President Obama ahead by only a single percentage point though *The New York Times’s* FiveThirtyEight blog still puts President Obama’s probability of carrying the state

at a fairly strong 64 percent. President Obama's lead is traceable to keeping or improving his white college-graduate support while keeping his white working-class deficit close to its 2008 level. In the latest *New York Times*/Quinnipiac poll of the state, Gov. Romney had a 34-point advantage among white working-class voters, only modestly better than Sen. McCain's 32-point margin in 2008, and Gov. Romney could manage only a tie with President Obama among white college graduates in that poll.²⁰ That's significantly worse than Sen. McCain in 2008, who carried the latter demographic by 11 points. Gov. Romney will have to do better in both departments in November if he hopes to carry the state.

New South summary

President Obama currently leads or is favored in two of the three New South swing states, Florida and Virginia. If he does manage to carry these two states, combined with his probable strength in the Midwest/Rust Belt and in the Southwest, then his chances of re-election would not be absolutely certain, but pretty close to that. If President Obama carries just Florida and the 18 states plus the District of Columbia, which Democrats have carried in every election since 1992, then he would be re-elected—even without any of the southwestern swing states. And if he carries only Virginia and those 18 states plus the District of Columbia then he would be re-elected if he also carried the southwestern states.

Gov. Romney seems likely to carry North Carolina, though the race there remains tight. But the state is not out of reach for President Obama. The key for him will be a large minority turnout that takes advantage of the shifting demographics in the state. Gov. Romney is also close in both Virginia and Florida. Gov. Romney particularly needs the latter state to have a reasonable chance at victory. Winning Florida will entail a larger margin among Florida's white working-class voters as well as, perhaps, a smaller deficit among Hispanics. In Virginia he also needs to widen his already large advantage among the declining white working class while getting closer to Sen. McCain's 2008 performance among white college grads.

A note on New Hampshire (4 electoral votes)

The only competitive state that lies outside the three regions just discussed is New Hampshire. We did not cover New Hampshire in our original report but we offer some brief remarks here.

Like Ohio and Iowa, New Hampshire saw essentially no change in its minority share of eligible voters, but did see substantial change within the white population. Since 2008 there has been a four-point decline in white non-college eligible voters and a four-point increase in white college-graduate eligible voters—a group that supported then-Sen. Obama by 18 points in 2008. That shift should benefit the president.

President Obama has led consistently all year in this state. The Pollster.com average, based on sparse polling, puts his lead at four points (49 percent to 45 percent), and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog puts his probability of carrying the state at a very strong 86 percent. Gov. Romney's chances of taking the state seem poor at this point and depend particularly on eliminating President Obama's big margin among the growing ranks of white college graduates.

What is the best path forward for each candidate and party?

As we enter the final stages of a long and contentious presidential contest, one that has remained remarkably stable for months despite the large sums of money spent by both candidates and outside efforts, Gov. Romney and President Obama clearly must address two primary strategic questions.

One, how does each side maximize base support and ensure that their voters turn out in higher numbers than the other side? And two, how does each side convince the few wavering voters remaining that their vision for the economy and government is the best way to get beyond the Great Recession?

The intersection of these questions poses some serious challenges for both campaigns.

Gov. Romney has benefited from the deep disdain for President Obama among the Republican base and the lingering doubts about his ability to produce jobs and growth. But he has suffered personally from a lack of enthusiasm among many conservative voters and mistrust for his candidacy among the wider public that has threatened to diminish support. His choice of Rep. Ryan as his running mate has clearly energized many conservative voters, which may be helpful in a few key states where enthusiasm has waned. Romney and the Republican Party clearly enjoy greater financial resources than would be normally expected for a challenger, and they will be well positioned to take advantage of the strong anti-incumbent sentiments and poor economy. Yet the addition of a controversial conservative vice presidential candidate and governing agenda has opened a series of new problems for Gov. Romney.

The ongoing struggles in the economy have left many voters unsure of the president's handling of the economy and potentially open to a new approach to governance. But the Romney-Ryan policies are deeply unpopular among many struggling middle-class voters. They do not support further tax cuts for the wealthy, particularly if they are financed by benefit reductions and increased taxes on the middle class.

The attempt to sell voters on changes to entitlement programs such as Medicare is also a huge gamble in the middle of an election. Voters are not particularly well informed about the details of the proposed changes, and the more they learn about them they less they appear to like them. Promoting a major change to the economic security of voters already hurt by the bad economy without lots of education beforehand rarely turns out well, as evidenced by President Bush's attempt to restructure Social Security. Similarly, the Republican Party's positions on social issues, particularly women's issues and gay marriage, have produced serious liabilities in a country that has transformed culturally and demographically over the past decade.

On the other side President Obama has maintained a narrow lead despite the struggling economy and ongoing doubts about his economic stewardship. He remains quite popular among many constituencies, viewed as a likable and trustworthy leader. His campaign has benefited from serious doubts about Gov. Romney's personal and business life and his commitment to the middle class. President Obama's basic policies on taxes and investment in education, infrastructure, and research and development are well liked.

At the same time the president's support among white-working class voters has deteriorated over the past four years. These voters, many concentrated in key battleground states, dislike him personally and do not support his vision for government and the economy. President Obama will need very strong turnout numbers and support levels among his 2008 coalition in order to offset this wall of opposition from many white voters. This is a major risk for the president.

A campaign that is primarily narrow-casted to a range of different voting groups may keep his base motivated and supportive but it will do little to break into the white working-class vote without some reconfiguration. President Obama needs to do more to show these voters that he is on their side and fighting for plans that will strengthen the middle class across racial, ethnic, and geographic lines.

Although the president has effectively challenged the Republican vision for the economy and entitlements, informing hard-pressed voters what exactly he plans to do in a second term remains problematic. Voters may well know that the president is fighting hard against a conservative agenda that he views as detrimental to the future of the country, but they are also eager to know what exactly he proposes to do differently after four years of successes and failures. What are the president's new ideas for creating jobs and growing the economy? What are his plans for addressing the deficit and long-term stability of government programs? How does the president envision moving an agenda given the staunch opposition he faces in Congress?

These questions assume special relevance given President Obama's difficulties with the white-working class. Even if he does manage to get re-elected, it is likely to be with a substantial deficit among these voters. The larger that deficit is, the more lack of support from these voters will cripple his efforts to enact an ambitious agenda that involves investment in infrastructure, promoting the transition to clean energy, and upgrading the educational system with significant spending frontloaded to jumpstart economic growth. President Obama will have what you might call "the Krugman problem"—the situation, often commented on by economist Paul Krugman,²¹ where there exists no overlap between the set of economic policies that seem politically feasible and the set of policies that might actually improve the economy.

The only way out of the Krugman problem for the president should he win a second term of office is to develop some real support among the white working-class voters for an activist agenda. These voters have to see a positive future for themselves in this agenda, a vision that jolts them out of their current despair about their economic trajectory and that of their children. They are, as journalist Ron Brownstein has dubbed them, "the most pessimistic group in America."²² Until President Obama can turn some of that pessimism into optimism, his greatest political problem, both in the campaign and even if he gets re-elected, will continue to be the white working class.

Six weeks out it is certainly possible to see Gov. Romney riding a surge of conservative activism and white working-class disdain into a narrow victory should the president's supporters end up being as apathetic as they were in 2010 and if late-deciding voters break heavily against him. But it is also possible to envision many voters, including some segments of the white working class, turning away from the perceived radicalism of the Republican ticket and agenda and returning the president to office by a few percentage points.

Many difficult challenges lie ahead for both candidates and campaigns to consider. The complex mix of demographics, economics, and ideology makes this already close race even more vigorously contested. Given the dynamics of this presidential race, and the larger turmoil of the past decade, it is clear that victory by either side will not mark the end of bitter conflict between two different visions of the country's future. That conflict will only subside when successful governance and economic performance ratifies one view or the other as the road forward for the nation. Until then we are likely to see a continuation of the partisan warfare of recent years.

About the authors

John Halpin is a Senior Fellow at the Center for American Progress focusing on political theory, communications, and public opinion analysis. He is the co-director and creator of the Progressive Studies Program at the Center, an interdisciplinary project researching the intellectual history, foundational principles, and public understanding of progressivism. Halpin is the co-author with John Podesta of *The Power of Progress: How America's Progressives Can (Once Again) Save Our Economy, Our Climate, and Our Country*, a 2008 book about the history and future of the progressive movement.

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Endnotes

- 1 Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin, "The Path to 270: Demographics versus Economics in the 2012 Presidential Election" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2011), available at http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/11/pdf/path_to_270.pdf.
- 2 Ruy Teixeira and William Frey, "New Data on Obama's Massive Demographic Advantage," *The New Republic*, July 9, 2012, available at <http://www.tnr.com/blog/plank/104746/how-much-will-demographic-changes-help-obama-in-swing-states>.
- 3 Authors' analysis of data from Pew Research Center, Latino Decisions, Fox, NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, and Gallup national polls of Latinos.
- 4 We use these polls as a reference for national data due to the fact they are the only national poll to regularly report a white college/white noncollege breakdown. Analysis based on polls conducted May through July 2012.
- 5 Authors' analysis of Pew Research Center polls, May–July 2012.
- 6 The only competitive state that lies outside these regions is New Hampshire. We did not cover New Hampshire in our original report but we offer a short note on the state after our discussion of the 12 states originally covered.
- 7 All data in this paragraph is from the authors' analysis of data in: Paul Mackun and Steven Wilson, "Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010" (Washington: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-01.pdf>; Karen R. Humes, Nicholas A. Jones, and Roberto R. Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin, 2010" (Washington: U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-02.pdf>.
- 8 Much more demographic and geographic data on each state in this region as well as in the Southwest and New South is available in our original report.
- 9 Data taken from Pollster.com and *The New York Times's* FiveThirtyEight blog webpages on September 12, 2012. See: "Obama vs. Romney Electoral Map," available at <http://elections.huffingtonpost.com/2012/romney-vs-obama-electoral-map>; "FiveThirtyEight," available at <http://fivethirtyeight.blogs.nytimes.com/>.
- 10 We use these polls as a reference in as many states as we can due to the fact they are the only state polls to regularly report a white college/white noncollege breakdown. The Pennsylvania poll was conducted July 24–30, 2012. See: Quinnipiac University, "Obama Hits 50% In Florida, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Quinnipiac University/CBS News/New York Times Swing State Poll Finds," Press release, August 1, 2012, available at <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/institutes-and-centers/polling-institute/presidential-swing-states-fl-oh-and-pa/release-detail?ReleaseID=1781>.
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- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ruy Teixeira, "Yes, Obama Can Win Arizona This Year," *The New Republic*, May 15, 2012, available at <http://www.tnr.com/article/ruy-teixeira/103322/arizona-obama-campaign-hispanic-vote-swing-state-phoenix>.
- 14 All data in this paragraph is from the authors' analysis of data in: Mackun and Wilson, "Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010"; Humes, Jones, and Ramirez, "Overview of Race and Hispanic Origin, 2010."
- 15 Quinnipiac University, "Wisconsin, Virginia, Colorado White House Races Close, Quinnipiac University/New York Times/CBS News Swing State Poll Finds," Press release, August 8, 2012, available at <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/institutes-and-centers/polling-institute/presidential-swing-states-fl-oh-and-pa/release-detail?ReleaseID=1786#States>.
- 16 Gov. Romney did even more poorly in a June Latino Decisions poll of Colorado Hispanics (part of a five-battleground-state poll of Latinos), trailing President Obama by 49 points.
- 17 All data in this paragraph from authors' analysis of Census Bureau data, ops. cit.
- 18 Quinnipiac University, "Ryan Micro-Bump in Florida, Wisconsin, But Not Ohio, Quinnipiac University/CBS News/New York Times Swing State Poll Finds."
- 19 Gov. Romney did better in a June Latino Decisions poll of Florida Hispanics (part of a five-battleground-state poll of Latinos), trailing President Obama by 16 points. That's still worse than Sen. McCain did in 2008.
- 20 Quinnipiac University, "Wisconsin, Virginia, Colorado White House Races Close, Quinnipiac University/New York Times/CBS News Swing State Poll Finds."
- 21 See, for example: Paul Krugman, "The Eurovonn," *Conscience of a Liberal* blog, *The New York Times*, September 28, 2012, available at <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/28/the-eurovonn/>.
- 22 Ronald Brownstein, "The White Working Class: The Most Pessimistic Group in America," *The Atlantic*, May 27, 2011, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2011/05/the-white-working-class-the-most-pessimistic-group-in-america/239584/>.

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