

ADVANTAGE DEMOCRATS: WHAT THE 2008 ELECTIONS MEAN FOR U.S. POLITICS

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Barack Obama's inauguration marks a moment of profound change in U.S. politics. Not only is Obama the first African-American President, he and the incoming Democratic Congress end fourteen years when Republicans controlled at least one, and for six years all, of the branches of the federal legislature. Whether the coming years will be ones of Democratic dominance remains to be seen, but based on the results of the 2008 elections Democrats have a better chance of retaining their majority than Republicans have of quickly returning to power.

On November 4, 2008, the Republican Party turned into a minority party in almost every sense of the word. Looking ahead, Republicans will be hard pressed to stave off further losses in 2010, and, barring a political accident of grand proportions, they have little hope of winning the presidency until 2016. Some long-term demographic and cultural changes evident in the 2008 election are undermining the Republican voting coalition's strength. Whether Republicans can come back depends as much on how they respond to the social changes in the electorate as it does on the success or failure of the incoming Obama administration.

Republicans should worry about their future based on the size of the Democratic victory. Measured against re-elections of incumbent presidents 2008 is far behind the incumbent landslides of 1936, 1956, 1964, 1972, 1984, or 1996, but considered in the context of transfers of power, 2008 stands out as one of the biggest shifts in party power since Franklin D. Roosevelt's victory in 1932. 2008 was a transfer of power

election, one in which the party out of power defeated either a sitting incumbent or the nominee of the incumbent party. Obama won a higher percentage of the popular vote than Ronald Reagan won in 1980; his party gained more congressional seats than Dwight D. Eisenhower 's 1952 (House +8, Senate +2). Reagan arguably had the bigger win because he picked up more electoral votes, and more seats in the House and Senate. However, after his congressional victories, Reagan's party was still a minority in the House. The incoming Democratic margin of 79 House votes and 18 Senate votes (this counts the two independents who currently caucus as Democrats) is the biggest advantage for a party controlling the White House since 1992. So, incumbent re-election landslide? No. Decisive transfer of power victory? Yes.

Transfer of power elections, 1932-2008

<i>Transfer of power elections & winner</i>	<i>Margin of popular vote win</i>	<i>Percentage of popular vote won</i>	<i>Electoral College votes</i>	<i>House seats gained</i>	<i>Senate seats gained</i>
2008 Obama [D]	8%	53%	365	21	8
2000 Bush [R]	-0.5%	48%	271	-1	-5
1992 Clinton [D]	6%	43%	370	-9	1
1980 Reagan [R]	10%	51%	489	35	7
1976 Carter [D]	2%	50%	297	1	1
1968 Nixon [R]	0.70%	43%	301	4	7
1960 Kennedy [D]	0.17%	50%	303	-20	1
1952 Eisenhower [R]	11%	55%	442	8	2
1932 Roosevelt [D]	17%	57%	472	97	12
Rank for 2008 out of these 9 elections	4 th	3rd	5th	3 rd	2nd

In state politics, the results were less devastating but still favored Democrats. Republicans lost an additional governor's race, in Missouri, leaving only 21 Republican governors in the nation. Democrats gained an additional 98 seats in state legislatures,

bringing them close to a 3:2 advantage in this measure of party strength.¹ Democrats currently control all three legislative branches in seventeen states, while Republicans control all branches in eight states. The question of uniform legislative power is central to congressional redistricting, which will occur after the 2010 federal census and will be carried out by the state governments elected in 2010. If House seats were redrawn today, Democrats would draft maps in states that elect a total of 141 House members compared to only 83 seats for states under Republican control. The only bright spot for Republicans is their three-branch control in Texas and Florida, two populous states that expect to add House seats after census reapportionment. If the current trends hold for another election cycle, Democrats will be able to use redistricting to convert some closely contested wins into safe seats.

Ahead to 2010: Holding the House and a filibuster-proof Democratic Senate

The upcoming 2010 congressional elections, which will occur before reapportionment, present fewer opportunities for Democrats than have the past two election cycles. In 2006 and 2008, Democrats cleaned out vulnerable Republicans representing districts that voted for Democrats at the presidential level. In 2008, only two Republicans won by margins of less than five points in districts that gave Obama a presidential majority. Conversely, at least six Democratic 2008 winners narrowly overcame Republicans in districts that McCain won at the presidential level. After picking up 52 seats in consecutive cycles, Democrats can expect to lose some House members in the 2010 midterm elections which traditionally see gains for the party

¹ Tim Storey, "2008 State Legislative Elections," November 7, 2008. National Council of State Legislatures, <http://www.ncsl.org/print/legismgt/statevote/statevote2008.pdf> (accessed January 11, 2009).

opposed to the president. Yet while a net gain looks possible, Republicans will need much more than the six to ten vulnerable Democrats in McCain districts to win the 41 seats required to take over the House. Barring a major change in the national standing of the Democrats they can expect to hold their House majority in the next few election cycles.²

Unlike the House, the Senate provides Democrats more opportunities to grow their lead. After two consecutive drubbings in senatorial elections that cost Republicans a total of fifteen seats, 2010 offers the GOP no mercy. Republicans must defend six seats held in states that Obama won and an additional seat in Missouri that went to McCain by only 6,000 votes and that yielded a Democratic pickup in the governor's race. Sensing a rout, Republican incumbents in vulnerable districts are calling it quits. In 2008, five Republican incumbents retired rather than run for re-election. Democrats won three of those races. Already four Republican Senators have announced plans to retire. Of those four, two are in states that Barack Obama won (Ohio and Florida) and a third is in Missouri. Commenting on the retirements, Lamar Alexander, chair of the Senate Republican Conference said that, "We're losing three of our best players." Meanwhile speculation swirls around several aging Republican incumbents facing re-election in competitive states. In Pennsylvania, a state carried by Democrats in the past five presidential elections, cancer survivor Arlen Specter turns 80 in 2010 and will face stiff competition if he decides to run. Also considering retirement is Kentucky's 77-year-old Jim Bunning, whose erratic behavior in 2004 almost cost him re-election. Iowa's 75-year-old Chuck Grassley will likely win re-election if he decides to carry his senate

² Data on House elections from "Election Results 2008," New York Times, December 9, 2008, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/house/votes.html> (accessed January 14, 2009); "Presidential Results by Congressional District," *Swing State Project*, <http://www.swingstateproject.com/showDiary.do?diaryId=4161> (accessed January 14, 2009).

career into a fourth decade. If Grassley retires, Democrats look to add another senator from Iowa, a state that has trended their way since Bush won it in 2004. Among Republican incumbents committed to running, North Carolina's first-term Senator Richard Burr currently polls just three points ahead of one Democratic challenger for his re-election. On the other side of the ledger, Democrats are defending only two Senate seats in states that voted for John McCain. And in each, the incumbent will be running for their third term and is the odds-on favorite to win re-election. In an early lowering of expectations, John Cornyn, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, said that, "The reality is that 2010 was always going to be a very competitive environment for Republicans, regardless of the names on the ballot."³ While a fair amount of 2008 press coverage addressed Democratic chances of winning a 60-seat, filibuster-proof Senate majority, a goal they fell short of by one seat, Democrats will almost assuredly get to 60 and beyond in 2010.

A Referendum on Bush and an opportunity for a New Democratic Majority

The breadth of the 2008 Democratic victory, which came on the heels of an equally impressive showing in the 2006 congressional elections, ended the Bush era. From the 2008 results, the Democrats have a clear opportunity to build a new electoral majority. Down ticket Democrats performed as well or better than did Obama, and while his candidacy was historic, Obama's victory belonged to a Democratic Party wave that swept Republicans out of office from top to bottom. The popular vote total for House

³ Quotations in Chris Cillizza, "For Senate GOP, 2010 Losses on Top of 2008 Losses," *Washington Post*, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/12/AR2009011203010.html> (accessed January 13, 2009). For North Carolina poll see Research 2000 for DailyKos, January 5-7, 2009, <http://www.dailykos.com/storyonly/2009/1/12/12352/9419/160/682241> (January 12, 2009).

candidates matched that of Obama, for example, and the share of self-identified Democrats in the electorate stood at 41 percent on election day as compared to 34 percent for Republicans. The Democratic advantage in partisan affiliation rose from 1.6 percent in 2004 to 7.6 percent last November. On the eve of Obama's inauguration it stands at 8.7 percent. Coming out of the 2008 elections, Democrats clearly have momentum on their side.⁴

Judging by what voters told survey researchers, the Democratic wave drew its energy from popular dislike of Bush and his party's job in governing the country. Although Obama voters ranked the economy as their top issue, political scientist Larry Bartels points out that the same voters also strongly disapproved of Bush's performance as president. Displayed in Table 1, the overlap between dissatisfaction with the economy and dissatisfaction with the president suggests that 2008 was a referendum on Bush as much or more so than it was a response to who had the best plan for the future.

Table 1: Retrospective Voting in 2008 Exit Polls⁵

	National Conditions Poor (Obama Margin)	Economic Strongly Disapprove of Bush's Performance (Obama Margin)
U.S.	49% (66-31)	51% (82-16)
Florida	53% (66-33)	52% (82-16)
Indiana	43% (66-32)	43% (86-13)
North Carolina	49% (64-35)	47% (84-15)
Ohio	53% (68-30)	52% (83-16)
Pennsylvania	44% (72-27)	53% (86-13)

⁴ CNN Exit Polls 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#USP00p1> (accessed January 11, 2009); "Summary of Party Affiliation," *Rasmussen Reports*, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/party_affiliation/party_affiliation/summary_of_party_affiliation (accessed January 14, 2009).

⁵ Table in Larry Bartels, "Election Debriefing," *Center for the Study of Democratic Politics, Election 2008*, <http://blogs.princeton.edu/election2008/2008/11/election-debriefing.html> (accessed January 12, 2009).

Virginia

| 43% (67-33)

50% (84-15)

Viewing 2008 as a referendum on Republican government makes sense given the disastrous second term of the Bush presidency. Although Bush had already fallen from his halcyon 90 percent approval rating following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, he managed to win reelection with fifty-one percent of the vote in 2004. Two days after the election, Bush told reporters that “I earned capital in the campaign, political capital, and now I intend to spend it.”⁶ Early in 2005, Bush made his first political capital payment by opening Social Security to privatization. Unlike his first-term successes on taxes, Iraq, and prescription drug funding, Bush miscalculated the strength of opposition on Social Security, which proved too much for his efforts. In March Bush sought to rally his conservative pro-life supporters (many opposed his reform of retirement pensions) by intervening in the case of Terry Schiavo, a Florida woman who had been in a persistent vegetative state since 1990 and who was kept alive through medical machinery. However, the ensuing grandstanding backfired as it became clear that Bush had turned a private family matter into a media circus. The metaphorical levees of Republican popularity broke in August 2005 when Hurricane Katrina generated a water surge that broke through the New Orleans’ flood defenses and inundated the city. Bush’s approval rating down to 40 percent, the lowest to date of his presidency, in response to incompetent handling of the flood and revelations that the federal Corps of Engineers had been derelict in maintaining New Orleans’ flood barriers.

⁶ Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, “President Holds Press Conference,” November 4, 2004, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/11/20041104-5.html> (accessed September 30, 2008).

These debacles added onto public frustration with the ongoing conflict in Iraq, which had devolved into a sectarian civil war with U.S. troops caught in the middle.⁷

The 2006 midterm elections confirmed the opinion polls. Democrats converted thirty-one seats in the House and six in the Senate, gaining control of both. They also captured six governorships and took control of four additional state legislatures. Taken as a whole, Democrats won the popular vote for House seats 52 percent to 44. This anti-Bush sentiment continued through the 2008 elections.

Viewing recent Democratic victories as a consequence of Bush's problems offers some solace to Republicans because it absolves their 2008 campaign of responsibility for defeat. Typical of this outlook is Byron York's plaintive litany of structural obstacles to McCain's success. "Could any candidate have been elected to succeed a president of his own party whose job approval rating was 25 percent? Probably not. Could any candidate have been elected to continue his party's stay in the White House when roughly 90 percent of Americans believed the country was on the wrong track? Probably not. Could any candidate from the governing party have been elected after the Dow Jones Industrial Average plunged 4,000 points before one could even turn around? Probably not." If Democrats won because of the liabilities attached to Bush, then one can infer that next time around, with Bush gone and Democrats responsible for Washington's record, things will be different.⁸

⁷ "Summary of Party Affiliation," *Rasmussen Reports*, http://www.rasmussenreports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/party_affiliation/party_affiliation/summary_of_party_affiliation (accessed September 3, 2008).

⁸ Byron York, "What Sank McCain?" *National Review Online*, November 5, 2008, <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=Yzc5MGU4YzY3OWJIN2Q1ZTdkYzdmZDZjOWNmNzY3YjE=#more> (accessed January 12, 2009).

However, trends evident in the 2008 results suggest that Republicans will need more than Bush's departure to revive their fortunes. One measure of Democratic strength in 2008 is the comparison of that election with the party's showing in the preceding presidential election of 2004. Standing above trends within the overall numbers was an additional 10,428,458 votes and a gain of five percentage points for Obama over Kerry. This general partisan shift brought Democrats more votes from all sorts of electoral blocks. For a particular constituency to have performed decisively better for Obama than the nation at large they needed to have shifted more than five points from their 2004 Democratic vote. In this respect the five percentage points that Democrats gained over 2004 among evangelical Christians did not produce a significant change in their support even though younger evangelicals moved somewhat away from the Republicans. Similarly the gender gap between majority male support for Republicans and female support for Democrats persisted into 2008 but Obama's five-point increase over Kerry's support among women followed the general partisan shift from Republican red to Democratic blue.⁹

Beyond their general gains in 2008, Democrats registered higher rates of increases over 2004 among several groups that, if they remain steadfast to the Democrats, will give the party an enduring majority coalition. The key voting blocks that over-performed for Democrats in 2008 electoral strength are growing whereas the Republican base is shrinking. Within the general increase in the Democratic vote, the most notable successes were among youth, working women, and nonwhites. Obama

⁹ Michael Paulson, "Articles of Faith," *The Boston Globe*, December 9, 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles_of_faith/2008/12/religion_and_th.html (accessed January 12, 2009); "How the Faithful Voted," *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, November 10, 2008, <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=367> (accessed January 14, 2009).

won 66 percent of the under 30 vote, a twelve-point improvement over Kerry. Not only do voters tend to lock in partisan preferences at an early age, but also the percentage of younger voters in the electorate has been steadily, albeit slowly, rising over time. Among working women Obama defeated McCain by a 21-point margin. That marked a dramatic increase above Kerry's 51-48 triumph over Bush among employed women.¹⁰

Obama won 66 percent of the Hispanic vote, a 13-percentage point improvement over Kerry. Obama also did well with African Americans who supported the first black nominee of a major party with a near unanimous 95 percent of their vote, up seven points from 2004. Furthermore, the minority share of the electorate is growing.¹¹ In 1968, when Richard Nixon defeated Hubert Humphrey and revived the Republican party's fortunes in national politics, whites made up more than 90 percent of the voters. By 2000, their share had fallen to 81 percent. This past year the white proportion of the electorate dropped to 74 percent.¹² Turnout among nonwhites will vary—for example, Hispanic turnout rose faster than black turnout between 2000 and 2004, but the rates reversed between 2004 and 2008—but the long-term trends that demographers predict will make the United States majority nonwhite by 2050 will only increase these predominantly these pro-Democratic groups' strength at the ballot box.

¹⁰ Ruy Texiera, "Digging into the 2008 Exit Polls," *Taking Note*, <http://takingnote.tcf.org/2008/11/digging-into-th.html> (accessed January 14, 2009); John B. Judis, "America the Liberal," *The New Republic*, November 5, 2008, <http://www.tnr.com/politics/story.html?id=c261828d-7387-4af8-9ee7-8b2922ea6df0&p=2>, (accessed January 12, 2009).

¹¹ "Inside Obama's Sweeping Victory," *Pew Research Center Publications*, November 5, 2008, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1023/exit-poll-analysis-2008> (accessed January 11, 2009); Norman Ornstein, "The GOP's Deep Hole," *The Los Angeles Times*, November 9, 2008, http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ornstein9-2008nov09_0_4539486.story (accessed January 11, 2009); Scott Keeter and Alec Tyson, "Young Voters in the 2008 Election," *Pew Research Center Publications*, November 12, 2008, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1031/young-voters-in-the-2008-election> (accessed January 11, 2009).

¹² Timothy Noah, "What We Didn't Overcome," *Slate*, November 10, 2008, <http://www.slate.com/id/2204251/#sb2204308> (accessed January 12, 2009); Stephen Ansolabehere and Charles Stewart III, "Amazing Race: How Post-Racial Was Obama's Victory?" *Boston Review* (January/February 2009), http://www.bostonreview.net/BR34.1/ansolabehere_stewart.php (accessed January 11, 2009).

Table 2: Leading elements of Obama vote¹³

<i>Voter Category</i>	<i>Percent Obama, 2008/share electorate</i>	<i>Percent Kerry, 2004/share electorate</i>	<i>Change 2004-08</i>
Age 18-29	66/18	54/17	12/1
Working Women	60/NA	51/16	9/NA
Hispanic	67/9	53/8	14/1
African-American	95/13	88/11	7/2
No religious affiliation	75/12	67/10	8/2
No high school education	63/4	50/4	13/0

The 2012 Presidential Elections: Democrats' Electoral College Head Start

Democrats will enter into the 2012 presidential campaign with several advantages. Obama's popularity may wane, but even comparatively unpopular incumbents, such as George W. Bush, have a built-in advantage when seeking re-election. They not only have the name recognition that goes with their office but also its powers which enables to them to keep their agenda before the media and the voters. Incumbents usually raise more money than challengers. Unless the term of the incumbent has been truly dreadful, voters need heavy persuasion from a challenger that the time is right to change leaders. In 2012 twenty-four years will have passed since the last incumbent, Bush's father, was defeated in a re-election campaign.

Added to the inherent advantage of incumbency, Democrats will start campaign with a base of 238 Electoral College votes from eighteen states that have voted for their

¹³ Voting Religiously, *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1022/exit-poll-analysis-religion> (accessed January 14, 2009); CNN Exit Poll 2008; CNN Exit Poll, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html> (accessed January 14, 2009).

party in the past five elections. These states encompass the Northeast, much of the Midwest, and the West Coast.

By the same measure—states won in every election since 1992—Republicans start with a much smaller base of 99 Electoral votes from thirteen states in the southeast and interior West plus Alaska. To this total Republicans can reasonably expect to carry four more southern states—Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Tennessee—that they won by double digits in 2008 and have trended Republican since 2000. That brings the GOP electoral base to 132. In 2008 Republican base states held up fairly well, although South Carolina and three of their interior West states either fell below ten percent victory margins or, in the case of Nebraska, yielded an Electoral College vote to Obama. For his re-election, Obama will need to add just 32 votes to his electoral total, while Republicans must scramble for 138.¹⁴

Party bases carry over into congressional power. In their respective bases, each dominates its congressional elections, although Democrats fare somewhat better than Republicans on this score. The larger size of the Democratic base means that their advantage yields more power. Unless Republicans can crack into the Democratic electoral foundation they will have many an unhappy November in the years to come.

¹⁴ The Democratic base states are California, Connecticut, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin. Republican base states are Alaska, Alabama, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, N. Dakota, Nebraska, Oklahoma, S. Dakota, S. Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming.

Democratic states totaled 248 Electoral College votes in 2008, but are expected to lose between 9 and 10 congressional seats in the upcoming census reapportionment. The Republican base states equaled 100 Electoral votes in 2008 and expect to gain six more by 2012. For estimates see Richard E. Cohen, "Up to 13 Seats Could be Reapportioned in 2010," *National Journal*, December 22, 2008, http://www.nationaljournal.com/njonline/no_20081222_1323.php (accessed January 13, 2009).

Table 3: Party electoral bases in 2008

Category	Democratic base states	Republican base states
Electoral votes in 2008	246	93
Total House seats	207	70
House seats held by base party	71%	63%
Total Senate seats	34	26
Senate seats held by base party	91%	85%

“In their presidential heyday of the 1970s and '80s, the GOP swept 40 or more states in four separate elections with three different presidential candidates . . . But, as is often said: That was then and this is now.”¹⁵ Rhodes Cook’s summation of the difference between 2008 and the peak years of Republican electoral success highlights the decline of GOP dominance in what had been a durable collection of states that consistently supported Republican presidential candidates and did so by margins so wide that most Democratic challengers avoided spending campaign time and money on them. The forty state Republican base had included most of the west, the South, and some key north central states like Ohio and Pennsylvania. Bill Clinton managed to pick the Republican electoral lock in 1992 with the help of third party challenger H. Ross Perot and he expanded on his success in 1996. When Republican returned to the White in 2000 they did so with the basic elements of the Nixon-Reagan era electoral base intact; that is, they enjoyed double-digit margins of victory in all of the South except Florida; all of the Interior West except Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico; beyond these regions they could always rely on Alaska and Indiana. This base gave the GOP a 181-vote head start on the road to the 270 Electoral College votes required

¹⁵ Rhodes Cook, “From Republican ‘Lock’ to Republican ‘Lockout,’” *Larry J. Sabato’s Crystal Ball ‘08*, <http://www.centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/article.php?id=FRC2008111301> (accessed January 14, 2009).

to win the presidency. Confident that they would hold this base, Bush's campaign team devoted its resources to a smaller number of battleground states that they contested with Democrats, who started from a somewhat stronger base of 199 Electoral College votes.

The 2008 elections have changed the predictive assumptions that will guide the next presidential campaign by ending the level playing field that helped George W. Bush squeak past Al Gore and John Kerry. Despite the reshaping of the Electoral College landscape, Republicans can take solace that the 2008 results were not abnormally different from prior swings between presidential elections. In addition, Republicans have reasonable hopes that they can win back four states (Ohio, Florida, Indiana, and North Carolina) worth a total of 73 electoral votes that tipped to Obama by less than five percentage points. On the other hand, the regional coalition that Republicans have relied on since the 1970s to win the White House shows signs of severe stress. The regional breakdown of the 2008 election returns point to some causes for the GOP's new straightened circumstances.

Where Did Obama Win? Race and the Regionalization of the Republican Party

At the state level, the difference between 2004 and 2008 was fairly uniform. That is, Democrats gained at the same rate across the entire country. Or, as one statistician puts it, "after accounting for the national swing in Obama's favor, most of the states were within 3% of where they were, compared to their relative positions in 2004."¹⁶ However, the national Democratic wave account of Obama's victory masks one

¹⁶ Andrew Gellman, "Election 2008: What Really Happened," *Red State Blue State*, <http://redbluerichpoor.com/blog/2008/11/election-2008-what-really-happened/> (accessed January 12, 2009).

important regional outlier to the general trend, the South. Consisting of the eleven states of the Civil War era Confederacy, the South had been “solid” in its support of Democrats from the rise of Jim Crow segregation and black disfranchisement in the late 1800s until their fall in the mid-1900s. The coming together of several historical patterns in the 1960s opened the South to two-party competition. The civil rights movement brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that dramatically increased the size of the black electorate and thereby created more votes for racial moderates running against segregationist reactionaries. Related to this change, the South underwent a rapid period of urbanization between 1930 and 1960 that made southern voters more receptive to the same kinds of political messages sent to city dwellers across the country. In effect, the 1960s made southern politics more like national politics, and thereby allowed the national system of competitive two-party politics to take hold in Dixie.¹⁷

However, despite the changes wrought by civil rights and city growth, the South’s politics remained more racially polarized than the rest of the country, and the Republican party in the South has become the preferred choice of whites while Democrats win the lion’s share of the black vote. These trends reflect the stronger racism of whites living in the South as compared to those in the rest of the nation.¹⁸ Republicans have increasingly identified with southern white racial mores through issues like displaying the Confederate flag and opposing affirmative action. Instead of

¹⁷ Matthew D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Byron E. Shafer and Richard Johnston, *The End of Southern Exceptionalism: Class, Race and Partisan Change in the Postwar South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 191; Earl Black and Merle Black, *The Rise of Southern Republicans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 391-393; Randy Sanders, *Mighty Peculiar Elections: The New South Campaigns of 1970 and the Changing Politics of Race* (2002. Reprint. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007).

¹⁸ Thomas F. Schaller, *Whistling Past Dixie: How Democrats Can Win Without the South* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006), 82; Lawrence Hamilton, “Rural Voting in the 2004 Election,” *Carsey Institute Fact Sheet No. 2* (Durham, New Hampshire: University of New Hampshire, Fall 2006).

lessening, the link between race and the southern Republican vote has intensified over time.¹⁹ Racial politics play out differently in the South than in the rest of the United States because southerners tend to vote according to racial attitudes more than do non-southerners.

One theory about the Obama victory holds that he managed to achieve positive racial polarization among nonwhites (Obama convinced them to vote for him because of race) without alienating whites.²⁰ This interpretation overlooks the longer trend of racial voting which shows that 2008 conformed to historical patterns. In every election since 1968, Republicans have won the white vote and Democrats have secured the black vote. In 2008, Obama did better with whites than Kerry, but as noted above, Obama outperformed Kerry in almost every category. More telling than the general Democratic gains between 2004 and 2008 was the geographic distribution of those gains. As Table 3 shows, Obama's white vote improvement over Kerry was weakest in the South.²¹

Table 4: White Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates, 2004-2008

Region	Kerry white vote, 2004	Obama white vote, 2008	Increase 2004-08
Northeast	50%	52%	2
Midwest	43%	47%	4
South	29%	30%	1
West	45%	49%	4

Obama's share of the total vote declined in only four states, three of them in South and the fourth, West Virginia, on the edge of the South. White southerners proved more

¹⁹ Nicholas A. Valentino and David O. Sears, "Old Times There Are Not Forgotten: Race and Partisan Realignment in the Contemporary South," *American Journal of Political Science* 49:3 (July 2005), 672-688, 684 (quotation).

²⁰ Marc Ambinder, "Race Over?" *The Atlantic* (January/February 2009), <http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200901/obama-race> (accessed January 13, 2009).

²¹ Andrew Gellman, "Just When I Thought I Was Out . . . They Pull Me Back In," *Statistical Modeling, Causal Inference, and Social Science*, http://www.stat.columbia.edu/~cook/movabletype/archives/2008/11/just_when_i_tho.html (accessed January 12, 2009).

resistant to the Democratic wave than did non-southern whites, and in a few southern states, white actually increased their allegiance to the Republicans.²²

Obama nonetheless managed to win three southern states—Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida—that had eluded Kerry in 2004 and Gore in 2000. In fact, Obama was the first Democrat to win Virginia since 1964 and the first to carry North Carolina since 1976. These states indicate how Democrats can win in the face of southern racialized voting that gives Republicans the region's white majority and Democrats its black minority.

Obama performed better with whites in these states than in the rest of the South, although he still lost out to McCain by margins of 10 percent or more. In Florida, Hispanics comprised 14 percent of the electorate and they backed Obama by nearly 2:1, a significant improvement over Kerry's losing share of their vote in 2004. In Virginia and North Carolina, Obama's improvement over Kerry's showing among whites rose dramatically above the norm, by 7 and 8 points respectively. In each state, Obama beat McCain in the rapidly growing metropolitan counties that contain the most non-southern whites and are the least similar to the heavily pro-Republican rural South. Building on victories in the 2005 governor's race and the 2006 senate campaign, Democrats carried the Washington D.C. suburbs of northern Virginia by margins wide enough to offset Republican support in rural counties.²³ Democratic chances for maintaining their hold on Virginia look good because their base in the northern suburbs is growing much faster than the Republican counties in south and western reaches of the state. Obama won

²² Alexandre Mas and Enrico Moretti, "Racial Bias in the 2008 Presidential Election," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Economic Association, January 5, 2009, San Francisco, <http://www.aeaweb.org/assa/2009/retrieve.php?pdfid=425> (accessed January 13, 2009). Quotations on pp. 2, 5.

²³ Charles Mahtesian, "Obama Gains in Fast-Growing Counties," *The Politico*, November 9, 2008, <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/1108/15456.html> (accessed January 11, 2009).

Virginia by a greater margin than North Carolina in part because Virginia had a somewhat higher nonwhite voter turnout and the South's third largest Hispanic voting population.

As in Virginia, Obama won the expanding urban counties of North Carolina. Critical to his victory was Wake County, one of the fastest growing counties in America and the home of Raleigh and Research Triangle high-tech industries. In North Carolina, Obama garnered a majority of the youngest cohort of white voters, something he failed to do elsewhere in the South. Obama's southern wins along with Democratic victories in state and congressional races disprove any impression of a Republicans lock on the South, but they also show that Democratic victories need to cut against the prevailing grain of racially polarized voting.

Georgia, where Obama registered his fourth best showing in the South, illustrates the limits and opportunities for Democrats in the region. Greater Atlanta is the ninth largest metropolitan area in the country and it accounted for 57 percent of all the votes cast in Georgia in 2008. Obama won metro Atlanta 52-48, but he lost Georgia 47-53 because McCain scored 59 percent of the non-Atlanta vote. Statewide Obama won a miniscule 23 percent of the white vote and a staggering 98 percent of the black vote, an example of the South's racially polarized voting. In metro Atlanta, Obama improved only slightly in the metro Atlanta white vote, taking 25 percent of it. However, within metro Atlanta's 28 counties the Democratic share of the white vote varied from this norm. In the six Atlanta area counties that Obama carried he garnered forty or more percent of the white vote. These counties stand out in two ways. First they included the two of Georgia's three most populous (Fulton and DeKalb). Second,

blacks comprised an average 34 percent of the pro-Obama metro county population, whereas the average for all 28 metro counties was 20 percent. In Fulton, Dekalb, and Clayton counties where blacks were near or above half of the population, a **majority** of whites voted for Obama. In the other three Obama metro counties black populations were just under one fifth, but the African-American population of these counties had more than doubled since 2000.

Not all of metro Atlanta followed this pattern. In mostly white suburban counties the statewide pattern of the white vote held. Similarly in racially balanced rural counties whites voted for McCain. Democrats did best in those parts of Georgia that looked like strong Democratic counties outside of the South. Places that are racially diverse and densely populated, and where whites are less likely to hail from the South.²⁴

The factors that made Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida tip to Obama are not sufficient to keep these states Democratic but they allowed Obama in a strongly Democratic year to pick off some vulnerable targets in the Republican heartland. On the other hand, Republicans won handily in Texas, the southern state with the largest Hispanic population; white youth generally voted for McCain; and McCain carried two states (Georgia and Texas) with large metropolitan areas. Obama's southern victories resemble those of Bill Clinton in 1992. Clinton managed to win four southern states, but only in his home of Arkansas did he win by more than five percentage points. Since the 1960s, both parties have been competitive in the South but the politics of racial

²⁴ James C. Cobb, "Did Obama Make the South Irrelevant?" *History News Network*, November 17, 2008, <http://hnn.us/articles/57077.html> (accessed January 13, 2009); Merle Black, "Southern Democrats Make a Comeback in the 2008 Election," *NCSL News*, December 12, 2008, <http://www.ncsl.org/programs/press/2008/pr121208Black.htm> (accessed January 13, 2009). Georgia population and voting data from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlanta-Sandy_Springs-Marietta,_GA_MSA and <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/president/georgia.html> (accessed January 13, 2009).

polarization are stronger there than elsewhere and for that reason Republicans, the choice of racially polarized southern white voters, retain an advantage over Democrats.

While the South remains favorable ground for the Republicans, the other half of its electoral foundation, the Interior West, is less secure. In the states between the Rocky Mountains and the Missouri River Obama outperformed his national gain over Kerry. As in the South, Obama picked up three states Bush won in 2004. But in these three pickups, Obama won by comfortable margins of seven points or higher. More significantly, Republicans did not benefit from racialized voting. Except for Colorado, McCain won the white vote, but he did so by a narrower margin than in the South and Obama's 4.3 point gain among white voters over 2004 came closer to his national five percentage point improvement. Significantly the states that Obama flipped were ones with high concentrations of nonwhite voters. Colorado, Nevada, and New Mexico ranked among the top four in Hispanic share of the vote (the exception being McCain's home state of Arizona), and in each Obama registered his highest gains over Kerry among Hispanics. Furthermore, while Obama won North Carolina by a mere 14,177 votes, he lost Montana by an even narrower margin of 11,096. After electing its second Democratic senator in 2006, Montana has turned from a bright red Republican bastion into a purple swing state. Not far behind are the Dakotas, which Obama lost by single digits, and Nebraska, which split its electoral vote for the first time in history.

Congressional races also manifested the comparative strength of Democrats in the Interior West versus the South. Although the South's congressional delegation is more than three times the size of the Interior West's, the former accounted for only three new Democratic House seats as compared to five from the latter. Moreover,

Democrats control 54 percent of the House seats in the Interior West, whereas they hold only 45 percent in the South. In 2008 the Republican retain their advantage in the South but lost their edge in the Interior West. They go forward as a party with a shrunken regional base that has to find a way to crack open the now formidable Democratic strongholds in cities, the coasts and the Midwest.

Culture War and the Future Balance of Party Power

Breaking into Democratic territory will be difficult for Republicans given the dynamics of the 2008 election, in which the McCain campaign had its best results with racially polarized white southerners. A staple of Republican campaigning in recent years has been “culture war” social issues that play, at their broadest, to voters who worry that modern society threatens traditional social relationships. Specific cultural issues have changed over time. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon opposed school busing and the Equal Rights Amendment while promising to get tough on crime. The next decade Ronald Reagan took on affirmative action, abortion rights, and school prayer.²⁵ Newt Gingrich and the new Republican congressional majority that won office in 1994 devised new cultural wedge issues such as flag burning and the sex life of President Clinton. In this decade Republicans have turned civil rights for gay Americans into an effective campaign theme. In 2008, ballot measures banning same-sex marriage won in three states including solidly Democratic California.

Assessing the effectiveness of cultural issues in the 2008 campaign is tricky. Beginning in August, the McCain campaign developed an attack on the Democratic

²⁵ Michael Schaller, *Right Turn: American Life in the Reagan-Bush Era, 1980-1992* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 31-34, 52.

nominee's character, a pattern familiar to observers of 2000 and 2004. Republican strategists focused on Obama's links to a variety of liberal bogeymen including Hollywood celebrities like Paris Hilton, 60s radicals such as William Ayers, and black power militants embodied by Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Obama's former pastor (despite post-election protestations to the contrary, in the final week of the campaign, Republicans ran ads highlighting Obama's relationship to Wright).²⁶ In addition, Republicans stretched Obama's record to claim that he promoted sex education for kindergarteners, called Palin a pig, and would have given a driver's license to 9/11 terrorist Mohammad Atta. By early October the McCain ad budget was devoted exclusively to negative attacks on Obama.²⁷ The campaign also created two new conservative culture-war icons: Alaska Governor Sarah Palin and Sam "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher, an Ohio small businessman who challenged Obama on his tax plan.

This is not say that Democrats ran a positive campaign, nor that Obama's near two-to-one funding edge allowed McCain control the airwaves. Democrats dished plenty of dirt on McCain/Palin and they relentlessly tied McCain to Bush and Bush to the problems of the country. Yet Democrats hammered away at economic issues, a winning hand in light of the financial collapse and early stages of recession, whereas Republicans resorted to culture war attacks in lieu of a compelling message on Bush and the economy. For future Republican campaigns, the relevant questions are

²⁶ "Pennsylvania Republicans Highlight Wright in Last Minute Ad," *CMW*, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/11/02/campaign.wrap/index.html> (accessed January 14, 2009).

²⁷ Joe Miller, "A License to Kill," *Newsweek*, October 28, 2008, <http://www.newsweek.com/id/166173> (accessed January 13, 2009). Greg Sergeant, "McCain Campaign's Ad Spending Now Nearly 100 Percent Devoted to Attack Ads," *TPM Election Central*, October 3, 2008, http://tpmelectioncentral.talkingpointsmemo.com/2008/10/mccain_campaigns_ad_spending_n.php (accessed January 13, 2009).

whether their culture war attack worked in 2008, and if it failed, what should they do with these issues going forward?

Gambling on a Conservative Pennsylvania

McCain's gamble on Pennsylvania displayed the problems with the Republican attack on Obama as a cultural liberal and economic socialist. Reasoning that Hillary Clinton's win in the Pennsylvania Democratic primary had weakened Obama's support, McCain spent heavily on ads in the state and visited it twelve times in the campaign's last fourteen days. In Pennsylvania McCain focused on turning out the party's base of rural supporters and adding to that white Clinton Democrats in industrial cities in the northeast and southwest. "McCain also hopes," asserted one report, "to keep Obama's margin of victory down in Philadelphia by carrying a handful of wards in white-ethnic neighborhoods where racial tensions have long influenced local politics." At Pennsylvania rallies, McCain and Palin emphasized their "Country First" message that implied Obama put his ambition ahead of America's interests. In one rural event that opened with country musician Alan Jackson's "Small Town Southern Man," McCain advanced the conservative theme of liberals as tax-happy enemies of economic growth. Obama, McCain said, "is more interested in controlling your piece of the pie than growing the pie."²⁸ In his rule-or-ruin gamble on Pennsylvania, McCain ran a Karl Rove-style red vs. blue campaign of cultural contrast.

²⁸ Scott Helman and Sasha Issenberg, "Obama on Defense in Pa. as McCain Senses an Opening," *Boston Globe*, October 29, 2008, http://www.boston.com/news/politics/2008/articles/2008/10/29/obama_on_defense_in_pa_as_mccain_senses_an_opening/ (accessed January 13, 2009). "McCain Returns to Western Pa.," *Politico*, http://www.oregonlive.com/us-politics/index.ssf/2008/10/mccain_returns_to_western_pa.html (accessed January 13, 2009).

The message could not move polls that correctly predicted a ten-point Obama victory, a significant improvement over Kerry's 2-point squeaker in 2004. McCain's three-pronged strategy—turn out the rural base, win over smaller industrial cities, and blunt Philadelphia minority turnout by mobilizing racially polarized whites—succeeded only in its bid for rural voters. McCain polled more than two thirds of the votes in counties with population densities fewer than 100 people per square mile. Even there, however, he under-performed Bush's showing in 2004. In the northeast's Lackawanna and Luzerne counties, homes of the aging industrial cities of Scranton and Wilkes-Barre, Obama improved over Kerry's totals, notwithstanding losing these same places to Clinton by 3:1 ratios in the April primary. Hopes for picking up racially polarized white voters disappeared on election-day when Obama improved six points on Kerry's share of the 2004 white vote.

But it was in suburban Philadelphia where Obama turned a close election into a comfortable victory. Obama won all of the counties surrounding Philadelphia, including Berkes and Chester, places teeming with wealthy white suburbanites who voted for Bush in 2004. The weakness of the culture war attack showed in Levittown an emblematic lower middle-class white suburb that helped elect Reagan in 1980. In 2008, Levittowners voted for Obama by a two-to-one margin. Their reasons centered on two issues: the economy and George W. Bush. According to one resident, "I don't want a clone of George Bush. With McCain, that's exactly what we'd get."²⁹ McCain's failure in

²⁹ Analysis based on vote results in *The Washington Post* at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/elections/2004/pa/prescounties/> and *The New York Times* at: <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/president/explorer.html> and exit polls at <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/results/states/exitpolls/pennsylvania.html>. Accessed January 13, 2009; Michael Sokolove, "The Transformation of Levittown," *New York Times*, November 8, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/09/weekinreview/09sokolove.html> (accessed January 12, 2009).

Levittown exemplified the larger weakness of McCain's message in suburbia and the futility of his bet on Pennsylvania as a place where Republicans could break into the Democratic base.

The New Moderates and the Democratic Advantage

In Pennsylvania, independents, a group more common in the moderate suburban swing districts, preferred Obama by a 3:2 margin. That pattern reflected the national trend wherein Democrats garnered 60 percent of ballots cast by self-identified moderates. However much the cultural conservative theme bolstered McCain's popularity with Republican partisans it did little to blunt Obama's momentum among liberal and moderate voters, and very likely drove away some late deciding independents. Polling near election-day found that only 6 percent of Americans ranked cultural issues like abortion, guns, and gay marriage as the most important to deciding their vote, whereas the economy, a topic that baffled Palin in her notorious interview with Katie Couric, ranked first for 44 percent of those surveyed.³⁰

Considered by place rather than demography, Democrats won the critical swing voters in the suburbs, which now hold the majority of the American electorate. The days are long gone when Democrats could rely on urban votes to carry them to the White House. Urban voters' share of the electorate peaked in 1948 and has been falling ever since.³¹ Meanwhile the suburban portion of the vote has risen steadily and now comprises over half of the total in presidential elections and is the majority in more than

³⁰ Peter Beinart, "Last of the Culture Warriors," *Washington Post*, November 3, 2008, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/02/AR2008110201718.html> (accessed January 12, 2009).

³¹ Richard Sauerzopf and Todd Swanstrom, "The Urban Electorate in Presidential Elections, 1920-1996," *Urban Affairs Review*, 35:1 (September, 1999), pp. 72-91, 76.

half of all congressional districts.³² In recent elections, the presidency has gone to the candidate who carried the suburban vote. Between 1980 and 1988 Republicans won suburbia by margins ranging from 55 to 61 percent. In 1992 and 1996, Democrat Bill Clinton carried the suburbs by narrower margins. In the deadlocked 2000 election, popular vote winner Al Gore edged out Bush 51-49 in the suburbs.³³ In 2004, Bush won suburbia by five points. Conversely, in the 2006 congressional elections, which saw Republicans lose the House and Senate, Democrats garnered a majority of the suburban vote.³⁴ In 2008, Obama not only won the suburbs (albeit by only two points), he closed the gap with Republicans in the exurbs, the fast-growing developments on the urban fringe that voted 2-to-1 for Bush in 2004. Obama gains over Kerry in the fastest growing counties outpaced his average five-point improvement over the 2004 party showing. Especially critical were Obama's victories in two of the nation's fastest growing counties, Wake in North Carolina and Clark County, Nevada, home of Las Vegas. With the growth suburbs shifting towards their column, Democrats have a more secure claim on the places that will add population in future elections.³⁵

Accompanying Republican losses among rank-and-file suburban voters was the defection of prominent Republican moderates and some conservatives who had broken

³² Gregory L. Giroux, "A Line in the Suburban Sand," *CQ Weekly* 63:26 (June 27, 2005); Myron Ornfield, *American Metropolitcs: The New Suburban Reality* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 2002), p. 28.

³³ Juliet F. Gainsborough, "Voters In Context: Cities, Suburbs, and Presidential Vote," *American Politics Research* 33:3 (May 2005), 435-461, 442; Charles E. Cooke, Jr., "How Does 2000 Stack Up?" *The Washington Quarterly* 24:2 (Spring, 2001), 213-220, 215; Seth McKee, "Rural Voters and the Polarization of American Presidential Elections," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 41:1 (2008), pp. 101-108, 101.

³⁴ Gainsborough, "Voters In Context," 442; CNN, U.S. President National Exit Poll, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/US/P/00/epolls.0.html> (accessed September 30, 2008); Eyal Press, "The New Suburban Poverty," *The Nation*, April 13, 2007, <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20070423/press> (accessed September 30, 2008).

³⁵ "Voter Shift," *The New York Times*, November 11, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/11/us/politics/11south.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin (accessed January 14, 2009); Mahtesian, "Obama Gains in Fast-Growing Counties."

with Bush. The list included former Secretary of State Colin Powell, three ex-senators, William F. Buckley's son Christopher, Bush neoconservative advisor Ken Adelman, and a slew of retired generals and admirals. These defections at the top undermine a crucial prop of Republican's appeal to independents; i.e. no matter what hard-right activists do, centrists have a role in the party leadership.

In the immediate aftermath of the election, Republicans are debating whether to stick to their conservative guns or reconfigure the party's message to win back moderates. Judging by Senate minority leader Mitch McConnell's opposition to the Democratic economic plan and by the competition among ideological conservatives to head the Republican National Committee, a move to the middle will not have the party's full support. Conversely, the electorate appears decidedly unreceptive to another culture war campaign, and demographic trends cut against any path to the White House that relies on racial polarization.

It is a distortion of political history to call the forty years between 1968 and 2008 an era of Republican domination. Democrats held the House of Representatives for 28 of those years, the Senate for twenty-two, and the presidency for twelve. The term "divided government" better captures the oscillation of party fortunes after Barry Goldwater, Nixon, and Reagan brought conservatives to power in the Republican party. Similarly, elections after Obama and 2008 will swing back and forth between the parties. Yet while Republicans have no cause to write their own obituaries, they face a daunting period in which the default preferences of the electorate favor Democrats. American voters are not the caricature of liberalism that Wurzelbacher and Palin demonized on the campaign trail, but things that the "moderate" plurality of the electorate wants from

government now include “creating new jobs with major new government spending on the nation’s infrastructure,” preferred by 78 percent of respondents in a Gallup poll conducted on January 6-7, 2009, and forcing Israel to the peace table in Gaza, the choice of a plurality of moderates in the same poll. A Republican administration could certainly meet these demands, but with the memory of Bush’s opposition to such policies lingering in their minds moderates will look carefully at the new Republican messengers before they revert to the party they so decisively rejected on November 4, 2008.