

POLITICS | FEBRUARY 2012

2012 Showdown: Battle for the Obama Independents

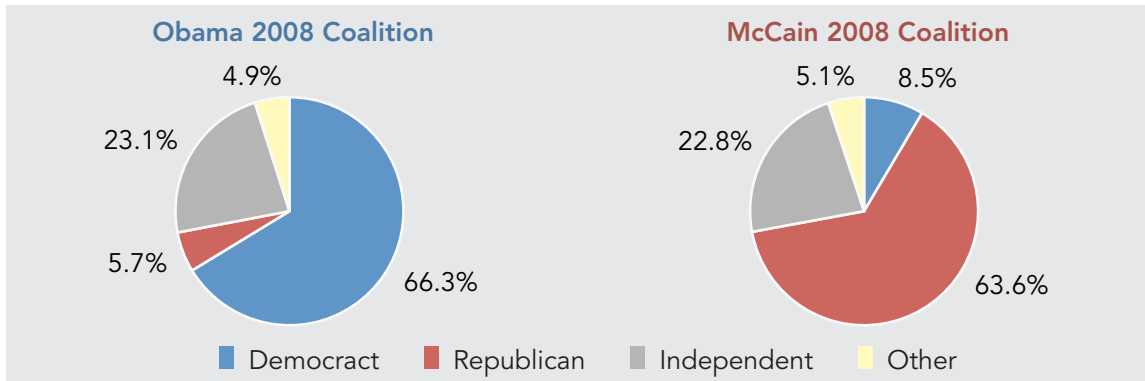
By Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson

Many analysts lump all Independents together, when in fact there are currently two very distinct groups of Independent voters: those who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 (“Obama Independents”) and those who voted for John McCain (“McCain Independents”). The Obama Independents are the real heart of the contest for 2012. If President Obama wins the Obama Independents, he’ll be reelected; but if the Republican nominee can peel off enough votes, he’ll be number 45.

In 2008, President Obama won 52% of Independent voters.¹ All signs point to an even bigger role for them in 2012; in fact, our recent analysis of voter registration numbers in eight key battleground states shows that Democratic registration is down 5.6% since 2008, while Independent registration is up 3.4%.² But many analysts lump all Independents together, when in fact there are currently two very distinct groups of Independent voters: those who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 (“Obama Independents”) and those who voted for John McCain (“McCain Independents”).

Given that it is highly unlikely that the President will win over many Independents in 2012 that he could not woo in 2008, he must instead focus relentlessly on winning back the Independents who have already pulled the lever for him once—the Obama Independents. But the same is true of the President’s opponent—if he can steal enough of the Obama Independents, he will prevail. This fact sets up the real showdown of 2012: the fight to win Obama Independents.

So who are these Obama Independents? According to exit poll data, they are distinct from McCain Independents, and even Independents generally, in specific ways that make them more winnable for the President—in addition to the fact that they liked and voted for him just 3 years ago. In 2008, Obama Independents were the most ideologically moderate segment of the electorate. And they are true swing voters, with one-quarter voting Republican in 2010 and one-quarter voting for President Bush in 2004.

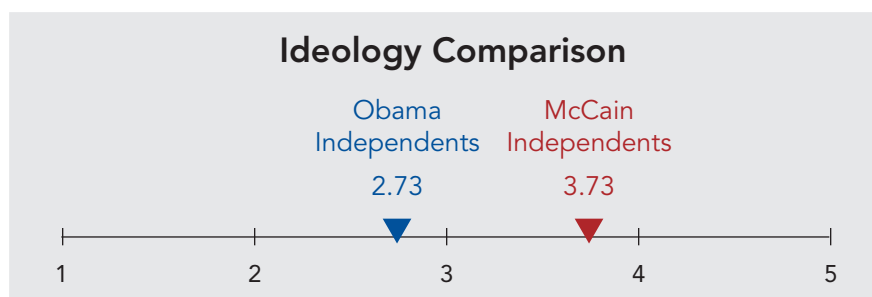


This memo outlines 10 interesting facts about the Obama Independents that paint a distinct picture of this crucial group—a group whose votes will be the key to victory in 2012.

IDEOLOGY

Obama Independents are the most moderate segment of the electorate.

Obama Independents are slightly center-left on the ideological spectrum, but McCain Independents lean to the right. On a 5 point scale—where 1 is liberal, 3 is moderate, and 5 is conservative—Obama Independents are at 2.73 and McCain Independents at 3.73, a full point apart. With 60% of Obama Independents identifying as moderates, there are more moderates in this group than any other, including all voters (44%), Democrats (47%), and all Independents (56%). By contrast, 42% of McCain Independents call themselves conservative and barely half say they are moderate.



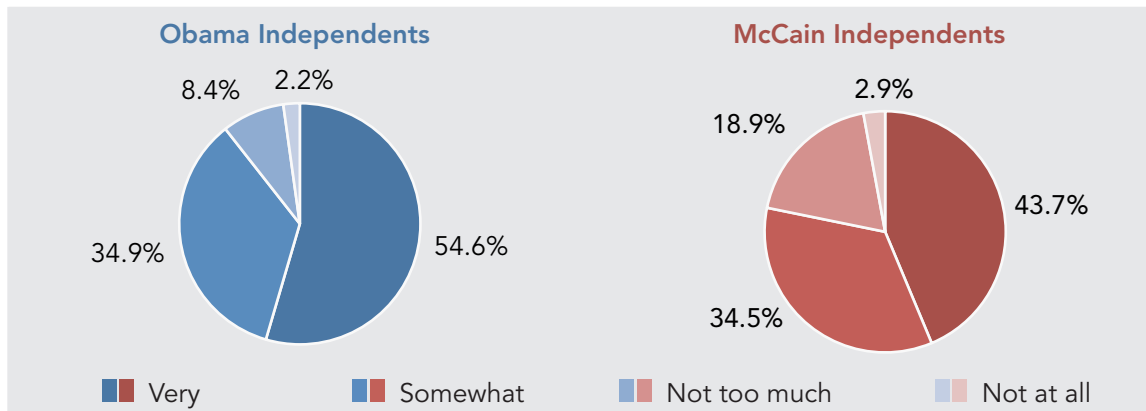
NATIONAL ECONOMY

Obama Independents were more concerned with the nation's economy than McCain Independents.

Obama Independents were more worried about the national economy in 2008 than McCain Independents. Eleven points separated the two groups, with

55% of Obama Independents saying they were very worried compared to only 44% of McCain Independents. Further, nearly one-quarter of McCain Independents said they were worried “not at all” or “not too much”—a stark contrast to all respondents (14% weren’t worried), Democrats (8%), Republicans (17%), and all Independents (16%). Only 11% of Obama Independents weren’t worried about the economy.

How worried are you about the direction of the nation’s economy in the next year?

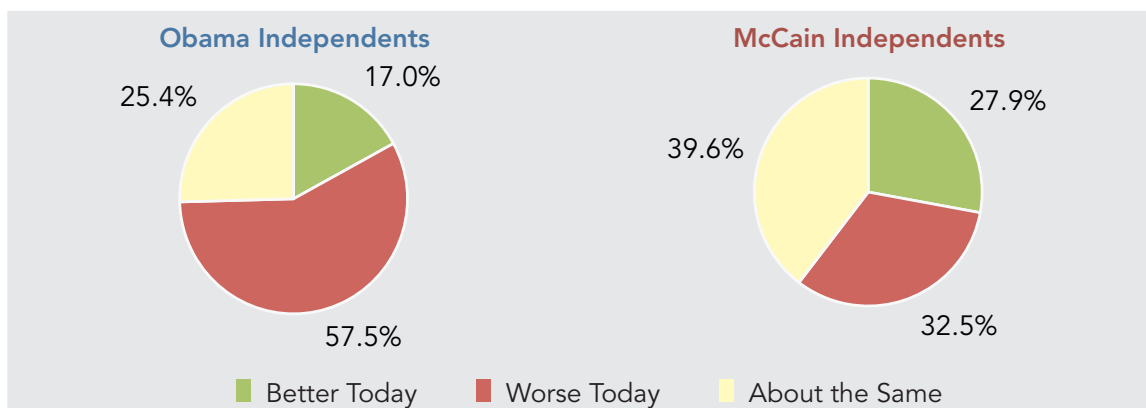


PERSONAL FINANCES

Obama Independents were hit hardest by the recession early on.

In 2008, the pain of the recession was already felt by Obama Independents more than any other segment of the electorate. Even though the recession had yet to hit many Americans, 58% of Obama Independents said their family’s financial situation was worse than 4 years ago—more than any group including Democrats (55%), who were the next closest. By contrast, only one-third of McCain Independents believed their finances had gotten worse, while 40% said they were the same as 4 years ago.

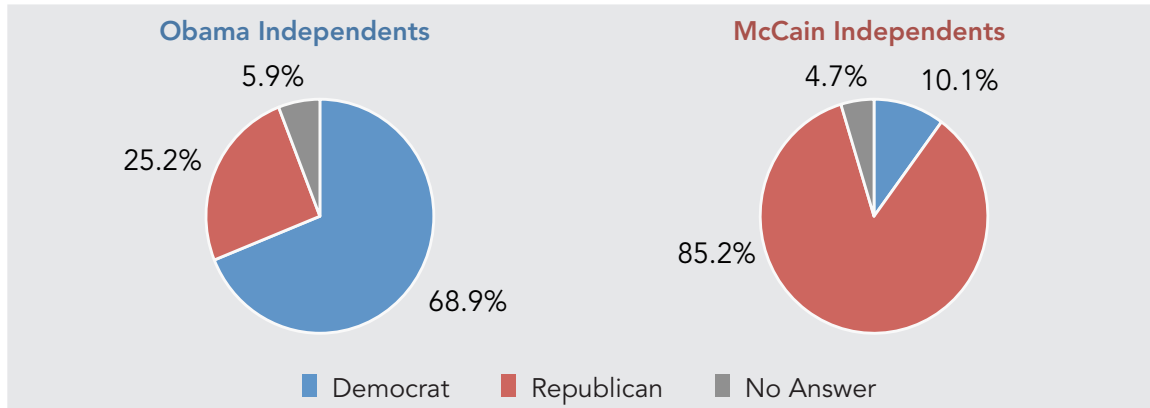
What is your family’s personal financial situation compared to four years ago?



SWING VOTING A: 2010 HOUSE VOTE

Obama Independents bolted from the Democratic Party in midterms.

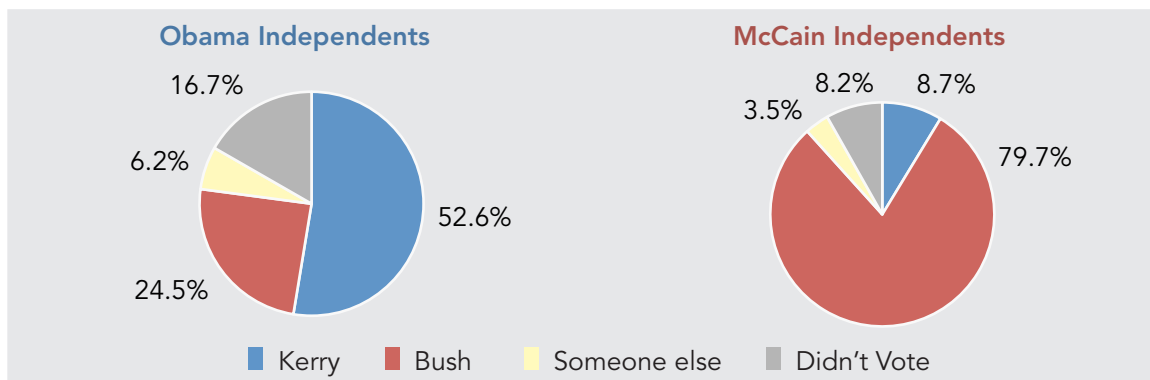
More Obama Independents are swing voters than McCain Independents. One-quarter of Obama Independents voted for a Republican for the House in the 2010 midterm elections.³ By contrast, only 10% of McCain Independents voted for a Democratic House candidate.



SWING VOTING B: 2004 PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

Nearly half of all Obama Independents were not Democratic voters in 2004.

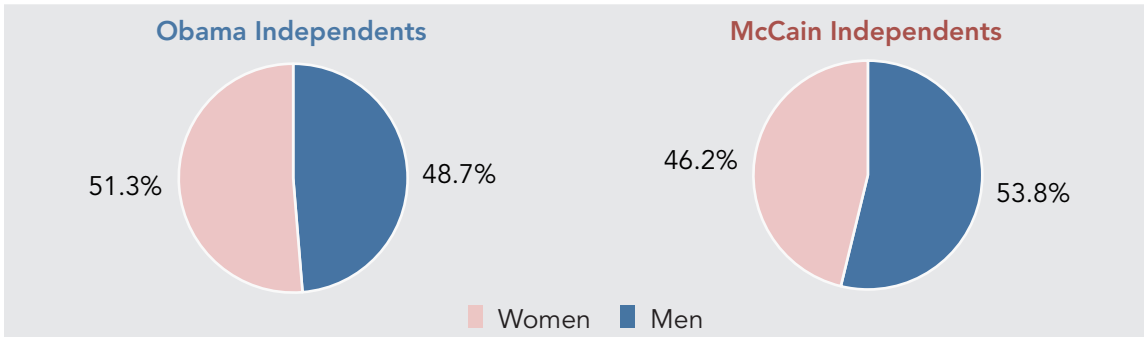
President Obama won more swing Independents than Sen. McCain in 2008. McCain Independents were primarily Bush voters in 2004, but Obama Independents are more complex. Nearly half were not Kerry voters in 2004—31% voted for Bush or someone else, and 17% didn't vote.



GENDER

Obama Independents include more women.

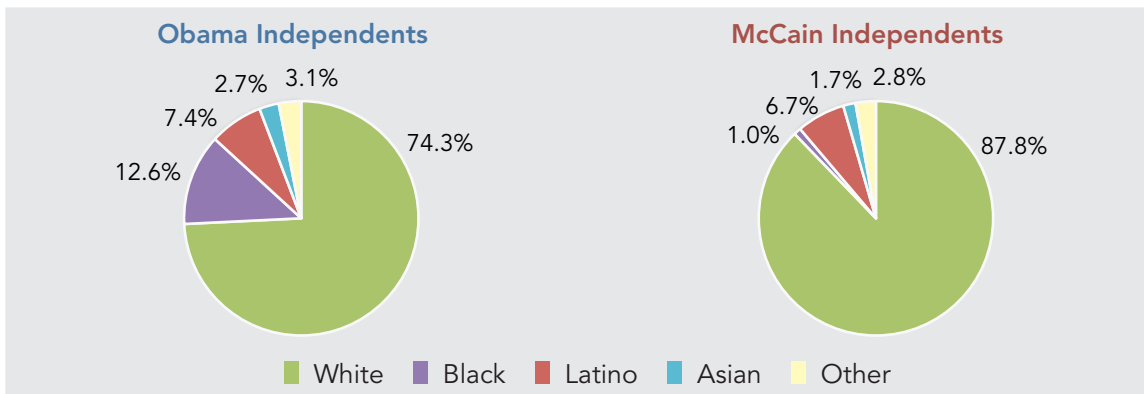
Conventional wisdom holds that Independents skew male—which they did in 2008—but Obama Independents skew slightly more female. The McCain Independents trend the opposite—tilting even more male than all Independents (51%), Republicans (49%), and the electorate as a whole (47%).



RACE

Obama Independents are more racially diverse.

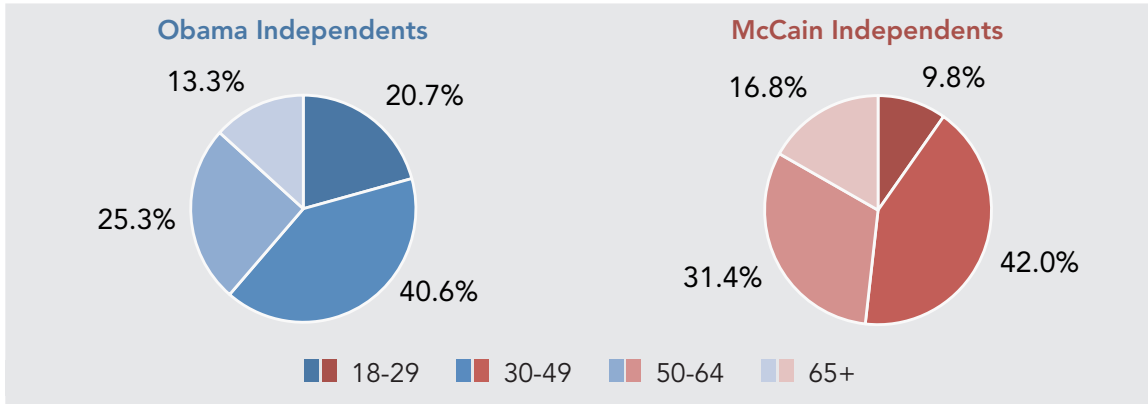
The Obama Independents are practically a mirror image of America, while the McCain Independents mirror Idaho.⁴ McCain Independents are almost exclusively white, with a small slice of Latino voters. By contrast, 74% of Obama Independents are white, with near parity in every category to the electorate as a whole.



AGE

Obama Independents are younger.

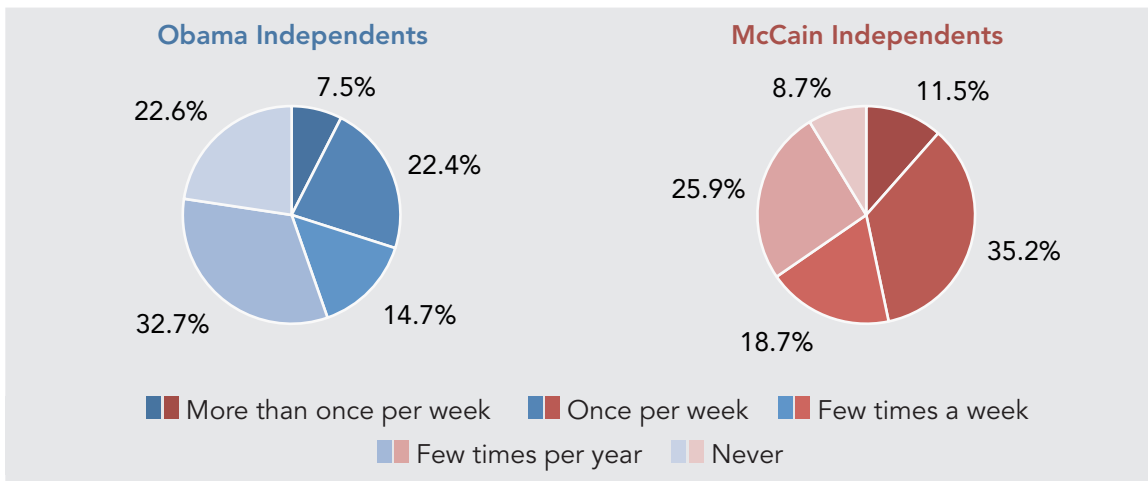
Obama Independents are younger than McCain Independents—nearly half of which were over 50 in 2008. One-fifth of Obama Independents were under 30, compared to one-tenth of McCain Independents.



RELIGIOSITY

McCain Independents attend religious services more often.

Obama Independents are less likely to attend religious services regularly than either McCain Independents or, interestingly, Democrats generally. Whereas 30% of Obama Independents said they attended services weekly or more, 47% of McCain Independents and 35% of Democrats are regular attenders.

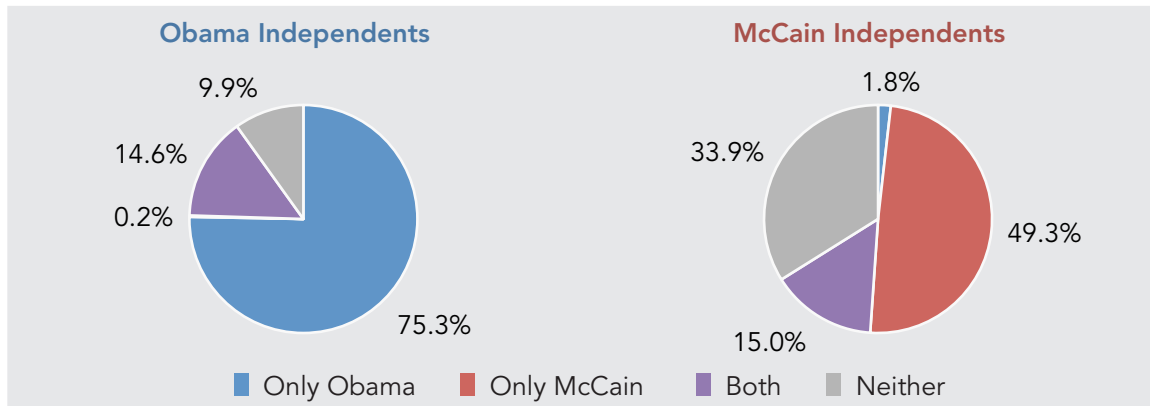


IN TOUCH

Obama Independents felt a connection to their candidate.

Obama Independents felt a strong connection to Obama, while McCain Independents were distant from McCain. When asked “which candidate is in touch with people like you?” Obama Independents overwhelmingly chose President Obama (75%) in 2008. By contrast, just 49% of McCain Independents chose McCain.

Which candidate is in touch with people like you?



CONCLUSION

In 2012, Independents are likely to comprise the highest proportion of the electorate since 1976, and winning them will be crucial to victory. But not all Independents are the same, and the real showdown for 2012 is over who will win the Obama Independents. If President Obama woos the vast majority of them back, he can be reelected. But if he performs among them like Democrats did in 2010, when one-quarter of the Obama Independents voted for a Republican, it's going to be a long election night.

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THE AUTHORS

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■ ENDNOTES

1 All data from the 2008 Presidential election, including crosstabs, is based upon authors' analysis of exit poll data. National Election Pool Poll # 2008-NATELEC: National Election Day Exit Poll [computer file]. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research Study USMI2008-NATELEC Version 3. Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International [producer], 2008. Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut [distributor], 2011.

2 Michelle Diggles and Lanae Erickson, "Independents Day 2012," Third Way, November 2011. Available at: <http://thirdway.org/publications/470>.

3 Authors' calculations of 2010 exit poll data. National Election Pool Poll # 2010-NATELEC: National Election Day Exit Poll [computer file]. Roper Center for Public Opinion Research Study USMI2010-NATELEC Version 3. Edison Media Research/Mitofsky International [producer], 2010. Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut [distributor], 2011.

4 Unites States, Department of Commerce, Census Bureau, "Idaho," State and Country Quick Facts. Accessed January 20, 2011. Available at: <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/16000.html>.