

MIT political scientist and voting expert weighs in on the state of the upcoming election

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Charles Stewart III, the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science.

With the 2012 campaign in the home stretch, the presidential race and many congressional matchups are too close to call. To hear more about them, MIT News spoke this week with Charles Stewart III, the Kenan Sahin Distinguished Professor of Political Science and a leading expert in elections, voting technology, congressional politics and American political history.

Q. Since the first presidential debate, we've seen a polling shift away from Barack Obama and toward Mitt Romney. What do you think is the state of the race right now?

A. We're where we've been for at least six months, which is a really close election in which the incumbent has a bare lead. Most observers would normally predict that given the state of the economy, the incumbent should not have a bare lead, but that the challenger should be well ahead at this point. ... I think there are two special factors making it slightly different from the normal scenario. One, there is still a surprisingly large number of voters who blame George W. Bush for the current state of affairs. The other part is, as one writer has remarked, [Mitt Romney](#) is carrying a brand that is tarnished: The Republican Party is not a particularly good brand to be running under right now, and I think he's burdened by the sense that the party is too far to the right to be of comfort to moderate, centrist voters. So people who might feel the president needs to be punished, because the economy is not doing well, are reluctant to do so because of worries about overreaching by the Republicans, should they win.

Q. Some polls have shown that Romney is faring much worse among Hispanic voters than, for instance, George W. Bush did in 2004, suggesting that the shifting demographics of the country may be an underappreciated part of the campaign story—and perhaps also explaining, in part, why Obama has been leading the race despite those economic struggles. How much of a factor is the demographic change in the United States?

A. I think it's huge. One of the ways that political scientists think about the appeals that candidates make to voters is that candidates need to convince voters that they have their concerns at heart ... so that when faced with tough choices, the candidates, when they're in office, will make decisions with those voters in mind. And increasingly, the demographics really are changing. The Republican Party, in many places around the country, has actively sought out positions that alienate the fastest-growing demographic parts of society. So it's not even that they're not embracing immigrants groups, but in terms of rhetoric and ballot initiatives, they're doing the best they can to take an anti-immigrant attitude. I think that has deep repercussions. The most visible part has to do with growing Hispanic populations in different part of the United States, but there's also growing immigration from both East Asia and South Asia. Ethnic groups that have been historically Republican are being pushed away from Republican Party into the hands of the Democratic Party, because of their general sense that the Republican Party is not really sympathetic to new Americans.

If you look at the long sweep of American history from the Civil War, right when the Republican Party started, to the present, if you go down the list of all major policy differences the Democrats and Republicans have held over the years, it's a safe generalization that the Democrats and Republicans have switched positions on all those issues at some point in history, except for one, and that has to do with how to deal with immigrants and new Americans. The Democrats have, from the 1860s to the present, been the party eager to embrace immigrants and new Americans and the Republicans have been the party embracing policies that alienate immigrants and new Americans.

Now, over time, ethnic groups become integrated into American society and generational change can lead to realignment ... 20 to 30 years from now, the kids of Hispanic and South Asian and East Asian working-class folks whose kids go off to college can begin to see the Republican Party

as not being the anti-immigrant party, but can embrace that party as being the party of the middle class, upper class or professional class. Things do change because of the melting pot.

Q. After the conventions and before the debates, when Obama's lead grew, Democratic candidates also gained ground in several competitive Senate races, leading some commentators to suggest that Obama's coattails were having an effect. To what extent should we think of those races as being part of a national election, and to what extent are they all being determined by local dynamics and the qualities of the individual candidates?

A. When I've looked at the Senate races, particularly those that have tightened up, you can almost always tell a local story as being the primary driver. The Missouri case with [Rep. Todd] Akin [the Republican candidate, who made controversial remarks about rape] is the most nationally visible, and it shows the most dramatic change of course in the polling. But that race will undoubtedly tighten yet again. Some people who were not reporting an interest in voting for Akin, maybe out of a desire to see him get out of the race, now that they know he's not going to get out of the race, now that they know it's really between a Democrat and a Republican, maybe will come back to the [Republican Party](#). Indiana is a similar story, where [Sen.] Richard Lugar, a moderate Republican, was defeated by a Tea Partier [in the primary], and as a consequence that race has tightened dramatically, and the polls show it as a tie. ... Similarly, in Massachusetts ... the [Sen. Scott] Brown versus [Elizabeth] Warren race should be a tight race, and it is a tight race. It really could go either way. It doesn't look like the national election, in the long term, is having much of an effect there. There really

aren't coattails in the Senate races, there are strong local factors.

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