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ACCESS UPDATE: THE WINNER!



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By Robert Mikkelsen, published 13 November, 2012

## The Winner!

On the evening of November 6, 2012, Barack Hussein Obama once again stepped out onto a stage in Chicago to give his victory speech as the winner of the office of the President of the United States of America. He had again beaten the odds against him, just as he had four years earlier. Not only had he won, but his victory had been unexpectedly large. The media and the nation had expected a much closer race. In the end he was elected with 332 electoral votes to Mitt Romney's 206, many more than the 270 he had needed (see *Access to English: Social Studies*, p. 207, "The Electoral College"). In some ways, however, these impressive figures masked a much tougher and closer fight for the White House than during his first campaign in 2008. There were many difficult obstacles to be overcome before he could stand on that stage once more.



President Barack Obama hugs his daughters Malia (R) and Sasha as First Lady Michelle Obama looks on during his election night victory rally in Chicago, November 7, 2012 (©NTB scanpix)

## Obstacles to Victory

First of all, Obama could no longer run as the unknown outsider. Four years before he had cast himself as the candidate of hope and change. He had promised to shake up the establishment in Washington and bring new political unity after years of bitter divisions between Republicans and Democrats. By 2012, he was *himself* at the very center of the Washington establishment and those divisions were, if anything, even deeper. Although he could blame this on the Republicans' unwavering opposition to his policies, there was no denying that the unity he had wished to create had failed to appear.

Second, the terrific enthusiasm and optimism Obama had created among his supporters in 2008 had been dampened by four years of practical governing and compromise. Many who had voted for him had hoped that he would quickly end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, close the hated prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, pass legislation to help the poor and generally clean up the mess in which they believed the Republicans under George W. Bush had left the country. Instead, the withdrawal from Iraq took years, the war in Afghanistan went on, Guantanamo Bay remained open and the number of people living in poverty actually went up. Many disillusioned Democratic voters did not show up at the polls for the Congressional elections of 2010. As a result, the Republicans gained a strong majority in the House of Representative which they immediately used to attack the President's policies even *more* aggressively (see *Access Update*: [The Perfect Slush](#)).

But by far the most serious obstacle to Obama's reelection was the deep economic crisis that he had inherited when coming into office. In 2007 the country had been plunged into the steepest economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The banking system collapsed. Credit dried up. People lost their homes and jobs. Middle class voters who had supported Obama were hit hard. The poor were hit even harder. By 2009 the unemployment rate soared to more than 10% and stubbornly remained above 8% for years (see *Access Update*: [Where Did All the Money Go?](#)). Only one President in history – Franklin Delano Roosevelt – had ever been re-elected in the middle of such hard times. Americans vote their pocketbooks.



## The Path to Victory

In order to win, Obama and his election team had to overcome these obstacles. For starters, in place of the calls for “hope” and “change” used so successfully as an outsider in 2008, the White House settled on the campaign slogan of “Forward!” This succinctly expressed the idea of continuing along the path Obama had put the country. The argument was that the policies were working. The wars *were* winding down. The economy *was* gradually improving. The poor *had* been helped by health care legislation that gave more than 20 million Americans coverage for the first time (See *Access Update*: [In Need of Treatment – American Health Care Reform](#)). Yes, it would take time and effort to pull America out of the deep hole in which the Republicans had left the country, but Obama was on the right path. “Have patience. We are moving forward,” was the message.



Second, Obama’s campaign headquarters set about to try to systematically recreate the coalition of voters that had brought them to power four years before. This had consisted of a large majority of voters in minority groups like Blacks, Latinos (of Latin American heritage) and Asians, as well as most women and a healthy proportion of well-educated White Non-Latinos voters (of European heritage). The big question was, could it be put

together again or was it a one-time-phenomenon created by Obama's charismatic leadership in 2008?

In place of the spontaneous enthusiasm of that election, the White House team turned to hard work on the ground. In key "swing states" that might have voted for either candidate, they set up two or three times the number of campaign offices on the local level as their Republican opponents. Each office was staffed by an "Obama for America" volunteer who acted as a coordinator for calls, for visits, for knocking on doors, for driving people to the polling stations, etc. More than 125 million voters were contacted directly – and not just any old voters. They were picked out by carefully sifting through mountains of data that had been compiled for years by Obama's experts. As one reporter put it, "The power of this operation stunned [the Republicans] on election night, when they saw voters they never even knew existed turn out in places like Osceola County, Florida."

Finally, shortly after suffering defeat in the Congressional Elections in 2010, the President made a strategic decision. He resolved to turn his 2012 reelection campaign into a battle of values and visions, rather than a referendum on how good he was at handling the economy. He wanted to make voters realize that there was a stark choice to be made between his vision of the country and that of the Republicans. His basic point was that he and his fellow Democrats believed that government could be a *positive force* for the good of the nation, helping people and providing a basis for businesses and individuals to reach their goals.

In contrast, Republicans were portrayed as believing that government was at best a *necessary evil* to be kept as small as possible so individuals could reach their goals with a minimum of state interference. Mitt Romney added to this contrast. When he became the Republicans' presidential candidate, he repeatedly claimed that Obama wished to make the United States into a European-style state under the control of an over-powerful central government that would limit and stifle individual freedom.

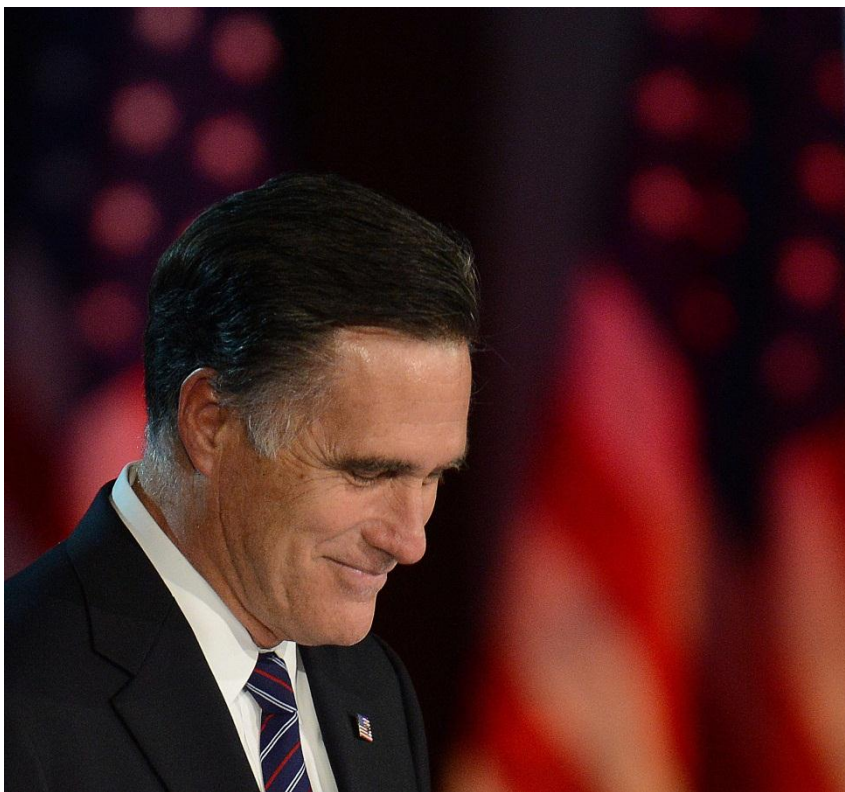
Whatever one thinks of this ideological conflict, shifting the focus from the weak economy to issues of political principle turned out to be to the advantage of Obama.

## The Victory Itself

### 1) The Size

On November 6th Americans chose between these leaders and these very different visions of government. You know the results, but let's look more closely at the numbers behind Obama's victory. First, although it was a solid win, it was not as large or as clear a victory as that of 2008. In that year he had won 365 electoral votes compared to 334 in 2012. There was an even greater drop in his majority of the popular vote which fell from almost 10 million in 2008 to only a little over 3 million in 2012. In part this reflected the fact that fewer people went to vote in 2012, but that in itself is a sign of less interest among American voters than in 2008.

On the other hand, this election did not turn out to be the cliff-hanger the experts had predicted on the basis of pre-election polls. A majority of voters in the nation made it quite clear whom they wanted as president and what view of government they supported. But who exactly made up that majority?



Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney concedes defeat November 7, 2012 (©NTB scanpix)

## 2) *The Coalition*

According to exit polls (people asked after voting), Obama's campaign team did succeed in recreating the coalition that had brought him to power in 2008. Here are the numbers to back that up:

	<b>Voter preference in 2012 (percentages)</b>	
	<b>Barack Obama</b>	<b>Mitt Romney</b>
<b>By Race</b>		
White	39	59
Black	93	7
Latino	71	27
Asian	73	26
<b>By Gender</b>		
Men	45	52
Women	55	44
<b>By Age</b>		
18–29	60	37
30–44	52	45
45–64	47	51
65 and older	44	56

A quick look at these figures makes it clear that while Mitt Romney won the majority of white male voters over the age 45, Obama won a majority of virtually everyone else in the country. This reflects a basic and long term demographic shift in the population of the United States. Not only did Barack Obama become the first *black* president of the United State in 2008, he also became the first *minority* president. And he was reelected with that same minority support. It was large majorities among Blacks, Latinos, Asians, as well as women and the young, which put him over the top.

This promises a bright future for the Democratic Party because it is just these minority groups with large numbers of young people which are growing the quickest. For example, in 2012 for the first time in American history the majority of children (50.4%) under

the age of one were from minority backgrounds. At the same time, the number of Americans who are of white European heritage is actually shrinking. By 2042 they will no longer be a majority in the country. This is known as the “browning out” of America. Obama’s Democratic coalition seems to be the wave of the future.

### **The Impact of the Election**

Ironically, however, as important as the reelection of President Obama may be for the future of politics in America, it has not changed the short-term political situation on the ground. That is because the Republicans kept control of the House of Representatives in the election. That means that, if they wish, they can continue to block Obama’s policies as they have for the past two years. In that case we will get what is called political “gridlock” – things will stand still as each side blames the other for not being willing to make necessary compromises. This could theoretically last until the new Congressional elections in 2014.

On the other hand, years of Republican political opposition did not succeed in getting the Democrats out of the White House. On the contrary, it seems to have split the country even more deeply and left the Republicans on what might be the wrong side of that divide. They will now have to ask themselves if they can afford to say no to the new majority which has backed Obama. In the long run, the voters who support the Republicans are getting fewer in number. Perhaps it is time for them to think about making compromises and mending bridges. After all, that’s politics.

## **Tasks**

### **Discussion**

- 1 Why can it be an advantage to be an “outsider” in American politics? Do you think it could be as much of an advantage in Norwegian politics? How are the two different?



- 2 Politics is often called “The art of the possible” – that is, getting some of what you *can* rather than all of what you *want*. Do you agree? Why might this cause people to feel disillusioned or disappointed in politics?

### Language

- 1 Repetition and rhythm are important parts of rhetoric. How does President Obama make use of them in the following excerpt from his victory speech in Chicago on November 6, 2012 (see *Access to English: Social Studies*, p. 415)?

America, I believe we can build on the progress we’ve made and continue to fight for new jobs and new opportunity and new security for the middle class. I believe we can keep the promise of our founders, the idea that if you’re willing to work hard, it doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from or what you look like or who you love. It doesn’t matter whether you’re black or white or Hispanic or Asian or Native American or young or old or rich or poor, able, disabled, gay or straight, you can make it here in America if you’re willing to try.

I believe we can seize this future together because we are not as divided as our politics suggests. We’re not as cynical as the pundits believe. We are greater than the sum of our individual ambitions, and we remain more than a collection of red states and blue states. We are and forever will be the United States of America.

### Working with Statistics

Look at the table for “Voter preference in 2012” on page XX and answer the following questions:

- 1 Which groups gave a majority of their votes to Obama?
- 2 Which groups gave a majority of their votes to Romney?
- 3 Which individual group gave the greatest percentage of its votes to one candidate?
- 4 Which individual group gave the greatest percentage of its votes to Romney?

5 According to this information, who would you expect the following to vote for?

- a Latino woman
- a white man
- a man under 45
- a black man
- a woman over 65
- an Asian man
- a man over 45