

Whatever Happened to the Republican “Lock” on the Electoral College?

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Abstract

During the 1980s some political analysts began to wonder if the Democratic Party would be able to regain the White House in the foreseeable future. The apparent Republican invulnerability in the South, the Great Plains, and the Rocky Mountain States made it appear that that party entered each election with an insurmountable lead in votes in the Electoral College. In the 1990s, however, the Democratic Party regained its competitiveness in presidential races. Democratic victories were helped by the emergence of regional Democratic strongholds, which include the Northeast, the Pacific Coast, and, to a lesser degree, the Great Lakes. The ideological polarization of the two major parties had indeed made the Democratic Party unpopular in the Republican strongholds, but it has also weakened the Republicans and strengthened the Democrats in regions of the country where the Republicans were once dominant.

Keywords: moralistic, strongholds, electoral lock, political culture

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Introduction

Just prior to the 1980 election, Democratic strategist and former presidential aide Horace Busby predicted that Ronald Reagan would defeat incumbent president Jimmy Carter. His prediction was based upon the configuration of the Electoral College, which he called a “Republican Institution” (Destler 1996, 491). According to Busby, the state-by-state winner-take-all method of awarding votes in the Electoral College assured that the Republican Party had a “lock” on it. This he believed explained why the Democrats could remain the majority party in the House of Representatives but could not win presidential races. As Busby had predicted, the Republicans won an electoral landslide in 1980. Ronald Reagan won by a bigger landslide in 1984, and in 1988 the Republican Party won another overwhelming Electoral College victory. In the 1980s it appeared that the states in the South, the Rocky Mountains, and the Great Plains were out of the grasp of the Democratic Party, and would give the Republicans a nearly insurmountable lead in every election; these states provided 207 of the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the presidency. The once Democratic “Solid South” had become a Republican “Solid South,” while states in the Rockies and the Great Plains had not voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964, and neither had the states of Indiana or Oklahoma, which gave the Republicans an additional 20 votes in the Electoral College. Meanwhile, after the 1984 election it appeared that the Democrats had no regional strongholds. The only state that the Democrats carried in 1984 was Minnesota, and that was because the Democratic presidential candidate, former Vice President Walter Mondale, was a native son and a former U.S. senator from that state. With the Republican Party having several regions that were strongholds, and the

Democratic Party having none, one can see why Busby and other analysts speculated that the Republican Party had a “lock” on the Electoral College.

This perception that Republican presidential candidates were invulnerable in the Electoral College ended in 1992 when Democrat Bill Clinton ousted Republican incumbent George H.W. Bush and received 370 of the 538 electoral votes. However, some might assert that Clinton’s victory in 1992 and his re-election in 1996 were made possible by the presence in the race of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, who ran a well funded campaign that appealed to many who would otherwise have voted Republican. In neither 1992 nor 1996 did Clinton receive the majority of the popular vote, so there is the possibility that he might not have been victorious in a two-person race. In the next presidential election, held in the year 2000, there was no strong third-party candidate, and that election provided the appearance that the Republicans did indeed have a strong advantage in the Electoral College. Republican George W. Bush lost the popular vote by over a half-million votes but was victorious in the Electoral College. This victory was assisted by a solid Republican South, and a near solid Great Plains and Rocky Mountain region. Bush’s victory was repeated in 2004, when he again carried those three regions and won narrowly in the popular vote and in the Electoral College.

In 2008 the “electoral lock” thesis was undone by the victory of Democrat Barack Obama, who carried 53 percent of the popular vote, and won 365 of the 538 votes in the Electoral College. He did likewise in 2012 by winning 51 percent of the popular vote and 332 of the votes in the Electoral College (Leip 2013). What might have seemed like a Republican “lock” in the 1980s has evolved into an era of far more competitive presidential races.

Republicans Regain Strength after 1990s Losses

The Republicans' string of presidential victories came to an end with the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, but Democratic strategist James Carville, who helped engineer his party's win that year, was careful not to discount the theory that the Republican Party had a lock on the Electoral College. He stated that the Democrats did not break the lock, but "We just picked it" (Smith 1994, 41). Though the Democrats won the White House, Clinton received only 43 percent of the popular vote, while H. Ross Perot's candidacy appealed to many voters in the Republican strongholds of the South and the West. This may have cost the Republicans electoral votes in those states. The scenario was repeated in 1996 when Ross Perot ran again, and President Clinton won with less than a majority of the vote. Clinton was victorious in 1992 and 1996 because he was able to secure victories in regions of the country that had previously been heavily Republican: the South and the Rocky Mountain states. In 1992 he carried the Mountain states of Nevada, Colorado, and New Mexico, and the Southern states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, and Tennessee. In 1996 he carried the Mountain states of Arizona and Nevada, and the Southern states of Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida and Tennessee. It must be noted, however, that among these nine states, only in his home state of Arkansas and the neighboring state of Louisiana did he receive a majority of the vote. In the other seven states he won by a plurality. He was not even able to receive the majority of the vote in his neighboring state of Tennessee, which was also the home state of his running mate, Al Gore (Leip 2013). Though Gore had represented Tennessee in the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate for a combined total of 16 years, his presence on the Democratic ticket did not bring a majority of his state's voters into the Democratic column.

The year 2000 saw an apparent return to the pattern of the 1980s, with a solid Republican South, and a Republican near sweep of the Great Plains States and of the Rocky Mountain States. The Republican Party was so strong in the South that they were able to carry Tennessee with a majority, even though the Democratic candidate was Vice President Gore. Despite losing the popular vote nationwide, the Republican candidate, Texas Governor George W. Bush, won majorities in ten of the eleven Southern states, and won a disputed plurality in the eleventh. By retaining their strongholds the Republicans were able to win the 2000 presidential election, even though they had lost the popular vote. Four years later Bush swept every Southern state with a majority, and he performed nearly as well in the Western states, giving the Republicans a narrow victory in the Electoral College. It began to appear that the Democrats could not win in the Electoral College unless there was a strong third-party candidate who was popular in the Republican strongholds. The Republicans also had control of the House of Representatives, the Senate, the U.S. Supreme Court, the majority of governorships, and the majority of state legislatures. The Republican “lock” seemed secure.

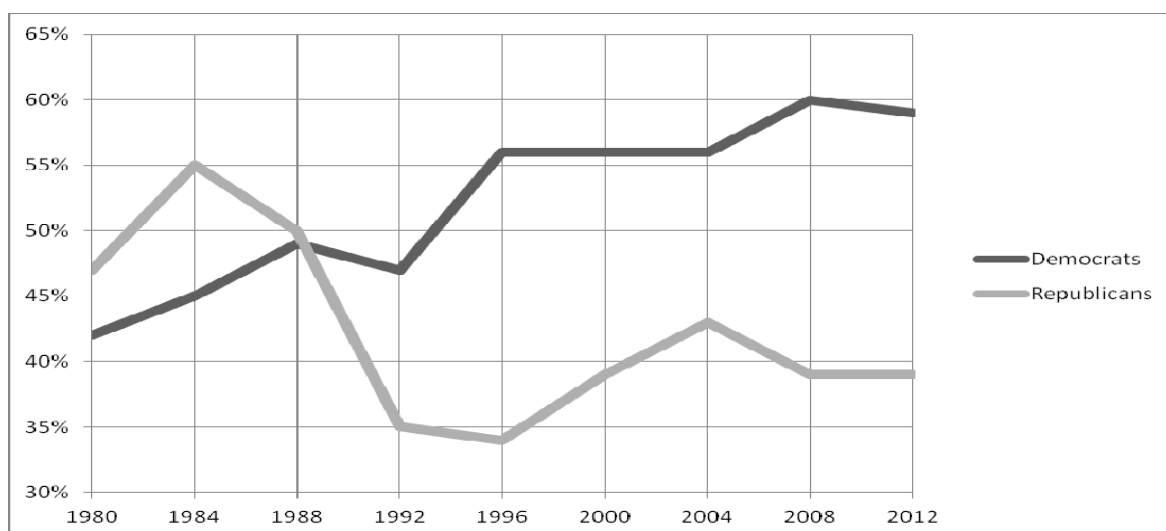
A Loosening of the Republican Grip

Republican strength was at a peak in 2004, but two years later there were signs of a loosening of the Party’s grip on the electorate. In 2006 Republicans suffered heavy losses in midterm elections. The Democrats regained control of the U.S. Senate, the House of Representatives, and of a majority of governorships. Though congressional and gubernatorial elections are not determined by anything resembling the Electoral College, the mid-term elections provided the Democratic Party with momentum going into the coming presidential race. The 2006 elections showed some Democratic strength in Republican strongholds of the South and the Mountain West. In the Southern state of Virginia the incumbent Republican

Senator George Allen lost his seat to Democratic challenger Jim Webb, and in Florida incumbent Democratic Senator Bill Nelson easily beat back a challenge from Republican Katherine Harris, the Secretary of State for Florida. Out West in Montana incumbent Republican Senator Conrad Burns was also narrowly defeated by his Democratic rival John Tester. These mid-term elections gave the Democrats control of the U.S. Congress, but in order to win the presidency they had to continue to make inroads in the Republican strongholds that Horace Busby believed gave that Party a lock on the Electoral College.

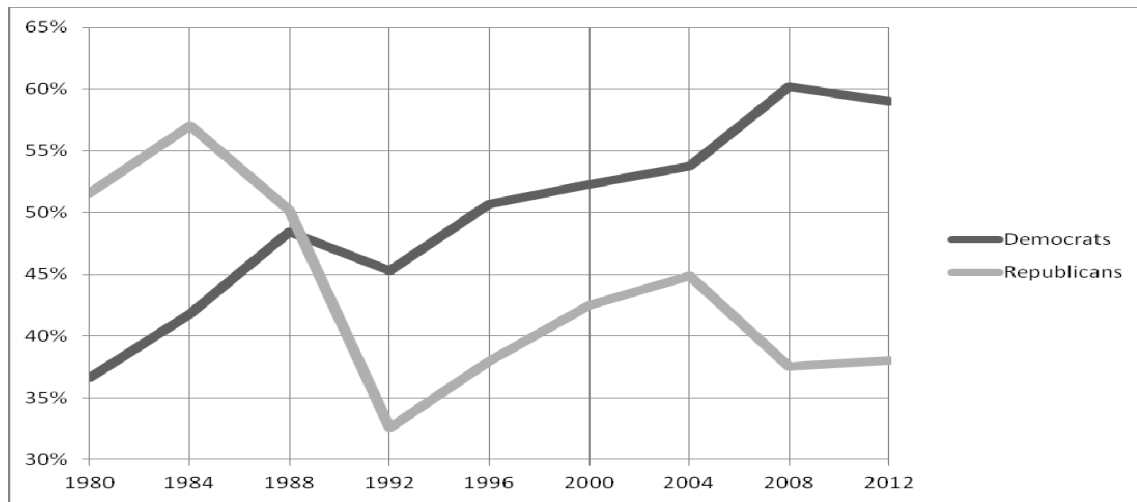
When Busby spoke of the lock back in 1980, he did not foresee that there would be areas of the country that would become Democratic Party strongholds. The New England States would become the core of Democratic Party strength. New England is now the region that most consistently votes Democratic in presidential elections, and whose states provide the Party with its highest margins of victory. The Democratic Party's base also includes the adjacent Mid-Atlantic States and the Pacific Coast States. This could not be observed in 1980 or 1984 when Republican Ronald Reagan was overwhelmingly victorious in all regions of the United States.

Figure 1 Percentage of Vote Received by Presidential Candidates in Northeastern States



Using the data provided by David Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, Figures 1 and 2 show the percentage of the votes received by Democratic and Republican candidates from 1980 to 2008 in these regions where the Democratic Party would become dominant.

Figure 2 Percentage of Vote Received by Presidential Candidates In Pacific Coast States



The Northeast's Historical Ties to the Republican Party

The Northeast, and New England in particular, resembles the “Solid South” of a century ago; it is the region of the strongest support for the Democratic Party. Conversely, the South has replaced the Northeast as the core of support for the Republican Party. In the 19th century, New England was a Republican Party stronghold, and a Whig Party stronghold before that. The Whigs were a successor to the Federalist Party, which was most popular in New England. Federalists favored a strong and sometimes interventionist central government and New England Whigs politically resembled their Federalist forbears in this regard. Likewise in the Republican Party there were factions who favored an activist government that served to ameliorate the ills of society. This support of governmental activism reflected their Puritan/Yankee roots. In the 19th century this translated into support for the abolition of slavery, for women's suffrage,

prohibition, and civil service reform. Daniel Elazar refers to this as a “moralistic” political culture, which believes that social change is not solely the responsibility of private individuals, but should be done in partnership with an active government (1966, 90). The moralistic culture was also present in other areas of the U.S. that had been settled by New Englanders, and those regions became Republican bastions in the 19th and early-20th centuries. These areas include Oregon’s Willamette Valley, Northern New Jersey, Northern Pennsylvania, upstate New York, the redwood coast of California, and the towns of Walla Walla, Washington and Ripon, Wisconsin. The latter town is where the Republican Party was founded. Kevin Phillips describes these areas as having a “sociopolitical kinship to New England . . . in matters of government and morality, and in partisan political allegiance and preference” (1969, 94).

The key to what Phillips mentioned was “partisan political allegiance and preference.” Regions that were dominated by New Englanders and their descendants remained with the Republican Party, even after the national Democratic Party began to adopt some of the issues championed by New England Republicans. Throughout much of the 20th century New England “Yankees” maintained their loyalty to the Republican Party, even when all other sections of the nation were voting Democratic. In 1932, during the height of the Depression, sections of New England and the Mid-Atlantic bucked the Roosevelt landslide by supporting incumbent president Herbert Hoover. The only two states that opposed FDR in all four of his successful presidential races were the New England states of Maine and Vermont. The large numbers of immigrants and children of immigrants in the other four New England states helped bring those states into the Democratic column, but Maine and Vermont had fewer immigrant stock voters than the other states in that region. Those two states were dominated by the descendants of early Protestant settlers from England.

Immigrant stock voters, particularly those who were Catholic, initiated the realignment that transformed New England and the rest of the Northeast from a region of solid support for the Republican Party into what it presently is, and that is the core of Democratic Party strength. The shift toward the Democratic Party in the Northeast began in 1928 in the urban areas of the region. That year the Democratic Party nominated New York Governor Al Smith as its presidential candidate. Smith, the grandson of Irish immigrants, was the first Roman Catholic nominated as a major party's presidential candidate. He lost in a landslide, but he won in areas that had never before voted against a Republican presidential candidate. Two such areas were Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Phillips 1969, 58). Samuel Lubbell (1965) looked at the 12 largest U.S. cities and how they had voted in presidential elections from 1920 to 1948. These cities had been Republican dominant in the 1920 and 1924 elections, but in 1928 they were carried by Al Smith. Smith also carried 122 formerly Republican counties in the North, 77 of which were predominantly Catholic (Lubbell 1965, 49). Fifty-seven of these counties remained Democratic through 1948 (1965, 50). V.O. Key describes 1928 as the "Al Smith Uprising" that preceded by four years the "Roosevelt Revolution." Key notes that, though the Republicans carried Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine in 1928, the Democrats picked up strength in each of these states. In 1932 Democratic candidate Franklin Roosevelt came within two percent of carrying Connecticut and New Hampshire, while Massachusetts and Rhode Island remained in the Democratic column (1955, 10-11). Among the Mid-Atlantic States President Hoover carried only Pennsylvania and Delaware in 1932, but by narrow margins, winning just above 50 percent in each state (Leip 2013). By 1936 Connecticut, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and Delaware voted for Roosevelt, leaving Vermont and Maine as the only two states in the entire U.S. to vote Republican in the presidential election. The difference between

these two states and the other Northeastern states is that they were the only two where there was a combination of two factors that favored the Republican Party: a majority of the residents living outside of urbanized areas of the states, and a majority of residents who were *not* of immigrant stock. Table 1 lists the eleven Northeastern states and the percentage of residents who were urban, and the percentage who were of immigrant parentage or of native-born parentage (U.S. Census Bureau 1943).

Table 1 European-American Population of Northeastern States in 1930

State	Percent Immigrant Stock	Percent Native Stock	Percent Urban
Connecticut	56.5	43.5	67.8
Delaware	19.9	80.1	51.7
Maine	30.5	69.6	40.5
Maryland	17.3	82.6	59.8
Massachusetts	56.3	43.7	89.4
New Hampshire	42.1	57.9	57.6
New Jersey	49.9	50.1	82.6
New York	55.2	44.8	83.6
Pennsylvania	32.5	66.9	66.5
Rhode Island	59.1	40.9	91.6
Vermont	28.5	71.4	34.3

V.O. Key's findings in New England coincide with those of Samuel Eldersveld, who examined the U.S. presidential elections nationwide from 1920 through 1948. What Eldersveld

discovered was that by 1928 voters in urban areas were leaving the Republican Party, and that the urbanized regions of states helped move the states into the Democratic column during this period. Though the Republicans won in a landslide in the 1928 presidential election, the Democratic candidate was able to carry large cities in states that went Republican (1949, 1194-95). In 1940 and 1944, with Roosevelt's popularity no longer at its zenith, the Republican presidential candidates would have carried Pennsylvania had it not been for the vote in the urban areas (1949, 1196). By 1948 the Northeast was back in the Republican column, with the exception of heavily Catholic Massachusetts and Rhode Island. The Northeast remained Republican until the 1960 election.

Since Vermont and Maine were traditionally Republican and predominantly rural, they never voted Democratic during this period. Maine had voted Republican in nearly every election since 1856, the first election in which that Party fielded a presidential candidate. The only exception was in 1912, when former Republican President Theodore Roosevelt ran as a "Progressive" and split the Republican ticket, which allowed Democrat Woodrow Wilson to carry Maine with a very small plurality. The state of Vermont held popular elections for president since 1828, but never voted Democratic until 1964. It was not until 1992 when Vermont voted Democratic again, and then only with a plurality, not a majority. Since 1996 Vermonters have given Democratic presidential candidates large majorities (Leip 2013).

In a state-by-state study of the 1940s U.S., John Gunther describes the typical Vermont Yankee as "the most impregnably Yankee of all Yankees" (1956, 506). This is because, unlike neighboring New Hampshire (which Vermont is often compared with), Vermont had not been affected by industrialization or immigration. In Gunther's opinion, Vermont was the only state that escaped the Industrial Revolution. In comparison to residents of neighboring states,

Vermonters were much more involved in farming due to the fact that the soil was richer. Moreover, in comparison to New Hampshire, Vermont had a much smaller percentage of French Canadians (who tended to be Catholic) and immigrants, which also led to fewer voters identifying with the Democratic Party (1956, 506).

In his study of New England, Key reports that the Democratic Party was helped by the large proportion of immigrants and immigrant-stock voters, persons whom the Democratic Party was able to capture beginning in 1928. Key contrasts rural with urban areas of New England. What he discovered was that even the rural Protestant areas increased their support for the Democrats in 1932, but by 1952 that level of support had dropped to pre-1932 levels (1955, 6-11). This is corroborated by Campbell, Gurin, and Miller who state that by 1952 many of the Republicans who had voted Democratic in the 1930s and 1940s had gone back to the Republican Party by 1952 (1954, 106-7). Voting results in New England attest to this. In 1948 New Hampshire and Connecticut returned to the Republican fold, and in 1952 Massachusetts and Rhode Island did likewise, for the first time in 28 years. In 1952 the Republican presidential candidate, Dwight Eisenhower, carried a higher percentage of the vote in the states of New Hampshire, Connecticut, Vermont and Maine than he had in the U.S. overall. Though his percentages in heavily Catholic Massachusetts and Rhode Island were lower than the national average, he nevertheless won the majority of votes in those two states, and was the first Republican to carry either of them since native son Calvin Coolidge (of Massachusetts) in 1924. In 1956 Eisenhower received a higher percentage of the vote in every New England state (including Massachusetts and Rhode Island) than he did in the U.S. as a whole. Eisenhower also carried the Mid-Atlantic States by large margins (Leip 2013).

This Northeastern return to the Republican fold would not last beyond the Eisenhower years. During the decade of the 1950s the Democratic Party was gaining strength, particularly during off-year elections. In 1954 the state of Maine elected its first Democratic governor in 20 years. Four years later Vermont chose its first Democratic U.S. representative since before there was a Republican Party. Then in 1962 Vermont and New Hampshire elected Democratic governors, while New Hampshire also elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate. As the national Republican Party became more conservative and Southern and Western oriented, Republican candidates in the Northeast were finding it increasingly difficult to compete with Democrats. This ideological transformation of the Republican Party began in the 1950s, and was demonstrated when Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-WI) conducted his hysterical anti-communist crusade. Kevin Phillips wrote that McCarthy symbolized “Southern, Western, German and Irish popular conservatism” that did not play well in the Northeast, particularly not in Yankee New England. McCarthy was strongly criticized by New England Republican senators such as Charles Toby (NH), Margaret Chase Smith (ME), Ralph Flanders (VT), and George Aiken (VT). These New England Republicans supported civil liberties bills that were opposed by conservatives from the South and the West (1969, 99-100). The increasing Democratic strength in the Northeast was demonstrated in the 1960 presidential election when Senator John Fitzgerald Kennedy carried his home state of Massachusetts, the neighboring New England states of Rhode Island, and Connecticut, along with all of the Mid-Atlantic States. Four years later there was even more evidence that New England would become a Democratic stronghold in presidential elections. Though the Democratic candidate President Lyndon Johnson won in a landslide, the proportion of the vote that he carried in the Northeast far exceeded his nationwide

proportion (Leip 2013). This was true in all of the Northeastern states save for Delaware, which he carried by roughly the same proportion that he carried the U.S.

The year 1964 marked a transition of the Republican Party, one that would eventually make it much weaker in the Northeast, but stronger in the South. The Party nominated as its presidential candidate Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, whose politics were antithetical to that of moralistic regions of the country. Goldwater ran on a platform that repudiated the idea that government can be used as a tool to remedy the ills of society. He opposed the newly passed Civil Rights Act, and he expressed reservations about continued federal funding for social security for senior citizens (Barnes 1998, A-01). Both of these were measures that the Republican Party's Eastern Establishment had supported for at least 24 years. When the Republican delegates met that summer in San Francisco, they steered their Party in a different direction from the one it had been going in for decades while under the leadership of the Eastern wing. Goldwater was a Westerner who allied himself with the South. Consequently the party became less competitive in the Northeast.

The election of 1964 was the first Democratic landslide since the Roosevelt days, but there were several key differences. This time the Yankee counties did not resist the Democratic onslaught. During the 1930s, in the midst of the Great Depression, Yankee counties did not participate in the Roosevelt realignment. These counties supported Hoover in 1932 and Republican Alf Landon in 1936, which is why Vermont and Maine continued to vote Republican during this era. The other Northeastern states were less Protestant and less rural, hence they moved into the Democratic column during the 1930s. The situation was very different in 1964. That year Yankee counties throughout the U.S., who opposed FDR during the Depression, went along with the Democratic landslide. No section of the United States lost more Republican

congressmen than the Northeast (13 seats). Democrats in the Northeast did well even in the 1966 mid-term elections, elections which favored Republicans in other parts of the U.S. Those elections left Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont with Democratic governors, and, for the first time in history, both of Maine's members in the U.S. House of Representatives were Democrats (Phillips 1969, 101).

The Emergence of Democratic Party Strongholds

Though the Democrats were rapidly gaining strength in the Northeast, Republicans did remain competitive there for another thirty years, and the Party is still quite strong in some counties of the mid-Atlantic region. In the Republican landslide victories of 1972, 1980, and 1984, New England and the Mid-Atlantic states went along with the rest of the U.S. in supporting the Republican presidential candidate. However, in New England there were pockets of resistance to the national trend. In 1972 the only state carried by the Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern was Massachusetts, and in the 1980 presidential election Rhode Island was one of only six states to vote Democratic; President Jimmy Carter carried that state by a double-digit margin. Though Reagan carried 49 states in 1984, the two states where he won by the slimmest of margins were Massachusetts and Rhode Island (Leip 2013). Those states went Democratic in 1988, as did neighboring New York State, but the Republicans won the White House for the third time in a row. In 1992 the Democrats were finally successful with the presidential candidacy of Bill Clinton. He swept New England and the Mid-Atlantic, winning all eleven states, nine by double-digit margins. That scenario was repeated in 1996. In 2000 the Republicans won a disputed victory in the Electoral College, but the Democrats carried ten of the eleven Northeastern states, and by large margins. The Republicans won again in 2004, but the Democrats swept the eleven states of the Northeast (Leip 2013).

The other region that has become a Democratic stronghold is the Pacific Coast, which includes Washington, Oregon, California, and Hawai'i. Much of the Pacific Coast had been reliably Republican prior to the 1990s. In those years in which the Democratic Party won narrow victories, the Pacific Coast (save for Hawai'i) voted Republican. This was the case in 1960 and 1976. Even the state of Hawai'i voted with the rest of the U.S. in the Republican landslides of 1972 and 1984. But by 1988 the Democratic dominance became noticeable in the Pacific states.

Throughout much of U.S. history, the Pacific Coast has politically resembled New England, which was the origin of many families who lived in California, Oregon, and Washington. Many of these New Englanders traveled Westward via the Oregon Trail and settled in the Pacific Coast states. In his writings on the "moralistic political culture," Daniel Elazar also states that the New England Yankees transplanted their political culture to the Pacific Coast (1966, 100). This is reflected in presidential voting results. In the 1948 presidential election the Northeastern and Great Plains States returned to the Republican Party. The Republicans were also on a verge of a comeback in the Pacific Coast. Though the state of Washington remained with the Democratic Party in 1948, California voted Democratic by a very narrow margin (without a majority), while Oregon went along with the Northeast and returned to the Republican fold. In the following presidential election (1952) all three Pacific Coast states voted Republican and, for the most part, continued to do so, with the exception of the 1964 Democratic landslide. The only Pacific Coast state where the Democrats displayed strength was the new state of Hawai'i, which did not vote in presidential elections prior to 1960. Even in the Democrats' victorious year of 1976, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, the Republican Party carried Washington, Oregon, and California (Leip 2013).

The 1988 election marked a political turning point in the Pacific Coast states. In that year the Republican presidential candidate, Vice President George H.W. Bush, won an overwhelming national victory, but he did poorly in two regions: the Northeast and the Pacific Coast. The Democratic candidate, Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, won slim majorities in Washington and Oregon and a comfortable majority in Hawai'i. Vice President George H.W. Bush carried California, but by a much smaller margin than his Republican predecessor had in 1984 and 1980. In 1992 all four Pacific Coast states were in the Democratic column, and remained so in the next four presidential elections. In the 2008 and 2012 elections the Democratic candidate, Senator Barack Obama, won in a landslide in all four Pacific Coast states (Leip 2013). These states have followed the same political trajectory as the Northeast: Republican strongholds in the first half of the 20th century, but Democratic strongholds in the 21st century.

An Increasingly Democratic Great Lakes Region

Another region where the Democrats have gained enough strength to deny the Republicans a “lock” on the Electoral College is the Great Lakes region. The states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan have become “swing” states that have gone Democratic in the past several elections. Like the Pacific Coast States, many of these states’ earliest White settlers were New England Yankees, and they brought a New England brand of politics to their adopted region. Elazar says that the Yankee settlers “established a greater New England” in Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota (1966, 100). Minnesota is a prime example of the exportation of New England Republicanism; at the state’s 1854 constitutional convention, 44 percent of the Republican delegates were from New England (Fenton 1966, 75). James Fenton describes Minnesota’s Republicans as being “anti-slavery, anti-liquor and anti-Catholic

Yankees,” who were bolstered by a large population of Scandinavian immigrants who shared their viewpoints on liquor and slavery (1966, 81). The Yankee-Scandinavian coalition in Minnesota made it a Republican-dominant state (1966, 75). The Republican Party carried Minnesota in every presidential election from the time it became a state in 1856 through 1928, with the exception of 1912, when insurgent Republican Theodore Roosevelt ran as a “Progressive” and carried the state. It was not until 1932 that Minnesota voted Democratic in a presidential election.

Minnesota’s Republican majority was by no means ideologically homogenous. There was a liberal pro-labor and pro-agrarian faction of the state’s Republicans, and in the early-20th century they formed an organization called the “Non-Partisan League.” In 1918 the Non-Partisan League split from the Republican Party and established the “Farmer-Labor Party.” They became a viable contender with the dominant Republican Party, while the Democratic Party was relegated to third-party status in the state. The Farmer-Labor Party won four successive gubernatorial elections: 1930, 1932, 1934, and 1936. During the New Deal the Democratic Party became more attractive to supporters of the Farmer-Labor Party, and in 1944 the Democratic Party and the Farmer-Labor Party merged, thus making the Democratic Party more competitive in the state, under the name “Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party,” or “D-F-L” (Fenton 1966, 95). Minnesota elected its first Democratic U.S. senator in 1948 and its first Democratic governor in 1954. By the 1960s the D-F-L had become the dominant party in the state, and Minnesota has voted Democratic in every presidential contest since 1960, with the exception of 1972. That year only Massachusetts provided the Republican candidate with a lower percentage of the vote than Minnesota (Leip 2013).

Minnesota's neighboring state of Wisconsin has a similar history. Wisconsin had been a reliably Republican state, especially in presidential elections. The Republican Party was founded in Ripon, Wisconsin in 1854 by Alvin Earl Bovay, a native New Yorker who had moved west to Wisconsin (Gilman 1914, 3). From the founding of the Party until the Great Depression the state of Wisconsin voted Republican in all but three presidential elections. In 1892 the Populist and Prohibition Parties took away enough support from Republicans to give the Democrats a slim plurality in Wisconsin, and in 1912 Theodore Roosevelt's "Progressive Party" candidacy did likewise. In 1924 Wisconsinite Robert LaFollette, Sr., a former Republican, also ran as a Progressive and carried his home state (Leip 2013). Other than those three aberrational races, Wisconsin was a Republican state. Like Minnesota, Wisconsin had a large Scandinavian population. Scandinavians coalesced with Northeasterners, such as Bovay, and formed the core of the state's Republican Party (Fenton 1966, 49). James Fenton describes Wisconsin prior to the 1930s as a "One-Party Republican state," where the political divisions were not between parties, but between factions of the dominant Republican Party. There were the traditional stalwarts versus the "progressives" (1966, 44). In 1934 the progressives split from the Republican Party and formed the Progressive Party. The Progressive Party won the gubernatorial elections in 1934, 1936, and 1942. After that, the Party went into decline, and in 1946 they returned to the Republican Party. Progressive Senator Robert LaFollette, Jr., competed in the 1946 Republican primary, but was defeated by conservative Joseph McCarthy. The McCarthy forces dominated the Wisconsin Republican Party, making the Progressives feel unwelcome. In 1949 the Progressives left the Republicans and joined the Wisconsin Democratic Party, which reinvigorated that theretofore moribund party. The Democrats went on to Wisconsin's gubernatorial elections of 1954, 1960, and 1962, and won U.S. Senate races in 1958

and 1962. By 1962 the Democratic Party was the majority party in Wisconsin. The Democratic Party became dominant by winning areas that were populated by voters of Yankee stock, Scandinavians, and former Progressives. Madison, Wisconsin, which had been a stronghold of the Progressive Party, strongly supported Democratic presidential candidate Hubert Humphrey in 1968. Rock County, a Yankee area that had been a Republican stronghold, showed a dramatic shift to the Democratic Party between 1960 and 1968 (Phillips, 389). While the gains were not enough to allow the Democrats to carry Wisconsin in the 1968 election, in 1976 Democratic Presidential candidate Jimmy Carter carried Wisconsin, only the second Democrat to do so since 1940. In 1988 Wisconsin was one of only 10 states to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate, and the state has voted Democratic in every presidential election since (Leip 2013).

In 1992 neighboring Great Lakes states Michigan and Illinois joined Wisconsin and Minnesota in voting Democratic, and those states have supported the Democratic Party in every presidential election since then. The presence of very large urban centers with significant numbers of minority voters and union members has helped keep Michigan and Illinois in the Democratic column, thus making the Great Lakes states a region of Democratic Party strength in the 1990s and 2000s. The other two Great Lakes states are Indiana and Ohio, and both of these have often voted Republican in recent presidential elections, but in both 2008 and 2012 a majority of Ohio's voters supported Barack Obama, the Democratic presidential candidate (Leip 2013).

Making Inroads into the Current Republican Strongholds

In the 2008 presidential election the Democratic Party made inroads in the Republican strongholds of the South and the Rocky Mountain States. From 1980 to 2004 Democrats running for president were unable to win majorities in most of the states in those regions. But in 2008

Barack Obama, won a majority of the vote in Florida, Virginia, Colorado, New Mexico and Nevada, and a plurality in North Carolina (Leip 2013). These were victories in regions that were once thought by some to be invulnerable to a Democratic onslaught, at least on the presidential level. The Republicans might have carried those states had it not been for demographic changes over the past several years. Though Virginia and Florida are states of the former Confederacy, in-migration of voters from other states has attenuated the Southern character of those two states. Of the eleven Southern states, Virginia and Florida are the only two in which fewer than half of the residents were born in the state. Just under half of Virginia's residents were born in the state, and only 35 percent of Florida's residents were born there (U.S. Census Bureau 2011). The massive in-migration to northern Virginia and to central and southern Florida has made these sections non-Southern from a cultural standpoint. They are also the most densely populated regions of their respective states; hence a candidate who carries those sections stands a good chance of carrying the states, as happened in 2008 and again in 2012.

In-migration has also changed the political character of some of the Rocky Mountain States. Just as the presence of immigrant-stock voters helped transform New England from a Republican stronghold into a competitive region in the late-1920s, the same factor has recently led to a similar transformation in the Rocky Mountain region. The difference is where the immigrants originated. In the early-20th century the immigrant-stock voters were of European origin, whereas in the 21st century many are of Latin American heritage. Nevertheless in both situations the beneficiaries have been Democratic presidential candidates. In 2008 and 2012 Barack Obama carried the three Rocky Mountain states with the highest percentages of Hispanic voters. In these states (New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado), the proportion of voters who are Hispanic is in the double-digits, ranging from 13 percent in Colorado to 41 percent in New

Mexico (Todd and Gawiser 2009, 124-25). These three states also saw a significant increase in the Hispanic proportion of the electorate from 2004 to 2008. That is why Obama was able to carry them despite their location in erstwhile hostile territory for Democratic presidential candidates.

Summary and Analysis

The ideological polarization of the two major parties on key political issues is what has led to each party developing strongholds that appear out of the reach of the other party. In 1964, after signing the Civil Rights Act, President Lyndon Johnson privately told his Press Secretary Bill Moyers that, “We’ve lost the South for a generation” (Davidoff 2010, 30). The President’s prediction has proved true for more than a generation. The Democratic Party’s support for the civil rights of African Americans is one issue that has led to the South becoming a Republican stronghold. Other factors that alienated the South from the Democrats include the Party’s positions on defense spending and social issues. The Republican Party has been able to capitalize on the Democrats’ leftward movement on issues of concern to many conservative Southerners. In addition, the Republican Party’s “small government” conservatism on issues of taxation, federal regulations, and firearm ownership has made them very popular in the Great Plains and the Mountain West. This contributed to the belief that the Republican Party was unbeatable in the Electoral College. The dwindling numbers of centrist Democrats has made the Republican Party the Party of the South, the Mountain States, and the Great Plains.

Conversely there has been a diminution of the ranks of centrist and liberal Republicans, which has hurt the Party in the Northeastern states, particularly in New England. Though New England had traditionally been the Republican Party’s most reliable stronghold, the region was never a bastion of conservatism. As is the case today, throughout the twentieth century New

England was the most politically liberal region of the country, despite its loyalty to the Republican Party. Many of the Republican members of Congress elected from New England could easily be classified as “liberals.” This list of liberal Republicans from New England includes Vermont’s Senators George Aiken, Ralph Flanders, Robert Stafford, and James Jeffords. In Rhode Island there were Senators John and Lincoln Chafee, while in neighboring Massachusetts there were Senators Leverett Saltonstall and Edward Brooke, the first popularly elected African American U.S. senator. Connecticut was the home to Senator Lowell P. Weicker, Jr., another liberal Republican. Out of Connecticut also came the moderate Republican Senator Prescott Bush, the progenitor of the Bush dynasty. Other moderate senators have been Mainers Margaret Chase Smith (who publicly denounced McCarthyism) William Cohen (who went on to serve as Secretary of Defense in a *Democratic* administration), and current senators Olympia Snowe and Susan Collins. Collins and Snowe are the two Republicans with the lowest lifetime ratings by the American Conservative Union (ACU 2013).

The Mid-Atlantic States have also sent liberal-to-moderate Republicans to the U.S. Senate. From Pennsylvania came Hugh Scott, Richard Schweiker, John Heinz, and Arlen Specter (who eventually switched to the Democratic Party). From New York came Kenneth Keating and Jacob Javits, while in New Jersey there was Clifford Case, and in Delaware and Maryland were Caleb Boggs and Charles Mathias. The Yankee outpost state of Oregon has also produced liberal Republicans, such as Mark Hatfield and Robert Packwood, both of whom served in the U.S. Senate during the 1980s. This was an era in which moderate and liberal Republicans were still welcome in their Party. Even President Reagan, who hailed from the conservative wing of the Party, reached out to include moderate Republicans in his Administration. Foremost was his vice president, George H.W. Bush, a native New Englander

who at the time was identified with the moderate wing of the Party. Reagan also included moderate northeasterners in his cabinet, such as Richard Schweiker and Margaret Heckler (R-MA), both of whom served as Secretary of Health and Human Services at different points in the Reagan Administration. With the passage of time the parties have become more polarized on the various social issues, and this has driven away moderates from both parties. The rightward shift of the Republican Party led to liberal Northeastern Republicans leaving their Party, just as the leftward shift of the Democratic Party alienated many Southern voters twenty-five years earlier.

In both the South and the Northeast the realignment was gradual, not sudden. As late as the 1990s the Democratic Party had a modicum of strength in the South. This is why Bill Clinton was able to carry Louisiana and Arkansas with a majority of the vote in 1996 (Leip 2013). But by 2000 that Democratic strength in the South had all but disappeared. Even though Al Gore was a Southerner, he failed to carry one Southern state, not even his home state of Tennessee. In 2004 Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry selected John Edwards as his running mate, but the Kerry/Edwards ticket was unable to carry any of the Southern states, not even North Carolina, the state Edwards had once represented in the U.S. Senate, nor South Carolina, Edwards' home state. Just as the Democratic Party maintained some Southern strength until the 1990s, in New England and the rest of the Northeast the Republican Party remained strong throughout the 1980s. Having a New Englander atop the Democratic ticket in 1988 did not help the Party to win the states of Vermont, Maine, New Hampshire, or Connecticut. While the Democratic Party swept the Northeast in 1992, in not one of the eleven Northeastern states did the Democratic candidate, Bill Clinton, win with a majority. It was not until 1996 that the Democratic Party became, in earnest, the Party of the Northeast. Bill Clinton swept that region,

receiving a majority in nine of the eleven states, and a plurality in the other two: Pennsylvania and New Hampshire.

Though Al Gore won the popular vote with only a slim plurality, he did quite well in the Northeast. Gore carried every Northeastern state except for New Hampshire, and won a majority in nine of the states, winning by a plurality in Maine. This pattern was repeated in 2004. Riding high on his post-9/11 popularity, President George W. Bush won a majority of the national popular vote, but his Democratic opponent John Kerry swept the Northeast, including the elusive New Hampshire. Kerry received a majority in every Northeastern state. In 2008 Barack Obama built upon his Party's earlier success and won every Northeastern state by higher margins than Kerry, receiving an undisputed majority in each state. Obama received 53 percent of the popular vote nationwide, and was the first Democratic presidential candidate in 32 years to receive a majority of the vote. His highest margin in the continental United States was in Vermont, where he received over two-thirds of the vote. The only state where he received a higher proportion was his home state of Hawai'i (Leip 2013). Vermont, which had long been the only state refusing to abandon the Republican Party in presidential elections, has become the most Democratic of all of the states on the U.S. mainland.

The partisan transformation of the Northeast was less the result of shifting ideologies of the public than it was of the increasing ideological polarization of the leadership of the two major parties. Even so, many of the voters were slow to abandon their partisan affiliation, despite the changes in the parties' positions on various issues. When the Republican Party moved to the right on these issues, many Northeasterners continued to vote for Republican presidential candidates, this due to their traditional affiliation with the Party. O'Connor, Sabato, and Yanus correctly state that partisan identification is the best predictor of vote choice (2011, 434), and

voters' identification with a party is more likely to be influenced by their parents than by ideology (2011, 377). In his study of voting behavior in national elections from 1952-1996, Larry Bartels confirms the strong impact of partisanship in voter choices, and notes that this impact is increasing (2000, 40). He goes on to state that when there is a regional abandonment of party tradition, it is gradual. Bartels looks at the South, where some conservative voters remained with the Democratic Party even after the national party took a distinctly liberal stand on racial issues (2000 41). Though the region had begun voting Republican on the presidential level in the 1950s, in 1976 there was a significant proportion of conservatives in the South whose party loyalty led them to vote Democratic, particularly when that Party's candidate was a moderate from the Deep South. Jimmy Carter, the former Governor of Georgia, attracted the votes of a large enough minority of White Southerners for him to carry all but one state of the former Confederacy. A smaller number of Southern states returned to the Democratic fold in 1992 and 1996, when the Party nominated for President Bill Clinton, another moderate Southerner. In 1976, 1992 and 1996 the Democrats were able to make inroads in the South and carry several former Confederate states, but by 2000 the Republicans carried every Southern state, even though the Democratic presidential candidate was a moderate Southerner. In 2004 the Republicans again swept the South, but by that time that region had completed its gradual transition from Democratic to Republican.

In New England the transition to the Democratic Party was complete by the 21st century, but it had also been gradual. That is why the states of Vermont and Maine remained in the Republican camp until the 1990s. The exception was the 1964 election when the Republican presidential candidate, Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, was especially unpopular in the Northeast. His candidacy was directly opposed to the Yankee values of an activist moral

government, and he appealed to the Southern and Western wings of his Party, not to the long established Eastern wing. In one campaign appearance, Goldwater publicly stated that, "Sometimes I think this country would be better off if we could just saw off the Eastern Seaboard and let it float out to sea" (Barnes 1998, A-01). Bartels sees the 1964 election as an aberration for that era (2000, 40). In that election many Republican identifiers outside of the South voted Democratic, while many Democratic identifiers in the South voted Republican, even though the Democratic presidential candidate was a Southern Democrat. After Goldwater's overwhelming defeat, the next two Republican presidential nominees, Nixon and Ford, had ties to the Eastern establishment of the Party, and were competitive in the Northeast. While Reagan did not have as strong a tie to that wing of the Party, he did select as his vice president George Bush, a native New Englander, whose family had been a part of the Eastern wing of the Party. Eventually the Easterners lost influence in the Republican Party, but their decline in support for the Party was gradual. In 1996 the Republican ticket included no candidates with close ties to the Eastern establishment; hence the Democratic Party carried a majority of the voters in the Northeast for the first time in over 20 years.

Barry Goldwater had been perceived as an extremist fringe candidate in 1964, which prevented him from carrying traditionally Republican regions. But by the 1980s the ideals Goldwater supported had become the mainstream of Republican Party thought. These ideals of limited governmental involvement in domestic matters, defense policy hawkishness, abandonment of commitment to social programs, and reversal of the remnants of the New Deal characterize the Republican Party today. The Southern and Western wings of the Party are now in control, while those Republican candidates for office in the Northeast must adopt the positions of the Party leadership or face the prospect of losing political support from the Party. The

Party's center of gravity has moved dramatically to the right, which has helped Republicanism in the South and West, but it has been to the detriment of the Party in the Northeast. Currently many voters in the Northeast feel estranged from the Republican Party, therefore in modern presidential elections the Northeast is the region that gives the highest level of support to the Democratic Party. This is similar to 1964 when it was the Northeastern states that gave Democratic President Lyndon Johnson his highest margins of victory. The difference was that 1964 was an aberrational election, after which the Northeast returned to the Republican Party. Today every Republican presidential nominee in varying degrees represents the viewpoints of the Southern and Western Party establishment. This has led to the Democratic Party becoming the dominant Party of the Northeast.

With the exception of New Hampshire in 2000, the Democratic nominee has carried every Northeastern state in every presidential election since 1992, for a total of six elections. The same has held true for the Pacific Coast. Throughout much of U.S. history the Pacific Coast states have voted similarly to New England, and that trend still holds. When New England was reliably Republican, so too was the Pacific Coast, which was the home of many New Englanders and their descendants. Similarly, now that New England is reliably Democratic, so too is the Pacific Coast. Each one of the four Pacific Coast states has voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1992. In the last two elections (2012 and 2008) Barack Obama carried each of those states by double-digit percentage margins.

The Northeast and Pacific Coast are the bases of Democratic Party support, but the Party is also competitive in the Great Lakes Region. These three regions combined provided Barack Obama with 283 electoral votes in 2008 and with 264 in 2012 (Leip 2013). Moreover, due to demographic changes among the populace, Democratic presidential candidates are also making

inroads in the South and in the Rocky Mountain states. In the other Republican stronghold, the Great Plains, the Democratic Party has managed to carry the state of Iowa in most elections since 1988. This presence of “swing states” in Republican regions added to the 264 Electoral College votes in Democratic strongholds, and was sufficient to give Barack Obama enough votes to win the 2012 election. Though their regional strongholds give them nearly enough votes to win in the Electoral College, Democrats must look at the 2012 results with caution. The 21 states of the Northeast (New England and the Mid-Atlantic), Great Lakes (excluding Indiana), and Pacific Coast carry 264 Electoral College votes, but this number is declining, due to population shifts

Table 2 Support for Democratic Presidential Candidates by Region (In Percentages)

Region ¹	1988	1992	1996	2000	2004	2008	2012
Northeast	49	47	56	56	56	60	59
Pacific Coast	48	45	51	52	54	60	59
Great Lakes	46	41	48	47	49	54	51
Rockies	41	36	42	30	42	48	44
Great Plains	47	36	42	40	41	47	43
South	41	41	46	43	42	46	45
Appalachia/Ozark	46	42	46	44	42	43	39

¹ For the purposes of this study, the Northeast includes the following states: ME, NH, VT, CT, MA, RI, NY, NJ, PA, DE, MD, DC. The Pacific Coast states are WA, OR, CA, and HI. The Great Lakes States are OH, IN, IL, MI, WI, and MN. The Rockies include the states of MT, ID, WY, UT, NV, NM, AZ, CO, and AK. The Great Plains include the states of ND, SD, NE, IA, and KN. The South includes the eleven states of the former Confederacy, while “Appalachia/Ozark” includes the states of WV, KY, MO, and OK.

that disfavor the Northeast. In 2008 these states provided Obama with 283 electoral votes, but after the 2010 census, and with the loss of Indiana, that number was down to 264, which is not sufficient to win a presidential race. Therefore one cannot assume that the Democrats now have a “lock” on the Electoral College

Using the data from David Leip’s Atlas of U.S. Elections, Table 2 shows the support for Democratic presidential nominees in the different regions of the United States.

Conclusion

The regional voting patterns that had been developing in the late-20th century persisted into the election of 2012. That year President Barack Obama entered the race in a weaker position than in 2008. He had been through a bruising battle over national health care, and two years earlier his Party had lost control of the House of Representatives and of the majority of state governorships. To make matters worse for the Democrats, the economic recovery that Obama had promised in 2008 was anemic at best. The president was vulnerable, and the polling data bore this out (Zelleny and Connelly 2012). By Election Day, Obama had a very narrow lead in the polls, narrow enough for his Republican opponent, former Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney, to feel assured that that he would defeat the president (Lippman 2012).

To the surprise of Romney, Barack Obama won with 51 percent of the popular vote, and received 332 of the 538 Electoral College votes. He did this by winning all of the states that he had won in 2008, save for Indiana and North Carolina, the only two states that he won by a plurality rather than a majority in 2008. Obama carried all eleven Northeastern states and all four Pacific Coast states. In addition he again received victories in some of the states in the Republican strongholds of the South and the Rockies (Florida, Virginia, Colorado, Nevada, and

New Mexico). He also did well in the Great Lakes, carrying every state in that region except for Indiana (Leip 2013), even though the Republican presidential and vice presidential nominees were from that region. Mitt Romney was born and raised in Michigan, and his father had been the state's governor during the 1960s, and Mitt Romney's running mate Paul Ryan represented a congressional district in his home state of Wisconsin. Obama decisively carried both of those states. In Massachusetts, the state where Romney had served as governor from 2003-2007, Obama won by a 23-point margin. The Democratic Party advantage in New England has become so strong that the former Republican governor of Massachusetts was unable to get 40 percent of the vote in his adopted state. Obama did extremely well in his own adopted state of Illinois, winning nearly 58 percent of the vote, and he won nearly 59 percent in Delaware, the adopted state of his running mate Joe Biden. In Obama's native home state of Hawai'i, he carried over 70 percent of the vote. He had been expected to do well in Hawai'i, Delaware, and Illinois, but there had been questions as to whether he would carry Biden's home state of Pennsylvania, the most conservative of Northeastern states. In the end Obama carried nearly 52 percent of the vote in Pennsylvania, giving him another sweep of the Northeastern states, the third consecutive Democratic sweep of that region (Leip 2013). The 2012 election also marked the sixth consecutive Democratic sweep of the Pacific Coast.

Though Obama's prospects for re-election once appeared to be in danger, he was able to win in part because of the strong support his Party has in certain regions of the country. These regions have served as a counterweight to the Republican strongholds, and have made U.S. presidential elections competitive in the 21st century. The reversals of the parties' political fortunes call into question whether there had indeed been a Republican "lock" on the Electoral College. While it is true that the Republican Party once appeared to have a solid grip upon the

South, the Rocky Mountain states, and the Great Plains states, today these regions combined provide the Party with only 230 votes in the Electoral College, which is still short of a majority. In 1980 and 1984 the Republicans were able to add other regions to their column, due to the popularity of Ronald Reagan, and in 1988 this popularity benefitted his Vice President, George H.W. Bush. Reagan's immense popularity, not an electoral lock, gave the Republican Party its three consecutive overwhelming victories during the 1980s. Though the Republican Party regained the White House in 2000 and retained it in 2004, those were elections in which one could see the emergence of a solid Democratic Northeast and Pacific Coast. The growing Hispanic electorate in some of the Rocky Mountain states, and the influx of non-Southerners into Virginia and Florida have made these regions less of a Republican stronghold than they once were, and have shown that in a nation with a mobile population, no party can be assured a "lock" on any region of the U.S. or on the presidency. To assume that a party has a "lock" on the Electoral College is to assume that the states are demographically static. Such has never been the case. The constant population shifts in the U.S. should make analysts view with caution any prediction that either party will have a long-term hold on the presidency.

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