Political campaign rhetoric often tends to divide the United States into patches of red and blue — for conservative and liberal bastions. But that patchwork is really the product of several distinct groupings, trends, and hot-button issues. A closer look at each region can yield surprising predilections and predictions for the upcoming election — and several more down the line.

BY Binyamin Rose, Shimmy Blum, and Rachel Bachrach
the year conservative political icon Ronald Reagan was elected president, 79% of the nation's eligible voters were white. The national debt was slightly under $1 trillion and gasoline prices had just pierced the $1 gallon mark. In the 32 years since, the national landscape has changed dramatically. Debt has soared—16-fold and gasoline prices have more than quadrupled. And the number of white voters has tumbled by 16 percentage points to 63%, according to Penn State's Department of Sociology and Population Research Institute.

In the America of 2012, Hispanics, followed by Asians, have made up the ground lost by whites over the decades. A record 23.7 million Latinos are eligible to vote in the 2012 presidential election, according to the Pew Hispanic Center's analysis of 2010 Census Bureau data. That's a rise of 4 million since the 2008 election. If current demographic trends continue, 50,000 new Hispanics will reach voting age every month for the next two decades. But Hispanic voting clout is only one demographic factor that will weigh heavily during the upcoming election. “Go West, young man” — an axiom attributed to Horace Greeley, a 19th-century founder of the Republican Party — is no longer just a saying. The Census Bureau’s list of fastest growing states is mostly historically Republican,” says Dr. Joshua Comenetz, head of the Washington DC-based Population Mapping Consulting. However, voters do have a way of confounding the demographers. Comenetz says no one could have predicted how population growth, especially among minorities, would eventually turn states like California — Ronald Reagan’s home state — into a solidly Democratic one. “Some political experts expect that even Texas might evolve that way, based on migration from other states plus a growing Hispanic population,” added Dr. Comenetz.

Migrants often bring along their political views when they relocate, subtly shifting the dynamics of their new home states. For example, middle-aged and senior citizens who head south as they age tend to be highly set in their political views, says University of Florida political science professor Kenneth D. Wald. Younger newcomers and their children, however, are more likely to be influenced by the region's historical conservative bent.

As a result of those demographic shifts, a recent Gallup Poll finds Obama and Romney fairly evenly matched in the Midwest and West. Obama enjoys a decisive advantage in the East while Romney has a comfortable lead in much of the South. If Gallup is on the mark, then this year’s election is more likely to echo past performance than reflect the new demographics. The Democratic candidate has won the East in every election since 1988, while the Republican has prevailed in the South in most elections since 1980. While the West has leaned Democratic in recent tallies, the Midwest has been downright fickle; backing the Democrat in 1992, 1996, and 2008, and the Republican in 1988, 2000, and 2004.

Reflecting that growth trend, the western and southern regions of the US will dominate the government come 2013, with a majority of the 113th Congress’s representatives hailing from these regions. Southern states will account for 35% percent of Congress, while 23% of the nation’s elected representatives and senators will be from the West. The northeastern states, due to population losses, will control only 18% of the Congress. What do these demographic and population shifts portend for Election Day?

“The fastest-growing states in population are mostly historically Republican,” says Dr. Joshua Comenetz, head of the Washington DC-based Population Mapping Consulting. However, voters do have a way of confounding the demographers. Comenetz says no one could have predicted how population growth, especially among minorities, would eventually turn states like California — Ronald Reagan’s home state — into a solidly Democratic one. “Some political experts expect that even Texas might evolve that way, based on migration from other states plus a growing Hispanic population,” added Dr. Comenetz.

So what's in store for November 6? While most election maps divide the country into red states for the Republicans and blue states for the Democrats, it might be a lot more instructive to subdivide the nation into five specific regions that share similar demographic characteristics and voter preferences. For each region, experts in election demographics were asked to provide local background and color, pinpoint what’s making their voters tick, and isolate each region’s hot-button issues. The result is an inclusive analysis of how America may vote in two weeks.

The Liberal Coasts

MAIn VoTER CoNcERNS Jobs, the Economy

THE DEMOGRAPHICS: The “liberal coast” states — chiefly situated off the Northeast Atlantic Coast from Maryland to Maine, including New York and New Jersey, and along the Pacific Ocean, including California, Oregon, and Washington — tend to vote Democratic.

Why? Demographically, these states are home to large numbers of racial minorities and immigrants, a major component of the traditional Democratic Party voter base. In contrast, their percentages of predominantly Republican evangelical Christians are comparatively low, says Dr. David Karol, a professor of American politics at the University of Maryland.

Immigrants' first port of call tends to be in the biggest cities and are industry hubs, says Dr. David Karol, a professor of American politics at the University of Maryland. “The fastest-growing states in population are mostly historically Republican,” says Dr. Joshua Comenetz, head of the Washington DC-based Population Mapping Consulting. However, voters do have a way of confounding the demographers. Comenetz says no one could have predicted how population growth, especially among minorities, would eventually turn states like California — Ronald Reagan’s home state — into a solidly Democratic one. “Some political experts expect that even Texas might evolve that way, based on migration from other states plus a growing Hispanic population,” added Dr. Comenetz.

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The #1 Hot-Button Issue

The Economy

“It’s all about jobs and the economy,” says Dr. Baum, noting this is so especially in California, where the economy has failed miserably. In these regions, “there is no secondary issue — that’s the one issue that’s going to turn this election.”
**The South**

The South is a very traditional part of the U.S., says Dr. Lance DeHaven Smith, a professor in the public administration and policy department of Florida State University. “Women are treated in a different way. They’re put on a pedestal; men are more likely to go hunting and are a little bit more macho; and (same-gender) marriage issues are something that turns many people here into Republicans.”
Republican Heartland

Main Voter Concerns | Infrastructure, Environment, Energy, Federal Regulation

The demographics | The Mountain States in this region, namely Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming, derive their nickname from the fact that the Rocky Mountains runs deeply through them. But so does a fiercely independent political streak.

Robert Cherry, a history professor at San Francisco State University, notes that Montana and the Dakotas were latecomers to the Union, becoming states only toward the end of the 19th century. Oklahoma remained a territory into the 20th century. Throughout these territorial days, residents could not elect their own governors, nor participate in presidential elections, so for them, presidential elections were non-events.

Along with their lukewarm voting history, these sparsely populated states currently have few major urban centers – a profile that often portends Republican tendencies. Characterized by an overwhelming white majority, it has been extremely difficult for Democrats to carve out a sustainable voter base in the region.

The economy is not an issue in many of these states. Unemployment in North Dakota is a paltry 3% and joblessness barely grazes 4% in Nebraska. “They’re having some real good economic times with exploration of natural gas and oil reserves,” says Grant Neeley, associate professor and director of the public administration program at the University of Dayton—Ohio.

Voting: Past and Future | America’s heartland states pack the least clout on Election Day due to their small number of electoral votes. But you can be pretty sure those paltry votes will be red.

However, there are some nascent signs of change that the Republicans would be well advised to note. Some of these states are rapidly outgrowing their rural roots and it will be interesting to see if newcomers inspire changed political attitudes in future years. Idaho’s population grew more than 20% between the 2000 and 2010 censuses, while South Dakota, officially considered part of the Midwest, has been the fastest growing Midwest state with a population gain of almost 8% since 2000. Idaho, particularly, could become a battle-ground state, given the increase in its population and demographic diversity, according to a report for the Brookings Institution by Dr. David Barrows, of the University of Nevada—Las Vegas.

The #1 Hot-Button Issue | Small Government

“This is a region whose political culture is built on rugged individualism,” says the University of Dayton’s Grant Neeley, putting the region’s Republican leaning in historical context. “Settlers moving across the plains, communally built schoolhouses and institutions in days when there was no government assistance. Their attitude is basically that government should not get in the way of individuals. Government exists to meet essential needs only, and leave everything else to the individual to accomplish and afford.”

Midwest Border States

Main Voter Concerns | Jobs, National Defense, Family Values

The demographics | If the Northeast and Northwest are solid blocks of Democratic blue and the Plains, Upper Mountain, and much of the Southern states are splashes of Republican red, then the Midwest is typified by shades of pink and gray used to depict “uncleared” and “leaning” states on electoral maps. At press time, five of the ten Midwestern states could be considered toss-ups, with Obama’s home state of Illinois the only one in the region that’s solidly in his column.

“After a lot of that diversity is due to the mixed economic base of the Midwest,” explains Professor Neeley, who noted that Ohio is a state that gave America John Boehner, the current House Speaker and a staunch, conservative Republican; as well as Rep. Dennis Kucinich, one of the leading Congressional liberals.

The checkered character of Ohio is partially due to the fact that Northeast Ohio is dominated by Cleveland, which tilts very Democratic; while the southwest region, outside the core of downtown Cincinnati, is very Republican.

Michigan also has an interesting dichotomy. It is home to Detroit, which benefited greatly from the federal bailout of the auto industry, yet it was also the state where Mitt Romney’s father, George, once served as its popular governor and titans of the automotive industry back in Detroit’s glory days.

The auto industry will factor into the vote in Ohio as well. The fact that the economy is doing better than the national average in Ohio — which supplies many products to the automobile industry — tends to help Obama in that critical state.

Pennsylvania also has a bit of a split personality. The eastern part, where Philadelphia is located, has a liberal coast feel, while the western section, dominated by Pittsburgh, is far more conservative.

Obama’s home state of Illinois is another study in contrasts. The bulk of the state is agricultural and rural. But because the city of Chicago has such a large population, the Democratic tilt dominates, and the state has remained solidly Democratic.

Voting: Past and Future | The Midwest has typically been the most competitive region and usually backs the eventual winner. According to the Gallup Poll, this region will once again play a pivotal role in the 2012 campaign, likely determining the outcome of the election.

Obama has enjoyed at least a slight edge there since June, consistent with his overall slight national lead. Considering Minnesota’s Democratic voting record in the last nine elections, he is expected to take it as well.

While many pundits say that Mitt Romney cannot win the election without winning Florida, others contend Ohio is just as pivotal. Because it too, like Florida, has a diverse and balanced population that reflects the national composite of urban Democrats and suburban or agriculturally based Republican voters.

Support for the Military | "I think it’s just kind of a streak of nationalism and pride," says Grant Neeley, who counterintuitively contends that defense issues could actually favor Obama; as many Midwest voters credit the president for running a well-balanced foreign policy, extracting the US from Iraq on the one hand, while picking his spots in the ongoing war on terror. "Hunting down Osama bin Laden and sending him to his watery grave won’t hurt Obama’s chances in this very traditional area of the country."