

Over the past 16 years, Democrats have tightened their grip on 18 states worth 248 electoral votes. That doesn't portend well for Republicans.

The Blue Wall

■ By Ronald Brownstein

State by state, election by election, Democrats since 1992 have methodically constructed the party's largest and most durable Electoral College base in more than half a century. Call it the blue wall.

After Barack Obama's sweeping victory in November, 18 states and the District of Columbia have now voted for the Democratic nominee in at least the past five presidential elections. The last time Democrats won that many states so consistently was from 1932 to 1948, when Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman won 22 states in five consecutive presidential races.

Together, D.C. and these 18 contemporary Democratic strongholds—running up the East Coast from Maryland through Maine, through the Upper Midwest, and down along the Pacific Coast—are worth a combined 248 Electoral College votes. That's more than 90 percent of the 270 votes required to win the presidency. Although Republicans have come close to capturing some of these states since the Democratic streak began in 1992, particularly when President Bush won re-election in 2004, the Democratic hold

■ Strongholds

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on all of them solidified in 2008. GOP nominee John McCain did not finish within 10 percentage points of Obama in any of the 18 states (or Washington, D.C.). By October 2, McCain had written off all of those states except Pennsylvania, which he eventually lost by more than 600,000 votes.

The Democrats' grip on such a large electoral bloc forced McCain into the situation that Democrats typically confronted while the Republicans won five of the six presidential elections between 1968 and 1988. Through those years, so many states solidly favored the GOP that analysts in both parties spoke of a Republican "lock" on the Electoral College. That left Democrats with few options for reaching an electoral vote majority and allowed Republicans to concentrate enormous resources on the handful of states, principally Ohio, that Democrats could not win the White House without.

By some measures, Democrats haven't locked up as many states in their current run as the GOP did during the 1970s and 1980s. But the solidifying Democratic hold on so many states left McCain with few plausible routes to a majority—a dynamic

WINNING BIG: The blue wall of states that Franklin Roosevelt constructed stayed intact from 1932 to 1948. Barack Obama won every state in its modern-day equivalent by at least 10 percentage points over John McCain.

symbolized by his decision to besiege Pennsylvania with events and advertising through October despite polls consistently showing him trailing by double digits in the state.

"McCain faced, really, the opposite of the situation the Democrats faced in the 1980s," said Earl Black, a political scientist at Rice University and co-author of *Divided*

America: The Ferocious Power Struggle in American Politics. "Given the states the Republicans could count on then, it was just very, very hard for the Democrats to get to 270. Now the tables have definitely turned."

Indeed, from the White House to the statehouse, Democrats now dominate these states up and down the ballot. Republicans hold just three of the 36 U.S. Senate seats in these 18 states (that number could climb to four if Norm Coleman is declared the winner over Democrat Al Franken in Minnesota). In the House, Democrats hold more than 70 percent of the seats from these 18 states, a net advantage of 88. In each chamber, the Democrats' advantage in these states provides their overall margin of majority.

Democrats also control two-thirds of these 18 governorships, every state House chamber, and all but two of the state Senates. Cumulatively, Democrats hold about two-thirds of all legislative seats in the 18 states. “It’s like we are building a fortress,” says veteran Democratic consultant Tad Devine.

How Blue States Are Alike

Almost all of the states in the blue wall fit a common demographic profile: affluent; well-educated; ethnically and racially diverse; culturally moderate to liberal; with below-average rates of church attendance and fewer evangelical Protestants than the national mean. In an era in which each party’s electoral coalition revolves more around cultural attitudes than economic interests, the Democratic advantage in these regions represents the flip side of the Republican edge in the culturally conservative South, Plains, and

But during that 1972 to ‘88 period, Republicans also won another 17 states worth an additional 196 Electoral College votes in four of those five elections. Democrats have won only an additional three states in four of the past five elections: Iowa, New Hampshire, and New Mexico, which are worth a combined 16 Electoral College votes.

For that reason, even Democratic strategists don’t equate their current Electoral College position with the preponderant Republican advantage from Nixon through the elder Bush. Yet the threat to the GOP is obvious if it cannot dislodge some of the 264 electoral votes that Democrats have won in at least four of the past five elections.

“It’s not quite a lock, but maybe it’s a vise that really narrows the room for maneuver for Republicans,” says Democratic pollster Mark Mellman. Ralph Reed, a Georgia-based veteran GOP strategist and activist, takes a similar view. “The next Re-



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—Republican strategist Ralph Reed

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Mountain West that keyed Bush’s victories in 2000 and 2004.

Those two triumphs demonstrated that the Democrats’ hold on these states doesn’t guarantee them the White House. Yet, because of Bush’s inability to dent the blue wall, he won with two of the narrowest Electoral College majorities ever. And although Obama and other Democrats made substantial inroads in culturally conservative states in 2006 and 2008, the Republicans have been steadily losing ground in the culturally cosmopolitan blue states, especially since Bush first appeared on the national ballot in 2000.

That daunting trend is likely to sharpen the conflict between those in the GOP who believe that Republicans can recover only by adopting a more aggressive conservative message and those who fear that the party’s current approach writes off too many voters and regions. Steve Schmidt, McCain’s chief strategist, sides with the latter camp. “The party on its current trajectory is a shrinking party,” Schmidt warns. “It needs to be an expanding party ... [and] to be a national party, it needs to compete in states like New Jersey, New York, and New Hampshire, Pennsylvania and California.... For the party to come back and grow, it must appeal to a broader majority of people. That is now the challenge.”

By the narrowest measure, the Democrats’ current electoral vote stronghold is larger than the Republican base was during the heyday of the GOP lock on the Electoral College. During those years, the most commanding winning streak for the GOP came in the elections from 1972 to 1988—from Richard Nixon through George H.W. Bush—when it won 24 states five consecutive times. Those states were worth 219 electoral votes by the 1980s. Although today’s Democratic streak doesn’t include as many states (18), it does involve more electoral votes (248, including D.C.).

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Foundations of the Wall

The Democrats’ blue wall connects three distinct groups of states. It includes 10 from the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast—every state from Maryland to Maine except New Hampshire. In the Pacific West are California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington. Four more come from the Midwest: Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. And finally, D.C.

For the GOP, the silver lining is that these states could lose as many as eight congressional seats (and, of course, Electoral College votes) in the reapportionment after the 2010 census, according to calculations by Polidata, an electoral demography firm. But even so, that would leave Democrats with a much larger base of reliable states than the GOP has. Republicans have won 13 states, worth only 93 electoral votes, over the past five elections.

Many of the foundation stones in today’s blue wall were elements of the Republicans’ earlier Electoral College lock; California, Illinois, New Jersey, and Vermont, for instance, each voted Republican in all six presidential elections from 1968 to 1988. Those shifts in loyalty are a reminder that there are no final victories in American politics and no permanent geographic advantages for either party. But these states also testify to the realignment of allegiances that has occurred over the past two decades as the principal glue cementing each party’s coalition has evolved from class interests to cultural attitudes.

After that geographic and ideological re-sorting, the Democrats' blue wall is now composed almost entirely of states that combine large numbers of well-educated, affluent, and less-religious whites with substantial numbers of racial and ethnic minorities, including sizable immigrant populations. Thirteen of the 18 blue states (plus the District of Columbia) rank among the 20 states with the highest proportion of college graduates, according to 2007 Census Bureau figures. Likewise, 13 of the states (plus D.C.) rank among the 20 states with the highest median income. Counting D.C., 12 of them rank among the 20 states with the highest percentage of foreign-born residents.

By contrast, these states are home to relatively few of the religiously devout, often evangelical, voters who are the core of the modern GOP coalition. The massive 2007 U.S. Religious Landscape survey conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that the percentage of residents who

Since then, in the five presidential elections across these 18 states, the Republican nominee has finished within 5 percentage points of the Democrat just 10 times out of a possible 90 results. In blue-wall states as far-flung as Connecticut and New York, Michigan and California, Obama won a larger share of the vote than did all but one Democratic nominee since 1932. And throughout these states Democrats have enormously widened their lead in congressional and state legislative seats. "The Republican brand is, across the board, going bad in these states," says Schmidt, the McCain strategist.

What changed? Two factors seem most important.

One is increasing racial diversity. Since 1988, according to network exit polls, the share of the vote cast by whites has declined in almost all of these states. That trend has been especially pronounced in many of the key states that switched sides from the Republican lock to the Democratic wall. In California,

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described religion as very important in their life was lower than the national average in each of these 18 states, except for the survey's combined sample of Maryland and Washington, D.C.—and even that result probably represented the influence of heavily Democratic African-American voters.

The survey also found that the share of voters who attended church at least weekly equaled the national average in just two (Illinois and Pennsylvania) of these 18 states, while falling just short in two others (Michigan and Minnesota). The share of residents who considered themselves evangelical Protestants equaled or exceeded the national average in just three of the 18 states; in 13 of them, the share of evangelicals was at least 20 percent below the national average.

At a time when social issues such as abortion divide the parties so starkly, many analysts see those cultural and religious trends as key to the Democratic grip on these states. "Basically, what they lack are the large numbers of white Protestants, especially the evangelicals, which have been the electoral base [for the GOP] in the South and the Mountain Plains," Black said. "Outside of those regions, the groups you have to compete for are much more diverse, and since the Republicans haven't been able to expand, they are really up against it when you have increased voting by minorities."

Why Republicans Are Losing

Not so long ago, Republicans were much more competitive across this blue terrain. In 1988, George H.W. Bush won 10 of these 18 states, and held Democrat Michael Dukakis to less than 52 percent in five others. At that point, Republicans held 14 of these states' 36 Senate seats and 86 of their 219 House seats—in each case a much larger percentage than the GOP holds today.

from 1988 through 2008, the white share of the vote fell from 79 percent to 63 percent; in New Jersey, from 87 percent to 73 percent; in Connecticut, from 94 percent to 78 percent; and in Illinois, from 90 percent to 73 percent. The offsetting increase has come among African-Americans, Asians, and Hispanics, all groups that are now voting overwhelmingly Democratic.

The other big change has been the growing Democratic strength among white voters with college or postgraduate degrees. In 1988, large, affluent, white-collar suburban counties such as Montgomery and Delaware in Pennsylvania, Bergen in New Jersey, Oakland in Michigan, and Fairfield in Connecticut, provided huge margins for George H.W. Bush.

But since Bill Clinton's two elections, Democratic presidential nominees have routinely carried all of those counties and such demographically similar ones as Santa Clara and Contra Costa in California, and Montgomery in Maryland. Exit polls this year found that Obama won white voters with a college education in each of these 18 states except Michigan and, ironically, Illinois, where he tied McCain among them. As these states move toward a postindustrial economy, college-educated voters constitute a larger share of the vote than they did 20 years ago in most of them, and a substantially larger share in some.

The Democratic gains in these upscale communities have paralleled the GOP's tightening identification since the early 1990s with a staunch Southern-flavored conservatism, particularly on cultural issues. Since the GOP takeover of Congress in 1994, the party has been increasingly defined by unabashed Southern conservatives, starting with congressional leaders such as Newt Gingrich, Trent Lott, and Tom DeLay, and continuing, of course, with President Bush. Almost universally, Democrats believe they are advancing in these leafy suburbs

■ The Blue Wall

STATE	CALIFORNIA	CONNECTICUT	DELAWARE	HAWAII	ILLINOIS	MAINE	MARYLAND	MASS.
ELECTORAL VOTES	55	7	3	4	21	4	10	12









































HISTORICAL PRESIDENTIAL RESULTS

PERCENT DEMOCRATIC MARGIN OF VICTORY
(1992-2008)

The graph displays the percent Democratic margin of victory in U.S. House elections from 1992 to 2008. The y-axis represents the percentage, ranging from 0 to 50. The x-axis shows the years. The data points are as follows:

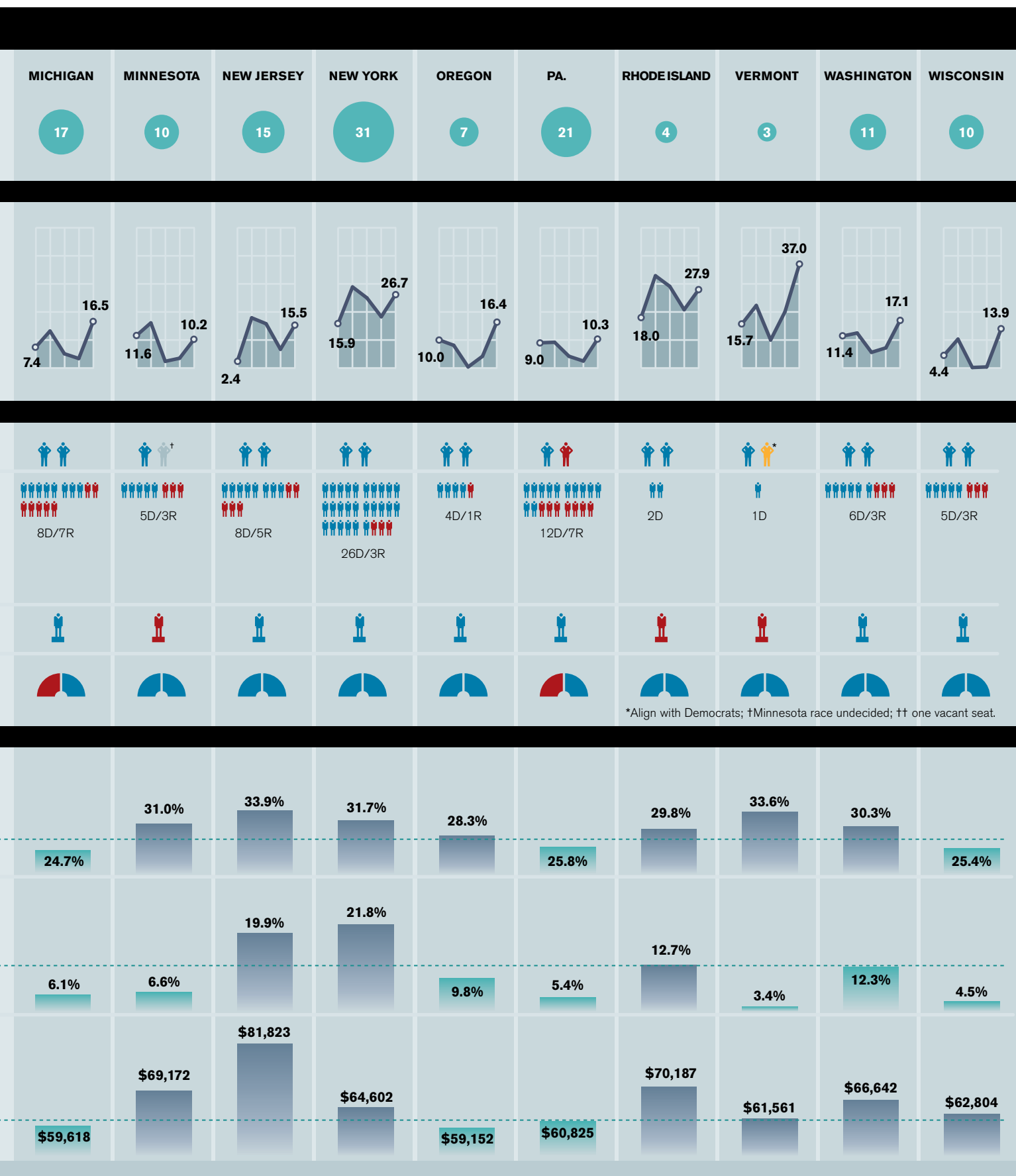
Year	Percent Democratic Margin of Victory
1992	13.4
1994	12.5
1996	11.5
1998	24.0
2000	6.4
2002	18.5
2004	18.5
2006	22.4
2008	25.0

CURRENT LANDSCAPE

SENATE									
Total: 30D/3R/2 Independents* <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td>									
HOUSE									
<div><div></div> Democrats (148)</div> <div><div></div> Republicans (60)</div>		 34D/19R	 5D	 1R	 2D	 11D/7R ^{††}	 2D	 7D/1R	 10D
GOVERNOR									
Total: 12D/6R									
CONTROL OF STATE LEGISLATURE									
<div><div></div> Senate</div> <div><div></div> House</div>									

KEY DEMOGRAPHICS

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
COLLEGE GRADUATES ('07)								
U.S. AVERAGE 27.5%	29.5%	34.7%	26.1%	29.2%	29.5%	26.7%	35.2%	37.9%
FOREIGN-BORN ('07)								
U.S. AVERAGE 12.6%	27.4%	12.8%	7.6%	17.3%	13.8%	3.4%	12.4%	14.2%
MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME ('07)								
U.S. AVERAGE \$61,173	\$67,484	\$81,421	\$66,198	\$73,879	\$65,761	\$56,266	\$82,404	\$78,497



*Align with Democrats; †Minnesota race undecided; †† one vacant seat.

largely because voters there have recoiled from that definition of the GOP.

"It's the flip side of the alliance with evangelical Christians in the South that has created social positions that a lot of those affluent, educated voters just do not agree with," says Bill Carrick, a veteran Los Angeles-based Democratic strategist.

Closely related, but distinct, other analysts say, is the perception in many of these places that the GOP elevates religion over science (on issues such as stem-cell research or the teaching of evolution) and prizes homespun "common sense" over advanced education—an inclination symbolized by the party's frequent portrayal of small towns like Sarah Palin's Wasilla, Alaska, as the "real America."

"The anti-intellectual side of the Republican Party is offensive to people who think what makes them different is they went to school and that they are smart," said Kieran Mahoney, a veteran

absent a "big external shock" that reshapes the political debate, "it will be very difficult if not impossible for a clear cultural conservative to win these places."

Learning From Obama?

Ralph Reed, reflecting a common view among religious conservatives, says that Republicans can regain ground in these blue states without moderating their views on social issues. The key, he says, is embedding those views in a compelling, larger agenda attractive to voters who may not agree with the party's cultural priorities. As proof that it can be done, Reed cites an unusual example: Obama's success at capturing states such as Virginia, Colorado, and North Carolina that were previously considered inhospitable to cultural liberals.

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—Democratic strategist Mark Mellman

RICHARD A. BLOOM

Republican consultant in New York. "If we are going to glory in the notion that we are not thinking this through, don't be surprised if we offend those who are thinking it through."

Mahoney believes that unified Democratic control in Washington will provide Republicans an opportunity to rebuild in these blue states. "The Democratic Party with its MoveOn.org, the union guys, all the pent-up demand for larger activist government that intrudes into the economy [is] going to offend the same voting blocs that the Republican Party has offended," he said.

But to seize that opportunity, Mahoney argued, Republicans will need to move away from a "moralist" definition of conservatism toward a more "libertarian" argument that links personal freedom and small government. That's the formula, he says, that allowed centrist, pro-abortion-rights Republicans such as George Pataki, William Weld, and Arnold Schwarzenegger to win governorships in these states even as Democrats dominated the federal contests.

Schmidt, although he ran a campaign for McCain that ultimately saw vice presidential nominee Palin stress culturally polarizing themes, takes a similar view. Although the party will remain overwhelmingly "pro-life," he says, the GOP will not restore its competitiveness in these states without "tolerance for a type of conservatism and Republicanism that is closer to the British Conservative Party: pro-environment, competent in government, socially tolerant."

Democrats tend to view the barriers facing Republicans in these states, especially on social issues, as virtually insurmountable in the near term. Although "there is no such thing as a lock," Mellman says,

where," Reed said. "And I think Exhibit A of that is Obama. He ran advertising [advocating] the largest tax increase of any Democratic nominee in my lifetime, and a withdrawal from Iraq, and a very liberal position on the moral and social issues. But he competed everywhere, and he found ways to signal empathy [to conservatives]. A lot of this is a candidate who can build bridges to people who don't think you are sympathetic."

But Obama's success in Colorado and Virginia probably owes less to converting conservatives than to the influence on those states of the same electoral trends that flipped many of the blue-wall states away from the GOP in the 1990s. Key among those changes are an increasing number of minorities and a movement toward the Democrats among culturally moderate-to-liberal college-educated whites.

If anything, this explanation for Obama's breakthroughs underscores the magnitude of the choices facing the GOP, because it presents Republicans with the risk that the same cultural and demographic dynamics that have solidified the Democratic hold on the 18 blue-wall states could increasingly shift these battleground states into the Democrats' orbit. Measured on such yardsticks as income, education, and residents born abroad, Colorado and Virginia (and, to a lesser extent, North Carolina) now resemble the blue states more than they do the typical Republican bastions in the South or the Great Plains. If Republicans cannot crack the code with minority and well-educated, socially moderate white voters, states such as Colorado or Virginia that are now teetering between the parties eventually could become new bricks atop the Democrats' blue wall.

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