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Independents Day 2012

By Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson

Democrats' path to victory just got harder. Fed up with the traditional two-party system and overwhelming polarization, voters are increasingly abandoning the parties. Since 2008, in all eight battleground states for which voter registration information is available, Democratic registration has declined relative to both Republicans and Independents. In 7 of those 8 states, Independents' share of the electorate has increased relative to both Democrats and Republicans. The number of Independents registered to vote in those states increased by 254,310, as Democratic registration fell by 825,708 and Republican registrations dropped 378,835.

In 2012, Independents are likely to turn out in their largest numbers in 35 years, and President Obama will need those Independent votes even more than he did in 2008, if he hopes to be re-elected.

TREND #1

Independents gained ground in battleground states.

The number of registered Independents has increased since 2008 in many of the battleground states that will decide the 2012 election. Among 12 likely battleground states,* 8 have partisan voter registration—Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania. In 7 of these 8 battleground states (all but Iowa), Independent registration gained ground relative to both parties in terms of voter registration between 2008 and 2011.

In each battleground state, Democratic registration fared worse relative to both Republican and Independent registration between 2008 and 2011. In all

* These 12 battleground states—Colorado, Florida, Iowa, Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Mexico, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Virginia—are used by USA Today/Gallup in their swing state polls.¹

eight states, Republican registration gained relative to Democratic registration between 2008 and 2011. In total among these eight states:

- Independent registration *increased* by 254,310, from 7,572,343 to 7,763,270, or a gain of 3.4%.
- Democratic registration *decreased* by 825,708, from 15,383,861 to 14,538,951, or a loss of 5.4%.
- Republican registration *decreased* by 378,835, from 12,174,786 to 11,783,552, or a loss of 3.1%.

In some battleground states, the differences were very small, but typically Independent registration crept forward while Democratic and, to a lesser extent, Republican registration declined or stayed relatively flat in these states.

Partisan Voter Registration in 8 Battleground States (% Change 2008-2011)

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Colorado	+0.9%	+1.8%	+8.6%
Florida	-5.0%	-2.2%	+4.0%
Iowa	-7.9%	+2%	-2.0%
Nevada	-4.3%	-3.9%	3.3%
New Hampshire	-14.6%	-13.5%	-6.9%
New Mexico	-3.9%	-1.6%	+0.8%
North Carolina	-3.9%	-2.2%	+9.1%
Pennsylvania	-7.6%	-6.7%	-3.1%
8 State Total	-5.4%	-3.1%	+3.4%

Partisan Voter Registration in 8 Battleground States (Actual Change 2008-2011)

State	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
Colorado	+9,666	+18,791	+92,539
Florida	-239,890	-90,132	+99,841
Iowa	-59,152	+12,325	-16,057
Nevada	-25,672	-19,059	+6,942
New Hampshire	-38,408	-36,091	-23,064
New Mexico	-22,868	-5,889	+1,485
North Carolina	-110,245	-43,055	+125,094
Pennsylvania	-339,139	-215,725	-32,470
8 State Total	-825,708	-378,835	+254,310

Four of the 12 battleground states—Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin—do not have partisan voter registration. Trends in exit poll data between 2008 and 2010 give us an imperfect sense of changes in overall turnout between Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, since 2010 was both a mid-term and a wave election in the Republican direction and was likely a unique electorate. But despite the lack of hard registration numbers, these states still follow the pattern. Democratic turnout suffered in 2010, as both Republican and Independent voters increased their share of the electorate.

National House Exit Poll, % Won²

	Composition of Electorate		Democrats Won		Republicans Won	
	2008	2010	2008	2010	2008	2010
Democrats	40%	35%	92%	91%	7%	7%
Republicans	33%	35%	9%	5%	89%	94%
Independents	28%	29%	51%	37%	43%	56%

However, the most significant shift was among the voting behavior of Independents, who pulled the lever much more frequently for Republicans. Democrats went from an 8 point margin of victory to a 19 point loss in House races among Independents nationally. In the 2010 House national exit poll, 56% of Independents voted for a Republican and 37% for a Democrat. Compare that with the 51% who voted for a Democrat in 2008 (and 43% for a Republican). The result is a **27 point shift** in Independent voters.

Independents have been swinging wildly in recent elections, and they have the potential to do so in 2012 as well. Independents in 2012 are unlikely to hit the highs of 52%—in support for Obama—of 2008, nor the lows of 37%—in support for Democrats—of 2010.

TREND #2

Independents' turnout in 2012 will likely surpass every election in the past 35 years.

The importance of Independents has grown over time as voters are increasingly leaving the traditional two-party system. Based on the combination of this general trend and the rise in both registration and self-identification of Independents since 2008, the most likely scenario for 2012 is that Independents will make up a bigger portion of the electorate next year than in any election since 1976, based on national exit polls. In that presidential election, Independents comprised 34% of the electorate. Independents fell to about 25% of the electorate throughout the 1980s, rose slightly in the 1990s, and bottomed-out at 23%

in 2002. By the 2010 midterm elections, Independents were back up to 30%, and based on both registration numbers and self-identification in polls, their numbers are continuing to rise to historic levels.³

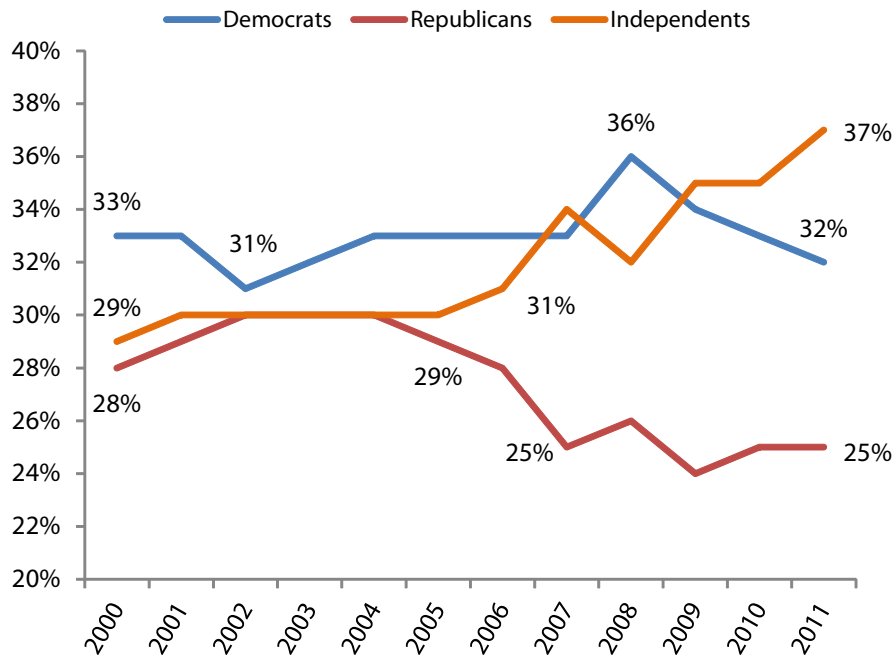
Since 1996, the number of registered Independents in the 8 battleground states with partisan registration has increased by nearly 4 million; Democratic registration is up 2,834,995, or **1.1 million less** than Independents. In each of these 8 battleground states, Independents have increased by double digit percentages since 1996. In half—Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, and North Carolina—Independents have more than doubled. And in Colorado, Iowa, and New Hampshire, Independents now comprise a plurality of registered voters.

Registered Independent Voters, 1996 to 2011

State	% Change in Independents	Increase in Independents
Colorado	57.5%	425,099
Florida	147.9%	1,553,712
Iowa	35.2%	202,414
Nevada	107.0%	113,853
New Hampshire	62.4%	118,733
New Mexico	133.8%	105,545
North Carolina	193.8%	991,311
Pennsylvania	85.6%	461,479
Total	104.8%	3,972,146

Beyond these battleground states, national surveys such as the American National Election Studies and Pew show a steady increase in Independent self-identification throughout the United States. According to Pew, between 2000 and 2011, both the Democratic and Republican parties lost members, and the number of self-identified Independents increased by 8%. In 2000, 33% of the electorate identified as a Democrat, 28% as a Republican, and 29% as an Independent. By 2011 only 32% identified as a Democrat, 25% as a Republican, and 37% as an Independent. Democratic and Republican losses were mirrored by gains in Independents, as shown on the chart below.⁴

Self-Identified Partisan Composition of the Electorate



Data from Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, May 4, 2011.

By 2012, given the trends in self-identification and party registration, Independents could comprise one-third of the vote—more than in any other election since 1976. The 1976 electorate was unique itself. Between 1972 and 1976, Democrats shed 5 points, Republicans 10 points, and Independents increased by 15.⁵ Republicans fled the party in the wake of Watergate; the Democratic coalition weakened over the anti-Vietnam protests. As a result, Independents temporarily gained ground. Next year may be similar, with the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movement serving as extreme poles to a disenchanted center.

TREND # 3

The path to victory in 2012 lies through Independents.

In 2008, President Obama did exceptionally well with Independent voters, winning them 52% to 44%.⁶ His lead among Independents practically mirrored his margin among the entire electorate—52.9% for President Obama and 45.7% for Senator McCain. And in all but 4 of the battleground states—Florida, North Carolina, Ohio, and Virginia—he won Independents by double digit margins. When he took office, President Obama's approval among Independents was 62%; in recent Gallup polling, that number is down to 39%.⁷ In a close race, Independents will be the deciders in 2012, and President Obama will need them to an even greater degree than he did in 2008.

Comparing national exit polls from 1996-2008, a record number of Independents turned out in 2008, and they voted for President Obama by their largest margin for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1996. For nearly a decade, Independents comprised approximately one-quarter of the electorate. President Clinton won 43% of Independent voters; but, if you factor out Perot voters, in a 2-party race against Senator Dole, President Clinton won 55% of Independents.[†] **By 2008, Independents were closing in on three-tenths of the electorate, and President Obama won over half of those votes.**

Independent Voters in National Exit Polls, 1996-2008⁷

Year	Independents as % of Electorate	% of Independents Dem Won
1996	26%	55%
2000	27%	45%
2004	26%	50%
2008	29%	52%

Nationally, President Obama won 89% of Democrats in 2008, an extraordinary performance unmatched by any previous Democratic candidate. The last Democrat to win the presidency, President Clinton in 1996, won 84% of Democrats (89% in a 2-party race). Though possible, it is unlikely the President will improve upon his 89% share in 2012. But equally crucial to his blowout victory, President Obama also won a majority of Independents. And the combination of fewer Democrats and more Independents in the electorate now makes the President's path to re-election more difficult.

The elections of 2008 and 2010 were likely high and low water marks, respectively, for Democrats, and the increasingly volatile electorate makes predictions nearly impossible this far out for 2012. Relying on exit poll data from recent elections is tricky since Presidential and midterm elections vary in numerous ways and 2008 was unquestionably a wave election in which Democrats also captured 5 Senate seats and 32 House seats.[‡] **However, a comparison using 2008 and 2010 data as a proxy can provide us with information to establish a likely range of scenarios for 2012.**

We assumed that changes in real voter registration data at the state level would be reflected in turnout. Thus, we started with the 2008 electorate in each state, based on exit polls, and adjusted likely turnout for 2012 to reflect the

[†] President Clinton won 43% of Independents, Senator Dole 35%, and Perot 17%. After factoring out Perot's Independents, in a two-horse race, President Clinton won 55% and Senator Dole 45%. Similarly, President Clinton won 84% of Democrats, Senator Dole 10%, and Perot 5%. After factoring out Perot's Democrats, President Clinton won 89% and Senator Dole 11%.

[‡] Republicans lost 6 Senate seats; 2 Independents—Sens. Lieberman and Sanders—were also re-elected. Republicans lost 27 House seats; there were 4 vacancies prior to the elections and 1 Independent.

changes in real voter registration for each state.[§] We then calculated President Obama's chance of winning these 8 battleground states depending on whether his performance with Independents mirrored his own in 2008 or Democrats' in 2010.

Scenario 1

2008 Performance: We assumed that President Obama and the Republican candidate would win the exact same percentage of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in 2012 as they did in 2008, but the electorate would change based on changes in registration. In this scenario, President Obama would win.

- Of the 8 battleground states he won in 2008, President Obama would lose only North Carolina and its 15 electoral votes.
- President Obama's margin of victory in Iowa and Florida would be 5 points or less.

Scenario 2

2010 Performance: We assumed that President Obama and the Republican candidate would win the exact same percentage of Democrats and Republicans as they did in 2008. However, we used Democratic and Republican performance from the 2010 National House exit poll to determine how each candidate would fare with Independents and assumed the electorate would change based on changes in party registration as above. In this scenario, President Obama could win, if he holds his other 2008 states (including Virginia, Ohio, Wisconsin, and Michigan):

- Of the 8 battleground states he won in 2008, President Obama would lose Florida, North Carolina, Colorado, Iowa, and New Hampshire, a total of 63 electoral votes.
- The remaining 3 states—Nevada, New Mexico, and Pennsylvania—would tighten.
- Four of the battleground states were not included in this analysis due to lack of registration data—Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and Wisconsin. If President Obama's performance among Independents in 2012 mirrors 2010 in those states, even without knowing the change in the electorate since 2008, Ohio and Virginia would be toss-ups (within 1 point), and Michigan and Wisconsin would tighten.

President Obama's road to reelection is tough and his performance among Independents will likely fall somewhere between 2008 and 2010. Although these scenarios are unlikely to play out exactly as predicted, given the differences

§ See the Appendix B for an explanation of our methods.

between a midterm and a Presidential election, they offer an indication of the importance of Independents—especially in a close election.

■ CONCLUSION

The rule in American politics is that Democrats vote Democratic—about 90% of the time—and Republicans vote Republican—also about 90% of the time. Independent voters are up-for-grabs, and their numbers are rising. In the past 3 years, Independent voter registration in most battleground states increased, while Democratic registration fell both in real terms and as a percent of the electorate. In 2008, Independents overwhelmingly supported President Obama and the Democrats; in 2010 their allegiance was to Republicans. The 2012 electorate could feature the largest share of Independents in a generation. For Democrats, then, the path to victory is lined with Independent voters.

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APPENDIX A

Voter registration data is available from states' Election/Secretary of State websites. The exact webpages where voter registration data is housed for the 3 years used in this report are listed in the table below. All of the data, except where noted, was the most current available as of November 21, 2011. Data for 2011 is current through:

- **Colorado:** October 2011
- **Florida:** September 11, 2011
- **Iowa:** November 1, 2011
- **Nevada:** October 2011
- **New Hampshire:** August 31, 2011
- **New Mexico:** January 31, 2011
- **North Carolina:** November 19, 2011
- **Pennsylvania:** November 2011

Voter Registration Data

State	1996 Data	2008 Data	2011 Data
CO	PDF's Secretary of State's office	http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2008/December/PartyAffiliation.pdf	http://www.sos.state.co.us/pubs/elections/VoterRegNumbers/2011/October/VotersByPartyStatus.pdf
FL	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp	http://election.dos.state.fl.us/nvra/history.asp
IA	http://www.sos.state.ia.us/pdfs/elections/vtreport.pdf	http://www.sos.state.ia.us/pdfs/VRStatsArchive/2008/CoDec08.pdf	http://www.sos.state.ia.us/pdfs/VRStatsArchive/2011/CoNov11.pdf
NV	PDF's Secretary of State's office	http://www.nvsos.gov/SOSElectionPages/voter-reg/2008/1208maint.aspx	http://www.nvsos.gov/index.aspx?page=1028
NH	http://www.sos.nh.gov/pre-sprim1996/nameessum.htm	http://www.sos.nh.gov/Voter%20Registration%20Statistics/Voters%20on%20the%20Checklist%20by%20Town%20-%20City%20Ward%202008-08-18.pdf	http://www.sos.nh.gov/Purge%20Numbers%202011-08-31.pdf
NM	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/Main/Elections/1996/PDF%27s/96Voters.pdf	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/pdf/COUNTY1031.pdf	http://www.sos.state.nm.us/pdf/COUNTY013111.pdf
NC	ftp://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/data/voterstats/199610.htm	http://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/NCSBE/VR/VR%20Stats/vr_stats_main.asp	http://www.app.sboe.state.nc.us/NCSBE/VR/VR%20Stats/vr_stats_results.asp?EC=11-19-2011
PA	PDF's Secretary of State's office	http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.t?open=514&objID=572645&mode=2	http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt?open=514&objID=572645&mode=2

■ APPENDIX B

For the 8 battleground states with partisan registration, we took the change in partisan voter registration—percent increase or decrease in registered voters (Democrats, Republicans, Independents) between 2008 and 2011—and adjusted the 2008 composition of the electorate (from exit poll data) by party to reflect the changes. Assuming President Obama and his Republican challenger win roughly equal portions of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents in 2012 as they did in 2008, we recalculated the likely margin of victory.

Using the 2008 turnout as a base, we adjusted the projected 2012 turnout based on the changes in registered Democrats, Republicans, and Independents between 2008 and 2011. First we took the total votes cast and determined how many were members of each party using exit poll data. Thus,

$$2008 \text{ Calculated Vote} = 2008 \text{ Actual Vote} \times \text{Exit Poll [Party ID] Turnout}$$

OR

$$2008 \text{ Democratic Vote} = 2008 \text{ Actual Vote} \times \text{Exit Poll Democratic Turnout}$$

$$2008 \text{ Republican Vote} = 2008 \text{ Actual Vote} \times \text{Exit Poll Republican Turnout}$$

$$2008 \text{ Independent Vote} = 2008 \text{ Actual Vote} \times \text{Exit Poll Independent Turnout}$$

For example, in Florida in 2008, there were 8,390,744 votes cast. According to Florida exit polls, 37% were Democrats, 34% Republicans, and 29% Independents. Thus, we calculated the number of Democrats, Republicans, and Independents who voted in 2008. Next, we subtracted the changes in actual partisan voter registration from the calculated 2008 vote to project how many Democrats, Republicans, and Independents would vote in 2012.

$$\text{Projected 2012 Vote} = \text{Calculated 2008 Vote} \times \% \text{ Change in Voter Registration}$$

Returning to the Florida example, Democratic registration decreased by 5%, Republican by 2.2% and Independent registration increased by 4%. Then we calculated the 2012 coalitions for each candidate—President Obama and the Republican nominee—based upon the percent of each party that had been won in 2008. For example, President Obama’s hypothetical vote total in Florida for 2012 would be based upon:

$$\begin{aligned}
 \text{2012 Obama Coalition} &= (\% \text{ Dem Won in 2008} \times \text{Calculated 2012 Dem Voters}) \\
 &+ (\% \text{ Rep Won in 2008} \times \text{Calculated 2012 Rep Voters}) \\
 &+ (\% \text{ Ind Won in 2008} \times \text{Calculated 2012 Ind Voters})
 \end{aligned}$$

Florida Example

	Democrats	Republicans	Independents
2008 Exit Poll Turnout	37%	34%	29%
Calculated 2008 Vote	3,104,575	2,852,853	2,433,316
Voter Registration Change Since 2008	-5%	-2.2%	+4%
Calculated 2012 Electorate	2,961,765	2,792,943	2,525,782
Pres. Obama Won 2008 Exit Poll	87%	12%	52%
Sen. McCain Won 2008 Exit Poll	12%	87%	45%
Pres. Obama Votes 2012	2,576,736	335,153	1,313,407
Republican Votes 2012	355,412	2,429,860	1,136,602

In this calculation, President Obama would receive a total of 4,225,296 votes in 2012, or 51% of the electorate, and the Republican candidate would win 3,921,874, or 47.4%. Thus, Florida would be won by President Obama by 3.6%. Based on these assumptions we calculated hypothetical vote coalitions for 2012 in all 8 battleground states. Only North Carolina actually switched from blue to red.

Scenario #2 follows the same method as scenario #1, with one change. Performance amongst Independents for President Obama and the Republican candidate are based on the 2010 National House Exit Poll.

■ ENDNOTES

1 Gallup, "Obama, Romney Tied Nationally and in Swing States," November 4, 2011. Available at: http://www.gallup.com/poll/150554/Obama-Romney-Tied-Nationally-Swing-States.aspx?utm_source=tagrss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=syndication. They are also the same states surveyed in Third Way's Droppers and Switchers polls. Available at: <http://www.thirdway.org/publications/438>.

2 "2008 Exit Poll," CNN, Accessed November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2008/results/polls/#val=USH00p1>; "2010 Exit Poll," CNN, Accessed November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2010/results/polls/#val=USH00p1>.

3 "National Election Day Exit Polls, 1972-2010," Roper Center, Accessed November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/elections/common/exitpolls.html#.TsrWWVap18E>.

4 Andrew Kohut, Carroll Doherty, Michael Dimock, and Scott Keeter, "Political Typology: Beyond Red v. Blue," Report, Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, May 4, 2011, p. 22, Print.

5 "National Election Day Exit Polls, 1972-2010."

6 "2008 Exit Poll."

7 "Presidential Job Approval Center, November 14-20, 2011," Gallup, Accessed November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/124922/Presidential-Approval-Center.aspx>.

8 "1996 Exit Poll," CNN, Accessed November 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/elections/natl.exit.poll/index1.html>; "2008 Exit Poll;" "2010 Exit Poll."