



## Key to the 2012 Presidential Election

### The Philadelphia Suburbs

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#### Abstract

Mitt Romney or Barack Obama: this is the choice Pennsylvanian voters will have in November as the 2012 presidential election draws closer. The voters of Pennsylvania will be at the height of importance in the history of American presidential elections, playing a key role as one of the leading battleground states in this upcoming election. With twenty electoral votes, tied for the fifth most of any state in the country, both campaigns will look to focus a great amount of time and money on trying to win this crucial state. And at the center of this fierce battle between the current GOP presumptive nominee and the President of the United States are four counties that comprise the suburbs of Philadelphia. These counties will ultimately decide the fate of Pennsylvania's electoral votes, and possibly even the election itself.

**Keywords:** *Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, election 2012, suburbs*



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### The Philadelphia Suburbs

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As the 2012 presidential election draws closer, the choice for Pennsylvanian voters clearly looks to be between former Republican Governor of Massachusetts Willard “Mitt” Romney and incumbent President Barack Obama. As one of the most prominent battleground states, Pennsylvanians will play a key role in the upcoming national presidential election. With its 20 electoral votes, Pennsylvania ties Illinois as the fifth greatest contributor to the electoral college. As such, both campaigns will concentrate a great amount of time and money in order to win this crucial state.

At the center of this fierce political battle between the GOP presumptive nominee and the President of the United States are four counties that comprise the suburbs of Philadelphia. Bucks, Montgomery, Chester, and Delaware Counties have historically decided the fate of Pennsylvania’s electoral votes, and could possibly decide this upcoming election. “There isn’t any doubt that Pennsylvania is back in the middle of it, and the Philadelphia suburbs are the crucial piece here,” said G. Terry Madonna, a leading Pennsylvania political analyst at Franklin and Marshall College. “If you don’t win them, you’re in real trouble.”<sup>1</sup> Will Mitt Romney’s business-friendly, job-creating, government-reducing message appeal to the men and women of suburban Philadelphia? Time will tell, but there is a strong possibility that there will be a presidential electoral victory that has not happened since 1988 when former President Ronald Regan was in office: a Republican winning Pennsylvania in a presidential election.

Democratic presidential candidates have won Pennsylvania five straight times going back to 1992.

Obama won the state by 10 points in 2008, a considerable improvement over Senator John Kerry’s 3 point and former Vice President Al Gore’s 4 point victories in their respective presidential runs. Obama’s solid victory came despite an exceptionally strong effort by Senator John McCain to flip the state. The counties of Bucks, Montgomery, and Delaware have also voted for the Democratic presidential candidate the last five elections, with Chester County joining the ranks in 2008 to create the overwhelming margins in favor of Barack Obama. Obama carried the Philadelphia suburbs (which had grown by 6 percent between 2000 and 2010, with the minority population up 51 percent) by 16 points in 2008, a 9 point improvement over Senator Kerry’s margin in 2004. The shift is even larger over the long term: Democrats have enjoyed a spectacular 39-point improvement in their margin in the Philadelphia suburbs since 1988. Combined, these three growing regions composed 52 percent of the Pennsylvania vote. Add in Philadelphia itself, where Democrats traditionally dominate by lopsided margins (67 points in 2008), and this region consequently comprises 64 percent of the statewide vote.<sup>2</sup> As of February 20, 2012, 20 percent of the total registered voting population of Pennsylvania lies within these four counties.<sup>3</sup>

Delaware County is traditionally a Republican stronghold. Residents voted for the Republican candidate in nearly every election since 1854 through 1988. With that said, the prevailing brand of Republicanism in Delaware County was traditionally moderate, as was the case in most Philadelphia suburbs. However, in recent elections Delaware County has been trending Democratic and the Republican registration edge has declined rapidly since 2002, when there were twice as many registered Republicans as Democrats. The county narrowly voted for Bill Clinton in 1992, but has gone Democratic in every Presidential election since then by 10 points or more and by progressively increasing margins. According to the Pennsylvania Department of State, Voting and Elections, as of February 20, 2012, Delaware County currently has 173,513 registered Republican voters and 165,317 registered Democrats.<sup>4</sup>

Although Republicans have dominated county politics in Montgomery County, the Democratic Party has made substantial gains over the last twenty years, gaining an edge in registration early in 2008 before the presidential election. After voting for the Republican presidential nominee for six consecutive elections from 1968 to 1988, the Democratic presidential nominee has carried Montgomery for the past five elections by progressively increasing margins. In previous presidential elections, the margin of victory of Democratic candidates from President Bill Clinton to Senator John Kerry was relatively low, lying between 4 and 11 percentage points. It was not until the 2008 presidential election that Montgomery County's Democratic shift became evident with Senator Barack Obama defeating Senator John McCain by 21 percentage points, taking in 60 percent of the vote in the county. Currently, Montgomery County has a breakdown of 210,468 Republican registered voters to 245,918 Democratic registered voters.<sup>5</sup>

Bucks County was once a safeguard for the Republican Party, and although the county has diversified politically, Republicans still control most local governing offices. Like Pennsylvania at large, most consider Bucks County a swing vote in major elections. Democratic registration there overtook that of Republicans in early 2008. All four statewide winners—Barack Obama for President, Rob McCord for Treasurer, Jack Wagner for Auditor General, and Tom Corbett for Attorney General—carried Bucks in November 2008 and then Tom Corbett again for Governor in 2010, suggesting that the key to winning Pennsylvania in an election lies in Bucks County. Unlike the other Democratic-turned counties surrounding Philadelphia, Bucks County has remained a tight race in presidential elections. It was only in 2008 that Senator Barack Obama won the county by 8 percentage points, the biggest margin since President Ronald Reagan's in 1988. Currently, Bucks County has 173,473 Republican registered voters and 185,072 Democratic registered voters.<sup>6</sup>

Chester County is a very reliable Republican stronghold at the county level. However, in recent elections it has tended to vote Democratic. In 2000, Al

Gore lost by almost 10 percentage points, but in 2004 George W. Bush defeated John Kerry by a much smaller margin of only 4 and a half points. Current Pennsylvania Senator Bob Casey Jr. carried the county by 10 points when he unseated incumbent Republican Senator Rick Santorum in 2006. In 2008, Chester County sided with the rest of Pennsylvania and voted for Barack Obama by a much larger margin of 9 percentage points, making him the first Democrat to carry the county in a presidential election since 1964. As of 2010, however, the trend seems to have been broken, with the Republican candidates sweeping all county row offices with an average margin of 20 percent and Governor Tom Corbett carrying the county by a wide margin. As of February 20, 2012, Chester County's distribution of registered voters is 145,902 registered Republicans to 123,484 registered Democrats.<sup>7</sup>

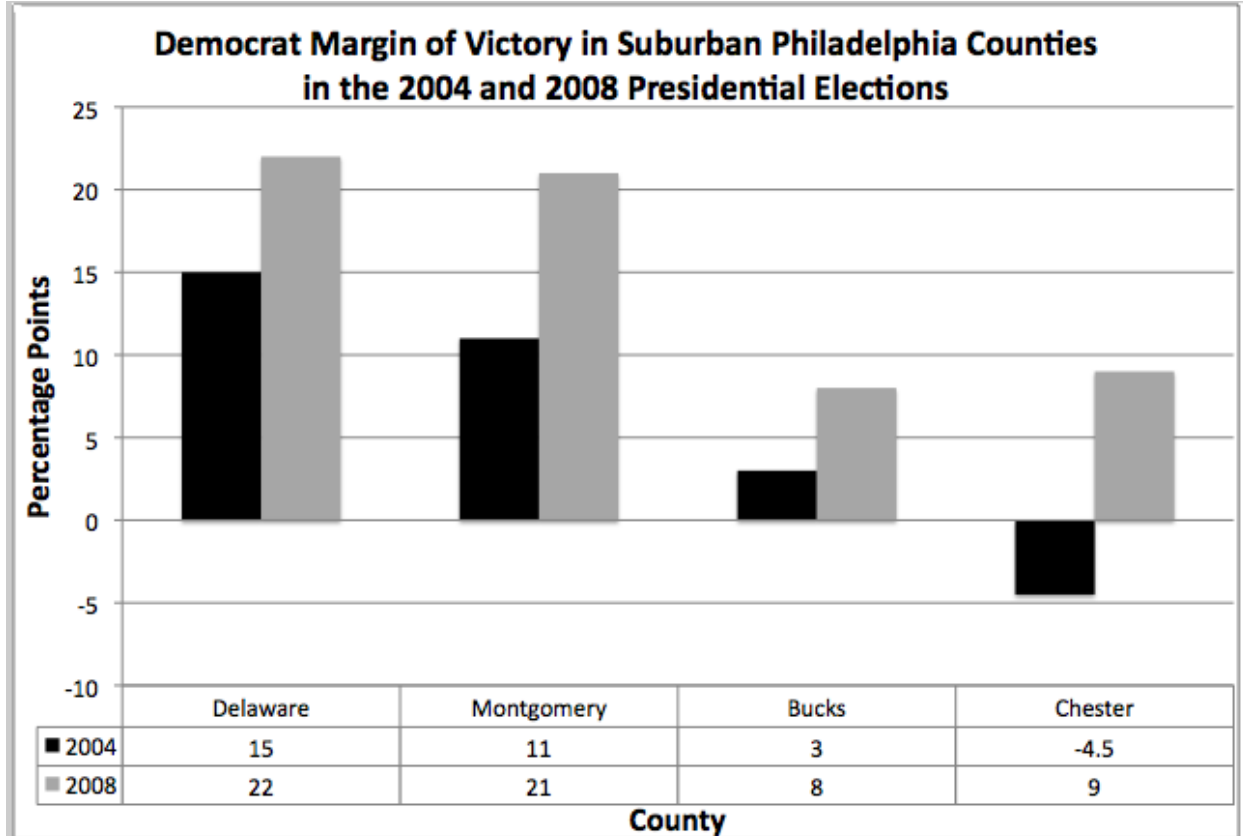
The Philadelphia Inquirer's Jeremy Roebuck, John Duchneskie, and Dan Hardy recently unearthed a troubling sign for President Obama as he prepares for his reelection. According to the trio, "A wave of support from Philadelphia's historically moderate suburbs helped push Barack Obama into the White House in 2008. But if the latest fund-raising totals are any indication, his grip on those crucial swing counties may be slipping."<sup>8</sup> An examination of recent fundraising totals in the Philadelphia suburbs shows a tie between President Obama and his Republican rivals for the presidency. In 2008, an overwhelming amount of support from Philadelphia helped Obama to surpass rival John McCain's vote total in Pennsylvania. A significant additional boost for Senator Obama was the unusually strong show of support for a Democratic candidate by the surrounding suburbs of Philadelphia. If Republicans manage to claim enough votes in Montgomery, Chester, Bucks, and Delaware Counties, they have a good chance of winning the swing state, as was the case with the 2010 gubernatorial election victory of Republican Tom Corbett.

The elections in 2010 can possibly foreshadow things to come for President Obama in 2012. In this election, Attorney General Tom Corbett won by 9 points state-wide, carrying Bucks County by 11 points

and Chester County by 12 points (formerly Obama victories in 2008, 8 and 9 point victories respectively) and cut the margin of victory in counties the president carried, with Montgomery County going from a 21 point victory in 2008 to a 3 point win and with Delaware County going from a 22 point victory to a 5 point victory for the Democratic candidate. Another potential indicator for a possible Republican victory in November 2012 is seen in the elections to federal office, more specifically the counties' congressional elections. In Bucks County, former Republican Congressman Mike Fitzpatrick defeated two-term Democrat Patrick Murphy by 8 points. Murphy had defeated Fitzpatrick previously in 2006 by less than 1,500 votes or less than 1 percent prior to President Obama's victory in 2008. In Delaware County, Congressman Joe Sestak, who served the district since 2007, decided to run for the US Senate, leaving the Democratic controlled district up for grabs. Republican Pat Meehan defeated the Democratic challenger by 10 points in 2010. In the usually Republican-leaning

Chester County, Congressman Jim Gerlach who has been serving the 6<sup>th</sup> Congressional District since 2002 won by 14 points in 2010, a significant improvement from 2008 when he only won by 4 points. In the PA 13<sup>th</sup> Congressional District, comprising almost all of Montgomery County, four-term Democratic incumbent Allyson Schwartz went from a 28 point victory in 2008 to a 12 point victory in 2010. Within all of these counties, Republicans made large strides, and the fact that President Obama is only \$36 thousand ahead of Republicans in fundraising as of November 2011 at this point in time is a strong indication that he is not positioned for winning Pennsylvania's electoral votes, or at least not as well as in 2008. Without Pennsylvania in the president's column, the electoral math becomes a lot tighter and his routes to reelection become extremely limited.

Another factor that will support Governor Romney's ability to carry not only Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester counties but also Pennsylvania in November is the participation of



groups that supported the President in 2008. President Obama will rely heavily on an unstable factor if he wants to carry these four suburban counties and Pennsylvania in the general election. He is relying on groups that grew rapidly in 2008 and those who predominantly do not side with Democratic candidates but did overwhelmingly in 2008. There is a great risk that these groups will not support him at the same level in 2012, and more importantly, that they will not turn out at the same rates as they did in 2008. Take minority groups, for example; Obama received 86 percent support from them in 2008. That unusually high figure reflected President Obama's 95 percent support among Pennsylvania's African-American voters and the fact that African-Americans made up two-thirds of Pennsylvania's minority voters compared to half of minority voters nationwide. Some or all of the 95 percent support seems very possible again if economic conditions improve; however, as some recent data suggests, economic pessimism in regards to the president may dampen African-American enthusiasm for President Obama. Latin-American enthusiasm for Obama might flag for the same reason, perhaps exacerbated by impatience on the immigration issue, which could bring down this demographics' 72 percent support rate in 2008.

Even less secure is President Obama's hold on white college graduates in the state. The inclination to vote Democratic is a recent trend among this growing group and could easily be disrupted by unfulfilled expectations—such as a lack of economic mobility due to continued economic stagnation. President Obama's second big obstacle is perhaps the GOP's best opportunity: a worsening situation among the white working class, the group already most hostile to the president. In 2008, Obama actually did worse among these voters in Pennsylvania (losing them by fifteen points) than Kerry did in 2004. Should they swing further away from him in 2012 and approach the 30-point nationwide deficit Democrats suffered in 2010, it could hand the Keystone state to the GOP.

Another factor that could cause a Romney victory in November is the economic conditions within these four counties. These four counties represent the

four wealthiest counties within Pennsylvania, with three of the counties (Chester, Montgomery, and Bucks) ranked in the top 100 wealthiest counties in the country. Economic conditions in 2008 were dire throughout the country, not excluding these counties. President Obama's message of hope and change appealed strongly within these very affluent counties, whose residents believed that President Obama would be able to return them to their glory days of just a few years prior. But, as the economic conditions of the United States remain stagnant and are not beginning to see significant improvements, President Obama will begin to find voters less inclined to support his economically optimistic message once again. Governor Romney's credentials favor these very affluent areas that are looking for an economic rebound; an extremely successful businessman and one term governor of an industrial state, similar to Pennsylvania in many ways, is the perfect combination to battle the incumbent president's economic track record. As of January 2012, the unemployment rate of Pennsylvania is sitting around 7.6 percent, with Bucks County at 7.6 percent, Chester County at 6.3 percent, Delaware County at 8.2 percent, and Montgomery County at 7.2 percent.<sup>9</sup> If these numbers remain the same or were to get worse, with three of these very populous counties having unemployment rates above or near the state's unemployment rate, President Obama is going to have a difficult time combating Governor Romney's economic message and attacks.

If there is an absolute deciding demographic in American presidential election history, simply look at the American Catholic vote during national elections. In nine of the past ten presidential elections, the Catholic vote has gone to the candidate who ultimately won the election. Five times it has gone to a Republican; four times to a Democrat. In five of those elections, the percentage of the Catholic vote taken by the winner has been within a single percentage point of the share he won overall. In 2008, 54 percent of Catholics voted for President Barack Obama, and he won.<sup>10</sup> For Pennsylvania, more specifically the suburban counties of Philadelphia, the Catholic vote will be equally important in deciding who ultimately wins the counties

as well as the state, because of the strong roots Catholicism has throughout Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester Counties. On a statewide basis, the January 2012 Franklin and Marshall College Poll indicated that President Obama was leading Governor Romney by a 41-28 margin with Catholic voters in the general election.<sup>11</sup> But more recently, the question over the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (“Obamacare”) requiring employers and religious institution to pay for contraception for its employees has brought this relatively moot social issue to the forefront of the campaign, and with it, the question of whether President Obama’s extremely enthusiastic Catholic support will carry over from the 2008 election. If Governor Romney can capitalize on the shrinking support from Catholic voters for President Obama, especially in the suburbs of Philadelphia, which have a Catholic population of nearly one million, Romney should be able to win these counties in the November general election. Delaware, Montgomery, Bucks, and Chester Counties rank third, fourth, fifth, and sixth respectively in terms of largest Catholic population in Pennsylvania, falling behind only Philadelphia and Allegheny Counties.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, Catholics make up 73, 66, 58, and 40 percent of the populations of Delaware, Bucks, Chester, and Montgomery counties, respectively.<sup>13</sup>

As Stephen S. Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at The Catholic University of America pointed out in a recent article on CNN, the Catholic vote in the United States is changing. Catholics in the last 50 years have lost much of their sense of special self-identity and have become more assimilated into mainstream American culture.<sup>14</sup> Long passed are the days when a Catholic running for elected office was a major concern because of potential ties to the Vatican, seen on a large scale in the 1960 presidential election with Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy. The difference between the rest of the nation and Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester counties that makes the Catholic vote extremely important in these areas is the fact that the growing change is occurring racially and ethnically, with a growing number of Latin-American Catholics

becoming less religiously strict. The makeup of these suburban counties mirrors the traditional makeup of Catholic areas established during the period of heavy immigration from Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: predominantly working class, often living in ethnically white neighborhoods, attending their own parochial schools and colleges, and establishing their own-religious based hospitals and charities in the United States. The point is that even though American Catholics are becoming less traditional in their practices, the Catholics of suburban Philadelphia remain relatively as traditional as they were 100 years ago and will be a major swing vote that will determine the winner of these counties, Pennsylvania, and possibly the national election.

One other factor that could help Governor Romney to win Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia suburban counties in November is his selection of a vice presidential candidate. Come the end of June, when the GOP nominee is all but official, both candidates will be making multiple trips to small towns like West Chester, Doylestown, Bryn Mawr, and Hatboro. However, expect the vice presidential candidates, once selected, to be camped out there. Romney’s choice of running mate will have an enormous impact on how Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester counties will vote. At this point in the presidential primary race, there are a few potential candidates Governor Romney can choose that could help Romney tremendously in those counties come November. Potential candidates such as New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, former Mayor of New York City Rudy Giuliani, and Indiana Governor Mitch Daniels, all may prove to be political assets in Romney’s quest to win the Philadelphia suburbs in November because of their popularity and political positions. Overall, the vice presidential choice will be a major decision not only because of the enthusiasm the running mate can bring to Governor Romney, but because the candidate will have to compete with the very popular incumbent, Vice President Joe Biden. Biden is a well-known figure in Philadelphia. Delaware County shares a border with the former Senator’s home state. He is very popular among

white working-class people because of his coal-country roots in Scranton, PA. A seasoned politician, he has already made several trips to the area whereas Governor Romney will not set foot there until the primaries reach Pennsylvania in late April.

Every political junkie knows that the presidential election is not a truly national contest; it is a state-by-state fight that focuses on a handful of key states to capture their electoral votes. And Pennsylvania, more specifically the suburban Philadelphia counties of Bucks, Montgomery, Delaware, and Chester are ones to watch over the course of the 2012 presidential election; as these counties vote, so does this key swing state. If economic conditions continue to remain stagnant or decline, if social issues such as abortion or the use of contraceptives become major debates, or if the voter participation rate declines leaving white-working class voters to dominate the voting blocks, then Governor Mitt Romney may become President Mitt Romney come January 2013.

#### Author

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Madonna is Director of the Center for Politics and Public Affairs, Professor of Public Affairs, and Director of the Franklin and Marshall College Poll.

Jeremy Roebuck, John Duchneskie, and Dan Hardy, "Obama, Gop Rivals Close in Money Race," October 21, 2011. Internet (accessed February 24, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Department of State, Voting, and Elections, *Current Voter Registration Statistics*, Pennsylvania Department of State Official Document (Harrisburg, PA, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Roebuck et. al., "Obama, GOP Rivals."

<sup>7</sup> US Bureau of Labor Statistics. Internet (accessed February 24, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Seib, "Misreading Catholic Barometer Is a Political Risk," *Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2012, Internet (accessed February 10, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> "Survey of Pennsylvanians Summary of Findings," Franklin & Marshall College Poll, January 26, 2012, Internet (accessed February 26, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Jones, Dale E., et al., *Congregations and Membership in the United States 2000* (Nashville, TN: Glenmary Research Center, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Stephen Schneck, "My Take: The Myth and Reality of the Catholic Vote," CNN, Internet (accessed February 24, 2012).