

# The 2012 Presidential Election: Taking the “Fun” Out of Fundamentals?

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Is President Obama's reelection a harbinger of a new electoral era, one in which cultural identity issues trump the traditional economic “fundamentals” such as the unemployment rate or growth in GDP on which most political science forecast models are based? That seems to be the dominant media interpretation of the 2012 presidential contest, as reflected in many journalists' election postmortems (Dickerson 2012; Kranish 2012; Wilson and Rucker, 2012). In their telling, Obama narrowly won a second presidential term despite an historically weak economy that in most previous elections would have doomed the incumbent president. Obama escaped this fate, however, largely because voters did not find Republican Mitt Romney's personal qualities very appealing, in no small part because Obama's early advertising blitz helped define Romney as a plutocrat out of touch with the average American. Many voters also ignored economic concerns to vote based on racial and cultural lines. That combination of “personalized, identity-based brand of politics ... trumped traditional economic metrics,” allowing the president to overcome economic conditions that otherwise would have led to his electoral defeat (Galston 2012). No wonder some economic-based political science forecasts models in 2012 were wrong—often spectacularly so (Bickers and Berry 2012)!

Fortunately for the reputation of both political science forecast models and the American voter, the evidence supporting this media narrative is remarkably thin. In fact, the outcome of the 2012 presidential race turned on the same factors, particularly the economic fundamentals, that political scientists have always cited as the keys to winning the presidency. Candidate strategy, including the media campaign, mattered but primarily as a means for both candidates to frame the economic fundamentals in ways most favorable to them. Perceptions of candidate qualities likely had a much smaller influence on the outcome than most pundits realize. The bottom line is that 2012 showed once again that it is very difficult to defeat an incumbent president in a time of economic growth—even weak growth.

## THE 2012 ELECTION: SNATCHING DEFEAT FROM THE JAWS OF VICTORY?

Pundits embraced the notion that Obama was over-performing the economic fundamentals very early in the campaign narrative, as polls consistently gave Obama a slight edge over his Republican rivals despite tepid job growth numbers and low consumer confidence. In May, 2012, for example, the *New York Times*' columnist David Brooks wondered, “Why is Obama even close? If you look at the fundamentals, the president should be getting crushed right now” (Brooks 2012). Brooks' query was echoed many times during the next few months, particularly by

conservative pundits, as Obama maintained his lead in most polls through Election Day.

To explain Obama's lead and eventual victory, many pundits assumed that voters must have discounted the impact of economic factors in favor of other issues. As evidence they cited differences in voters' assessments of the candidates' personal qualities, such as empathy, likeability and leadership “style”. In a characteristic media assessment, the *Washington Post*'s Chris Cillizza and Aaron Blake argued, “Presidential elections are rarely won and lost on policy. Voters instead tend to choose the person they most want to be president based on who they like... Call it the empathy factor. And it matters. A lot” (Cillizza and Blake 2012). In this vein, Gallup polls indicated that Obama had “a clear advantage over Mitt Romney in terms of perceived likability... the characteristic Americans most associate with both candidates...” (Jones 2012). Other surveys showed Romney trailing Obama when asked who connects better with ordinary Americans, a fact driven home by election exit polls indicating that when asked “Who is more in touch with people like you?”, voters chose Obama over Romney, 53% to 43% (Pew Research Center 2012). The prevailing view conveyed in media accounts is that Romney was less likable than Obama, and that hurt his election chances. As one media blogger put it, “People simply find it hard to vote for a candidate they don't like—or that they don't like as much as the other guy. It takes something big to override that difference” (Chinni 2012).

The differences between the two candidates, however, went deeper than likability. Obama, pundits argued, had effectively framed the election in terms of cultural issues, such as abortion, gun control, and immigration that exploited existing cleavages in the electorate based on gender, race, and ethnicity (M. Adams 2012). In a similar vein, Obama's leadership “style” was designed to appeal to his electoral coalition of women, liberals, young people, and minorities; as Brooks explained, the president had adopted “a kind of ESPN masculinity: postfeminist in his values, but also thoroughly traditional in style—hypercompetitive, restrained, not given to self-doubt, rarely self-indulgent” that helped keep his electoral prospects afloat despite the dismal economy (Brooks 2012).

Pundits did not credit Obama's victory solely to style points. They also blamed Romney for running a lackluster campaign. In a searing but not atypical election postmortem, *Boston Globe* writer Michael Kranish cited key organizational and strategic errors that cost Romney the election: “His campaign made a series of costly financial, strategic, and political mistakes that, in retrospect, all but assured the candidate's defeat, given the revolutionary turnout tactics and tactical smarts of President Obama's operation” (Kranish 2012). Perhaps the biggest mistake

cited by Kranish and others was Romney's failure to aggressively counter the negative advertising by Obama and his campaign surrogates during the summer of 2012, particularly in swing states, designed to define Romney as someone who did not share ordinary Americans' values. One oft-cited example was the “brutally effective” series of ads run by the Priorities USA Super Pac in Ohio that depicted Romney “as a cold-hearted plutocrat, ruthless in his pursuit of profits and unaffected by the human toll of Bain's brand of buying and selling companies” (Kroll 2012). By portraying Romney as a heartless capitalist, pundits claimed, these ads eroded his support among independents, particularly blue-collar voters in the crucial Midwest swing states.

most political scientists projected that, while the election would be close, Obama was likely a slight favorite (Montgomery, Hollenbach and Ward 2012).

Of course, most of these models were not based solely on economic factors; many also included some measure of presidential approval, in addition to other factors such as time in office of the incumbent's party. Presumably, however, Obama's approval numbers reflected, at least in part, voters' perceptions regarding his culpability for economic conditions. The bottom line is that even the most charitable reading of the economy from Romney's perspective indicated that Obama was at worst running neck and neck with the challenger, and not that it was Romney's race to lose.

### *Does Obama's election point to a changing electoral dynamic, one in which traditional economic factors will play a smaller role? The short answer is no.*

Of course, journalists also cite Romney's highly publicized campaign “gaffes” as contributing factors to his loss. The most conspicuous, perhaps, was the infamous secret recording showing Romney condemning the 47% of voters who are “dependent on government,” but critics also cite his remarks favoring self-deportation by illegal immigrants, his failure to release individual tax returns, and his ill-timed criticism of Obama as sympathetic to anti-American interests in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Benghazi compound attack, to name the most prominent. As one postmortem summarized, “Obama, weighed down by a poor economy, also needed help—and he often got it from Romney” (Wilson and Rucker 2012). In short, the story of the 2012 presidential campaign, as gleaned from a survey of the major media outlets and opinion makers, is that Romney snatched defeat from the jaws of victory (S. Adams 2012). And his loss is evidence that future presidential races may be driven by an emerging dynamic that places less weight on the economic fundamentals central to most political science forecast models.

#### **WAS IT ROMNEY'S ELECTION TO LOSE?**

What is one to make of this prevailing media narrative? Does Obama's election point to a changing electoral dynamic, one in which traditional economic factors will play a smaller role? The short answer is no. There is no need to posit a different decision calculus to explain why voters returned Obama for a second term. Instead, as several forecast models indicated, the economic fundamentals were not nearly as unfavorable to Obama's chances as many pundits claimed. In September 2012, *PS: Political Science and Politics* posted 13 forecast models, eight of which predicted an Obama victory and which in the aggregate had the president winning 50.2% of the two-party vote (Campbell 2012). To be sure, the models differ regarding what specific economic measures matter to voters. Some forecasters point to income growth, others to changes in gross domestic product, and some use an index of economic indicators. The point is, however, that based on the economic fundamentals,

One should not conclude from this, however, that campaigns do not matter. They do. But there is little evidence to back journalists' claims that disparities in campaign strategy or tactics were the key to Obama's victory in 2012. Keep in mind that presidential candidates do not create campaign narratives out of whole cloth. Instead, they are constructed from the election fundamentals. For an incumbent president like Obama, this usually means running a campaign focused on the fundamentals most favorable to him, be it the economy or keeping the nation secure. The challenger, in contrast, usually must shift the campaign narrative away from the incumbent's preferred frame—a much more difficult task (Vavreck 2009). All evidence indicates that Obama hewed closely to this script in 2012 by repeatedly emphasizing the poor economic conditions he inherited and suggesting that the economy was on the mend. That strategy left little maneuvering room for Romney. Ultimately, rather than try to switch the campaign frame to a topic less favorable to Obama, Romney chose instead to stake his campaign on the argument that the economy was not improving quickly enough. In the end, slightly more voters bought Obama's frame. The key point is that the economy, and not a new form of “identity” politics based in part on candidate qualities, was the major election issue—just as the forecast models anticipated. Indeed, exit polls show that fully 74% of respondents cited the economy (59%) or the deficit (15%) as the major campaign issue (CNN 2012).

Did Obama's vaunted campaign organization make the difference by boosting turnout in key battleground states (Sinderbrand 2012)? There is evidence that Obama's campaign ran a more sophisticated voter outreach program that allowed it to micro-target persuadable voters in key swing states (Issenberg 2012). Obama also opened almost three times more field offices than Romney, including more offices in battleground states. However, it is not clear that the marginal effect of Obama's superior ground game was big enough to change the outcome of the race (Sides May 2013). Indeed, overall turnout in 2012 was down from 2008, by 3.4%, as was Obama's share of the vote, which dropped in that same period by 1.9% (McDonald 2012).

Moreover, in five of the eight key battleground states, the drop off in Obama's vote was greater than the decline in his overall national vote. In short, while it is possible that Obama's vote share would have declined even more without his advanced voter outreach effort, it is hard to prove that he won because his ground game outperformed Romney's.

A similar story can be told about the relative impact of the two campaigns' media strategies. A recurring media theme is that Obama was able to define Romney in key battleground states through an early advertising blitz that Romney failed to counter (Wilson and Rucker, 2012). It is true that Obama ran significantly more ads than Romney in all media markets from April through Election Day. However, that advantage diminishes considerably when one factors in advertising by outside groups on behalf of both candidates (Franz 2013). Moreover, most research indicates that the impact of media ads on viewers decays rather rapidly. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that early media buys by the Obama campaign in key swing states were nearly as instrumental in defining Romney as pundits suggested. Indeed, with the exception of a postconvention polling bounce, one is hard pressed to find much variation in Obama's polling support in the key battleground states throughout the campaign; for the most part, his numbers stayed relatively flat.<sup>1</sup> In this vein, the "devastating" secret "47%" video recording appears to have had minimal effect on Romney's polling support (Sides March 2013).

Finally, what about the difference in candidate qualities? As Fiorina (2012) points out, contrary to what pundits suggest, not much historical evidence indicates that differences in candidate "likability" have an impact on the presidential vote. In the 13 presidential elections from 1952 to 2000, Fiorina finds the candidate with the net advantage in personal ratings won only seven times. It is true that Romney was viewed less favorably than Obama by most voters, but it is hard to disentangle favorability ratings from voters' partisan leaning and their overall assessments of the fundamentals, including the state of the economy.

## CONCLUSION

Underlying the dominant media campaign narrative is the belief that voters can be easily swayed by media ads, candidate blandishments, and other campaign tactics, and that unexpected events, such as candidate gaffes, can weigh more heavily than election fundamentals in determining electoral outcomes (Kroll 2012). This media narrative is not particularly flattering in its portrayal of the electorate, but the horse-race perspective fits well with journalists' need to attract and maintain a daily audience. Fortunately, while entertaining, this perspective is not very accurate. The overwhelming evidence is that voters, while perhaps not deeply informed regarding candidates and issues, do cast their vote based on their understanding of fundamentals, such as the state of the economy, as viewed through their own partisan predispositions. Viewed collectively, then, voters are quite rational. That is good news for the future of political science forecast models—and, more importantly, for the future of the US political system.

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## NOTE

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