



# The Obama Coalition in the 2012 Election and Beyond

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# Introduction and summary

Since Robert F. Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1968 and George McGovern's run in 1972, progressives have sought to create a multiracial, multiethnic, cross-class coalition—made up of African Americans, Latinos, women, young people, professionals, and economically populist blue-collar whites—supporting an activist government agenda to expand economic opportunities and personal freedoms for all people. With the re-election of President Barack Obama in 2012, this progressive coalition has clearly emerged, albeit in an early and tenuous stage.

In 2012 President Obama won re-election with 50.9 percent of the popular vote<sup>1</sup> and 332 Electoral College votes. He is the first Democratic president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to win two terms with more than 50 percent of the total popular vote. Unlike Democratic victories of the past, however, President Obama was also able to achieve victory with a historically low percentage of the white vote. According to the national exit poll, President Obama achieved victory by carrying 93 percent of African American voters, 71 percent of Latino voters, 73 percent of Asian American voters, and only 39 percent of white voters—slightly less than former Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis' share of the white vote in 1988.<sup>2</sup>

Why was this possible? First, the shifting demographic composition of the electorate—rising percentages of people of color, unmarried and working women, the Millennial generation and more secular voters, and educated whites living in more urbanized states—has clearly favored Democrats and increased the relative strength of the party in national elections. Similarly, white working-class support for Democrats has been higher in key battleground states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin than in other states, while white college-educated support for Democrats has been strong in emerging battlegrounds such as Colorado and Virginia.<sup>3</sup> 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.

Second, this transition toward a new progressive coalition was possible because of the ideological shift of the American electorate. Voters are moving away from the Reagan-Bush era of trickle-down economics and social conservatism and toward the more pragmatic approach of the Clinton-Obama vision that includes strong governmental support for the middle class, public investments in education and infrastructure, a fairer tax system that requires the wealthy to pay their fair share, and more inclusive social policies.

The Obama coalition of the 2012 election provided a clear mandate for governing that focuses on improving the economy, protecting key social programs, expanding opportunity, and addressing rising inequality and unfairness in American life. Post-election polling by Democracy Corps shows that President Obama enjoyed a 51 percent to 42 percent margin over Republican presidential nominee and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney on the question of who would be best at “restoring the middle class.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, voters express far more interest in a post-election deficit plan that invests in jobs and growth, raises taxes on the wealthy, and protects the middle class and social programs than one that shelters the wealthy, cuts economic and social programs, and increases defense spending.<sup>5</sup>

The 40-year transition of progressive politics—from Robert Kennedy to President Obama—has not been without difficulties, setbacks, and outright failures. Progressives witnessed the rise of a resurgent conservative movement that successfully shifted political discourse and public policy away from New Deal and Great Society liberalism to supply-side principles, social conservatism, and aggressive militarism. At the national level, the Democratic Party lost many traditionally Democratic states, particularly in the South, and a large percentage of the country’s white working class drifted toward the reactionary conservatism of the Republican Party under former President Ronald Reagan and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.<sup>6</sup> The harsh reaction to the centrist Democratic presidencies of both Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton—and President Obama’s first term—signaled the challenges progressives continue to face from their conservative opponents.

Despite these challenges, President Obama and his progressive allies have successfully stitched together a new coalition in American politics, not by gravitating toward the right or downplaying the party’s diversity in favor of white voters. Rather, they did it by uniting disparate constituencies—including an important segment of the white working class—behind a populist, progressive vision of middle-class economics and social advancement for all people regard-

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less of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. Should President Obama and progressives deliver on their agenda for the nation and improve the economic standing of middle- and working-class families, the potential for solidifying and expanding this progressive coalition well beyond the Obama years will only increase.

The primary strategic question for supporters of progressive values and policies is whether this coalition can be sustained going forward and, if so, how it can be harnessed to achieve progressive policy victories. This paper examines the demographic and geographic changes undergirding the rise of the new progressive coalition and explores some potential ideas for keeping this coalition together in support of progressive policies that will benefit all.

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