

U.S. Elections From Melting Pot to Multiculturalism in the United States

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INTRODUCTION

A tyranny of small-group decisions had huge cultural consequences in the November 2012 U.S. elections. It was not just the minority groups (Hispanics, Afro-Americans, and Asians, in order of voting clout) “ganging” up against Mitt Romney and the Republican Party, or even other non-mainstream groups (such as gay men and lesbians) doing the same: even the largest voting bloc, women, took a decisive pro-Obama stand. Was a melting-pot United States yielding to a multicultural alternative? If it was, the predicted outcome of Samuel P. Huntington’s “clash” thesis may have arrived without a clash.¹

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Four sections of this article explore that puzzle. Whereas the first defines culture before distinguishing between the melting-pot and multicultural conceptions, the second analyzes culture-related election data. The third places the immediate electoral aftermath within a historical context, while the fourth probes the immediate future.

CULTURAL TRANSITION: BATTLE OF MELTING-POT AND MULTICULTURAL MINDSETS

Behind Huntington’s clash thesis, built upon immigration from what he called “torn” countries, like Mexico, lay other discordant forces: a) at least two strands of Islam, one promoting fundamentalism, the other depicting non-assimilation into Western society, as with veil-wearing women; b) mass

production, fast-food, and genetically-modified farm production displacing rice-paddy- or *tortilla*-based cultures elsewhere;² and c) an unfolding Internet revolution breaking all country- and culture-based barriers, exposing deviant behavior by just about everyone, including Muslim mullahs, Catholic priests, and Protestant evangelists.³

According to the giants disseminating it,⁴ culture boils down to the relationship between the human being and his/her environment.⁵ So the farmer's environmental interaction became agriculture, which became impossible for Eskimos, while Chinese sericulture depended on locally available silk producers, whose laborious work required they sit, differing significantly from the Detroit assembly-plant operator's work, which was largely done standing. Edwin T. Hall describes what emerges as a "highly selective screen between man [and, to be politically correct, woman] and the outside world," including all the "disparate" events that constantly occur: "the subject or activity, the situation, one's status in a social system, past experience . . . ," and so forth.⁶

Hopping, skipping, and jumping over so many fascinating dimensions to the immigration context, "the melting pot" is a harmonizing bucket in which the different shades pooled produce the essence of the host country. Whether the inputs are "white," "black," "yellow," or "brown," the U.S. end-product should know the Constitution, sing *God Bless America*, build an "American pie" repertoire, and eventually promote a "made-in-the-U.S.A." mindset. Since these were all long-term WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant) expectations, the U.S. melting pot was expected to reflect and relate to that.

Under multiculturalism on the other hand, the Chinese-American and the Muslim-American, the Indian-American and the Hispanic-American can retain not only their original "cultures" but also be able to have them constitutionally protected. Canada was the first to establish such multicultural guarantees (beginning in 1971),⁷ but given how the Bloc Québécois was wiped out in the 2011 elections, questions persist about whether Canadian multiculturalism has sunk in sufficiently. Nevertheless, the headscarf controversy is informative:⁸ at one extreme, a Muslim woman's right to wear it is constitutionally protected in Canada; at the other extreme, France, the perfect melting-pot country, forbids her to do so, while in between, the United States gives her constitutional freedoms but she alone faces pressures in the social market. Returning to the original puzzle, with the November 2012 elections nudging the United States toward a multicul-

tural future from a melting-pot past, the country may overtake Canada as the ideal multicultural country and France in disbanding a melting-pot identity.

NOVEMBER 2012 ELECTION MESSAGES: A MULTICULTURAL *QUID PRO QUO*?

There is a catch to any argument attributing Obama's victory to "minority" votes: 55 percent of women's votes went to Obama, 43 percent to Romney, with women accounting for at least 50 percent of the U.S. population. Yet, that the "minority" votes disproportionately favored Obama may have been the clincher: 93 percent of Afro-American, 74 percent of Asian, and 69 percent of Hispanic voters preferred Obama, as opposed to 6 percent, 25 percent, and 29 percent, respectively, favoring Romney.⁹ These same "minority" groups favored Obama by similar margins in 2008, creating an eight-year window of opportunity for institutionalizing any socio-cultur-

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al transformation... formally or informally. Romney raking in 48 percent of the popular vote (57 458 819) against Obama's (60 190 138) exposed the WASP plight to be not only that of a minority, but also a minority in decline (unlike the others):¹⁰ Romney won 56 percent of the Protestant vote but missed out on half of all Catholic and 70 percent of all Jewish voters. Huntington recounts how Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of "Anglo-Saxons" in his 1830s visit as "one group among many in the American ethnic landscape," but since its culture had "survived for three hundred years as a paramount defusing element of American identity," others had no choice but to adapt to it.¹¹

That is the equation the 2012 elections changed. In the 2012 elections, "minority" groups made up 37 percent of the population, casting an unprecedented 28 percent of the votes.¹² According to PEWS's Paul Taylor and D'Vero Cohn, "minority groups . . . [are] on track to become a majority of the nation's population by 2052." In 2012, 70 percent of the electorate was white, dropping from 72 percent in 2008,

while Latinos increased from 9 to 10 and Asians from 2 to 3 percent of the electorate for those years. Since the latest U.S. census recorded more non-white than white births, politics cannot remain oblivious to demographic changes: not only is the United States “increasingly brown rather than white,” but also a place where “women and the young are finally finding their full political voice.”¹³

Politicians might ignore demographic changes, as was true of Romney specifically and Republicans broadly, but subtle demographic changes reconfigure politics significantly. Given how the 1992-2007 economic boom expanded immigration, the Hispanic population, which profited the most of all U.S. immigrant groups in this surge, shot up in Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Nevada, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Washington, while actually doubling in proportion to the state population in Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee.¹⁴ Many of these states were safe Republican strongholds in the 2012 elections, but with higher Latin population growth rates, by 2050, they are expected to become less “red” and more “blue,” less “white” and more “brown.”

Swing states made that change in the 2012 election because a) Romney ignored Latinos, and b) first-generation immigrants have a historical preference for Democratic Party affiliation. Romney’s 2011 promise to veto the DREAM Act had an impact, as did the hiring of Kris Kobach, the FAIR leader instrumental in creating Arizona’s SB1070 and copycat legislations elsewhere,¹⁵ and the belief that illegal immigrants would “self-deport” alienated many—just as Obama’s Deferred Action immigration legislation attracted many—especially in swing states.¹⁶ Seventy-five percent of Colorado Hispanics voted for Obama, 70 percent in Nevada, and 53 percent in Ohio. Broader still, at least half of the 24 million eligible Hispanic voters (12.2 million) registered to vote, utilizing this political tool to make political changes for the first time. Any future election victory will be measured by adjustments to this dynamic. For the Republican Party, it is not a matter of *if* that change will take place but *when*. Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal’s mild post-election rebuke of Mitt Romney suggests the adjustment issue is already on the table.¹⁷

Whether the Tea Party hijacks the Republican Party manifesto again or not, for now the Democrats have emerged as the multicultural champions just the way the Republicans were the WASP counterpart. With the first Hindu elected to the U.S. Congress (Tulsi Gabbard, a Democratic woman from Hawaii), the first Buddhist elected to the U.S. Senate (Maz-

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ie Hirono, another Democratic woman from Hawaii who won a seat vacated by retiring Senator Daniel Akaka), not to mention the growing number of Latino legislators and justices, a critical U.S. detour from a WASP toward a multicultural identity is underway demographically and, in 2012, electorally. Surely this is not a window of opportunity many politicians will neglect for long.

David Bositis of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies correctly sees the end of the Ronald Reagan “era,” or “mandate,” and with it, its key characteristics: “conservative dominance powered by conservative voters and Southern whites.”¹⁸ Dubbing Obama’s victory a “mandate for moderation,” *Time*’s Joe Klein argues the South “won’t rise again until it resolves the issues that have marked its difference from the rest of the country since the land was colonized,” a clear message that the Republican Party’s fate is also the South’s,¹⁹ but also that without a different approach to immigrants, that message will no longer bring victory.

ANOTHER MANDATE ELECTION?

If that reading is correct, then the 2012 election was a mandate, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s in 1936, Lyndon Baines Johnson’s in 1964, Ronald Reagan’s in 1980, and Barack Obama’s in 2008. Of the three of those presidents to win a second term, Obama barely squeezed by with his victory margin: 50 percent versus 59 percent for Reagan and 61 percent for FDR.²⁰ Yet, he is in the company of those who redefined the country’s political trajectory: FDR by institutionalizing the New Deal and Reagan by rolling the snowball to uproot the New Deal. Obama stands at the precipice to renegotiate the New Deal, but his success will come only from “new Americans”: the minorities, as previously discussed, a larger proportion of whom built their U.S. dreams on precisely the welfare provisions provided by the New Deal.

Donna Brazile, who deals with all of the above cases except Reagan,²¹ interprets a mandate as having three characteristics: a) a charismatic candidate, obviously with a manifesto

of change in hand; b) an inconsequential opponent; and c) a snapshot moment when historical circumstances weigh heavier than everyday political dialogue. Judging by those standards, despite a poor first debate, Obama won the election without renegeing on the momentous changes he wants in the next four years. Yet, since many of his 2008 proposals did not pan out, could this be *déjà vu*? Those proposals that did, though, were astonishing: jettisoning “don’t-ask-don’t-tell,” the Iraqi withdrawal, finding and serving justice on Osama bin Laden, and a foreign-policy track record that, for the first time since John F. Kennedy’s 1960-1963 administration, has left a positive foreign-policy balance and garnered immense foreign support.

Romney’s flip-flop campaign and stout defense of fading WASP interests fulfill the second mandate criterion. The third is debatable, but plausible. At a time of immense economic ills, epitomized in Obama becoming the first president to win with an unemployment record as high as 7.9 percent, historical circumstances can only serve secondary purposes. If, however, Obama plays to the socio-cultural changes underway, he might become the first president to usher in two mandates in U.S. electoral history. This is not unreasonable. As the “first black man in the White House” and winner of a Nobel Prize for rhetoric rather than for deeds, Obama is uniquely placed to make other epochal changes. How he does so will brand him for posterity: either a “messiah” as he appeared to be in 2008, or an overblown under-achiever as in the first 2012 presidential debate.

WHICH WAY 'BAMA: HAIL HILLARY?

The question is very much like whether the University of Alabama will end the college football season on top or not. Barack Hussein Obama needs nothing short of multiple touchdowns. At the top is an economy thirsty for jobs — a huge arena of cultural change since the new demand for U.S. global competitiveness is service-sector training with education as the spearhead rather than the technical training necessary for manufacturing jobs. *Race-to-the-top* education,

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race-to-the-bottom energy dependence, and multifaceted climate-change transformation are all one package. This touchdown began by avoiding a fiscal cliff in January 2013 — that is, even before the first term concluded.

It must be followed by immigration reform. A third touchdown would be to avoid any foreign adventure. Finally, his “Hail Mary” move has to be to strengthen the Democratic Party through congeniality, rather than stiff-upper-lip restraint, much like Bill Clinton showed him how to do in the Charlotte, North Carolina, Democratic Party convention. This is not to suggest anointing Hillary Clinton as his successor, but given the cultural changes underway, women’s empowerment, and surging minorities, no other candidate from either party presently has better credentials than she. The message is clear, but unlike his ill-prepared first-debate performance, the president had better do his homework this time. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations: Remaking World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

² Among others bringing out this transformation, see Jean-Jacques Serban-Schreiber, *The American Challenge* (New York: Scribner, 1968); Laurence Wylie, *Village in the Vaucluse: An Account of the Life in a French Village*, third edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974); and William and Charlotte Wiser, *Behind Mud Walls, 1930-1960*, second edition (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1994).

³ On the socio-cultural consequences of technological changes, see David Heenan, *The New Corporate Frontier: The Big Move to Small-town U.S.A.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991). The “deviant behavior” comment stems from the post-9/11 Al-Qaeda propaganda of suicide-bombers finding “77 virgins in heaven,” the Catholic Church fending off staggering pedophile charges against perpetrators in its own ranks, and likewise for televangelists like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart caught with prostitutes.

⁴ For instance, David Landes, “Culture Makes Almost All the Difference,” *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, Chapter 1 (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

⁵ Culture is, as French politician Edouard Herriot observed, “what remains when one has forgotten everything.” See Guy Olivier Faure, “Cultural Aspects of International Negotiations,” *International Negotiations: Actors, Structure/Process, Values*, Peter Berton, Hiroshi Kimura, and I. William Zartman, eds. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), p. 12, but see Chapter 1.

⁶ Edwin T. Hall, *Beyond Culture*, second edition (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), pp. 85 and 87, but see Chapter 6.

⁷ Richard J.F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁸ For example, see Joes S. Felzer and J. Christopher Soper, *Muslims and the State in Britain, France, and Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims: The New Generation* (New York: Continuum, 2000); and Jørgen Nielsen, *Muslims in Western Europe*, third edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).

⁹ Emily Schultheis, “Exit polls 2012: How President Obama Won,” *Politico*, November 7, 2012, <http://dyn.politico.com/printstory.cfm?uuid=8C63570F-1044-4337-A6A3-FC67385BAE>, accessed November 7, 2012.

¹⁰ “The White House: Obama’s Path to Victory,” *Time*, November 19, 2012, p. 16.

- ¹¹ Samuel Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), pp. 58 and 62, passim.
- ¹² Halimah Abdullah, "With Their Big Political Win, the New American Electorate Has Arrived," *CNN*, November 10, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/09/politics/demographic-political-power/index.html?iref=allsearch>, accessed November 10, 2012.
- ¹³ John Ibbitson, "Obama won re-election because he represents the America that is," *The Globe and Mail*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/obama-won-re-election-because-he-represe...>, accessed November 7, 2012. Also see "The White House: Obama's Path to Victory," *Time*, November 19, 2012, p. 16.
- ¹⁴ Halimah Abdullah, "GOP Problem: Their Votes are White, Aging and Dying Off," *CNN*, May 24, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/21/politics/gop-census-latino/index.html>, accessed November 10, 2012.
- ¹⁵ See my "Arizona's SB1070, Copycat Bills, and Constitutional Conundrums: Costly Collisions?" *FIU Law Review* 6, no. 2 (2011), pp. 201-230.
- ¹⁶ Cindy Y. Rodriguez, "Latin Vote Key to Obama's Re-election," *CNN*, November 9, 2012, [-vote-key-elections/index.html?iref=allsearch](http://www.edition.cnn.com/2012/11/09/politics/latino-vote-key-elections/index.html?iref=allsearch), accessed November 10, 2012.
- ¹⁷ Mollie Recilly, "Bobby Jindal: 'I Absolutely Reject' Mitt Romney's 'Gifts' Explanation for Obama's Victory," *Huffington Post*, November 14, 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/14/bobby-jindal-mitt-romney-gifts_n_2133578... accessed November 16, 2012; and Ashley Parkes, "Romney Blames Loss on Obama's 'Gifts' to Minorities and Young Voters," *New York Times*, November 14, 2012, <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/romney-blames-loss-on-obamas-gifts-to...>, accessed November 16, 2012.
- ¹⁸ Abdullah, op. cit, November 10.
- ¹⁹ Joe Klein, "Obama's Mandate for Moderation," *Time*, November 19, 2012, p. 31.
- ²⁰ "A Subtle Message about Things to Come . . .," *Time*, November 19, 2012, pp. 38-39.
- ²¹ Donna Brazile, "Where Obama, and America, Go from Here," *CNN*, November 8, 2012, <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/11/07/opinion/opinion/roundtrip-election-result/index.html?iref=allsearch>, accessed November 10, 2012.