

The Deciders: Moderates in 2010

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President

Amid growing concerns over an “enthusiasm gap,” many are urging Democrats to focus on rallying the base. By carrying a left-leaning message and agenda, so the argument goes, Democrats can reactivate liberal enthusiasm to match the Tea Party’s passion.

Motivating the liberal base is necessary for Democrats to keep their seats—but it’s not sufficient:

1. **Liberals are outnumbered, and the conservative base has grown.** Ideologically, liberals make up the smallest share of the electorate and in many states are outnumbered by conservatives by 2-to-1 or more. Moreover, many states have lurched to the right since 2008. Nationally, the share of conservatives has risen 5-percentage points since 2008, according to Gallup, while the share of liberals has declined.¹
2. **2008 performance is not enough for 2010.** Given the unfavorable math of a larger conservative bloc, Democratic candidates can’t win just by matching President Obama’s performance in 2008. In 16 of the 21 most hotly contested states this cycle, Democratic candidates who simply match President Obama’s overall 2008 performance with liberals, moderates and conservatives still won’t have the votes to win.

The upshot: **Moderates matter more than ever.**

Democrats can compensate for the votes lost to a larger conservative base by wooing moderates. Moreover, in states with a hotly contested match-up, Democratic candidates need a majority of moderate votes—if not a super-majority—to win or maintain a seat. To preserve their fortunes this fall, Democrats should focus as much (or more) on moderates as they do their liberal base.

Red Shift

Since the 1970s and until very recently, the ideological makeup of the American electorate has been remarkably stable, averaging 20% liberal, 47% moderate and 33% conservative. ²

But since 2008, many commentators ³ have noticed a dramatic increase in the number of self-identified conservatives, and according to Gallup, the share of Americans who call themselves “conservative” nationwide is now at a record-high since 1992. ⁴ From 2008 to 2010, conservatives as a share of the national electorate rose from 37% to 42%, while the share of liberals and moderates declined (from 22% to 20% and from 37% to 35%, respectively). ⁵ *

* The following table includes a sample of these recent polls:

		Conservative/Moderate/Liberal
A. Third Way/Democracy Corps (Sept. 2010)	1,000 2008 voters (including 865 likely voters)	43% / 34% / 17%
B. Associated Press/ GfK Roper Public Affairs (Sept. 2010)	1,000 adults	45% / 31% / 22%
C. Democracy Corps/ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner (Sept. 2010)	1,000 national voters	46% / 29% / 20%
D. ABC News/Washington Post (Sept. 2010)	1,002 adults	40% / 37% / 19%
E. NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey (Sept. 2010)	1,000 adults	39% / 37% / 21%
F. Pew Research Center (June 2010)	1,802 adults (1,496 registered voters)	40% / 36% / 22%
G. NPR/Greenberg Quinlan Rosner (June 2010)	1200 likely voters	46% / 33% / 18%
H. CNN/Opinion Research Corporation (June 2010)	534 adults	44% / 36% / 18%

Chart endnotes: ⁶

“How would you describe your political views?”

	2008	2010	Net Change
CONSERVATIVE	37%	42%	+5
MODERATE	37%	35%	-2
LIBERAL	22%	20%	-2

Source: Gallup

On a state-by-state basis, according to Gallup, conservatives have also increased their share of the electorate in 23 states (and in some states by significant margins), while liberals have seen only modest gains in eight states. ⁷ Eighteen states have increased their share of moderates, but in many of these states, a gain in moderate voters has come at the expense of liberals.

In no state do liberals make up a majority—or even a plurality—of the electorate. Even in Rhode Island—currently the most liberal state in the country and the only state in which liberals

outnumber conservatives (by 3-points)—moderates outnumber liberals 36% to 32%. In the country’s second-most liberal state, Connecticut, conservatives and moderates both outnumber liberals with respective shares of 32%, 34% and 29% of the populace.⁸

In 19 states, conservatives outnumber liberals by roughly two to one, while in 14 states, conservatives outnumber liberals three to one. In Wyoming, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Mississippi, the ratio is four to one or higher.*

* These electoral realities also explain why conservatives can succeed with a strategy aimed at the conservative base. They are much less dependent on moderates to pull them over the finish line.

State Electoral Ideology, 2010

Top Most Conservative	Conservative share of electorate	Top Most Liberal	Liberal share of electorate
Wyoming	53%	Rhode Island	32%
Mississippi	53%	Connecticut	29%
Utah	51%	Vermont	29%
South Dakota	50%	Massachusetts	28%
Alabama	49%	Colorado	27%
North Dakota	49%	New York	27%
Idaho	48%	Oregon	26%
South Carolina	46%	Washington	25%
Oklahoma	46%	New Jersey	25%
Nebraska	46%	Maryland	24%
Louisiana	46%	New Hampshire	24%

Source: Gallup

“Base-ic” Math

In 2008, President Obama won 20% of conservatives, 60% of moderates and 89% of liberals—an all-around stellar performance compared to recent Democratic presidential candidates.

But the combination of a relatively small liberal base and a shift toward conservatism means that matching President Obama’s performance in 2008 may not be enough in 2010 to carry a Democrat to victory.

We chose 21 states with either a highly competitive Senate or state-wide House race. We calculated the share of the total vote that a Democratic candidate would receive if he or she won the same percentage of liberals, moderates and conservatives that President Obama did in 2008, based on the current ideological breakdown for that state according to

Gallup. We also assumed that on Election Day, the actual turnout among voters would match those proportions. *

* Arguably, this is a best-case scenario. If disgruntled moderates or liberals stay home and conservatives are highly energized, the ideological makeup of the voters who actually show up at the ballot box might be skewed even more to the right.

In Colorado, for example, conservatives currently make up 37% of the electorate, while moderates make up 33% and liberals account for 27%. If a state-wide candidate matches President Obama's performance to win 20% of conservatives, 60% of moderates and 89% of liberals, that candidate would just squeak by—winning 51% of the total votes. ⁹

In Indiana, on the other hand, where conservatives now make up 42% of the electorate, while moderates make up 39% and liberals 16%, matching the President's performance would garner just 46% of the total vote. ¹⁰

The following chart shows the hypothetical performance of a Democratic Senate or House candidate in these 21 chosen states. *In 16 of these 21 states, a Democratic candidate who simply matches President Obama's 2008 performance will lose.* In just five states—Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Oregon and Washington—matching 2008 is enough to win.

	Breakdown of Electorate by Ideology			Share of total vote if Democratic candidate matches President Obama's 2008 performance
	CONSERVATIVE	MODERATE	LIBERAL	
Connecticut	32%	34%	29%	53%
Oregon	33%	39%	26%	53%
Washington	33%	38%	25%	52%
Colorado	37%	33%	27%	51%
Delaware	29%	45%	21%	51%
California	33%	39%	23%	50%
Illinois	35%	39%	22%	50%
New Hampshire	38%	36%	24%	50%
Nevada	39%	41%	17%	48%
Alaska	42%	39%	17%	47%
Florida	39%	37%	19%	47%
Ohio	40%	37%	19%	47%
Pennsylvania	39%	38%	19%	47%
Kentucky	42%	36%	19%	47%
Wisconsin	43%	36%	19%	47%
Indiana	42%	39%	16%	46%
Arkansas	45%	37%	15%	45%
Missouri	43%	36%	17%	45%
Louisiana	46%	36%	15%	44%
North Dakota	49%	37%	10%	41%
South Dakota	50%	33%	13%	41%

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Democratic candidates can, however, compensate for a rightward shift in their state by courting moderates.

The following chart shows the percentage of moderates a candidate would need to win in a particular state to garner 50.1% of the total vote (assuming he or she matched President Obama's performance with liberals and conservatives). The chart also shows the improvement over President Obama's national performance that a candidate would need to reach that threshold.

In Alaska, for example, a Democratic candidate would need to win 68% of moderates to reach 50.1% of the total vote (assuming he or she also wins 20% of conservatives and 89% of liberals). This would mean that this candidate would need to outperform President Obama's 2008 showing among moderates by 8 points. In Connecticut, on the other hand, a Democratic candidate would need 53% of moderates to win. In this case, that candidate has the luxury of winning even if he or she under-performs with moderates by 7-points in comparison to President Obama. Two findings stand out:

- In the majority of battleground states highlighted below, Democratic candidates must outperform President Obama among moderates to win the majority of the vote.
- Even in more liberal states, where matching 2008 is enough to win, a candidate still can't afford to lose among moderates. In California, for example, a candidate still needs 59% of moderates to reach 50.1% of the total vote

Moderates Can Make the Difference		
	Share of moderates necessary to win 50.1% of total vote	Improvement needed over Pres. Obama's 2008 performance
Alaska	68%	8%
Arkansas	75%	15%
California	59%	-1%
Colorado	57%	-3%
Connecticut	53%	-7%
Delaware	57%	-3%
Florida	68%	8%
Illinois	60%	0%
Indiana	71%	11%
Kentucky	69%	9%
Louisiana	77%	17%
Missouri	73%	13%
North Dakota	86%	26%
New Hampshire	59%	-1%
Nevada	66%	6%
Ohio	69%	9%
Oregon	51%	-9%
Pennsylvania	67%	7%
South Dakota	86%	26%
Washington	56%	-4%
Wisconsin	68%	8%

Conclusion

Democrats are right to focus on their base. But just as important to the fortunes of Democrats this fall are moderates. While the middle has always played a pivotal role in American electoral politics, where they swing this fall will certainly decide the fate of the Democratic majority.

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END NOTES

1. Lydia Saad, "In 2010, Conservatives Still Outnumber Moderates, Liberals," June 25, 2010, Accessed September 21, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/141032/2010-conservatives-outnumber-moderates-liberals.aspx>.
2. William Galston and Elaine Kamarck, "The Politics of Polarization," Third Way, October 1, 2005. Available at: http://content.thirdway.org/publications/16/ThirdWay_Report_-_The_Politics_of_Polarization_-_A_Path_Back_To_Power.pdf.
3. See, for example, William A. Galston, "Why the Parties Just Can't Get Along (And More 2010 Trouble for Dems)," *The New Republic*, January 7, 2010, available at <http://www.tnr.com/blog/william-galston/why-the-parties-just-cant-get-along-and-more-2010-trouble-dems>. This article was among the first to point out this phenomenon.
4. Saad.

5. Some may point out that the national exit polls, which are based on actual turnout, have historically shown moderates to be a higher share of the electorate compared to other polls of adults, registered voters, or likely voters. The 2008 exit polls, for example, show an ideological breakdown of 22% liberal, 44% moderate and 34% conservative. This does not diminish the validity of the argument in this memo. First, despite the gap between the exit polls and Gallup on moderates as a share of the electorate in 2008 (44% versus 37%), the gap between the exit polls and Gallup on conservatives and liberals is much narrower (34% in the exit polls versus 37% from Gallup for conservatives and 22% in the exit polls versus 20% from Gallup for liberals, and the bulk of our argument rests on the respective shares of conservatives versus liberals. Second, if moderates do turn out in larger numbers, it only confirms our overarching thesis on their importance. Another potential objection might be based on Gallup's methodology. Gallup's numbers are based on the combined findings of eight separate Gallup and USA Today/Gallup surveys conducted from January through June 2010. These surveys sampled a total of 8,207 adults nationwide. Gallup's finding that conservatives now make up a plurality of the electorate is mirrored in other point-in-time surveys of both adults and registered voters. While the actual magnitude of the conservative shift on Election Day is impossible to predict, these surveys show the phenomenon is real.

6. “The Politics of National Security, Vol. 3: Poll,” Third Way/Democracy Corps., September 11-14, 2010, 1,000 2008 voters, Accessed September 30, 2010. Available at: http://www.thirdway.org/programs/national_security_program/publications/331.

Associated Press/ Gfk Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications, Poll, September 8-13, 2010, 1,000 telephone interviews. Accessed September 24, 2010 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Available at: http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

Democracy Corps/ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, Poll, August 30 - September 2, 2010, 1,000 telephone interviews with national voters, Accessed September 24, 2010 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. Available at: http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

“Washington Post/ABC News Poll,” The Washington Post/ABC News, August 30–September 2, 2010, 1,002 adults, including users of both conventional and cellular phones, Accessed September 30, 2010. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/polls/postpoll_09072010.html.

“NBC News/Wall Street Journal Survey,” The Wall Street Journal/ NBC News, September 22- 26, 2010, 1000 adults, including 200 reached by cell phone, Accessed September 30, 2010. Available at: http://msnbcmedia.msn.com/i/MSNBC/Sections/NEWS/A_Politics/___Politics_Today_Stories_Teases/Sept_Poll_WSJ_NBC.pdf.

“Dems Viewed as Farther from Political Center than is GOP: Voters rate the parties’ ideologies,” Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, July 16, 2010, Accessed September 22, 2010. Available at: <http://people-press.org/reports/pdf/636.pdf>.

“NPR - Congressional Battleground Frequency Questionnaire,” National Public Radio/ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, June 7-10, 2010, 1200 Likely Voters in 60

Democratic-held and 10 Republican-held Districts,
Accessed September 30, 2010. Available at:
http://www.gqrr.com/articles/2454/5721_npr061010fq1.pdf.

CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll, Interviewing
conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, June 16,
2010, 534 telephone interviews, Accessed on
September 24, 2010 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper
Center for Public Opinion Research, University of
Connecticut. Available
at: http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html.

- 7.** Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, New Hampshire,
New Jersey and Rhode Island each saw a net 1-percentage
point increase in the share of the electorate identifying
themselves as liberal from 2008 to 2010, while liberals
increased by 2-points in Connecticut. In states that went
from red to redder, North Dakota saw a 12-point increase
in the share of conservatives, while Wyoming saw an 8-
point rise. "State of the States," *USAToday*/Gallup and
Gallup polls, 2008-2009, Accessed September 21, 2010.
Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125066/State-States.aspx>.

- 8.** Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, New Hampshire, New Jersey and Rhode Island each saw a net 1-percentage point increase in the share of the electorate identifying themselves as liberal from 2008 to 2010, while liberals increased by 2-points in Connecticut. In states that went from red to redder, North Dakota saw a 12-point increase in the share of conservatives, while Wyoming saw an 8-point rise. "State of the States," *USAToday/Gallup* and Gallup polls, 2008–2009, Accessed September 21, 2010. Available at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/125066/State-States.aspx>. Another potential objection might be based on Gallup's methodology. Gallup's numbers are based on the combined findings of eight separate Gallup and USA Today/Gallup surveys conducted from January through June 2010. These surveys sampled a total of 8,207 adults nationwide. Gallup's finding that conservatives now make up a plurality of the electorate is mirrored in other point-in-time surveys of both adults and registered voters. While the actual magnitude of the conservative shift on Election Day is impossible to predict, these surveys show the phenomenon is real.
- 9.** Here's the math: $(.2 \times .33) (.6 \times .38) (.89 \times .25) = .066 .228 .22 = .51$.
- 10.** Here's the math: $(.2 \times .42) (.6 \times .39) (.89 \times .16) = .084 .234 .142 = .46$.