

Why Obama Won: The Empathy Factor



During this election season, my young daughters posed many questions that were difficult to answer. What's the difference between Democrats and Republicans? Do politicians tell the truth? How do you decide which candidate to vote for?

I tried to give them meaningful answers that didn't oversimplify the issues at stake, but after a while, I resorted to shorthand. Democrats care about the poor. Republicans care about themselves. All politicians stretch the truth, but some do so more than others. Support the candidate who shares your values.

Following President Barack Obama's reelection to a second term, pundits have put forward various theories for why he won both the Electoral College and the popular vote, and why Gov. Mitt Romney lost.

We have heard that the president prevailed because he had a better ground game, that his staff and volunteers were more effective at getting out the vote than the governor. Some emphasize that he had the advantage of the incumbency and that he benefitted from Hurricane Sandy and Chris Christie's praise for the president's response to the storm.

Others say that it was Romney's election to lose, that he failed either because his policies were too conservative,

turning off swing voters, or not conservative enough, failing to convince the right that he would protect their interests. Still others contend that the GOP and its funders – big banks, corporations and individuals like Sheldon Adelson, the Koch brothers and Karl Rove – miscalculated by assuming that citizen's votes could be readily purchased through misleading campaign ads or effectively suppressed through state-level ballot directives.

While there is some degree of truth to all these theories, the most compelling data is largely overlooked. [Exit polling](#) tells us that people who want a candidate who “cares about people like me” voted overwhelmingly for Obama – more than 80 percent. Further, 68 percent of those who say that Obama's handling of Hurricane Sandy was important to them voted for the president. And 75 percent of those who view health care as the most important issue facing the country voted for him.

The [demographics](#) of those who voted for the president are revealing: the majority of people under age 40, especially single women and mothers; 93 percent of African-Americans; 73 percent of Latinos; 60 percent of those with an annual income of \$50,000 or less; 71 percent of those who believe that the U.S. economy favors the wealthy; and the majority of those whose biggest problems are the housing market (63 percent) or unemployment (54 percent). Further, despite reports to the contrary, the percentage of youth, African-Americans and Latinos who went to the polls was up from 2008.

When voters chose President Obama, what were we motivated by?

For each of us it was different, but collectively we knew what we didn't want: a government that would repeal health care reform, end Medicare, cut food stamps, or give a 20 percent tax cuts to millionaires and billionaires. We didn't want to overturn Roe v. Wade, veto the Dream Act, pass a constitutional amendment outlawing gay marriage, or let the auto industry go bankrupt. And we didn't want to return our foreign policy to the architects of the Iraq War.

What is the common denominator, the central thread running through these policy choices? It's not just compassion, defined as a sympathetic awareness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it; it's empathy – the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts and experience of another.

In other words, empathy is not merely feeling sorry for those who are less fortunate and wanting to help them, but it's being able to put oneself in another's shoes and to imagine what they are experiencing. When asked in 2007 what he'd look for in a Supreme Court nominee, Senator Obama said [the following](#):

“You know, Justice Roberts said he saw himself just as an umpire. But the issues that come before the court are not sport. They're life and death. And we need somebody who's got the heart – the empathy to recognize what it's like to be a young, teenage mom; the empathy to understand what it's like to be poor or African-American or gay or disabled or old. And that's the criteria by which I'm going to be selecting my judges.”

In many ways, Gov. Romney's fate was sealed when he privately told supporters that he didn't worry about the [47 percent](#) who are “dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing, to you name it.” In the first debate, the president missed his chance to seal the deal when he failed not only to reference this admission but to condemn it.

On Election Day, Gov. Romney [drew his strongest support](#) from white men, particularly those older than 40. He carried 66 percent of those who view the deficit as the most important issue facing the country and 66 percent of those who say taxes

are their biggest economic problem. He had the support of 73 percent of those who believe that undocumented immigrants working in the United States should be deported and 74 percent of those who believe that the policies of the Obama administration favor the poor. Of those who believe that abortion should always be illegal, 79 percent voted for Romney.

The white male leaders and self-appointed spokesmen of the GOP not only made wildly inaccurate predictions about Romney's chances in the weeks and months leading up to the election, but they refused to face reality when the results came in, causing a 90-minute delay before the governor conceded.

Yet again, this was a function of the Republican Party's failure to be empathic. They could not imagine why those at the margins – women, people of color, gays and lesbians, young people and immigrants – would not care foremost about taxes or about protecting their own wealth. They could not understand why women would object to outlawing abortion or why anyone would support government programs for children or the poor. They could not believe that despite the long lines, ID requirements and other tactics to impede voting that the most marginalized would make it a priority to cast a ballot.

As I entered my 10-year-old's room the morning after the election, she asked who won. "Obama," I told her. It was a question I was more than happy to answer.