

Obama's Center-Out Coalition



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After enduring nearly 2 years of prognosticating naysayers predicting that he couldn't win, President Obama delivered a decisive victory on Election Night and became only the second Democratic President to be re-elected in modern political history. Much has been said about the strategies and tactics behind his historic win, but politicians, academics, and media pundits alike are still sorting out exactly who the coalition was that granted the President a second term and what the makeup of that coalition means for governing over the next four years and for the future of majority building for both political parties. Together with Peter Brodnitz of Benenson Strategy Group, Third Way conducted a survey* of 800 Obama voters immediately after the election to answer that defining question. Our data reveals that the Obama Coalition is far more moderate than people may suspect. From the role of government, the size of deficits, and the level of taxes to social issues and the notion of compromise, the Obama Coalition holds center-left positions on a range of issues. Democrats were victorious this year not because they played to the wings, but because President Obama effectively built a center-out coalition. This analysis of our post-election poll finds that:

1. Moderates made up the largest ideological voting bloc of Obama voters;
2. The Obama Coalition perceives that the President is a moderate, which they felt was a virtue;
3. The Obama Coalition ascribes to moderate values, particularly on the need to compromise; and,
4. Obama voters hold moderate positions on a series of important issues.

Benenson Strategy Group conducted a poll for Third Way of 800 Obama voters November 7–9, 2012. The margin of error for the overall results is $\pm 3.4\%$ and higher among subgroups.

#1 Most Obama Voters Are Moderate

They place themselves in the center ideologically.

The Obama Coalition is composed primarily of moderates and liberals, with slightly more, 42%, identifying as a moderate and 40% as a liberal. Another 14% call themselves conservatives. According to our poll, nearly three-fifths of the President's support came from self-described moderates and conservatives. This breakdown tracks closely with exit poll data, which shows that 42.7% of Obama voters were liberal, 45.6% were moderate, and 11.8% were conservative. In our poll, amongst the members of the Obama Coalition:

- Women who voted for the President were evenly split, with 41% identifying as liberal and 41% as a moderate. There was a similar split among unmarried women, with 40% identifying as a liberal and 40% a moderate.
- Nonwhite voters who supported President Obama described themselves as more moderate than liberal, with 34% identifying as liberal and 40% as moderate.
- By a slim margin, younger voters (18–29 years old) described themselves as liberal more than moderate, 44% to 41%.
- By a slim margin, Obama voters who hold a college degree or more identified as liberal more than moderate, 47% to 43%.

We asked voters to place themselves on an ideological scale from 1–9, where 1 means liberal, 9 means conservative, and 5 means moderate. Obama voters placed themselves at 4.6, slightly to the left of center. And a full 54% placed themselves between 4 and 6, in the moderate third of the scale. In every subgroup of the Obama Coalition except self-described liberals, at least half of the voters placed themselves in the moderate section of the ideological scale.

Ideological Breakdown of Obama Coalition

Obama Coalition Group	Mean Ideological Score	Percent identifying as a Moderate (4–6 on scale)
All Obama Voters	4.60	54%
Obama Moderates [†]	5.12	84%
Nonwhite Voters	5.04	58%
Unmarried Women	4.53	53%
Women	4.51	54%
College Degree or More	4.26	56%
Young Voters (18–29)	4.25	50%
Obama Liberals [‡]	3.3	32%

[†] This category includes voters who described themselves as moderate when asked to choose between the labels of liberal, moderate, and conservative. Eighty-four percent of those voters also placed themselves between 4 and 6—in the center third—on the 1 through 9 ideological scale.

[‡] This category includes voters who described themselves as liberal when asked to choose between the labels of liberal, moderate, and conservative. Thirty-two percent of those voters placed themselves between 4 and 6—in the center third—on the 1 through 9 ideological scale.

#2 They Perceive that the President is a moderate.

They voted for President Obama because they thought he was the more moderate candidate.

The Romney campaign spent hundreds of millions of dollars trying to convince voters that President Obama was a free-spending, big government liberal. It may have worked for Romney supporters, but Obama voters didn't buy it.

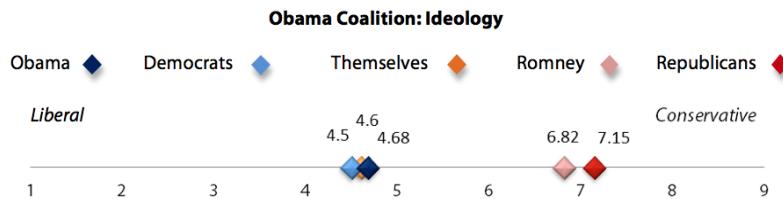
Half of the Obama Coalition thinks the President is a moderate, with only one-third believing he is a liberal. By contrast, only 13% of Obama supporters viewed Mitt Romney as a moderate, with 62% saying he is a conservative and 12% describing him as liberal. President Obama was clearly considered the more centrist candidate than Romney by these voters.

The Obama Coalition also believes Congressional Democrats are moderates, with 49% of voters describing them as such and only 30% labeling Congressional Democrats as liberals. By contrast, only 7% of Obama voters believe Congressional Republicans are moderate—instead, a full 71% described them as conservative. These Democratic voters viewed both the President and his allies in Congress as moderates and

viewed Republicans and the Republican presidential candidate as highly conservative.

They may view the President as a moderate, but is that what they want? When asked what sort of president they wanted, 52% of Obama voters said they wanted a moderate president, compared to only 29% who said they wanted a liberal one. By 23 points, the Obama Coalition desired a moderate president over one who was liberal. This desire for a moderate president over a liberal one was widespread, with women (+22), unmarried women (+14), nonwhite voters (+22), young voters (+8), and those with a college degree or more (+26) all desiring a moderate president over one who was liberal. And when asked specifically what they wanted to see the newly re-elected President do in his second term, 47% of his voters said they hope the President will be *more* moderate, with only 29% hoping he'll be more liberal.

When asked to rank themselves, President Obama, Governor Romney, Congressional Democrats, and Congressional Republicans on a 1 to 9 ideological scale (where 1 is liberal, 5 is moderate, and 9 is conservative), Obama supporters placed themselves at 4.6—just to the left of center—and located the President only 0.1 away at 4.7, a minuscule more moderate than themselves. Obama voters placed Congressional Democrats just a small step to the left of themselves as well, at 4.5 and only 0.5 away from dead center. By contrast, they ranked Romney at 6.8, perhaps because they took him at his word that he was “severely conservative,” and put the nominee only slightly more towards the moderate center than the Congressional GOP, at a far right 7.2. The fact that Republicans were ranked further away is not surprising, since these are Obama supporters, but the huge gap between Republicans and the center illustrates a serious problem for the party’s prospects for reaching these voters. Only 15% of Obama voters placed themselves at a 7, 8, or 9.



The Obama Coalition viewed themselves, the President they supported, and Congressional Democrats as just to the left of center. These are moderates who chose candidates they perceived to be aligned with their ideology. But they viewed Romney and Congressional Republicans as much farther to the right than any party or candidate was to the left. Given that Republicans would need to win at least some of these voters to assemble a victorious coalition, that fact indicates a major problem for their party's future prospects.

#3 They ascribe to moderate values.

Beyond calling themselves moderates, much of the Obama coalition share a series of values that describe ideological moderates. In general, they don't see the world in black and white but view political arguments more pragmatically. Compromise, for example, is a virtue. So is spending within one's means. Business is generally thought of positively and the American Dream is a product of hard work. But to be sure, there is also a vibrant liberal view within the Obama coalition that is more skeptical about business and concerned that the rules are stacked against average people.

They support compromise over standing one's ground.

“Democrats and Republicans both need to make real compromises to come to an agreement on fixing the deficit,” was the most unanimously supported statement in the entire poll, with 80% saying it described their views extremely well. Obama voters ranked this statement at an average 9.24 on a 0 to 10 scale.

We also found that less than 4 in 10 Obama voters worried that in general the President might compromise too much

with Republicans. Instead, in line with their view that they want the President to be more moderate this term than in the past (47%, with another 14% wanting him to be more conservative), the Obama Coalition wants to see President Obama work across party lines.

They hold favorable views of government.

If compromise favored moderates, the efficacy of government favored the traditional liberal viewpoint among Obama voters. Sixty-one percent believe the government “usually does a better job than it gets credit for” with only one-third saying that the government is “mostly wasteful and inefficient.” Rather than being reflexively anti-government, these voters express faith in what the federal government can achieve.

Democrats in general and the President’s campaign in particular argue that the government tends to help people get ahead more than it holds people back. It seems they have successfully litigated this claim, with 59% of Obama voters agreeing that the federal government has mostly helped people get ahead, 20% saying it has had no impact on whether people have gotten ahead, and 16% saying the federal government has mostly held people back.

Nonetheless, far fewer members of the Obama Coalition believe the federal government has helped them *personally*. Less than half (45%) of Obama voters believe the federal government has mostly helped them get ahead personally, with 40% saying the government has had no impact—up 20 points from the number who say the same about people generally. The Obama Coalition believes that government is on the side of people, though they are less certain what government does for them.

They express some concerns about the role of government in the economy.

Forty-one percent of Obama voters said they worry that “the role of government in the economy is increasing,” but there are divisions within the Obama Coalition on this issue. Nearly one-half (46%) of Obama Moderates share that concern while only about one-third (31%) of Obama Liberals express the same worry. Nonwhite voters’ views are closer to moderates on this issue, with 52% expressing concern.

Simultaneously, when asked what would do the most to improve the U.S. economy, Obama voters’ clear first choice (44%) was increasing investments in education, research, and infrastructure—which they rank as more important than taxing the wealthy, reducing government spending, or reducing regulations. They do believe the government can be a force for good, but the Obama Coalition also harbors some skepticism about the government’s role in the economy.

They believe America is the land of opportunity.

Do people reap what they sow? On this question, the values of opportunity and hard work paying off win out, but a sizable portion of the Obama coalition is more dubious.

The Obama Coalition overwhelmingly believes that “America is still the land of opportunity,” with 55% saying this describes their views extremely well and 87% agreeing with the statement on the whole. On a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means not at all and 10 means extremely well, “America is still the land of opportunity” ranked at 8.18.

The Obama Coalition expresses optimism, but not blind faith, in how this operates in practice. Voters ranked “People who work hard mostly get ahead” at 6.87, with 32% saying this described their views extremely well and 68% agreeing. On this point there were some differences, with liberals expressing more pessimism (6.60) than moderates (7.10). And the statement “The American economic system is basically fair” ranked at a meager 5.32, with liberals (5.06) and moderates (5.49) differing again slightly.

But for the future, Obama voters overwhelmingly want an emphasis on economic opportunity over economic security. By 66% to 29%, they agreed that the government should provide more economic opportunity to people instead of providing more economic security. And there was agreement among key subgroups in the coalition on this point: women (+36), Obama Moderates (+43), nonwhite voters (+50), and young voters (+28).

Finally, the Obama Coalition is also not reflexively anti-business, not even anti-big business. Nearly half (47%) agreed that “Large companies are essential to the U.S. economy and mostly help, not hurt, the middle class.” However, 44% agreed that “Large companies are a threat to the middle class and must be more strictly regulated.” On this, we see an 11-point swing between liberals and moderates, with the former more critical of large companies (48% to 43%) and the latter more likely to see companies as essential (50% to 44%).

They recognize that there are limits to what government can do.

The Obama coalition is vexed by the question of doing right by people who are struggling while also keeping spending under control and encouraging individual efficacy.

The Obama Coalition supports government spending on social programs. However, they are also deficit sensitive (as expanded upon below), and they balance those values with pragmatism on government services. We asked Obama voters “Do you think the federal government should be doing more to help the needy?” and by 73% to 23% they said yes. But when we added the phrase “even if it means increasing the federal debt” support fell from +50 to +18. Moderates went from +37 to -5. While Obama voters believe the government should provide support for those who fall on hard times, they also emphasize personal efficacy. We asked participants to rate how well each of these statements described their own view on a scale of 0 to 10:

1. Government should provide people with the tools and opportunity to succeed *but everyone is ultimately responsible for helping themselves*; and,
2. Government should provide people with the tools and opportunity to succeed *and help people out if they fall behind*.

Nearly half (49%) said the opportunity statement reflected their views extremely well, with 83% agreeing. Obama Moderates overwhelmingly supported the first statement, with 54% saying it described their views extremely well and 91% agreeing. Only 28% of Obama Moderates said the second statement described their views extremely well—meaning the added responsibility language provided a 26-point bump on those who agree strongly, plus a 12-point bump on total agreement with the statement.

Even more surprisingly, 43% of Obama voters agree that “Programs such as welfare and unemployment benefits are making people too dependent on government,” with 18% saying this described their views extremely well. Among moderates, the figures are 47% and 16%; and among nonwhite voters they are 52% and 21%.

#4 They hold moderate positions on important issues.

Federal Debt & Deficits

America’s debt is not just the preoccupation of a few elites. Sixty-five percent of the Obama Coalition agrees that “It is immoral for us to leave future generations 16 trillion dollars in debt,” with 37% saying that describes their views extremely well. Young voters (76% agree, 41% extremely), nonwhite voters (64% agree, 42% extremely), women (64% agree, 37% extremely), liberals (60% agree, 29% extremely), and moderates (68% agree, 38% extremely) who voted to re-elect the President express serious concerns over a legacy of debt.

This considerable agreement within the Obama Coalition about our nation's fiscal problems showed up in other poll questions as well, with 69% of Obama voters saying the federal deficit is a major problem, including 64% of Obama Liberals and 77% of Obama Moderates. And 83% of the President's coalition identifies reducing the deficit as an important priority in the next Obama term, including 77% of Obama Liberals and 90% of Obama Moderates. Furthermore, 74% agree that reducing the deficit will help grow the economy, with 41% strongly agreeing.

In speeches, debates, and ads, President Obama frequently used the term "balanced" to describe his approach during his re-election campaign. According to our poll, the voters heard him. Only 5% of the Obama Coalition favors relying on tax increases alone to solve our deficit problem; only 10% favors a spending cuts only approach. The vast majority (82%) support a mix of policies, with 41% favoring mostly tax increases with some spending cuts and 41% favoring mostly spending cuts with some tax increases.

	All Tax Increases	Mostly Tax Increases, Some Spending Cuts	Mostly Spending Cuts, Some Tax Increase	All Spending Cuts
Obama Coalition	5%	41%	41%	10%
Obama Liberals	4%	50%	37%	6%
Obama Moderates	4%	37%	48%	9%

Taxes

President Obama ran on a platform of increasing the tax rates for high income earners while preserving middle class tax cuts. That message resounded with his voters. Eighty-five percent of the Obama Coalition favors increasing taxes on the wealthy—the single highest rated priority for the President at a mean of 8.09 on a 10 point scale. At the same time, they want to preserve middle class tax cuts, with 82% saying that should also be a priority for the President.

The Coalition's support for increasing taxes on the wealthy to get our fiscal house in order was evident throughout our poll. Eighty-two percent of Obama voters agree that wealthy Americans need to pay more in taxes so we can fix our deficit. And 86% express more concern about wealthy people not

paying enough in taxes, as opposed to only 10% who are more concerned that some people, including the poor, do not pay any income taxes. The Obama coalition is united on this issue: they favor raising taxes on the wealthy.

Social Security & Medicare

No one believes that fixing Social Security and Medicare will be easy or without controversy. But almost no one in the Obama Coalition believes these programs are healthy. An overwhelming 89% of Obama voters believe Social Security and Medicare are in financial trouble—with 53% saying these programs have major problems. To be clear, this is a view shared across all demographics:

- 90% of Obama Liberals worried the programs faced financial trouble, with 50% believing those problems are major.
- This concern persisted across every age group, with even 81% of those over the age of 60 saying the programs were in financial trouble.

Because they fear that Social Security and Medicare are in jeopardy if we remain on the same track, nearly 8 in 10 Obama voters believe the President and Congress should make changes to fix the programs. We asked, “Which would be better for the country? The President and Congress make changes to fix Social Security and Medicare? OR The President and Congress make no changes to Social Security and Medicare?” Seventy-nine percent of the Obama Coalition said the first outcome would be better for the country—only 17% wanted no changes made to these programs. Obama Liberals (79%), Obama Moderates (81%), men (79%), women (78%), Democrats (79%), Obama Independents (80%), and nonwhite voters (80%) all agreed by wide margins. Even those Obama voters over the age of 60 believed it would be better for the country if the President and Congress made changes to Social Security and Medicare, choosing that option by a whopping 35-point margin.

On a 0 to 10 point scale of priorities for the President in his second term, Obama voters ranked fixing Social Security and Medicare at 8.01—second only to raising taxes on the wealthy. A full 85% of the Obama Coalition listed fixing the programs as an important priority, with 48% saying it was extremely important, ranking it a 9 or 10 on the scale. Notably, in our prior focus groups on this issue, we found that Obama supporters want to ensure that changes made are done to fix and preserve these programs for themselves and future generations—not to pay down the debt.

National Security

After a decade of fighting, the U.S. is a war-weary nation. But that doesn't mean that Americans, even Obama voters, are necessarily peaceniks. The Obama Coalition overwhelmingly supports the use of drones, with 69% agreeing they are necessary to "protect our national security while keeping troops out of harm's way." But when it comes to Iran, opinions are more mixed. Fifty-six percent of Obama voters support sanctions and other measures to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, but they do not want to "engage in direct military conflict with Iran," while 39% would not rule out direct military action (still a relatively high number, given that the sample is only Obama voters).

Dealing with the prisoners at Guantanamo Bay is much less clear. The Obama Coalition is nearly evenly divided, with 43% wanting to keep the prison open and use military commissions to try detainees and a nearly identical 42% wanting to try the prisoners in federal courts and put them in U.S. prisons. Obama Liberals support trying prisoners in U.S. courts by 5 points (47% to 42%), while Obama Moderates support military commissions by 5 points (44% to 39%).

Guns, God, Gays, & Abortion

On the social issues that have often been used as a wedge, and sometimes a weapon, in American politics, the Obama Coalition is largely in line with the President they re-elected. They support marriage for gay couples (68%), with 53%

doing so strongly. They disagree with Republican assertions that “religious liberty is under attack in this country,” with only 31% agreeing and 13% saying that statement describes their views extremely well. Nonwhite voters expressed the most agreement with this statement, with 42% saying it describes their views and 19% says it describes them extremely well.

On abortion and guns, the coalition is torn and generally supports stasis. Obama voters split on guns with 49% agreeing that we need to better enforce laws already on the books and 46% wanting to pass tougher gun control laws. Although we didn’t ask about specific gun control policies like closing the gun show loophole, other polls have shown that particular gun laws score better than the general question on the need to enact stricter laws. Still, Obama Liberals support new laws (54%) over enforcement of existing laws (42%) while Obama Moderates are reversed, with 56% supporting enforcement and 41% new legislation.

Fully 60% of the Obama Coalition says existing laws on abortion are sufficient and we shouldn’t change them, while 25% want to repeal existing restrictions. But overwhelmingly, abortion is a private matter for these voters, with 90% agreeing that “The decision to have an abortion should be between a woman, her family, and her doctor,” with 78% agreeing strongly. The only statement which received more unanimous support from Obama voters was the one that said Republicans and Democrats both need to make real compromises to come to a deficit agreement. Clearly, extreme statements by certain Republican candidates were rejected by members of the Obama coalition, and the contrast on the issue may have helped consolidate this voting bloc. However, despite overwhelming support for abortion to remain a private matter, Obama voters continue to have deep moral concerns about the issue: nearly 4 in 10 Obama voters believe “abortion is the taking of a human life,” with 29% agreeing strongly.

Immigration

The post-election narrative has drawn renewed focus to immigration reform, and public polls consistently show support for reform in the 60s across the country. However, digging a bit deeper on what “reform” means elicits some variance even within the Obama Coalition. When asked how we should deal with the 11 million undocumented immigrants currently living in the U.S., 50% of Obama voters said those immigrants should be able to earn a path to citizenship. However, another third said they should be able to earn some kind of legal status but *not* citizenship, and 15% said there should be no path to a legal status of any kind. There may be a new jolt of energy for immigration reform in the current political climate, but these numbers reveal that finding agreement on the 11 million is still a complicated matter.

Energy Policy

The Obama Coalition supports an all-of-the-above energy policy while simultaneously expressing concern over climate change. Increasing investments in clean energy ranked as a fairly high priority for these voters, with 83% saying it was important and 41% saying it should be a top priority in the President’s next term. Obama voters expressed more concern that the President and Congress would fail to pass legislation and global climate change would get worse (62%) than that they may pass legislation that goes too far and hurts domestic energy industries (29%).

Yet 66% want the President to expand drilling for oil and natural gas on U.S. soil and off of the U.S. coast, with only 30% opposed to that action. And on expanding drilling, support never fell below a majority for any subgroup, including Obama Liberals (55% to 42%), Obama Moderates (69% to 25%), young voters (59% to 39%), and those with a college degree or more (59% to 36%).

Conclusion

The Obama Coalition isn’t composed simply of reliable Democratic voters. A significant portion of the voters who re-elected the President are Swing Voters who are not wedded to

either party and must be courted. One-quarter of Obama voters describe themselves as Independents, and 26% of the President's coalition say they have changed their party in the past. Over half (54%) have voted for a Republican candidate, and 43% say they would vote for a Republican in the future. While there were relatively few undecideds in the presidential election this year—only 13% said they had considered voting for Romney and 12% said their decision on the presidential ballot was a hard one—the center-out coalition that President Obama created is diverse and not full of partisan loyalists. Their votes in the future will flow to those who appeal to who they are and what they want: moderate voters who want to support moderate policymakers who will enact moderate policies.

The coalition of voters who re-elected President Obama was built from the center-out. They describe themselves as moderate, but their centrism is rooted far deeper than just labels, emanating from a set of moderate values which translate into approaches driven by pragmatism and compromise on the big issues facing our country today. In order to turn the Obama Coalition into a winning majority in 2014 and beyond, the Democratic Party must appeal to those values and moderate viewpoints in both their rhetoric and their governing and do what the President did so successfully with these voters: convince them that the Democratic candidate is the moderate alternative.