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“Droppers” and “Switchers”: The Fraying Obama Coalition

By Anne Kim and Stefan Hankin

In 2008, President Obama and Congressional Democrats assembled a broad and winning coalition of moderates, Independents and first-time “surge” voters. In 2010, this coalition all but disappeared as Democrats suffered heavy losses in the House and a shrinking majority in the Senate. In a new post-election survey, Third Way and Lincoln Park Strategies polled 1,000 Obama voters who abandoned Democrats in 2010, either by staying home (the “droppers”) or by voting Republican (the “switchers”). This report paints a portrait of these droppers and switchers—the voters that Democrats will need to win again in 2012. Our key findings:

- **Droppers are more than the base.** One in 3 droppers is conservative, 40% are Independents, and they are split about whether Obama should have done more or did too much.
- **For switchers, it’s not just the economy.** The economy matters but switchers also overwhelmingly think Democrats are more liberal than they are. Two in three say “too much government spending” was a major reason for their vote.
- **Republicans won a chance, not a mandate.** Only 20% of switchers say that a major reason for their vote was that “Republicans had better ideas,” and nearly half say Republicans are more conservative than they are.

OVERVIEW

The Democratic Dilemma

In the aftermath of the 2010 election, Democrats are now debating a central strategic question: which path—to the left or the center—will restore their fortunes in 2012 and beyond?

The historic turnaround is not in dispute. House Democratic candidates won 55% of moderates, a 6-point drop from 2006 and well below the levels they need to win a majority of the vote. They also lost Independents 37% to 56%, a nearly mirror-image reversal of their 57%-39% victory in 2006. Compared to 2008, Democrats underperformed with such reliably Democratic-leaning groups as women and seniors.

What is in dispute is *why*.

On both sides, the conventional wisdom about the causes for the Democratic losses is beginning to harden. On the one hand, many Democrats believe that this year's results were the consequences of a disappointed and disaffected base—yet, according to exit polls, liberal turnout in 2010 mirrored 2006. If Democrats had pushed harder with a more progressive agenda and refused to compromise with the center, the argument goes, the momentum of 2006 and 2008 would have continued, motivating both base and swing voters. On the other hand, the strength of the Tea Party has contributed to a growing sense among Republicans that the 2010 elections mark a renewed public mandate for conservative policies.

In part to test the validity of this conventional wisdom, Third Way and Lincoln Park Strategies polled 1,000 voters who backed Obama in 2008 but who decided not to vote Democratic this year. 500 of these voters stayed home—the “droppers”—and 500 voted for a Republican candidate for either the Senate or the House—the “switchers.”

We chose to focus on these voters because they are both the least committed members of the 2008 Obama coalition and among the most critical to Democrats' future success. We also limited our poll to 10 battleground states that are both central to 2012 and that witnessed particularly contentious races this year.*

Here's what this survey found:

#1 THE DROPPERS

More than just the base

Conventional wisdom: *Liberal, committed Democratic base voters were the ones who stayed home in 2010.*

Our findings: *The Obama voters who stayed home in 2010 encompass more than the Democratic base. And disappointment that Obama didn't go farther was not a major factor in their reasons for staying home.*

* This was done to ensure that relatively sleepy jurisdictions—such as the District of Columbia—did not affect the pool of droppers. See the Appendix for full details on the methodology of this survey.

Although droppers are somewhat more liberal than 2010 voters as a whole, they are equally split among liberals, moderates, and conservatives.

Further, 42% of droppers are Democrats, 40% are Independents and 8% are Republicans. In another sign of their ideological diversity, almost a quarter of droppers voted for George W. Bush in 2004, while 40% voted for John Kerry.

Who Are the Droppers?*

Liberal	32%	Democrat	42%
Moderate	31%	Independent	40%
Conservative	32%	Republican	8%

"Would you say..."**	Democrats are...	Obama is...	Republicans are...
More liberal than you	31%	25%	18%
More conservative than you	13%	16%	50%
About where you are	47%	50%	21%

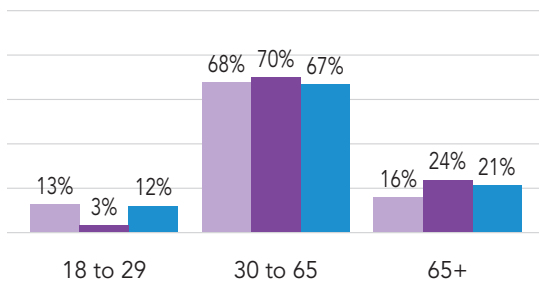
In fact, droppers are as likely to think Obama is more liberal than they are (25%), than more conservative (16%). Just 36% of droppers say both President Obama and Democrats are "about where you are ideologically."

Moreover, the demographics of the droppers do not resemble the traditional Democratic base.

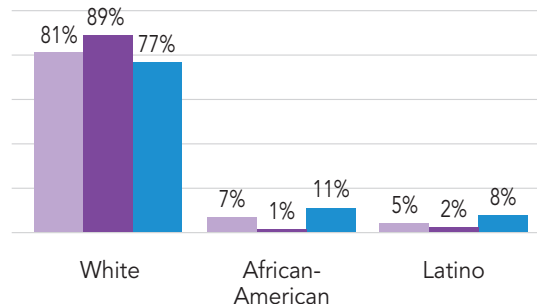
For one thing, droppers are not disproportionately young. According to exit polls, voters (age 18 to 29) made up 12% of the electorate in 2010—the same percentage as in 2006 and almost exactly the percentage of droppers in that category. Overall, the median age range of droppers is 45-49, versus 50-54 for switchers and 40-49 for 2010 voters generally.

Droppers are also overwhelmingly white. 81% of droppers are white (roughly comparable to the racial breakdown of the states in our poll), while 7% are African-American and 5% are Latino.

Droppers and Switchers by Age



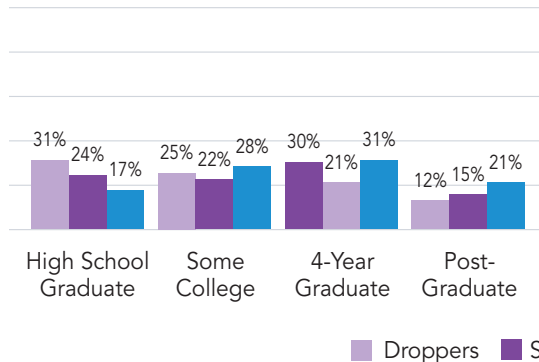
Droppers and Switchers by Race



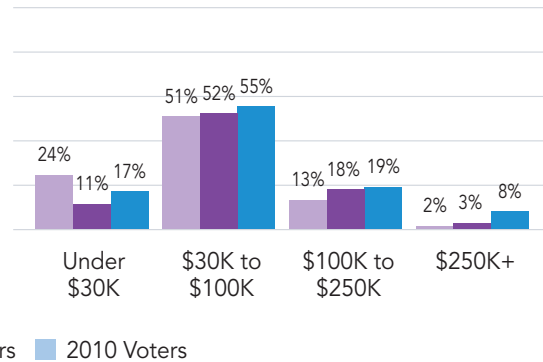
Legend: Droppers (purple), Switchers (dark purple), 2010 Voters (blue)

And while they are somewhat less affluent and educated than either switchers or 2010 voters as a whole, droppers are solidly middle class. 51% of droppers earn between \$30,000 and \$100,000, while 15% earn \$100,000 or more (their median income range is \$30,000-\$50,000). Moreover, 58% of droppers have at least some college, including 33% with at least a four-year degree.

Droppers and Switchers by Education



Droppers and Switchers by Income



As a consequence of this strong moderate/conservative tinge and their unexpected demographics, the droppers were split about whether President Obama should have done more, or if he went too far.

- **44%** disagree that “President Obama and Democrats did not push hard enough on issues like climate change, ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ and immigration reform (vs. 39% who agree).”
- **39%** say President Obama and Democrats “tried to have government do too much,” versus 45% who say President Obama and Democrats “should have tried to have government do more.”

Droppers are also concerned about deficits. 50% say “deficits are a serious problem that are weakening the economy,” compared to 42% who say deficits are “a concern but we have more pressing priorities.” Moreover, 76% of droppers say Democrats are not “serious about reducing the deficit,” while 78% say Democrats are not “responsible with taxpayer dollars.”

This focus on fiscal discipline could drive their future votes as well—58% of droppers say that if President Obama makes a serious proposal to reduce the deficit, they would be more likely to support him in 2012.

#2 THE SWITCHERS

It’s not just the economy, stupid

The conventional wisdom: *The election results were almost exclusively a referendum on the bad economy.*

Our findings: *Switchers had more complex reasons for their vote than just the economy. There is a significant disconnect between switchers' values and preferences and their perceptions of the Democratic agenda and brand.*

Unlike the droppers, who are more diverse ideologically, the switchers are a far more homogeneous group, and it is tinged distinctly red.

Only 11% of switchers are liberals, while 45% are moderate, and 39% are conservative. Democrats also make up a minority of this group, comprising just 15% of switchers, while 24% are Republican and a whopping 53% are Independent. Moreover, just 14% of switchers think both President and Democrats are “about where you are” ideologically. 64% think Democrats in general are more liberal than they are, and 60% think President Obama is more liberal than they are. Consistent with this rightward bent, 56% of switchers also voted for George W. Bush in 2004.

Who Are the Switchers?*

Liberal	11%	Democrat	15%
Moderate	45%	Independent	53%
Conservative	39%	Republican	24%

“Would you say...”**	Democrats are...	Obama is...	Republicans are...
More liberal than you	64%	60%	12%
More conservative than you	7%	7%	44%
About where you are	23%	27%	38%

Without doubt, the poor state of the economy loomed large in switchers' minds. 64% say they don't think Democrats have “a plan to get our economy back on track,” and 52% say “not enough focus on jobs” was a major reason for their vote.

Nevertheless, the economy was not the only reason that switchers opted for a Republican candidate this year. For one thing, switchers are solidly middle class (median income... range: \$50,000-\$75,000) and have a fairly positive view of their own personal circumstances—personal impacts from the downturn did not seem to be a driving force behind their votes. 82% of switchers, for example, rate their personal economic circumstances as “excellent” or “good” and 71% say they have suffered no major personal impacts from the recession.

"How would you rate your own economic situation?"**	Droppers	Switchers
Excellent	7%	11%
Good	66%	71%
Bad	17%	11%
Very bad	7%	3%

"Would you say the economic downturn..."**	Droppers	Switchers
Had no effect on you or your family	11%	11%
Had some effect... but did not have to make any major sacrifices	55%	60%
Had a big effect	32%	25%

Our poll points to three other powerfully motivating concerns that switchers share:

1. Size and scope of government.

66% of switchers say President Obama and Democrats in Congress "tried to have government do too much," versus just 23% who say President Obama and Democrats "should have tried to have government do more." Switchers also have a generally negative view of government:

- **60%** say government is "almost always wasteful and inefficient," versus 33% who say government "often does a better job than people give it credit for."
- **53%** of switchers also say Democrats are "too reliant on government to solve problems."

51% of switchers also say the health care reform bill was a major reason for their vote, though only 26% support the law's repeal (22% say leave it alone).

2. Attitudes toward business and growth.

Switchers are "cautious capitalists."

On the one hand, they are aspirational, have a strong belief in the inherent fairness of the American system, and believe in private-sector led growth:

- **60%** of switchers say people who are wealthy “generally worked hard to get to where they are,” versus just 26% who say wealthy people “generally got lucky or had the right connections.”
- **84%** of switchers also say they have “had a fair shake in life and opportunities to succeed,” versus just 12% who say they feel “the system has been unfair to me and has denied me opportunities to get ahead.”
- **60%** want Congress to “work more closely with business to create private sector jobs” versus 23% who would rather that Congress “crack down on businesses to stop abuses.”

On the other hand, switchers are also skeptical about unfettered capitalism. Just 38% think “most American companies behave responsibly, creating jobs while making a profit,” while 53% say companies “behave irresponsibly and hurt the middle class in order to make a profit.” And despite their individualistic and aspirational bent, just 33% think that “most people who are having trouble making ends meet made poor financial choices like buying a house they couldn’t afford.” Instead, 56% say most people having a tough time “are struggling because the economy is so bad.”

3. Spending and deficits.

66% of switchers say “too much government spending” was a major reason for their decision not to vote Democratic this year. This is the number-one ranked factor switchers gave in our poll.

- **64%** of switchers say deficits are a “serious problem that are weakening the economy” (versus 32% who say “deficits are a concern but we have more pressing priorities”).
- **76%** don’t think Democrats are “serious about reducing the deficit.”
- **78%** don’t think Democrats are “responsible with taxpayer dollars.”

In fact, 68% of switchers say they would be more likely to support President Obama in 2012 if he offered a serious proposal to reduce the deficit. Among switchers who say they are currently unlikely to support the President in 2012, 60% say an Obama plan for deficit reduction would increase the likelihood that they do support him.

“Please tell me whether each of the following was a major reason, a minor reason, or not a reason at all for why you did not vote for the Democratic candidate this year.” (asked of switchers only)**

	Major reason	Minor reason	Not a reason at all
Too much government spending	66%	17%	17%
Not enough focus on jobs	52%	24%	23%
The health care reform bill	51%	21%	26%
The bank and auto company bailouts	38%	26%	35%
Democrats are too partisan	23%	31%	42%
Democrats’ cap and trade energy bill	22%	33%	40%
Republicans had better ideas	20%	34%	43%

#3 REPUBLICANS

A chance, but not a mandate

Conventional wisdom: *Republicans and the Tea Party won a definitive mandate.*

Our findings: *Republicans should be wary of over-confidence. For most switchers, their vote was a rejection of Democrats, not an embrace of Republican policies.*

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell has said that he views his main job in the next Congress as defeating President Obama in 2012. Switchers and droppers do NOT agree. Despite pulling the lever for Republicans this time, 47% of switchers still approve of President Obama’s job performance, and 51% of switchers say they are likely to support him in 2012. Droppers are even more positive—74% approve of President Obama’s job performance, and 78% say they are likely to support President Obama in 2012 (including 40% who are very likely).

As noted in a table above, only 20% of switchers say that a major reason for voting Republican was that “Republicans had better ideas.” Similarly, only 10% of switchers say the main reason for vote was “to give Republican ideas a chance.”

Moreover, neither switchers nor droppers view the Republican Party as an ideologically perfect fit. Only 38% of switchers see Republicans as “where you are” ideologically, and 44% say Republicans are more conservative than they are.

“When it comes to most issues, would you say that Republicans in Washington are....”**

	Droppers	Switchers
More liberal than you are	18%	12%
More conservative than you are	50%	44%
About where you are	21%	38%

As noted above, many switchers are dissatisfied with Democratic policies, which implies that for many in this group, theirs was a vote of protest. For other switchers, their vote was a plea for compromise. When asked to pick one of five reasons, 22% of switchers say a main reason for switching was that “Washington works better when one party does not control everything.”

Indeed, compromise is something that both droppers and switchers want more of from Washington:

- **76%** of switchers and 56% of droppers say President Obama “should compromise with Republicans to pass legislation” rather than “stand on principle.”
- **67%** of switchers and 75% of droppers also say Republicans should compromise with President Obama and Democrats rather than “stand on principle.”

Moreover, in an open-ended question asking respondents “what is the one thing you would tell the new Republican Congress if you could,” responses involving bipartisanship and compromise were by far the most common answer. Typical verbatim responses include such advice as “co-operate with the Democrats to get things done”; “we need to put partisan issues aside and work together”; and “compromise and get our economy moving.” Tellingly, no responses reflected the view that Republicans should mainly work to stop the Democratic agenda.

These attitudes point to an important warning for Republicans: don’t claim a mandate you don’t have.

“In one sentence what is the one thing you would tell the new Republican Congress if you could?”* (Open ended)

Type of response	Droppers	Switchers
Bipartisanship/compromise	26%	28%
Jobs/economy	10%	13%
Policy statements	5%	7%
Health care related	3%	7%
Spending	3%	7%
Listen to the people	4%	4%
Fight against the Democrats in Congress	0%	0%
Other	32%	22%
Don't know	17%	11%

CONCLUSION

Rebuilding the Obama majority

Without doubt, this survey delivers some tough news for Democrats. They are perceived as being too far left of where swing voters see themselves. Their brand remains weighed down by the traditional baggage of big government and big spending.

But these results also point to several rays of hope. The droppers and switchers who were in the 2008 Obama coalition are eminently still winnable. To do this, Democrats must move convincingly toward the center with a strategy that connects with the values and aspirations of these voters and directly addresses their concerns. A forthcoming Third Way memo will offer more specific advice on how Democrats can achieve these goals.

One thing, however, is clear. To rebuild the Obama coalition, Democrats must work from the center out.

■ APPENDIX – METHODOLOGY

This poll was conducted in two stages: (1) with an automated pre-poll to create a pool of Obama voters who fit our definition of “dropper” and “switchers” and (2) with a live poll.

The automated pre-poll was conducted between November 3-9, 2010. We called over 100,000 voter households from voter files in 10 battleground states: Pennsylvania, Ohio, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Hampshire, Wisconsin, Iowa, New Mexico and Michigan. Of 2,071 Obama voters who completed our pre-poll survey, 9% were droppers and 24% were switchers.

Our live poll was fielded Nov. 4-12, 2010. We surveyed 1,000 respondents, 500 of whom voted for President Obama in 2008 but did NOT vote in 2010 (the “droppers”) and 500 of whom voted for President Obama in 2008 but voted for a Republican candidate in 2010 in either a Senate or House race. The margin of error for each group is +/- 4.4%.

**** Source (all data):** Exit polls; Third Way/Lincoln Park Strategies

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