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## Barack Obama and the nationalization of electoral politics in 2012

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### ABSTRACT

In 2012, the United States experienced the most partisan, nationalized, and president-centered federal elections in at least six decades. Record levels of party loyalty in the presidential contest carried over into the House and Senate elections, and the consistency in voting across offices, measured at both the individual and aggregate levels, was the highest observed since the requisite data have been available. In this article, I document these points, with special attention to how patterns of opinion and voting in 2012 compare with those in prior elections contested by sitting presidents. I then consider possible explanations for why Barack Obama's pursuit of reelection produced such remarkably coherent electoral politics, examining Obama's racially-tinged image among Republicans, sources of his extraordinarily high level of support among Democrats, and the vagaries of the Romney campaign. Finally, I explain why, under the current electoral configuration, electoral coherence delivers incoherent government.

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Barack Obama held onto the White House 2012 after the most partisan, nationalized, and president-centered federal elections in at least six decades. The proximal reasons for Obama's victory were that, despite a weak economy, virtually no crossover appeal to Republicans, and less than majority support among independents, he received overwhelming approval and electoral support from ordinary Democrats, and they participated at rates high enough to give their side a substantial numerical advantage in the electorate (Jacobson, 2013a; 2013d; Hetherington, 2014; Mellow, 2013). Record levels of party loyalty carried over into the House and Senate elections, and the consistency in voting across offices, measured at both the individual and aggregate levels, was the highest observed since the requisite data have been available. In this article, I document these points, with special attention to how patterns of opinion and voting in 2012 compare with those in prior elections contested by sitting presidents. I then examine

possible explanations for why this president and this election produced such remarkably coherent electoral politics. Finally, I briefly consider some consequences of the election for present-day politics in Washington.

### 1. Party line voting, ticket splitting, and presidential influence

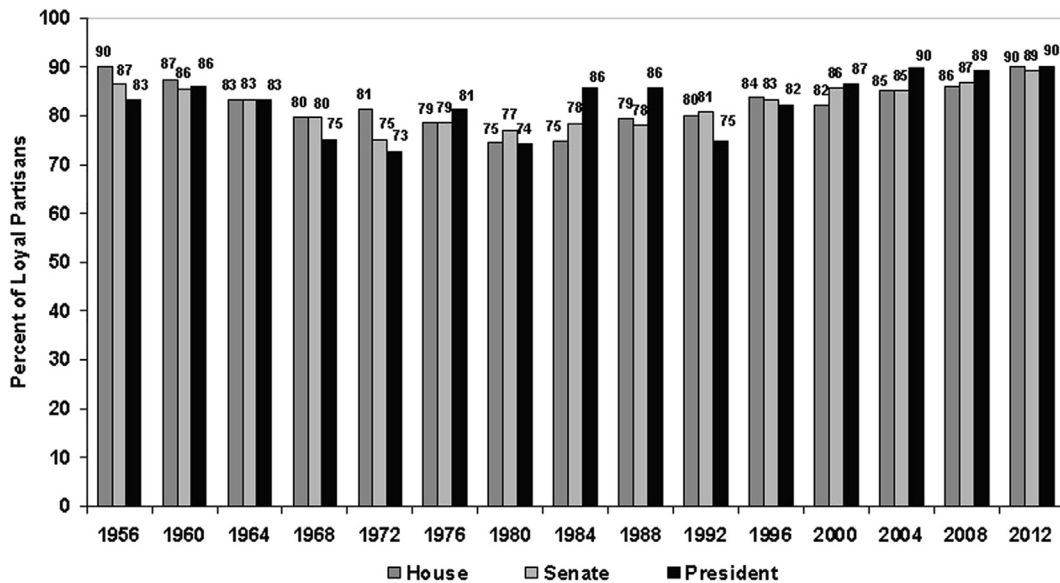
The 2012 election produced the highest levels of party line voting in any survey in the American National Election Studies (ANES) time series (ANES 2013).<sup>1</sup> Fig. 1 displays the percentage of partisans voting for their own party's candidates for president, representative, and senator in elections since 1956. Party loyalty rates for president (90.1

<sup>1</sup> American National Election Studies ([www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)) TIME SERIES CUMULATIVE DATA FILE [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers and distributors], 2010; The American National Election Studies (ANES; [www.electionstudies.org](http://www.electionstudies.org)). The ANES 2012 Time Series Study [dataset]. Stanford University and the University of Michigan [producers].

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Source: ANES Cumulative Data File and 2012 ANES Time Series (face-to-face component).

Fig. 1. Party-line voting in U.S. elections, 1956–2012.

percent) and Senate (89.2 percent) and House (90.2 percent) are all the highest for the period.<sup>2</sup> Only the 2004 electorate approached (at 89.8 percent) the level of party line presidential voting reported in 2012. For comparability with other ANES surveys, I use only the face-to-face component of the 2012 study; if the internet component is included, all of these numbers are a bit higher, and other major national surveys found even higher levels of party loyalty (Jacobson, 2013d). With party-line voting for all three offices so high, it is no surprise that ticket-splitting reached its low point for the period in 2012 (Fig. 2). Less than 11 percent of ANES voters reported voting for different parties' candidates for president and House or Senate in 2012, far below the rates of the 1970s and 1980s and also well below elections in the 2000s.<sup>3</sup>

As Figs. 1 and 2 make clear, the observations for 2012 extend trends that began in the 1970s. Still, the question arises as to why they reached such extremes when Obama sought reelection. One major reason is that Obama himself emerged as an unusually powerful focal object for the coordination of political attitudes and behavior in 2012. Fig. 3 offers some initial evidence for this claim. It displays the percentage of voters whose votes were congruent with their evaluations of the president's job performance—for the president or his party's candidates if they approved, for

the other party's candidates if they disapproved—when presidents have run for reelection since 1972. Of course, presidential job approval is always quite highly congruent with the presidential vote—it would be very strange if it were not—with 80 percent (in 1976) representing the lowest level of congruence in the series. But the consistency between opinions of Obama's performance in office and presidential voting decisions in 2012, at 94 percent, is still remarkably high. And compared to previous elections, the levels of congruence reported by House and Senate voters—87.1 percent and 86.6 percent, respectively, both record highs—are at least as remarkable.

Aggregate data also reveal an extraordinary degree of electoral coherence in 2012. Fig. 4 presents two measures of the relationship between presidential and House voting at the district level: the percentage of variance shared by the district-level House and presidential vote, and the percentage of districts that delivered split verdicts, with pluralities voting for a presidential candidate of one party and the House candidate of the other. By both measures, 2012 stands out as extreme. The district-level vote shares for president and House candidate are correlated at greater than .95, and hence 90.7 percent of their variance is shared, a far larger proportion than in any previous post-war election. The incidence of districts delivering split verdicts, 6 percent, is less than half the previous low of 14 percent established in 2004; only 17 of the 435 districts went for Obama and a Republican, and only 9 went for Romney and a Democrat. Moreover, only 6 states favored different parties in the Senate and presidential elections, the smallest number and proportion for the entire period, and the shared variance between the state-level vote for president and senator, 63 percent, was the greatest since 1956 (67 percent) and substantially greater than in any election since then (Jacobson, 2013a).

<sup>2</sup> For House and Senate elections, analysis for Figs. 1–3 is confined to voters in races contested by both parties, where voters have the necessary options to be loyal or consistent—or not; the 2012 election's status as the most extreme case in data in all three figures is unchanged if voters in all races are included.

<sup>3</sup> The rate of ticket-splitting in the 2012 Senate elections was 10.9 percent, very slightly above the previous record low set back in 1960 (10.6 percent); ticket splitting is defined as voting for a presidential candidate of one major party and a congressional candidate from the other major party; the rates of ticket splitting would be higher in years such as 1968, 1980, and 1992 if third party or independent candidates are included.

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