Charlie Cook

A Considered Postmortem on 2012

The November 2012 election results revealed and underscored greater changes in American political dynamics than many of us had anticipated. Republicans, who had won the popular vote in four out of the five presidential elections from 1968–1988, have now lost five out of the last six, with 2000 notably featuring a Democratic popular vote win but George W. Bush capturing the Electoral College. Republicans last won 300 or more electoral votes in 1988; Democrats have now exceeded 300 in four of the last six elections, from 1992–2012. Keeping in mind that 270 electoral votes are needed to win, Democrats have now carried 18 states plus the District of Columbia in six consecutive elections, a combination totaling 242 electoral votes—89 percent of the 270 needed to win an election. One can now say that Democrats have a home field advantage in presidential races.

The challenge facing the Republican Party isn't limited to presidential elections. Republicans had seemed close to recapturing a Senate majority in both 2010 and in 2012, but came up shorter than expected in the former and actually scored a net loss of two seats in the latter. While the six seat gain Republicans made in 2010 was large by traditional standards, Republicans lost five of the seven races that *The Cook Political Report* rated as "Toss-Up" going into Election Day, drawing them up to 47 seats, four short of a majority. 2012 was a year when a GOP majority seemed quite feasible; but in the end, Republicans lost eight of the ten Election Day "toss-ups" and suffered a net loss of two seats. Losing 13 out of 17 "toss-up" races in two consecutive cycles is hardly a random pattern—the close Senate races are now breaking away from Republicans.

Even in the U.S. House, where Republicans managed to retain their majority, the GOP lost eight seats, one-third of their margin; they also lost the national

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popular vote for the House. The Republican Party was able to retain their House majority because of favorable congressional district lines drawn by state legislators and governors, many of whom were elected or re-elected in 2010 in what was considered a wave election for Republicans (when one party has minimal losses while the other loses at least 20 seats in the House). Interestingly, Republican gubernatorial candidates, who identify less with the national party and fight on a different set of issues, have done quite well in both elections.

The House is pretty much sorted out with Democrats now holding the preponderance of Democratic-tilting districts, just as Republicans now hold the overwhelming majority of Republican-leaning districts. Of the 201 congressional districts held by Democrats, Obama won 192, or 96 percent. Republicans now hold 234 districts; Romney won 219 of those, or 94 percent. With only nine Democrats occupying Romney districts and fifteen Republicans in Obama districts, there is very little natural elasticity in the House and little likelihood of significant changes in seats until after the 2021 remapping, to be based on the 2020 Census.

In the carefully drawn enclaves of the House, the Republican Party is still doing fine—but in terms of federal races, above the congressional district level, the news is all bad.

Blame the Candidate, the Campaign, or the Party?

Much of what happened to Republicans in 2012 cannot be blamed solely on Mitt Romney, his campaign, or larger problems involving the Republican Party's image, brand, or their recent course of action. Competitive presidential elections and broader national elections usually don't turn on one single issue, event, or situation. They tend to have many moving parts; things are rarely as simple and straightforward as partisan bloggers and cable news pundits portray.

While it's true that President Ronald Reagan's well-earned reputation for being the most skillful Republican candidate of the last century was in little danger of a challenge from Mitt Romney, the former Massachusetts Governor's extraordinary performance in the first presidential general election debate and quite competent performances in the two subsequent ones proved that he was not without talent. We have had quite a few presidents in the last half-century who were "charismatically challenged," though it didn't help that he lacked sizzle.

The contest for the Republican nomination went on far longer than many expected, forcing Romney—who in campaigns for the U.S. Senate and for governor had forged the image of a moderate—to reposition himself farther to the right than he probably wanted or anticipated. Romney's opposition to the bailout of several automobile companies clearly hurt him in auto- and auto-parts-producing areas in Ohio and elsewhere. His position during the primaries on immigration, including his remark about "self-deportation," inflamed Latino voters and may have even hurt him with other minority voters. But last year's election results were far bigger than that.

Role of the Economy

A year before the election, the state of the U.S. economy was dire. President Obama's re-election prospects looked pretty dicey; indeed, one could argue that Obama had a 300-pound millstone around his neck as the race began. Obama ended up with 43 months of unemployment at eight percent or higher—more than the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, and both Bush administrations combined. While no one could blame Obama for the economic onslaught that began before he was even elected President, there is a degree of ownership of the economy that comes over four years. Not many people would have guessed that Obama would go on to see re-election by almost four percentage points (3.85 percent), a margin wider than five other presidential victors since the end of World War II.

Modest improvements in the economy in the last few months before Election Day may have lessened the weight of that economic millstone a bit. The housing sector turnaround, improvement in home prices in the three months leading into the election, along with the stock market's upturn in September and October meant that the value of American's homes, retirement funds, and stock portfolio's had finally improved some. The unemployment rate in September and October 2012 dropped below eight percent, still awful but a move in the right direction (remaining below eight percent in November and December). These factors caused the most watched consumer-confidence ratings to climb appreciably in the period leading up to the election, one to almost a five year high, and the other to its highest in five months. Americans were somewhat less pessimistic about the state of the economy and the direction of the country than they had been, but were hardly sanguine about either. But this modest improvement in the economy cannot by itself explain how a president in dire straits the year before managed to get re-elected by almost four percentage points.

Allowing the Obama Campaign to Define Romney

This election was determined not by the economy or candidate performance so much as by the campaigns waged on behalf of Romney and Obama. The Romney campaign's decision to allow the Obama campaign to effectively define

the Republican challenger over last summer amounted to the seminal event in the campaign.

In April, when former Sen. Rick Santorum formally suspended his campaign, Romney effectively won the Republican nomination. Focus groups conducted at the time indicated that Romney was largely a blank slate in the minds of swing voters; some were truly undecided while others leaned in favor of one candidate but were still malleable. Many of these swing voters identified themselves either as independents, not aligned with either the Democrats or Republicans, or as moderates, not considering themselves either liberal or conservative. They were voters seeking balance.

Remember, swing voters tend to follow current events and politics less than many other voters. They are less inclined to read newspapers and watch television news; they usually avoid cable political shows on CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC. They tend to not like any politicians or either party. In focus groups, participants usually knew that Romney was a rich and successful businessman; some would even allow that he probably understood the economy pretty well. But in the spring of 2012, knowledge about him extended very little beyond that.

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Most importantly, these swing voters had no opinion on whether Romney was an honest person, had the character they wanted to see in a president, had a family, had done anything for anyone else, or whether he understood or cared about them. He was very much an aloof, one-dimensional character.

In the minds of Romney strategists, the election would simply represent a referendum on Obama, on the economy, and specifically on Obama's handling of the economy. In the words of one of his top advisors during the summer of 2012, "any day or dollar we spend on anything other than on Obama and the economy is a day or dollar wasted."

Seeing that Romney was undefined in the minds of swing voters, particularly those in the key battleground states that would eventually decide the election, in early summer the Obama campaign sought to define their challenger themselves. By moving up to June almost $60 million in advertising originally planned for the fall, the Obama campaign and Priorities USA (the pro-Obama "super PAC") began attacking Romney relentlessly. They focused on outsourcing, layoffs, plant closings, and employee benefit cuts at companies owned or acquired during Romney's tenure as head of Bain Capital. They also targeted his income taxes and accounts as well as holdings in Bermuda, Switzerland, and the Cayman

Islands. According to figures compiled by Kantar Media's CMAG unit, 55,699 anti-Bain Capital television ads aired (starting with 908 in April; 4,754 in May; 6,743 in June; 41,219 in July; and 2,075 in August). Romney's favorable/unfavorable numbers soon became "upside-down" or "underwater" in pollster parlance, meaning he had higher unfavorable than favorable ratings, a situation that makes winning an election very difficult.

While some choose to say that Romney's "failure to respond" to the Bain attacks cost him the election, more damaging was the failure of his campaign to define him *before* the attacks began, to inoculate him or to apply a Teflon coating that would protect him from the inevitable attacks that proved fatal. Because of that lack of previous definition, that protective coating or inoculation, the 55,699 ads took their toll on Romney and were never effectively reversed.

The standard practice of campaigns is to run both biographical ads (telling the candidate's life story) and testimonial ads (people who know him waxing on about his admirable traits). Indeed there is much to like and admire about Romney but this story went largely untold, or at least unheard by swing voters. The decision by the Romney campaign to air a very effective 11-minute biographical film during the Republican National Convention—when it would get little television coverage—is an example of this failure.

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Whether one personally likes President Obama or not, or approves of his policies, it's hard not to admit that his campaign was superior on virtually every level to the Romney campaign. The Obama campaign was consistently one step ahead, both strategically and tactically. Further, they took full advantage of his four years in office to prepare for the general election; they built a grassroots organization and developed a superior technological edge over Romney. The rough parity in terms of campaign sophistication that existed in the 2004 George W. Bush–John Kerry election shifted due to Republican atrophy, yielding a significant Democratic advantage in 2012. Taking together the strategic mistakes by the Romney campaign and the skill of the Obama campaign, the President gained a critical edge and won a race that he easily could have lost.

Demographic and Ideological Challenges Facing the GOP

The scope of the threat to Republican election chances goes much deeper. Demographic and ideological challenges, like in race, gender, age, and ideology, combine to present the GOP with monumental challenges.

In terms of ethnicity, the white share of the vote in presidential elections has dropped 15 points over the last six elections, from 87 percent in 1992 to 72 percent in 2012. This trend has little to do with Barack Obama's candidacy because the declines from one presidential election to the next have been consistent: a four-point drop from 1992 to 1996, two more points in 2000, four additional points in 2004, three points in 2008, and two points last year.

At the same time, the Republican presidential and GOP congressional share of the minority vote is turning grisly. Among the 13 percent of 2012 voters who are black, Obama won by 87 points (93 to 6 percent), and congressional Democrats won by 83 points (91 to 13 percent). Latinos made up ten percent of last year's electorate and gave the President a 44-point edge (71 to 27 percent), while congressional Democrats had a 38-point advantage (68 to 30 percent). The Asian vote, three percent of the electorate and now the fastest growing ethnic group, sided with Obama by 47 points (73 to 26 percent), and congressional Democrats won by a one point wider margin (73 to 25 percent).

According to a November 14, 2012, report by the Pew Research Hispanic Center, 40 percent of the population growth of citizens of voting age will be Hispanic, 21 percent will be black, and 15 percent Asian. Only 23 percent of that growth among those eligible to vote will be white. Indeed, 50,000 Latinos will turn 18 years of age each month for the next 20 years. The Census Bureau reported last year that 50.4 percent of all births in this country, in the 12 months ending July 1 of 2011, were minorities; 49.5 percent were among non-Hispanic whites.

This is simply math. As long as the GOP drives minority voters away, it is inevitable that they will no longer be a nationally-competitive party. Sure, congressional district boundaries, as currently drawn, will most likely keep the GOP in the majority in the House for the duration of this decade and until the 2022 election, the first after the next census. But Republicans had better pray that the 2020 gubernatorial and state legislative elections go their way and they can get another favorable remapping, otherwise their situation in the House could change a lot as well.

But this isn't just a question of race and ethnicity. Consider gender politics. You could once say that there was a half-empty, half-full aspect to the political gender gap: Yes, Republicans had a problem with women voters, but Democrats also had a problem with male voters, making the problem seemingly symmetrical.

There is a catch here: there are more women voters than men and women live longer. For the last two presidential elections, 53 percent of the electorate was female. But worse for Republicans, the vote wasn't symmetrical. Romney and congressional Republicans won the male vote by seven and eight points,

respectively, while Obama and Democrats won the female vote by 11 points. That's a losing equation.

While Republicans (Romney and GOP congressional candidates) still do better among voters 45 and older, particularly those over 65, they are losing among voters in their thirties and losing badly among those under 30. Among the 19 percent of voters between the ages of 18 and 29, Obama won by 23 points (60 to 37 percent). In the next age group of 30- to 44-year-olds, constituting 27 percent of the electorate, Obama won by seven points (52 to 45 percent). The tide turns as you move up to 45- to 64-year-olds, who constitute 38 percent and the largest share of the electorate, with Romney winning by a meager four points (51 to 47 percent). Only among the 16 percent who are age 65 and older did Romney win decisively, by 12 points (56 to 44 percent). Voting patterns in congressional elections are very similar.

As someone who just turned 59 years old, I can make this next provocative statement: Democrats are doing better among voters who can be considered the future. Republicans are doing well among those who could be described as the pre-dead. As the voters whose political identities were strongly affected by both the success of Ronald Reagan's presidency and the less-than-successful tenure of Jimmy Carter's begin to lose their share of the electorate, and as those whose political identities formed during less auspicious times for the GOP continue to grow their own share of the electorate, the future looks troubling for the Republican Party. Simply put, Republicans have to learn to appeal to younger rising generations of voters—voters who see many issues, particularly social, cultural, and environmental issues, quite differently than the central tenets of the Republican Party. This is about substance as well as rhetoric: the language used by some Republican candidates effectively marginalizes the party as extremists in the minds of many young voters.

Holy Grail: Independents or Moderates?

After covering eight presidential and seven mid-term election campaigns, I still manage to learn new things or come to view things differently. For many years, I have fixated on independent voters as the political equivalent of the holy grail, but now believe voters who describe themselves as moderates are certainly just as important, perhaps more important than those who call themselves independents.

It's not hard to figure out why so many of us obsessed over independents for so long. In the five presidential elections from 1996 forward, the Democratic nominee has won between 85 and 92 percent of the vote of self-identified Democratic voters (averaging 88 percent), while Republicans have garnered between 81 and 93 percent of those who said they were Republicans (averaging

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90 percent). Both parties have been on the higher end of those scales in the last three elections. With the decisions of so many voters seemingly cast in stone, independents seemed to represent the biggest variable. Until last year, the winner of the independent vote won the election in six of eight elections since 1976. (President Gerald Ford in 1976 and Senator John Kerry in 2004 both won bare majorities of the independent voters, by 52 to 48 percent and 50 to 48 percent, respectively.) A candidate could win the presidency while still losing the independent vote by a point or two, but wider margins made it very hard to win.

But last year, Mitt Romney won the independent vote by five percentage points (50 to 45 percent), yet lost the election by almost four percentage points. For many avid election-watchers, if all we knew was that Romney would carry the independent vote by five points, many of us would have bet on Obama losing the election. Congressional Republicans carried the independent vote nationally by an even wider seven points, 51 to 44 percent, yet lost, albeit narrowly, the popular vote for the House. One explanation is that within the group of voters now identifying themselves as independents, there are quite a few Tea Party adherents, people who are very conservative, and used to call themselves Republicans but are now independents, despite the fact that they usually still vote Republican.

But in a much larger sense, what has happened is that the gap between the share of voters who identify themselves as Democrats compared to those who consider themselves Republicans has grown so wide that, for the GOP, winning a majority of the independent vote nationally is necessary but no longer sufficient to winning a national popular vote. In this most recent election, 38 percent of voters called themselves Democrats and just 32 percent called themselves Republicans. In 2008, it was Democrats with 39 percent and Republicans with 32 percent. Over the last five elections, only one year, 2004, saw party identification evenly matched at 37 percent. In the other four elections, the Democrats had an advantage of four points in 2000 (when Al Gore won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College), five points in 1996, six points in 2012, and seven points in 2008. This is certainly one reason why Republicans have lost the popular vote in five of the last six elections; generally there are more Democrats than Republicans. When the gap gets really wide, independents can't make the difference.

Taking a look at how voters describe themselves in ideological terms, in those last five elections, Democrats have won between 81 and 89 percent of the vote of self-described liberals (averaging 86 percent), while Republicans have won

between 72 and 84 percent of those who called themselves conservatives (averaging 80 percent).

Why do Republicans tend to stick together a bit more than Democrats do? Why do liberals tend to vote a little more for Democrats than conservatives do for Republicans? This is anyone's guess; some speculate that there are some African-American and Latino voters, particularly the most religious in those groups, who consider themselves conservative and yet pretty reliably vote Democrat.

So if Democrats can reliably count on winning the lion's share of the votes of Democrats and liberals while Republicans can be equally assured of the support of Republicans and conservatives, the question that arises is whether it's independents or moderates that are decisive.

Last year, while Romney won among the 29 percent of voters who identify themselves as independents by five points (50 to 45 percent), he lost by 15 points among the much larger 41 percent who self-describe as moderates (56 to 45 percent). Though congressional Republicans carried the independent vote by seven points, they lost the moderate vote by 16 points. While conservatives certainly have bragging rights over liberals in terms of self-identification, a ten-point edge, the fact that Republicans do so badly among the largest group, moderates, is more important.

Just as black is said to be the absence of color (actually the absence of light, therefore the absence of color), moderate is more the absence of ideology. Without any overriding ideology, these voters are very pragmatic, and view each issue on a case-by-case basis and prefer balance to rigid dogma. These voters become uncomfortable when the rhetoric gets too ideological or overheated.

The point of all of this is not to be dismissive of the importance of independent voters while obsessing over moderates, but that both of those groups matter and either party that ignores either one does so at their own peril.

As we come out of the year-end fiscal cliff crisis, but endure equally challenging fights over the next three months, public opinion is more likely to be won by whichever party seems to offer the message of balance which appeals to these moderate voters, people who are obviously neither liberal nor conservative ideologues, and more pragmatic than dogmatic.

Conclusion

For now, a majority of House Republicans receive protection from the friendly enclaves afforded them by those who drew the congressional districts. Republican gubernatorial and other statewide, state-level offices have some insulation since non-federal races tend to be fought on slightly less ideologically-

driven issues, and they are less impacted by statements and actions coming from Washington. But for Republicans whose federal aspirations are greater than simply wanting to hold a majority of the House, particularly those who hope to have more than just a third of the governing responsibility, their party needs to stop digging holes and start filling some in.