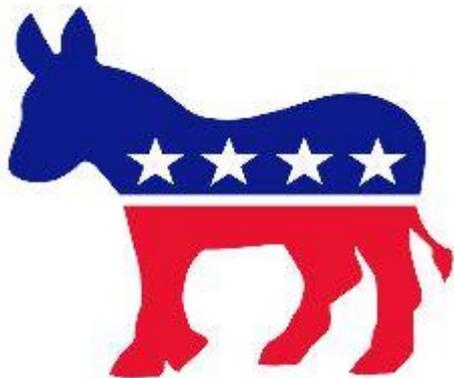

The Democrats under Obama and Beyond



Nicol C. Rae

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United States Program

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Ifri
27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE
Tel: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00
Fax: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60
Email: accueil@ifri.org

Ifri-Bruxelles
Rue Marie-Thérèse, 21
1000 – Brussels – BELGIUM
Tel: +32 (0)2 238 51 10
Fax: +32 (0)2 238 51 15
Email: info.bruxelles@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Ce qu'il faut retenir

Le professeur Nicol Rae décrit ici les évolutions récentes de l'électorat du Parti démocrate, notamment lors des élections de 2008 et 2010. Il étudie ensuite les différents scénarios pour l'après-2012 et identifie huit candidats possibles à l'investiture démocrate en 2016.

Depuis les années 1990, dans un contexte de polarisation croissante, l'électorat américain se porte pour 45 % vers les démocrates et pour 45 % vers les républicains – le choix des 10 % restants, modérés et indépendants, est décisif. Aujourd'hui, les électeurs démocrates sont pour l'essentiel les minorités ethniques, les jeunes, les syndiqués et l'ensemble des plus progressistes sur les questions de société (droits des homosexuels, contraception, etc.). Les démocrates ont en revanche perdu une bonne partie de la classe ouvrière blanche.

En 2008, grâce à une organisation de campagne très efficace, Barack Obama a réussi à attirer un certain nombre d'ouvriers blancs ainsi que la partie de la classe moyenne supérieure qui est à la fois conservatrice sur les plans économique et fiscal et progressiste sur le plan des valeurs. Mais cet assemblage ne pouvait garantir un soutien durable pour les démocrates au pouvoir. Les difficultés économiques ont vite pesé, laissant le centre droit et la gauche radicale déçus par le président. Les républicains ont gagné les élections de mi-mandat de 2010.

Comme souvent lors d'un second mandat, une victoire d'Obama en novembre mènerait à une présidence assez faible dans tous les domaines sauf la politique étrangère – et donnerait de meilleures chances au candidat républicain en 2016. À l'inverse, une victoire républicaine en 2012 avantagerait les démocrates en 2016.

La démarche idéale pour le Parti démocrate serait d'attirer de nouveaux types d'électeurs pour construire une coalition de centre gauche, fondée sur un interventionnisme modéré, une certaine justice économique et une politique étrangère multilatérale. Mais la stratégie du parti pour 2012 consiste à renforcer sa base existante, à attirer la classe ouvrière blanche grâce à une rhétorique « anti-riches » et les élites cultivées en soulevant des questions de société. Cette stratégie constitue un problème de fond pour le Parti démocrate, car elle ne pourra jamais produire une coalition pro-démocrate cohérente dans l'opinion.

Executive Summary

In this paper, FIU Prof. Nicol Rae describes the evolutions of the Democratic Party's electorate over the years, with a focus on the 2008 and 2010 elections. He then gives an appraisal of the different scenarios for 2012, and names 8 possible contenders for the 2016 Democratic nomination.

Since the 1990's, in the context of a growing polarization, the US electorate can be said to vote 45% Democrat and 45% Republican. Election results follow the choice of the 10% of independents or moderates in the middle. Nowadays, Democratic-voters are a coalition of minorities, the younger voters, Union members and cultural liberals. Over the years, Democrats have lost a significant part of the white working class to the Republicans.

In 2008, Obama's very efficient campaign organization managed to add to the 45% enough of the white working class and of suburban high-income educated voters. The latter may be conservative on economic and fiscal issues, but tend to be liberals in terms of society and moral choices (gay rights, reproductive rights, etc). But this "21st Century Democratic Coalition" was not a governing coalition. The economic difficulties soon destroyed it, leaving the far left and center right equally disappointed by the President. This led to a Republican victory in the 2010 Midterms.

As is usual for "second termers", an Obama victory in November would lead to a weak presidency in all but foreign affairs – and better chances for a Republican candidate in 2016. A Republican victory would benefit the Democrats in 2016.

The ideal move for the Democratic Party would be to reach outside its traditional constituency to build a center-left majority, based on moderate government activism, economic fairness and a more multilateralist foreign policy. But the strategy of the Democratic Party in 2012 appears to be to reinforce the existing base, bringing in the cultural elite by using wedge cultural issues, and the white working class by voicing "anti-rich" populists appeals. This strategy is a real and long term issue for the Party, as it can never produce a strong governing coalition.

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Introduction

Barack Obama's triumph in the 2008 elections and the increased Democratic majorities in Congress following their takeover of both houses in 2006 appeared to promise a renaissance for the Democratic Party. With the exception of the freakish LBJ landslide of 1964, Obama's percentage of the popular vote at 53% was the highest of any Democratic presidential candidate since FDR in 1944. Obama's 2008 election also broke new ground for the Democrats by winning states such as Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana that had not been carried by Democrats for a generation in a presidential contest. The 2008 campaign witnessed the apparent fruition of a new Democratic coalition of minorities, young voters, and highly educated professionals, and the promise of a new progressive governing majority united behind a program of governmental activism to revive the battered economy and a multilateralist foreign and defense policy in opposition to American "adventurism" abroad (Tanenhaus 2009)

In fact this Democratic promise was not fulfilled as the new administration over-read its "mandate" from the 2008 election, which on closer examination provided fairly slender evidence of a new liberal progressive majority in the US (Trende 2012). In office, the Obama administration's measures to address the economic crisis – the stimulus package, the bailout of two of the "big three" automakers, and the extension of the Bush Administration's bailout of the major Wall Street banks – alienated the right and center of the American political spectrum in opposition. For many Democrats in Congress and beyond, Obama's measures were not assertive enough at home and too timid abroad. Many on the left of the party were also disappointed by the administration's maintenance of the George W. Bush administration's policies on homeland security and the treatment of terrorist suspects. The President's health care reform plan united Democrats in Congress but further alienated conservative and moderate voters giving rise to the Tea Party and the staggering Democratic losses in the 2010 Midterm elections (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010). This left the President unable to further advance the progressive political agenda and struggling for reelection in 2012 – despite several major foreign policy triumphs such as the killing of

Nicol C. Rae is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the Florida International University.

Osama Bin Laden and the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya – largely due to a sluggish economy and the continuing unpopularity of health care reform.

This essay examines the state of the Democratic Party at the time of Obama's election and its subsequent evolution during his presidency. We look at the constellation of forces within the party that secured the 2008 Democratic nomination for Obama and how the party responded to Obama's decisions on economic and foreign policy once in office. The reasons for the erosion of the 2006-2008 Democratic electoral advances will also be examined as well as the Democrats' efforts to reassert themselves after the 2010 Midterm debacle. We then turn to the likely course of the Democratic Party following either an Obama reelection or defeat in 2012, and discuss the prospects of the likely contenders for the party nomination in 2016. The elections of 2006 and 2008 seemed to offer the Democrats an opportunity to break out from the highly competitive and closely contested federal elections of the post-Cold War era and build a new center-left majority based on moderate government activism, economic fairness, and a more multilateralist foreign policy. Regardless of an Obama reelection in 2012, I will argue that this opportunity has largely been squandered. The Democratic Party has a strong geographic and social base of electoral support but the recent pattern of closely contested and highly polarized elections between the major parties in the US appears unlikely to be broken in the short term.

The 2008 Obama Coalition

The closely contested Democratic nominating campaign between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama exposed the major fissures within the contemporary Democratic coalition. In essence this coalition is composed of the following (sometimes overlapping) elements:

- Minority voters and the leaders of the interest groups that claim to speak for them. This group is focused generally on issues concerning poverty and economic redistribution, and also issues pertaining to the inclusion and representation of minorities.
- Urban and suburban cultural liberals: generally highly educated, increasingly secular, professionals many of whom work in education or other parts of the public sector. For this group issues concerning gender equality, equal rights for gays and lesbians, reproductive choice and freedom of expression predominate coupled with a strong desire for a foreign policy based on human rights and multilateralism.
- Labor unions - and more importantly public sector labor unions, where most of the growth in labor organization has taken place in recent decades. Unions in the US were traditionally interventionist in economic and social policy and staunchly anti-communist abroad. As public sector and education unions have become more powerful in the movement, Labor in general has moved increasingly toward the more “dovish” foreign policy positions of the cultural liberals.

Beyond these core constituencies Democrats require a significant level of support from two increasingly volatile sections of the electorate to win elections:

- White voters of lower socioeconomic status who have traditionally been economic populists, pro-interventionist on domestic and foreign policy, and social conservatives. For voters in this category who are not enrolled in public sector unions these views still predominate. This group was critical to Democratic success during the New Deal Era but has become increasingly Republican in recent decades.
- Upscale, highly-educated, suburban voters: a traditionally Republican constituency with conservative views on economics and welfare policy but liberal attitudes on social issues such as reproductive rights and acceptance of same sex relationships.

This group is now highly contested by both major parties and was critical to Democratic electoral successes in 2006-2008.

Historical overview

From the New Deal era to the 1960s labor and the white working class clearly predominated within the presidential Democratic Party and wedded the Democrats to an agenda of government interventionism to combat poverty at home and contain Soviet communism abroad. At that time they were opposed within the party by the highly conservative segregationist southern Democrats who generally predominated within the congressional Democratic party. After the civil rights revolution of the 1960s the latter group began to lose power and influence in the party and is now virtually extinct as: 1) the Republican Party has become dominant in the South; and 2) African Americans have become the dominant Democratic-voting group in the southern states. In addition to mobilizing newly empowered minorities behind the Democratic Party, the 1960s also witnessed the rise of the cultural liberals who enthused over the John F. Kennedy administration and essentially brought down his successor Lyndon Johnson due to their opposition to Johnson's Vietnam War policy. During the 1970s and 1980s the power of the cultural liberals and minorities within the coalition rose as the southern conservatives gradually faded from the scene and the unions and the white working class became less significant players within the party.

In the 1980s and 1990s, however, white working class voters were still regarded as critical to Democratic victories in general elections and this tempered Democratic liberalism on cultural issues and foreign policy (where the white working class remains generally conservative) in presidential general election campaigns and during the Clinton administration (1993-2001). As these voters have drifted toward the Republicans more recently, Democrats have instead sought support in presidential and congressional elections from the highly educated, economically advantaged, suburban professional class. While still skeptical of government interventionism on the economy and wary of economic populism, this group has been amenable to Democrats on cultural liberalism and foreign policy issues. Indeed it has been argued by Ruy Teixeira and John Judis (2004) that there is a potential new Democratic majority based on the support of growing minority populations (particularly Latinos and Asians) and highly educated professionals that does not require substantial support from the white working class.

Essentially they argue that demographics are creating a new Democratic majority based on George McGovern's losing coalition in the 1972 election (Judis and Teixeira 2004, 2007): the antiwar movement and the cultural liberals secured the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination for McGovern, but the country was not yet ready and McGovern won only 38% of the vote in the general election

against Richard Nixon. Following McGovern's defeat, Democratic elites (the leaders of the groups comprising the party coalition) strove to find presidential candidates who could still appeal to all components and not just cultural liberals and minorities. Jimmy Carter's candidacy in 1976 promised a new Democratic majority based on a biracial South but that fell apart with his presidency in 1980. During the following decade Republican presidential candidates proved singularly adept at wooing the white working class and even unionized voters (the so-called Reagan Democrats) while welding the South to the GOP. A southerner – Bill Clinton – broke the pattern in 1992 by providing appeal to white working and upper middle class voters as well as the party's new core electoral of minorities and cultural liberals, and even proved able to win some southern states in his presidential victories in 1992 and 1996. Cultural liberals became increasingly disenchanted with Clinton's retreats on totemic issues such as lifting the prohibitions on gays and lesbians serving openly in the US military and his support of the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act prohibiting federal recognition of same sex unions. Despite (or perhaps because of) Clinton's impeachment by the Republican Congress and subsequent Senate trial in 1998-99, he left office fantastically popular among Democrats. The election of his wife Hillary Rodham Clinton to a US Senate seat in New York in 2000 indicated that she had inherited the leadership of Clinton's intra-party coalition – strong support from minorities, union members, and sections of the white working class with grudging acceptance from cultural liberals.

The narrow defeats of nominees Al Gore in 2000 and John Kerry in 2004 revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the 21st century Democratic coalition. Gore and Kerry consolidated the Democratic grip established by Clinton on the coastal "blue states" generally distinguished by their cultural liberalism: California, Oregon, Washington and Hawaii on the Pacific, all the New England states (except for New Hampshire which George W. Bush carried narrowly in 1980), and all the Middle Atlantic states from New York to DC (although Pennsylvania with a large white working class vote was very close in both years). The Chicago metro region – increasingly culturally liberal with a growing minority population - also placed Illinois in the blue (i.e. Democratic) column, and Gore and Kerry eked out narrow wins in the upper Midwestern states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan – states where the electoral dominance of the culturally liberal metropolis was not nearly as great as in Illinois. Beyond these zones the Democratic ticket was generally weak – although Florida with a significant Cuban population and several culturally liberal urban centers (Miami-Ft. Lauderdale-Palm Beach, Tampa Bay, Central Orlando, Gainesville and Tallahassee) was highly competitive in both years as was Ohio (somewhat less urban and more culturally conservative than the other Great Lakes states). Iowa and New Mexico were won narrowly by Gore in 2000 and lost narrowly by Kerry in 2004. In the other Plains states, the southern and Border States (including the traditional bellwether state of

Missouri) and the Mountain states of the West the Democratic ticket was generally weak beyond the urban centers and college towns.

But these were close elections and the Democrats had built a solid Electoral College base of “blue states” that they had carried in every election since Michael Dukakis’s defeat in 1988. To win the presidency, Democrats had to expand that base by winning the more vulnerable Red States – Ohio, Florida, Virginia, Nevada, and Colorado. For Judis and Teixeira (2004-2007) the road to triumph was to maximize the growing minority support and break into the highly educated, highly-paid, private sector professional sector by exploiting cultural liberalism and a multilateralist foreign policy. For traditional Democratic elites, the Clinton strategy of winning back culturally conservative white working class voters seemed more promising.

The 2008 Democratic Primary

For much of the build up to the 2008 election the latter strategy appeared to be prevailing. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton was the long-established frontrunner for the nomination. As the heir to her husband Clinton could call on residual loyalties at the Democratic grassroots, solid support in the Union movement, and her feminist credentials enabled her to break into the cultural liberal domain. By the time of the Democrats’ triumph in the 2006 Midterm elections – when they won back control of Congress for the first time since 1994 - opposition to the Iraq War and the George W. Bush administration’s “war on terror” had become the single most important motivating issue for cultural liberals. Using the internet, the so-called “netroots” had mobilized cultural liberal support behind the ultimately abortive candidacy of former Vermont Governor, Howard Dean, in 2004. After the 2004 defeat, the antiwar movement was definitely looking for a champion – a role Hillary Clinton was unsuited to play since she had not only voted for the Iraq war in 2002 but had never expressed any regret for doing so. The candidate who instead emerged to tap the anger and intensity of the netroots was first term Illinois Senator Barack Obama (Brownstein 2009).

Obama was by no means a consensus choice as Democratic nominee in 2008 as significant sections of the party – Labor, women’s and gay organizations, and Latino Democrats – were already aligned with Hillary Clinton. The key to Obama’s success was establishing early strength among the anti-war movement based on college towns and urban liberal enclaves, demonstrating an unanticipated funding capacity sufficient to compete with Clinton, and ultimately cementing the loyalty of initially dubious African-American Democrats. While losing important components of the Democratic coalition and several major states to Clinton during the 2008 primary campaign, Obama was able to prevail narrowly due to a superior campaign strategy and critical victories at certain key points of the contest (Simon 2008).

Obama's early win in the caucus state of Iowa shot him to the front of the pack and his early victory in the South Carolina primary consolidated his support among African American Democrats. Clinton had a number of big state victories on "Super Tuesday" (February 5, 2008) including the megastates of New York and California, but Obama was able to fight her to a draw in overall delegates won by winning smaller, generally Republican, caucus states in the West that Clinton's campaign had completely ignored (Simon 2008, Wilentz 2008). The Illinois Senator then began to build up a solid lead in delegates through a sequence of convincing primary wins in states where African Americans accounted for 40% or more of the Democratic presidential primary electorate – Mississippi, Louisiana, Virginia, Maryland – or in culturally liberal antiwar bastions such as Wisconsin and Oregon. Clinton secured late wins in Texas, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia due to her heavy support from white working class Democrats, but she proved unable to catch Obama in the delegate count and she finally conceded the race as the party's hitherto neutral "superdelegates" (party office-holders with convention delegate slots) began to drift toward Obama.

The desire to win the White House and the powerful symbolism of providing the first African-American major party presidential nominee enabled any wounds created within the Democratic coalition by the prolonged Obama-Clinton battle to be quickly healed. Conscious of a potential weakness among white working class Democrats, Obama reached out to that section of the party by nominating veteran Senator Joseph Biden as his vice presidential running mate. Yet during the summer of 2008 there were warning signs that even despite the continuing unpopularity of the Iraq War and the slowing economy, the Obama-led Democratic ticket might be in trouble. The nominee's past association with radical figures such as William Ayers, former leader of the extreme left organization "Weather Underground," and the fiery Chicago Pastor Jeremiah Wright raised doubts among some more moderate voters. A recorded aside at a fundraiser about lower status white voters "clinging to their guns and religion" reinforced concerns regarding the professorial, culturally liberal Obama's appeal to economically stressed white working class swing voters. Republican nominee John McCain held a generally successful convention in Minneapolis in early September and McCain selected a vice-presidential nominee – Alaska Governor Sarah Palin – whose main role on the GOP ticket was to raise doubts about Obama's cultural liberalism among that same swing constituency of middle/working class white voters. Between the GOP convention and the onset of the financial crisis on September 15, it seemed that the old post-1968 Republican "culture war" formula for success in presidential elections might work again as McCain closed the gap with Obama in the polls. Then came the financial collapse in late September to which McCain appeared to have no answer while Obama – particularly in the presidential debates – appeared knowledgeable, measured, and serious in his responses.

The Vote of November 2008

Obama eventually won the popular vote by 7% and by a convincing margin in the Electoral College. In addition to winning all the states already carried by Gore and Kerry in 2000 or 2004, the Illinois Senator carried the two great bellwether states of Florida and Ohio, and expanded the Democratic geography of the Electoral College by winning states that had not been carried by a Democrat in a generation – Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana. The Democratic ticket also racked up large margins among highly-educated voters, minorities, and the young and was greatly helped by record turnout among the latter groups (Campbell 2009). The contours of the “Emerging Democratic Majority” promised by Rudy Teixeira and John Judis (2004) appeared to be taking shape.

In fact, the new Democratic majority was tenuous and concealed major weaknesses. Obama actually ran behind Gore and Kerry among white working class voters in the Appalachian region and he did not penetrate the heart of the Republican coalition - religiously observant voters – despite efforts during the campaign to appear as a cultural moderate (Pew Research Center 2008). Older voters also stayed solidly Republican. Obama more than compensated for these losses by mobilizing the minority vote and winning over upscale highly educated urban/suburban independents (Campbell 2009). But there was no natural compatibility of interests between these groups. Minority voters and union Democrats were likely to focus on traditional Democratic issues of economic redistribution – particularly in times of hardship. Upscale independents were likely to be more attracted by cultural liberalism, multilateralism abroad, and fiscal conservatism. What brought them together was a concern over the state of the economy given the recession and the financial crisis, but governing in a manner to satisfy all elements of Obama’s 2008 Democratic coalition would likely prove problematic.

There was also little evidence in the election returns that the electorate had moved ideologically in a markedly liberal direction. Exit polling revealed that conservatives (34%) outnumbered liberals (22%) among the 2008 electorate and that conservatives plus moderates (44%) accounted for almost 80% of voters (Zernike and Sussman 2008). Obama won the election because he won over enough moderates to wipe out the conservative-liberal deficit. His victory, while impressive, did not change the essential contours of American politics over the past two decades – two increasingly ideologically polarized parties in very close electoral competition in national elections with a shrinking number of independent swing voters holding the balance of power (Abramowitz 2010). In 2008, due to the financial collapse, the latter gave the election to Obama and the Democrats. The 2008 election “mandate” was thus not for a second New Deal but merely to fix the economy, and secondarily, to wind down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to the extent possible.

Obama in Office: the First Phase

Obama entered office as the first African American president amidst an outburst of euphoria and a 70% approval rating. Even within his own party it would prove hard to maintain that level of enthusiastic support when confronted by the realities of governing. The most immediate problem facing the new President was the continuing financial crisis and the weak economy. With strong Democratic majorities in Congress the Obama administration set out to address these issues but not always in a manner that met the expectations of the Democratic base. As regards the financial crisis, Obama supported a continuation of the Bush administration's Trouble Assets Relief Program (or TARP) to bail out the failing banks while placing Wall Street reform and greater government regulations to prevent future panics temporarily on the back burner. The administration supported a \$787 billion package of measures to stimulate the economy although this was less than had originally been hoped. The near bankruptcy of two of the "big three" automakers led to a bailout of General Motors and Chrysler. Obama and the congressional Democrats eventually passed a mild banking reform measure (the "Dodd-Frank" bill) in July 2010, but many Democrats believed that it did not go far enough in regulating the banks. The administration also secured Senate confirmation for two liberal Democratic nominees to the US Supreme Court: Judge Sonia Sotomayor (August 2009) and Solicitor General Elena Kagan (August 2010). In foreign policy Obama studiously adopted a more multilateralist tone which earned him more respect abroad than that accorded to his Republican predecessor, but as regards basic national security procedures, Obama largely maintained the policies of the Bush administration including the controversial detention center at Guantanamo Bay.

As such, the measures taken by the Obama administration in its first year were hardly radical and there was some restiveness among the more interventionist section of the party and civil libertarians (Harris and Hohman 2010). This centrist course accorded with the 2008 mandate but as the economy remained in the doldrums the administration did not reap the benefit. Given the comfortable Democratic majorities in both Houses of Congress, there was little the Republican minority could do to stop Obama, even if they voted together, but Obama's mildly interventionist economic policies did arouse the wrath of the conservative grassroots in the form of the "Tea Party" a loosely organized movement that surged to the forefront of American politics during 2009 (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010).

The administration took a much sharper turn to the left later in the year and in early 2010. The introduction of universal health care had been a Democratic objective since the Truman administration and escalating health care costs had brought the issue to the fore of American politics in recent years. On the other hand, health care was not a priority for voters to anything like the extent of the economy. Congressional Democrats, heavily influenced by union and minority voters in their districts, badly wanted to pass significant reform. The Obama administration let House Speaker Nancy Pelosi take the lead but even in a heavily Democratic Congress, the votes were lacking to pass the “single payer” system that the union wing of the party supported (Bai 2010). A plan mandating all Americans to have health insurance, thereby insuring universal coverage, was eventually passed after a prolonged struggle, but the political horse-trading required to get conservative and moderate Democrats to rally behind it added to its unpopularity. Obama eventually succeeded where other Democratic Presidents (including Bill Clinton) had failed in passing health care reform but it came at great cost to his personal popularity and that of his party, as they lost the political middle-ground that they had secured in the glory days of 2006-8 (Rasmussen and Schoen 2010). Already, as the 2010 election season progressed, the 2008 Obama coalition was fraying badly as the younger voters and minorities became disenchanted and the upscale urban professionals became concerned that the administration had become too interventionist in economic and social policy.

2010 and After

By the late summer of 2010, with the economy still stagnant and health care reform seriously unpopular despite the all the energy exerted to pass it on Capitol Hill, Obama and the Democrats suddenly faced the prospect of seeing their congressional gains of 2006-8 wiped out by a resurgent GOP riding a wave of Tea Party enthusiasm. In the November elections, the Democratic Party lost the largest number of House seats (63) in a Midterm election since 1938, six US Senate seats, eight governorships, and 680 state legislative seats. After the 2010 elections the Republican Party controlled both houses of the legislature and the governorship in 29/50 states to 15 for the Democrats. Instead of the death of conservatism and a second New Deal, everyone in the political community was talking about the ascendancy of the Tea Party.

The 2010 exit polls indicated that three key components of the Democratic coalition – minorities, union households and young voters – continued to support the President (Bowman 2010, White 2011). The problem was that they all voted in far lower numbers than in 2008. Upscale moderates and independents swung to the GOP in most House and gubernatorial contests, although the nomination of very conservative and controversial “Tea Party”-backed candidates in critical Senate races in Delaware, Colorado, Nevada and Connecticut alienated these voters and cost the Republicans four Senate seats that if won would have given them control of that chamber as well. Losses among white working class voters – where the President was already weak in 2008 – were vast (Thrush 2010, Bowman 2010, White 2011). The only upside for the Democrats was that the new Republican House would have to share responsibility for the state of the country, and (as was the case in the Clinton administration fifteen years earlier) might prove a useful political foil for the President if he played his cards wisely.

In his first two years the President had done enough to keep the various Democratic factions reasonably happy but he had failed to consolidate the party's gains in 2008 in the critical middle ground of American politics. Now he was cast in a defensive posture against the resurgent GOP. There was a strand of argument from the cultural left of the party and the labor unions that Obama had been too conciliatory toward Republicans hitherto and now was the time to draw clear distinctions with a view to the 2012 election (Rich 2010). One possibility was that Obama, like previous defeated incumbents presidents in the modern era – Ford, Carter, and George H. W. Bush

– might face a substantial primary challenge. No Democrat – and particularly Secretary of State Clinton – showed any interest in challenging the President, however, realizing that to do so would effectively guarantee a Republican victory in 2012 and the reversal of all the policy achievements of the Obama administration.

The congressional Democratic Party did not change direction after the 2010 defeat and in fact became even more dominated by members from the “blue” coastal states. Nancy Pelosi who had been used effectively by the Tea Party as a symbol of everything wrong in Washington somewhat surprisingly secured reelection as House Democratic Leader. In the Senate, the Republican minority with 47 seats could effectively block all Democratic initiatives in a body where legislation now invariably requires 60 votes to proceed. For most of 2011 it appeared that the administration was attempting to replicate the highly successful “triangulation” strategy used by the Clinton administration: doing enough to keep the Democratic base happy while crafting popular bipartisan deals with Republicans on selected issues. Indeed, in the last days of the 111th Congress (before the new Congress was sworn in) the President made a deal with the Republicans that locked in the George W. Bush tax cuts for another two years while allowing passage of the repeal of the ban prohibiting gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military, and the START Treaty with Russia.

In the new 112th Congress, however, the Republicans – perhaps mindful of the Clinton experience - were less inclined to cooperate with the President. The new House Republican majority also included a large contingent of hard-line Tea Party-backed freshman members committed to hold the line against the White House on tax increases and the escalating federal budget deficit (Steinhauer 2011). Various attempts at a “grand bargain” between the White House and House Speaker John Boehner broke down in the summer of 2011 and it appeared that Congress might fail to vote to increase the US’s national debt ceiling thereby igniting a round of debilitating cuts in public expenditure. Indeed, the ugly debate over the debt ceiling resulted in a reduction in the US’s AAA bond rating by major ratings agency *Standard & Poors* and raised doubts about the efficacy of the entire governing process.

After the debt-ceiling near-debacle it became clear what the Democratic strategy for 2012 would be:

- Mobilize the Democratic Party coalition to the maximum by maximizing turnout among minorities, young voters, cultural liberals, and union activists.
- Resurrect the formidable Obama campaign organization and fundraising machine from 2008.
- Use “wedge” cultural issues - immigration, gay rights, reproductive issues - to help rally the base and create uncertainty about the Republican nominee among the critical swing voting

block of highly educated, upscale professionals (and especially professional women).

- At the same time rally the base with populist “soak the rich” appeals and hope to contain Democratic losses among the white working class.
- Emphasize the dysfunction of Congress and try to blame it on the Republican House (while forgetting the Democratic-controlled Senate).

All of this might be enough to sow doubts about the Republican nominee and win a narrow reelection. Any hint of economic recovery would make the execution of the strategy easier. A rancorous GOP nomination campaign and party divisions might make holding the narrowly Democratic Senate and regaining the House a real possibility. In many ways it resembles the successful “base plus” strategy devised by Karl Rove for George W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 2004.

This strategy is hardly inspiring or transformative in tone like the 2008 Democratic campaign, but in the absence of significant economic recovery, “winning ugly” is likely the Democrats’ only chance to retain the presidency. The foibles of the Republican House over the debt ceiling and the payroll tax increase in late 2011, and the divisive 2012 Republican nominating campaign, has certainly given the Democrats some grounds for hope. But even as the economy showed some signs of improvement in early 2012 and Obama’s poll numbers also began to look healthier, the Democratic Party still faces major problems (Kuhn 2012). The President’s approval rating barely exceeds 50% at best in most reputable polls. His numbers among white working class voters remain poor despite the emphatically populist tone of his administration in recent months. Despite a divisive Republican nominating campaign that has dramatically highlighted the shortcomings of the major Republican contenders – former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich – Romney and Santorum have both been highly competitive with Obama in most national and swing state general election match ups. In fact Romney, despite his tin ear on the campaign trail as regards issues pertaining to the fortune that he earned as venture capitalist, may yet prove to be the Democrats’ worst nightmare in the general election due to his presidential bearing, moderate reputation, and focus on the deficiencies of the Obama economic policy. With that profile, he is well placed to woo the upscale, highly educated professionals, who may have little taste for Obama’s rediscovered economic populism (Barone 2012). Given an adjustment of his message and selection of an appropriate running mate, Romney may also be able to maintain the Republican advantage among white working class voters – particularly if the economy remains sluggish.

The Democrats and an Obama Second Term

Barring a complete meltdown of the Republican Party in 2012 (unlikely given the pattern of recent presidential elections and the precarious economic state of the US), an Obama reelection would likely be bitterly contested and narrowly won. It is possible that Democrats could regain control of the House and (although less likely) increase their Senate majority but even in that scenario, Obama would become an instant “lame duck” as the eyes of the “policy demander” elites (Cohen et al 2008) who set the policy agenda in both parties turn toward 2016. Partly because of this factor, presidents do not tend to enjoy politically successful second terms (Rae 2009). One reason for this is the “hubris” factor – the tendency of reelected presidents to over-interpret their mandate from the voters and overreach, not just politically, but also in terms of their actions and day to day decision-making. For the latter reason, presidents appear to be particularly prone to scandal in their second terms as they and their staffers invariably become increasingly overconfident, complacent and careless.

Moreover, as the next election approaches there is less and less reason for members of Congress - even of the President’s own party – to pay attention to Presidents who are becoming increasingly weak politically. This is reinforced by the tendency for the party of reelected Presidents to suffer significant losses in the “sixth year” or second Midterm election of a two-term presidency. Thus, presidential second terms are generally bereft of significant legislative achievements except for bipartisan packages such as Immigration and Tax reform in Ronald Reagan’s second term and the Clinton-Gingrich budget deficit reduction plan in 1997 that contributed to the temporary budget surpluses and booming economy of the late 1990s. Of course, there is always the possibility of a second term presidency that breaks the pattern due to unanticipated circumstances.

It also should be noted that in foreign and defense policy where even “lame duck” presidents can still more easily control the policy agenda, the record of second term failure does not so clearly apply.

Below I provide three political scenarios for the fate of the Democratic Party in the event of an Obama reelection, in decreasing order of likelihood as of the spring of 2012:

1. Obama Reelected with Republican House and (Narrowly) Republican Senate

In this scenario Obama is reelected but the Democrats fail to capture the majority in the House and narrowly lose the Senate, because they were defending more seats in states that generally vote Republican in presidential elections. This outcome would obviously provide no mandate for further economic policy interventionism and expansion of the welfare state. Under this scenario, no Democratic policy priorities are likely to be enacted, but there might be opportunities for bipartisan “grand bargains” on the budget deficit and comprehensive immigration policy, as Obama would no longer require the solid support of congressional Democrats for re-nomination and reelection. Any “grand bargains” would tear the Democratic Party apart and prompt Democratic leaders with presidential ambitions in 2016 to oppose the President. Such divisions would probably enhance likely Republican congressional gains in 2014 with the GOP increasing their House majority and taking a comfortable majority in the Senate. Any “grand bargain” is more likely to occur before the 2014 Midterm than after, as the incentives for Republicans to cooperate with Obama would decrease markedly as the 2016 election approaches. There would be little change in US foreign policy over which the President exercises more influence. With this outcome, it is likely that both Democratic Leaders on Capitol Hill – Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid – would step down.

2. Obama Reelected with Republican House and (Narrowly) Democratic Senate

The outcomes under this scenario would not be greatly different from the first except that, at least until the 2014 Midterm, the President would probably find it marginally easier to get any Supreme Court nominations confirmed than under scenario 1. Reid would also likely stay on as Senate Leader if the majority is held. The implication for “grand bargains” and Democratic losses in 2014 would be roughly similar to scenario 1.

3. Obama Reelected with (Narrowly) Democratic House and Senate

This outcome probably assumes a more comfortable victory for the President along similar lines to 2008 or better. It is only likely to occur if there is significant and palpable improvement in the US economy during 2012. Such an outcome would lead the President and Congressional Democratic Leaders Reid and Pelosi to claim a

mandate, but efforts to pass liberal policies would likely run aground in the Senate due to the filibuster and lack of popular support. The situation would be very similar to that of the 2004 elections: due to hubris, over-reading of the mandate, and complacency, the second Bush term – and particularly the first phase in 2005-6 – was a disaster for the Republican Party. In fact, given past precedents I would anticipate the Republican gains in 2014 to be even greater than under scenarios 1 and 2 because they would have no responsibility for government outcomes and the budget deficit is likely to continue escalating even with gradual economic recovery. The Obama administration would of course have more of a free hand in foreign policy.

Under each of these scenarios the Obama Presidency is likely to become progressively weaker. Following past precedent, the Democrats will almost inevitably lose both houses of Congress in 2014, although the losses are likely to be worse if they control both houses after the 2012 elections, since they will have total responsibility for the federal government. “Grand Bargains” on significant legislation are quite likely under scenarios 1 and 2. Indeed given the fine partisan balance the narrower Obama’s victory the more likely such bargains are to ensue. Under scenario 3, the Democrats would remain more or less united but achieve little. Under scenarios 1 or 2 it is quite likely that serious party divisions would occur with minority and union Democrats outraged at bipartisan “grand bargains” on the budget and immigration, and this outrage would provide a base of support for radical 2016 candidates. Under all three scenarios, grassroots Democrats are likely to become decreasingly enthusiastic as the Obama administration peters out but could become energized by a radical candidacy in 2016.

The Democrats in the Light of a Republican Victory in 2012.

In the event of a Republican victory in the 2012 presidential election, it is highly likely that the House majority will remain comfortably Republican and that the GOP will also gain control of the US Senate although the margin there is likely to be fairly narrow – probably 53-47 at best. Under this scenario the new Republican administration and congressional majority would embark on a more conservative policy agenda including the repeal of the Obama Health Care Plan, a deficit reduction package including reforms in Medicare and Social Security, immigration legislation focused more on defending the Mexican border rather than amnesty for illegal aliens, and probably a Republican-oriented version of the economic stimulus with more emphasis on tax reductions and incentives rather than public works. All of these would be wholeheartedly opposed by the Democratic congressional minority and with 47 or so seats, the Democrats would be well placed to conduct blocking filibusters in the Senate. The same would apply to Republican appointments that might change the balance of the Supreme Court. The question for the Senate Democrats would be whether or not they should attempt bipartisan deals with a Romney administration. The context of modern congressional politics indicates that they would see little electoral incentive to do so and thus the issue would be whether, with several further US Senate seats to defend in conservative territory in 2014, the Democratic Minority Leader would be able to hold his troops in line sufficiently to prevent cloture. This outcome would immediately precipitate the change in congressional leadership mentioned above. With a Republican in the White House, the Senate Democrats might prefer the more abrasive, media-savvy, Senator Charles Schumer of New York to the current Deputy Leader, mild-mannered Senator Richard Durbin of Illinois, as Reid's successor.

Unless the new Republican administration is able to achieve a dramatic economic recovery the Democrats would be well placed to make significant gains in the 2014 Midterm elections with a chance of winning back the majority in the House and the Senate (although the Democrats would have more seats to defend from their very successful 2008 class). Certainly a Republican legislative agenda along the lines above would help unify the congressional Democratic party and would energize the Democratic base. The Democrats would also be well placed to capitalize on the long term demographic trends that have favored the party among the growing Latino

population, young voters, other minorities and upscale professionals – particularly if the new Republican administration emphasizes spending cuts, aggressive enforcement of the immigration laws, and social conservatism. A Republican agenda heavy on public spending cuts and entitlement reform might also draw economically vulnerable white working class voters back into the Democratic fold in 2014 and 2016.

I thus conclude that even with a Republican victory in the 2012 presidential election, there is no reason to expect that the overall position of the Democratic Party in current American politics will be any more significantly weakened than that of the Republicans after their defeat in 2008. The Democrats would have lost the election because they forfeited the moderate and independent voters they had won in 2008, but their base presidential vote of about 45% of the American electorate will remain fundamentally intact. Since the early 1990s, both national American political parties have secured a base vote of about 45% each with close and highly contested elections being decided by the remaining 10% in the middle. With a Republican in the White House there is no reason to believe that an astutely led Democratic party will not shortly again contend for the majority, since there is no indication that the 2012 election, whoever wins, is going to fundamentally change the post-1992 contours of American politics.

The 2016 Democratic Presidential Nomination

Whether President Obama wins or loses, the Democrats will have an open contest for their presidential nomination in 2016. If Obama wins, the Democrats' chances of winning the election in 2016 automatically decrease because, since the end of the World War II, only once has a party holding the White House for two terms been able to win a third – the Republicans with George H. W. Bush in 1988 (Albert Gore won the popular vote in 2000 but lost in the electoral college). After two terms in the White House, the “in” party tends to become exhausted and demoralized while the opposition is generally invigorated. Of course, a booming economy can change the equation as in 1988 and (almost) 2000. Other things being equal, however, the nomination should be worth more if the Democrats are the out party.

In terms of the contenders, the odds for Vice-President Biden are certainly greater should the Obama-Biden ticket hold the White House in 2012. If a second Obama terms results in compromises with the Republicans involving cuts in entitlement programs, there are likely to be grassroots protest candidacies in opposition to that policy. Reflecting recent Democratic nominating contests, we are also likely to see candidates from the party's growing contingent of minority officeholders. It is not yet clear who the party elite of officeholders, policy analysts, media figure, interest group leaders, and financial backers (Cohen et al 2008) will support, but it is unlikely to be either a very radical candidate or one who is widely perceived as centrist. The rule in modern presidential politics is to find the most electable candidate who is also acceptable to the party's base supporters in the electorate and that is also likely to obtain for the Democrats in 2016.

Here are the likely contenders (and some possible contenders):

Vice-President Joseph Biden

The twenty five year veteran of the Senate has proved to be a loyal and popular, if occasionally gaffe-prone, Vice-President. Biden would probably be acceptable to the party elite (he has been part of it for as long as anyone can remember) and all sections of the party, and would be an asset in attracting white working class voters. Given his age (73 at the time of the 2016 election), Biden is likely to be a stronger contender as incumbent Vice President rather than as a representative of a failed administration – in the event of an Obama

defeat, it appears unlikely that he would run. If the Obama administration is popular in 2016, Biden would be a formidable contender acceptable to all sections of the party, almost certainly backed by Obama, and with potential outreach to the voters the Democrats need. His appeal to minority voters, cultural liberals, and younger voters is likely to be somewhat more limited than that of Obama however.

Hillary Rodham Clinton: Former Secretary of State, US Senator and First Lady

Clinton will turn 69 a few days prior to the 2016 election. Following her heartbreakingly narrow loss of the 2008 presidential nomination to Obama, Clinton has been a loyal and highly effective Secretary of State. She can take credit for the administration's generally successful diplomacy and has undoubtedly been one of the Obama presidency's major success stories. In addition to her pedigree as First Lady to President Bill Clinton, and her successful career in the US Senate, Clinton is also one of the most well-known and well-admired individuals in American public life. Should she choose to seek the presidency in 2016, she would be the immediate frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, and even more so than Biden, she would be a candidate revered by some sections of the party and acceptable to all, except perhaps the hard-core cultural liberals and veterans of the "netroots" anti-Iraq war movement who cannot forgive her occasionally hawkish tendencies on foreign policy as reflected by her Senate vote in support of the Iraq War. Clinton apparently intends to leave her position at State even if Obama is reelected so Democratic success or failure in 2012 will not affect her situation too much for 2016. A possible run from Clinton in 2016 might well dissuade Biden from entering the fray at all and leave Clinton as the choice of the party establishment and (de facto) of the outgoing administration (potentially a mixed blessing).

Clinton's appeal would be similar in scope to Biden although she would probably be more attractive to minority voters and to Democratic women across the board. Her general election appeal with outreach to women and the white working class voters who appreciated her in 2008 would be as great as any potential Democratic candidate. Her problems would be similar to those she had in 2008 – being perceived as too much of an establishment Washington figure and not immediately attractive to younger Democrats. The Clinton brand is also regarded with some distrust in sections of the party elite and Clinton would be vulnerable, as she was in 2008, to a grassroots challenge, although it is hard to conceive that another Clinton presidential campaign would be as strategically inept as her 2008 effort. The major issue with a Clinton candidacy is whether she wishes to enter the Presidential fray once more or revert to an elder stateswoman role within the party alongside her husband. The opportunity to make history by becoming the first woman

president may prove powerful enough to draw her once more into the presidential arena.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo

The son of another legendary Democratic politician, Mario Cuomo, Andrew Cuomo (who served as Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Clinton administration) was elected to the New York state governorship in 2010 and has already made a major impact on the national Democratic scene. Cuomo has managed to cultivate a centrist independent image as a reformer in New York while also demonstrating powerful appeal to voting groups in the party's national base. He earned particularly warm plaudits from one of the party core groups – Gay and Lesbian voters – by shepherding same sex marriage legislation to passage in the New York legislature in 2011. If Cuomo were to run in 2016 he could prove an attractive candidate with a fresh face, but the primary calendar's critical early contests in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina are not particularly favored terrain for a New Yorker. And Cuomo has not demonstrated appeal beyond the confines of the Democratic base. What appears as centrist reformism in deep blue New York may just look like standard Democratic liberalism and interest group politics to the voters who decide presidential general elections. No New York Governor has been a presidential nominee since the hapless Tom Dewey in 1948 and none has been a Democratic nominee since FDR.

Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley

State governorships have proven to be a more effective platform to the presidency than Congress for most of US history and O'Malley like Cuomo has proven to be something of a star among Democratic Governors. O'Malley, a former Mayor of Baltimore, defeated the incumbent Republican Governor, Robert Ehrlich, in 2006 and defeated him again more emphatically in the very good Republican year of 2010. He is attractive, articulate and suitably liberal on all the major issues that matter to the Democratic Party base. Like his New York counterpart, O'Malley has earned plaudits from cultural liberals for his strong support of same sex marriage and the legalization of the latter in Maryland. In his campaigns and as Governor he has proven to be an effective media performer. Like Cuomo it is unclear how an O'Malley candidacy would play outside even more deep-blue Maryland but, given his background, he could prove to have a Biden-like appeal to working class white voters in a populist context. Unlike his New York counterpart, O'Malley has not cultivated a centrist reputation to date. On the other hand he could be a possible leader of a protest candidacy against any "grand bargain" involving entitlement reform accepted by a second Obama administration.

US Senator from Virginia Mark Warner

Warner served as Governor of Virginia before getting elected to the Senate in 2008. A politically attractive moderate, Warner achieved extraordinary political success in Virginia by pursuing centrist economic policies and not emphasizing cultural issues. With proven political appeal in a “purple” state, Warner could prove to a very attractive general election candidate for the Democratic Party. His political profile might also prove to be a very good fit for the purple or red states that fall early in the nominating process: Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina. An Obama defeat in 2012 that could be attributed to the administration’s economic interventionism and failure to tackle the budget deficit could provide the ideal context for Warner to run for President as the latest incarnation of the Clintonian New Democrats in 2016. But given his moderate to conservative stances on economic and welfare issues there would be substantial opposition to Warner from much of the party elite and grassroots, and in the deep blue states that hold a large cache of convention delegates. The presence of Hillary Clinton in the field would deny Warner the “New Clinton” moniker. Only an utter repudiation of the Obama administration’s economic policies in 2012 would likely make a Warner nomination possible.

Former Virginia Governor Tim Kaine

Kaine served as Virginia Governor from 2005-2009 and also as chair of the Democratic National Committee for the latter part of that time. He, like Warner, cultivated a moderate reputation as Governor, but Kaine’s service as Democratic National Committee chair (2009-2011) inevitably identified him more with median national Democratic issue positions and simultaneously heightened his national profile. Kaine is an effective media performer and he would undoubtedly be more acceptable than Warner to national Democratic Party elites. Whether he becomes a serious contender is contingent on his winning the 2012 Virginia Senate contest against former Republican Governor and Senator, George Allen.

Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel

A notoriously combative politician, Emmanuel served in senior positions in the Clinton White House and as President Obama’s first White House Chief of Staff (2009-2010). Emmanuel was also the architect of the Democrats’ takeover of the US House of Representatives in 2006 as chair of the House Democratic campaign committee. Emmanuel is extremely intelligent and politically astute, and widely respected within the party on those grounds. In many circles he is also regarded as highly opportunistic, however, and not entirely reliable ideologically. His Chicago background and abrasive style are unlikely to prove attractive to early primary state voters but a politician with Emmanuel’s skills should never be underestimated.

Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick

There is likely to be an African-American Democrat in the presidential field for 2016 and Patrick probably has the strongest claim as the sole current African-American Governor. Patrick has twice been comfortably elected in Massachusetts – a state with an overwhelmingly Democratic voting record in presidential politics but strangely resistant for many years to electing Democratic Governors. In fact, Patrick in 2006 was the first Democratic Governor elected since Michael Dukakis in 1986. A former Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in the Clinton Justice Department (1994-1997), Patrick has Washington savvy combined with proven appeal to white voters and independents in Massachusetts. His problem, like that of fellow Governors Cuomo and O'Malley, is the inveterate “blueness” of his state – particularly on social and cultural issues. If the Democrats divide over budget cutting in a second Obama administration, Patrick like O'Malley could run an outsider populist campaign in defense of traditional entitlement programs for the disadvantaged and could, like Obama, rally a formidable base of support among African American voters in early states with large black populations such as South Carolina.

Summary: The Democrats Post-Obama

In summarizing the condition of the Democratic Party post-Obama - whether in 2013 or 2017 – we have to consider the context of American party politics in the modern era. In an era of very finely balanced party coalitions, any Democratic majority in the nation (or any Republican majority for that matter) is likely to remain fragile and transient. The Democrats have clear advantages among minority voters, public sector employees, feminists and other cultural liberals regardless of class, and the so-called “millennial generation” of younger voters. In most years, this support will guarantee the Democrats at least 45% of the electorate, and in a good year they can win over enough independents to gain a majority. But demographics are not destiny, as some Democrats, media commentators, and political analysts seem to believe, since these allegiances are not necessarily frozen in place (Trende 2012). Younger voters change political allegiances as they mature. Latino voters already show some variability in their support for the Democrats: as they prosper, assimilate and move up the social scale, Democratic allegiances will not necessarily be maintained. Upscale private sector cultural liberals could also be effectively wooed by the GOP on economic issues, and the party’s continuing weakness among white working class voters also should be cause for concern.

Is there a potential candidate in the likely 2016 Democratic field that can reach beyond the 45% in a general election? With the exception of the Virginians Warner and Kaine above, the contenders for the party nomination in 2016 are from a solidly blue-state base with a strong (and proud) record of undeviating cultural liberalism. But in general blue state optimism about the prevalence of cultural liberalism in the nation as a whole has tended to be exaggerated, and this creates problems for blue state Democrats contending in the national arena. Many Democrats appear to have forgotten that despite all the inherent Democratic advantages in 2008, John McCain was leading Obama in the polls prior to the financial collapse on September 15.

In future elections, Democrats will have to make the choice between a “base plus” or an outreach strategy in national elections. The former approach seems to have been adopted by the Obama administration in 2012. Given the precarious economic situation of the country and the weakened position of the Democrats in Congress, it may have been the only viable option barring an unforeseen degree

of economic recovery. This approach relies on a relentlessly negative campaign and the use of cultural wedge issues to undermine the opposition party candidate and convince a majority of the 10% swing group of independent voters that reelecting President Obama is the least bad option. It worked for Karl Rove in George W. Bush's 2004 reelection campaign against John Kerry, but it provided no policy mandate for a second Bush term and did not extend the Republican electoral coalition in any meaningful way. In the absence of an outreach strategy, any Democratic presidential majority in the modern era is likely to remain tenuous, but the rules of candidates selection at the presidential and all other levels militate against such effective outreach as the system skews in favor of those beholden to the party elite of ideologues and leaders of constituent groups (Cohen et al 2008).

The Democrats' one big consolation in contemporary American politics is that there is no evidence that the Republicans are close to building a stable governing majority either.

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