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When Unity Fails, Results Must Prevail

Sen. Marco Rubio, speaking at a recent Republican fundraising dinner in South Carolina, said about President Obama, "We have not seen such a divisive figure in modern American history as we have over the last three and a half years." Really? Not George W. Bush? Or Bill Clinton? There were plenty of Clinton-haters in the 1990s and Bush-haters in the 2000s. Is Obama more divisive than they were?

The answer from the Gallup poll is yes. Gallup uses a simple index to measure divisiveness: the difference between approval of the President among members of his own party and members of the other party. That index has been creeping upwards for more than 30 years. Gallup reports, "Prior to Ronald Reagan, no President averaged more than a 40-point gap in approval ratings by party during his term; since then, only the elder George Bush has averaged less than a 50-point gap." The average gap between Democrats and Republicans under Bill Clinton? 55 points. Under George W. Bush? 61 points. Under Barack Obama in his first three years? 67 points.

Polarization always rises in a presidential election year, and so it has this year. In mid-May 2012, Obama was supported by 84% of Democrats and 10% of Republicans. A whopping 74-point gap.

Rubio claims that Obama 2012 is

"a very different person" than Obama 2008. How so? "He was going to be a post-partisan uniter to bring Americans together." But now, Rubio said on Fox TV, "The President has become just like anybody else in Washington, D.C. . . . He has lost what makes him different."

Heidi Heitkamp, former North Dakota attorney general and 2012 Senate candidate, took the criticism of Obama one step further. She told the Associated Press that Obama "failed in the one test America had for him, which was to unite the country." Heitkamp is a Democrat.

She's right that voters saw Obama as a leader who could do what three Presidents before him had failed to do—bring the country together. Obama's first exposure to a national audience came during the 2004 campaign, which was one of the most bitterly divisive contests in recent history. Obama thrilled voters with his keynote convention address: "There's not a liberal America and a conservative America. There's the United States of America."

Obama had unique qualifications to be what George W. Bush had called himself—"a uniter, not a divider." Obama was both black and white. He was not part of the culture wars of the 1960s that shaped the nation's two baby boomer Presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Obama could speak the language of faith that

many Democrats are uncomfortable with. He promised to reach out to Republicans and govern in a spirit of bipartisanship.

In the Democratic primaries, Hillary 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: "One voice can change a room. If it can change a room, it can change a city. If it can change a city, it can change a nation. If it can change a nation, it can change the world. One voice can change the world! Let's go change the world!"

It hasn't exactly gone as planned. For one thing, unity is not a theme conservatives respond to. They don't want unity. They want victory. Richard Mourdock, the Tea Party candidate who defeated Sen. Richard Lugar in the Indiana Republican primary last month, defined unity this way: "I think bipartisanship ought to consist of Democrats coming to the Republican point of view."

"Unity" seems to be a liberal value Kum-ba-ya and all that. Conservatives prefer a combative style of politics. Conservatives are talk radio. Liberals are "All Things Considered."

President Obama's style may not have been divisive, but his policies were. That must have come as a surprise to him. In the first few months of his Administration, the new President proposed a stimulus plan, a mortgage rescue

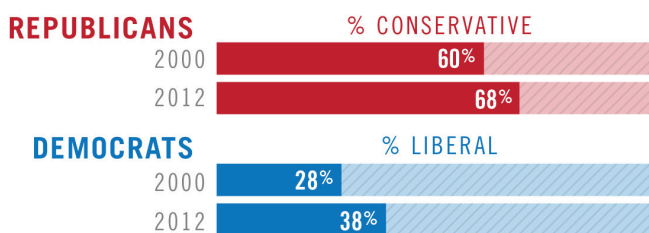
program, bailouts of failing companies, and health care reform Obama saw those policies as practical solutions to urgent problems. But from the outset, conservatives saw a sinister ideological agenda: their worst nightmare of big government. A resistance movement sprang up almost immediately—the Tea Party.

Obama's policies were a lot more controversial than he expected them to be. Anything that looks like "big government" is bound to be. There is only one way a big government program can succeed. It has to work. Americans are pragmatists. They believe whatever works must be right. Ideologues believe that if something is wrong, it can't possibly work. Even if it does work.

To win re-election, Democrats have to convince voters that the President's policies are really working. That the economy is getting better. That their health care security has improved. That jobs are coming back. Right now, Americans are not entirely convinced. That's why the election is so close.

Like three Presidents before him, President Obama has failed to deliver unity. To get re-elected, there's one option left. He has to deliver success. ■

POLARIZED PARTIES



Pew Research Center



Americans (Don't) Elect

Does the failure of Americans Elect mean Americans are satisfied with the two party choice? No. In a 2011 Gallup poll, a majority endorsed the view that "the Republican and Democratic parties do such a poor job of representing the American people that a third major party is needed."

What the failure of Americans Elect means is this: you can't win a horse race without a horse. A horse can be a charismatic candidate like Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 (a former President) or Ross Perot in 1992. TR and Perot got the highest popular support of any third party candidate in the last 100 years.

A horse can also be an ideological cause like segregation (George Wallace in 1968, Strom Thurmond in 1948), or progressivism (Robert LaFollette in 1924, Henry Wallace in 1948, Ralph Nader in 2000). John Anderson's vote in 1980 was the dying gasp of liberal Republicanism after Ronald Reagan took over the GOP (Anderson did best in New England, where liberal Republicans held out the longest).

Americans Elect had neither a charismatic leader nor an ideological cause. The cause it represented was dissatisfaction with the two parties. That is certainly widespread. But it needs a charismatic leader who promises to deliver the country from gridlock. Military heroes often fill that role—someone like Dwight Eisenhower (World War II) or Colin Powell (the Gulf War). David Petraeus? He is associated with wars that are not exactly heroic (Iraq and Afghanistan). In any case, Petraeus wasn't interested.

The last four Presidents got elected on a pledge to bring the country together. They all failed. Americans Elect had the pledge and the organization but not the candidate. The cause is still there. It's just waiting for a leader.

The Enthusiasm Race

When Barack Obama got elected President in 2008, he was not just leading a campaign. He was leading a political movement. Can President Obama revive that movement for his re-election?

The *Washington Post*-ABC News poll has an encouraging sign. A majority of Obama supporters describe themselves as "very enthusiastic" about supporting him. That's about the same level of enthusiasm he was getting at this point in the 2008 race. It's twice as high as the number of Mitt Romney supporters who call themselves "very enthusiastic." Enthusiasm for Romney is only slightly higher than enthusiasm for John McCain in 2008.

There are two movements in American politics right now: the Obama movement and the conservative movement. George W. Bush identified closely with the conservative movement when he ran for re-election in 2004. The level of enthusiasm of his supporters that year was very similar to Obama's. Neither McCain nor Romney is identified with the conservative movement, though not for lack of trying. You can see it in the relatively low enthusiasm of their supporters.

Third Party Presidential Candidates Since 1900

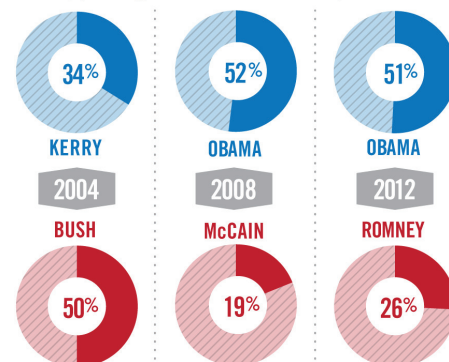
(Receiving 1 million votes or more)

CANDIDATE	% OF POPULAR VOTE WON	ELECTORAL VOTES WON
1912 Theodore Roosevelt	27%	88
1924 Robert LaFollette	17%	13
1948 Strom Thurmond	2%	39
1948 Henry Wallace	2%	0
1968 George Wallace	14%	46
1972 John Schmitz	1%	0
1980 John Anderson	7%	0
1992 Ross Perot	19%	0
1996 Ross Perot	8%	0
2000 Ralph Nader	3%	0

David Leip, "Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections," <http://uselectionatlas.org/>

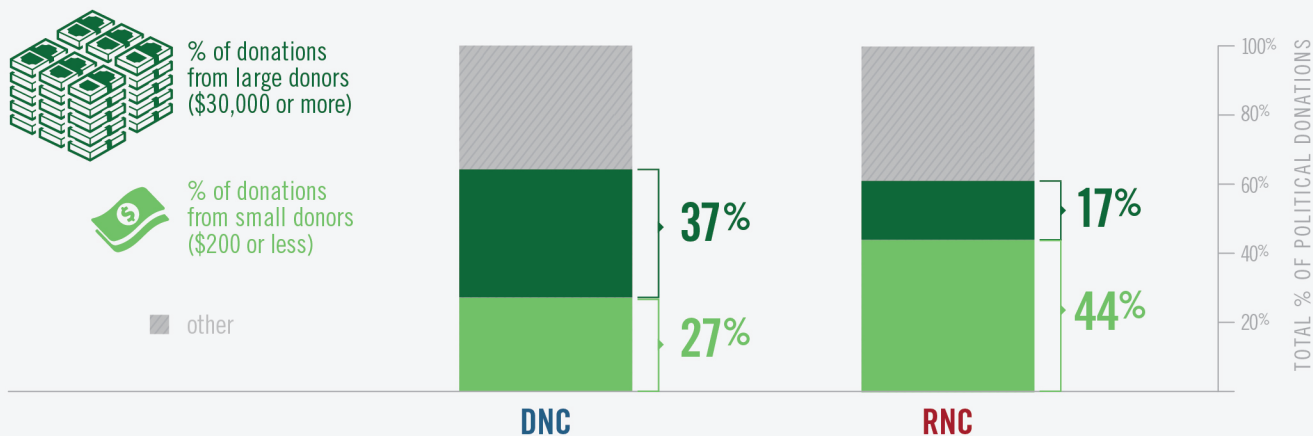
ELECTOR ENTHUSIASM

% of voters who are very enthusiastic about supporting their candidate for president

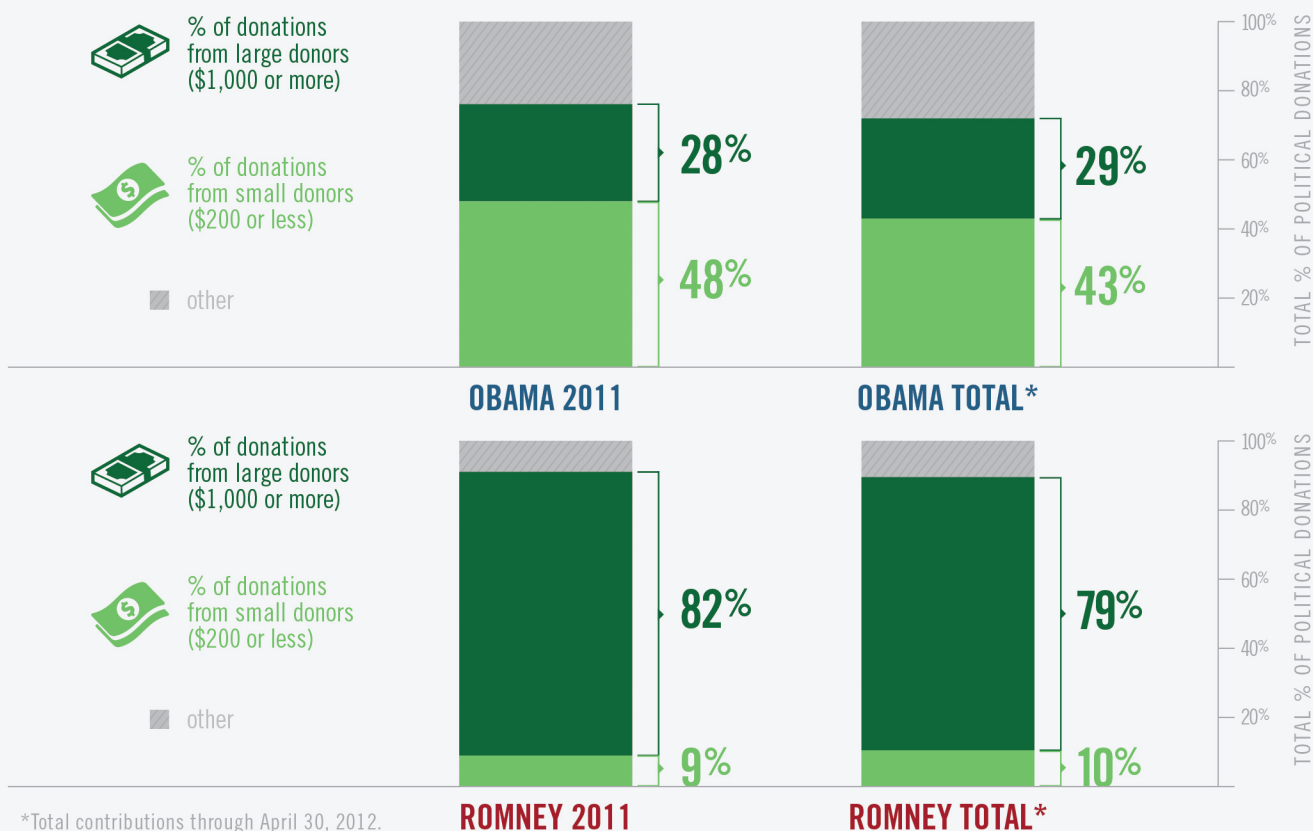


Washington Post/ABC News Poll, May 17-20, 2012.

INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO PARTY COMMITTEES IN 2011



INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO 2012 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES



*Total contributions through April 30, 2012.

More evidence that the Obama campaign is a political movement: most of Obama's contributions are in small amounts (\$200 or less), while Romney gets most of his money in big bucks (\$1,000 or more).

The reverse is true for the two parties. Big money fuels the Democratic National Committee, while the RNC gets mostly small contributions. The RNC has become a branch of the conservative movement.

Campaign Finance Institute. Accessed June 6, 2012. Available at: <http://www.cfinst.org/default.aspx>.

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