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Two Elites, Two Elitists

According to the well-worn script of American politics, Democrats run on economic populism ("fairness") and Republicans run on social populism ("values"). Not this year. In 2012, social issues—"God, guns and gays"—have been shoved aside, even in Iowa and South Carolina where evangelical voters have always been a major force.

Social issues were not very big in 2008 either. And for the same reason: the nation's economic crisis eclipsed everything else. Barack Obama was never a very convincing economic populist, but he still won a solid victory. Times were tough. Putting Sarah Palin on the ticket was a ploy by John McCain to keep "values voters" in the Republican column. It didn't work.

In some ways, 2012 looks like a replay of 2008. Times are still tough. Jobs and the economy continue to dominate the agenda. But there's one enormous difference: in 2012, the incumbent President is a Democrat.

Both President Obama and Mitt Romney are elitists by style and temperament. They just represent different elites. One is an elite of education—educated, upper-middle-class liberals. The other is an elite of wealth—country-club conservatives. The two elites have been competing for power since the 1960s. 2012 looks like the ultimate showdown: two elites, two elitists, both posing as "men of the people."

Who's trying to stop Romney? "Values voters"—the populist wing of the Republican Party. Those voters have two problems. One,

they can't unite behind one candidate. They've been split between Rick Santorum, Rick Perry, and Newt Gingrich. Two, social issues are not high on the agenda this year. As a result, we have this odd spectacle of Gingrich and Perry lobbing attacks on Romney as an economic elitist. Perry called Romney a "vulture capitalist." Gingrich said, "Show me somebody who has consistently made money while losing money for workers and I'll show you someone who has undermined capitalism."



Those attacks have drawn counterattacks from conservatives who believe, correctly, that economic populism is the preserve of the left. Mike Huckabee said, "It's surprising to see so many Republicans embrace that left-wing argument against capitalism." Romney complained that "free enterprise" was on trial. "I thought it was going to come from the President, from the Democrats on the left, but instead it's coming from Speaker Gingrich and apparently others," Romney said.

The attacks are not working. Economic populism doesn't have much resonance on the right. But the attacks did spare Romney from having to defend his wavering positions on social issues, where he is vulnerable to criticism from the right.

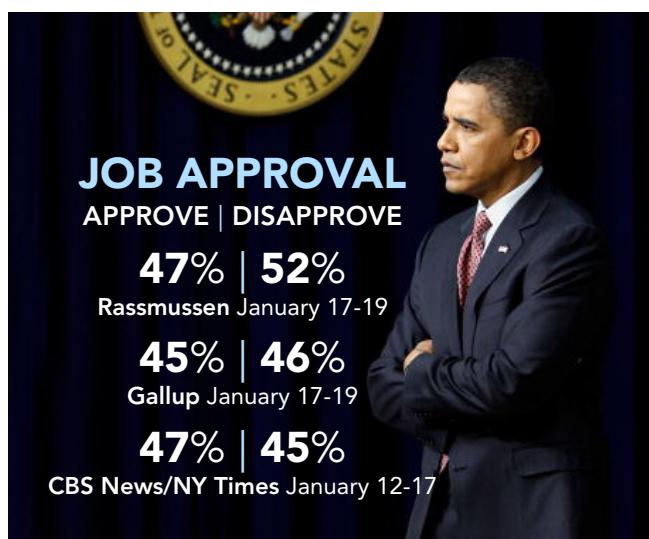
Obama also has an elitism problem. He drew a populist challenge in 2008 from Hillary Clinton. Clinton was the fighter ("If I tell you I will fight for you, that is exactly what I intend to do"). Obama was the dreamer ("It's about you, your hopes and your dreams"). Clinton beat Obama in Rust Belt states where white working class voters—economic populists—predominate: Ohio, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee. Some Democrats have been advising President Obama to put Hillary Clinton on the ticket in 2012 to help him to reclaim that populist vote.

Obama's elitism comes through in off-the-cuff remarks like the one in 2008 when he talked about small-town voters who "get bitter" and "cling to guns or religion." Romney tried to resurrect that gaffe in his New Hampshire victory speech, when he called President Obama "a leader who divides us with the bitter politics of envy." Meanwhile, Romney made his own gaffes with his offer of a \$10,000 bet and his statement that he likes being able to fire people.

In 1988, Republicans nominated another candidate born to wealth and privilege—George H.W. Bush. His Democratic opponent, Michael Dukakis, was a Massachusetts governor with liberal social values. Two elites, two elitists.

Bush won by running a ruthless campaign on social issues—the flag, the pledge of allegiance, the death penalty, criminal furloughs. Bush made Dukakis look like the bigger elitist. It also helped that the economy was doing very well under a Republican President, so Dukakis's errant displays of economic populism never gained much traction.

Romney can't run on social issues. He doesn't have the record for it, and social issues are not very prominent this year. Can a man of Romney's wealth and temperament run a campaign of economic populism? He will certainly try. Romney's populism will be anti-government, anti-Washington, and anti-foreign. We will hear attacks on China, illegal immigration, and Europe ("The President takes his inspiration from the capitals of Europe; we look to the cities and small towns of America").



Meanwhile, President Obama's speech in Kansas last month signaled his own turn toward economic populism: "the breathtaking greed of a few" . . . "on-your-own economics" . . . "This kind of inequality—a level we haven't seen since the Great Depression—hurts us all."

Neither candidate is a convincing populist. President Obama continues to sound like a college professor speaking from a lectern (actually, a teleprompter). Mitt Romney is Mr. One Percent. The 2012 election is likely to be very odd, and very unsatisfying for voters. At a time of populist outrage, populists have no authentic champion. Think of it this way: in the last three years, we've seen a populist eruption on the right (the Tea Party movement) and a populist eruption on the left (the Occupy movement). Neither one of them has a candidate for President. ■

Rich vs. Poor

The United States is a classless society, right? That's what Republicans say.

Rick Santorum tore into Mitt Romney for using the term "middle class" in a recent Republican primary debate. "We don't put people in classes," Santorum said. "The idea that we're going to buy into the class warfare arguments of Barack Obama is something that should not be part of the Republican lexicon."

Maybe not when the economy is booming. But at a time when workers' wages are stagnant and the rich are making out like bandits, class resentment goes up.

Percent who say there are strong conflicts between <i>Rich</i> and <i>Poor</i> in America	
2009	2012
47%	66%

Pew Research Center

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center came up with a startling increase in the number of Americans who believe there are strong conflicts between poor people and rich people in the U.S. Two thirds of Americans now see big conflicts between rich and poor—more than see conflicts between immigrants and natives (62%), blacks and whites (38%) and young and old (34%).

The last time class tensions were that high was in 1992, when the issue was "the economy, stupid."

Mitt Romney has denounced what he calls "resentment of success." Is that what's going on? Or is it resentment of corrupt and abusive behavior by Wall Street?

Not-So-Strange-Bedfellows

	Mormons	White Evangelical Christians
Republican	74%	68%
Conservative	66%	61%
Favorable opinion of Barack Obama	25%	25%

Pew Forum polls, November-December 2011

Tensions between Mormons and evangelicals are well-known. Nearly half of white evangelicals do not think Mormons are Christians. That could be a factor in Republican primaries. In a November Pew poll, among the 60% of white evangelical Republicans who knew that Mitt Romney is a Mormon, one quarter said his religion

makes them less likely to vote for him. But put Romney against President Obama and there's no contest. Among white evangelical voters, Romney beats Obama 91 to 6.

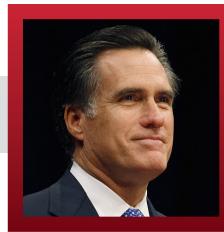
MITT ROMNEY: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

After a strong second place finish in Iowa and a decisive victory in New Hampshire, what do those early voters *really* think about the Republican frontrunner?

● % of respondents ■ % voted for Romney

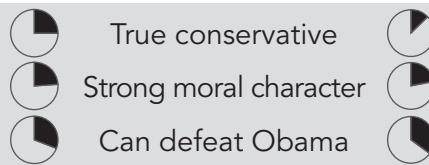


1,787 Respondents



2,760 Respondents

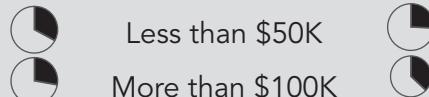
MOST IMPORTANT:



#1 ISSUE:



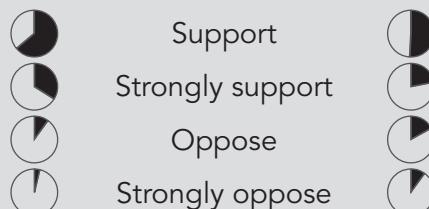
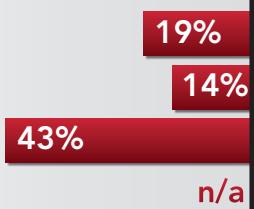
INCOME:



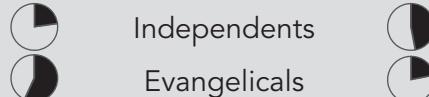
AGE:



TEA PARTY:



SELF-ID:



CNN New Hampshire Republican Primary exit poll, January 10, 2012. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/primaries/epolls/nh>.
 CNN Iowa Republican Caucus entrance poll, January 3, 2012. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/election/2012/primaries/epolls/ia>.

* Iowa poll age range was 17-29.

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