

attempts to reduce existing programs that they believe protect their interests, such as Social Security and Medicare. The result of this continuing cycle can be referred to as “interest group government.” No single interest dominates government and politics as business groups did before the Great Depression. Instead, government and politics are based on reaching compromises with a large number of groups and pleasing as many as possible.

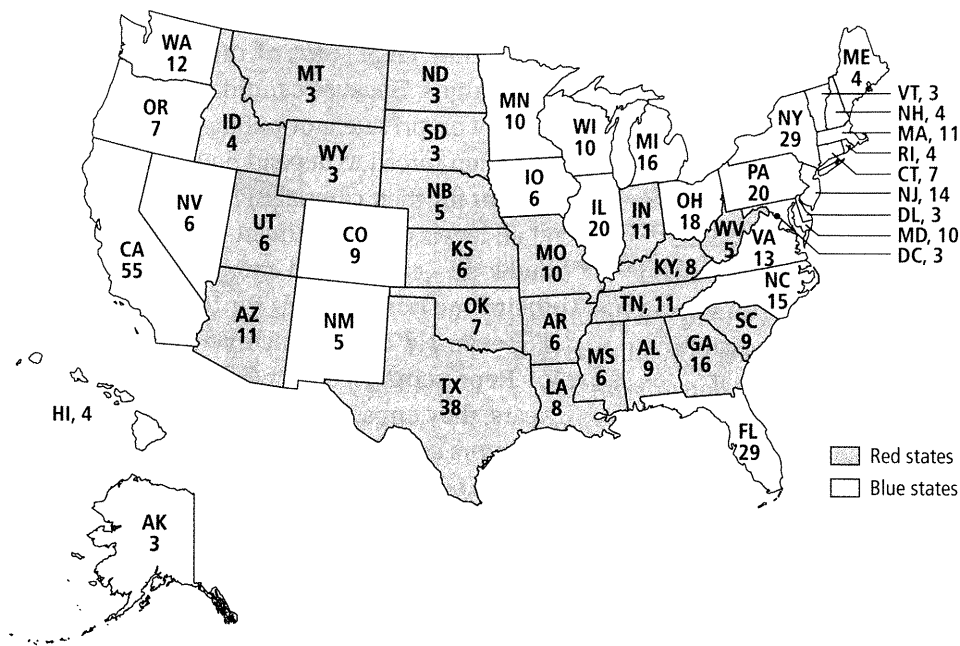
The New Individualism: Interest-Group Government

- 36 Interest-group government can be seen as expressing a new form of American individualism. Unlike the old frontier or business individualism, individuals do not claim to succeed on their own, but rather by forming groups to influence the government. Still, it is individuals, their rights, their interests, and their ambitions, not those of the nation as a whole, that are the focus of their attention. The interest group is no more than a tool to achieve the goals of the individual by influencing the government.
- 37 Although many Americans have benefited in some way from government-sponsored programs, some experts believe that interest-group government is harmful to the United States. The effect on politicians is enormous. First, interest groups often focus on one issue that is more important to their members than all others. For example, some people feel very strongly that abortion should not be legal in the United States. They may choose to vote for candidates primarily because of their stand on the abortion issue. Generally, because their members feel so strongly, lobby groups are able to promise that their members will vote for a candidate if he or she promises to support their issue once elected. The NRA gives members of Congress grades for their voting record on gun control, and it has been particularly effective in re-electing or defeating senators and representatives.

- 38 Second, members of special interest groups contribute large sums of money to election campaigns. Because candidates must rely mostly on private, not public, funding, they are often forced to depend on special interest groups for their campaign funds. Candidates at all levels of government—national, state, and local—must spend enormous amounts of their time raising funds for their re-election. For example, because members of the House of Representatives are elected every two years, they engage in continual fundraising. Senators and presidential candidates are also pressured. The situation has become so bad that many people are agreeing with the statement, “We have the best government that money can buy!” There have been efforts to reform the system, but the Supreme Court’s *Citizens United* decision in 2010 ruled that corporations, individuals, and labor unions could make unlimited contributions to political campaigns through Super PACs (Political Action Committees). In the presidential election of 2012, Super PACs spent over \$524 million, according to the Federal Election Commission.

The Political Landscape in the 2000s: Red States vs. Blue States

- 39 In reporting the results of presidential elections, TV news reports show the map of the United States with red states (awarding the state’s electoral votes to the Republican candidate), and blue states (giving the electoral votes to the Democratic candidate). These colors have come to symbolize the deep divisions in America. In Obama’s first national speech at the Democratic Convention in 2004, he offered his vision of a country where we are not red states or blue states—we are one people—the United States of America. But the divisions persist.
- 40 In *Barack Obama and the New America: The 2012 Election and the Changing Face of Politics*, Alan Abramowitz says the American voters are strongly divided



along party lines. In an unusually partisan election, over 90 percent of the Democrats voted for Obama, and over 90 percent of the Republicans voted for Romney. Even the Independents, now about one-third of the electorate, were split 50/50 Obama/Romney. Also, more than 90 percent of voters chose their House or Senate representatives according to their party. Abramowitz says that this unusual degree of party loyalty reflects the deep divisions in American society:

A close examination of the voting patterns in 2012 demonstrates the existence of three major divisions between Democrats and Republicans—a racial divide between a Democratic Party increasingly dependent on votes from non-whites and an overwhelmingly white Republican Party, an ideological divide over the role and size of government, and a cultural divide over values, morality, and lifestyle.

traditionally had more support from non-white Americans than the Republicans, but this election brought people of all races together behind a candidate that promised “hope and change”—an America where the ultimate American Dream could come true. Some believed that it was a fluke,⁹ something that happens only by chance or luck. But Obama captured the imagination of millions of Americans. Young voters were energized for the first time since the anti-war movements of the 1960s and early 1970s, and also for the first time, social media played an important role. Obama built a grass-roots organization where his campaigners came to know potential voters personally, and many Americans felt like they were part of history. Well over a million people stood outside in the freezing weather on the Washington, D.C., Mall in January, 2009, to watch Obama’s inauguration on huge TV screens.

41 *First, the racial divide.* Barack Obama's winning the presidency in 2008 was truly a historical event. For the first time ever, the United States had an African-American president. The Democrats had

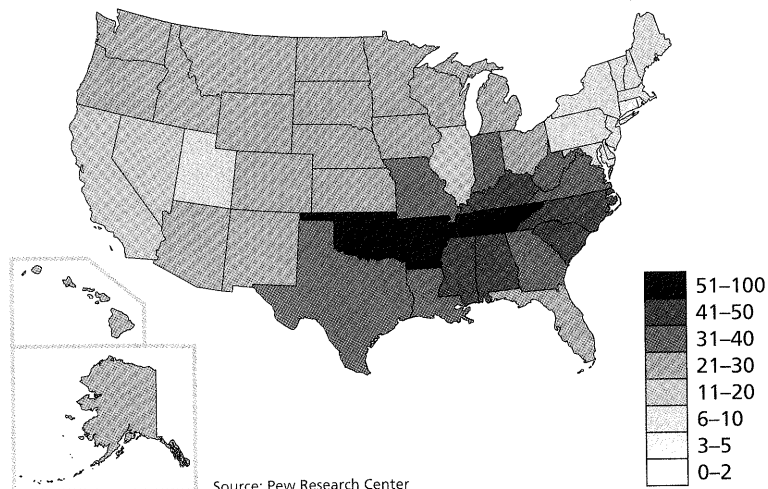
42 Obama's re-election in 2012 proved that
his winning in 2008 was not a fluke.
Obama lost a number of white voters, but

⁹ fluke: something that only happens because of chance or luck

his coalition of non-white voters held. By 2012, 28 percent of the voting public were non-white: African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and other non-whites. Republicans were greatly surprised by Obama's victory and realized that it reflected a new reality in the United States: In spirit, the country has already become the multi-racial, multicultural country the demographers predicted for 2050. We do not have to wait thirty or forty years to see the political effects of being a majority-minority country—the demographic shift is already affecting elections. The Republican Party is in search of a new direction. Because the Republican Party hopes to attract new voters, it will have to appeal to Hispanics, African Americans, Asian Americans, and other non-white voters. The color of the electoral map is also changing, as Democratic Hispanic populations in states such as New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada are starting to turn these red states blue.

- 43 *Second, the ideological divide over the role and size of the national government.* Republicans have traditionally believed that big government is not only inefficient, it also endangers individual rights and freedoms. In 2012, the Tea Party* pushed the Republican Party more to the very conservative right, insisting that government spending is the cause of all economic problems and demanding severe budget cuts. Romney campaigned on a plan to reduce huge budget deficits through significant cuts in social programs; the elimination of many health, safety,

PERCENTAGE OF EACH STATE'S POPULATION THAT AFFILIATES WITH EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT TRADITION



and environmental regulations; and the repeal of the Obama health care law, while cutting taxes on upper income households and corporations. Obama and the Democrats called for more government regulation of financial institutions and corporate polluters, higher taxes on upper income Americans to fund social programs, and full implementation of the new health care law.

- 44 *Third, the cultural divide over values, morality, and lifestyles.* Republicans have increasingly built an alliance with religious conservatives of all faiths, particularly evangelical Christians. Republicans have become associated with traditional values and lifestyles, such as limiting access to abortions and opposition to gay marriage and other rights for homosexuals. They have also been against some birth control methods, including the “morning after” pill. In the meantime, the Democratic Party has moved further left on these issues. Obama allowed gays to serve openly in the military, and he called for gays’ right to marry and other minority rights in his second inaugural address.

* The Tea Party is a very conservative grass-roots movement originally organized by people who were worried about growing government debt (the amount of money owed). The name refers to the Boston Tea Party when American colonists threw tea into the Boston Harbor to protest the British tax on tea.

45 The country as a whole has become more liberal on these social issues, with a majority now favoring gay marriage and the right to abortion in early months of a pregnancy. Most young people are more liberal and less religious than their parents, so the demographics favor the Democrats in the future. Other lifestyle differences include the legalization of marijuana and the passage of laws recognizing gay marriage in a number of states. A look at the red state/blue state map shows the Democratic strength in the liberal Northeast and West coast states and the big cities, while Republicans find their supporters in the more conservative South and in rural areas.

Finding the Way Forward

46 Both the Republicans and the Democrats truly believe that they have the roadmap that will lead the United States to a safe and prosperous future. Republicans believe the country's economic difficulties are due to a spending problem, while Democrats believe it is an income problem. Republicans believe that dependence on entitlements seriously weakens individual freedom and responsibility. They believe that Americans are living beyond their means, borrowing money they need to run a larger and larger government, and creating a terrible financial burden for their children and grandchildren.

47 Democrats are concerned about the widening gap between those who are very, very wealthy and those who are very, very poor. They believe that the government can protect individual freedom by passing laws that ensure equal access to health care and jobs for all Americans, and by showing the way forward with government programs that will engage private businesses in cooperative projects to rebuild needed infrastructure, roads and bridges, and create partnerships between

schools and businesses to provide the educated workforce of the future.

48 In *Our Divided Political Heart: The Battle for the American Idea in an Age of Discontent*, E.J. Dionne, Jr. urges Americans to look back at their history to understand who they are as a people. They must recognize that from the beginning, Americans have lived with a tension between two core values: their love of individualism and their respect for community. These two values work together to give the nation balance, and both values interact with the important value of equality.

49 Obama has spoken about this need for balance between the individualism of private business and the community of common government:

From our first days as a nation, we have put our faith in free markets and free enterprise as the engine of America's wealth and prosperity. More than citizens of any other country, we are rugged individualists, a self-reliant people with a healthy skepticism of too much government.

But there has always been another thread running throughout our history—a belief that we are all connected; and that there are some things we can only do together, as a nation. . . . The America I know is generous and compassionate; a land of opportunity and optimism. We take responsibility for ourselves and each other; for the country we want and the future we share.

50 Obama is expressing a belief in the role traditional American values play in the nation and its government. The twenty-first century will continue to offer challenges to the United States citizens and its government leaders. Hopefully, the six basic cultural values—individual freedom, self-reliance, equality of opportunity, competition, material wealth, and hard work will continue to guide and direct the United States and its people in the future.