

Sorry, but Failure to Rally the Base Didn't Make the Difference

☒ There was a lot of fuss on the political talk shows today about the fact that Mitt Romney, the Republican presidential candidate, received some 2 million fewer votes this year than were cast for John McCain, the 2008 GOP presidential nominee.

Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity both suggested that this means the Republicans didn't do enough to mobilize the party base, and that this may have cost Romney the election.

However, President Obama's vote total compared even less favorably with his tally in 2008. This time he got 9 million fewer votes than last time. So, if we follow the logic, the Democrats did an even worse job of mobilizing their base, yet Obama had enough wiggle room to win by a close margin, rather than the comfortable margin he achieved four years ago.

Obama's nationwide popular-vote lead, with some votes yet to be counted, stands at about 2.9 million. Even if we could somehow award Romney the 2 million votes that slipped away from the Republicans this time, Obama would still be some 900,000 votes ahead in the popular count.

Well, but we all know that it isn't the popular vote total that wins elections, it is the electoral votes. If we gave Romney back those 2 million lost McCain votes, could he perhaps have won the electoral vote even if he lost the popular vote?

Sorry, but it doesn't look that way. The lost McCain votes were distributed last time mainly among states that were never in play during this year's election. They were concentrated

mainly in states that would have gone to either Obama or Romney no matter what.

As I write this, 31 states and the District of Columbia have counted every last ballot, while nineteen states still have at least a few to count.

Among the group that is done counting, the Republicans attracted fewer votes in ten states and the District of Columbia. Five of the states showing Republican vote losses – Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Mississippi and Oklahoma, – were nonetheless carried by Romney by substantial margins.

A lot of the vote loss in those states might simply have been prompted by laziness – by people figuring that their states would go for Romney no matter what, so why bother bucking traffic to get to the polling place.

The Republicans also lost votes in California, D.C., Hawaii, New Mexico, Ohio and Vermont. Let's set aside Ohio for the moment, and look at the others. There couldn't have been a single Republican in any of those states who thought Romney would win their electoral votes. Many of them, too, must have concluded that there was little point in voting.

A considerable portion of the Republican vote loss, then, probably can be attributed to the very nature of the electoral college system, which gave people in solid red or blue states little incentive to vote.

OK, now let's consider Ohio. Romney lost the state by about 103,000 votes, and he drew 84,000 fewer votes there than McCain. If the McCain votes could be magically restored to Romney, that certainly would narrow the margin, but it wouldn't have closed it. Meanwhile, Obama lost a humongous 243,000 Ohio votes this time compared to last, yet he won the state anyway.

I don't think any rational person can conclude that either

party failed to rally its base in Ohio. If anything, that probably is the state where the parties tried their hardest. In spite of all the glad-handing and lapel-grabbing, both parties lost votes there – perhaps because the voters simply didn't much like the candidates. Ohio just wasn't destined to go to Romney.

What about the nineteen states that are still counting votes as we speak?

Six of them were considered sure things for the Republicans, eight of them sure things for the Democrats, and all of those voted according to form. Scratch them from consideration.

That leaves five states that were considered by at least some prognosticators to be part of the so-called battleground – Michigan, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Wisconsin.

Romney already has drawn more votes than McCain in all those states except Pennsylvania, and in Pennsylvania, even with votes still to count, Romney has almost equaled the McCain 2008 total.

Is anyone going to argue that either party failed to rally their base in any of those battleground states? Even if we generously hand Pennsylvania's 20 electoral votes to Romney, on the ground that the Republicans didn't start campaigning there soon enough, Obama would still win the election.

Let's face the dreary fact once and for all: Obama won this election, and would have won it even if Romney had paid personal visits to every registered Republican. Let's start looking for a winning strategy, because we sure didn't come up with one this time.