



The Path to 270 Revisited

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

Ruy Teixeira and John Halpin

September 2012

Introduction and summary

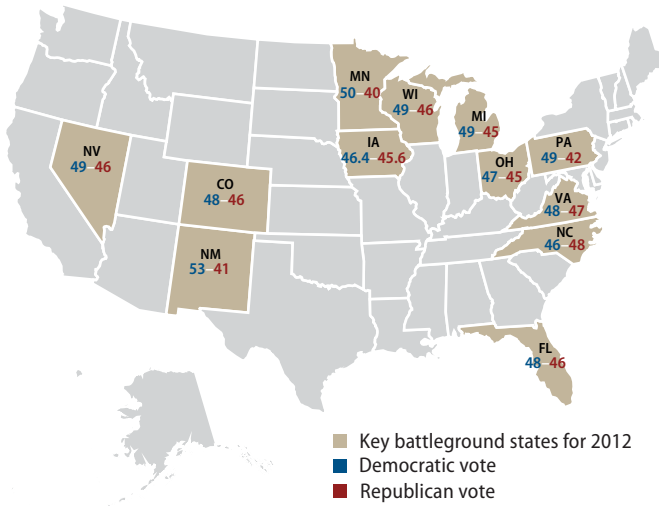
With less than two months to go until the presidential election of 2012, the contours of the campaign thus far have been remarkably similar to the ones outlined in our paper from the fall of 2011, “The Path to 270.”¹ In that paper we argued that the election would boil down to the relative balance between 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 Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just, and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

