Could Limbaugh Be (Gasp) Wrong?

 I had better start by declaring that I consider the Rush Limbaugh show the best thing going on radio. I listen to it every chance I get, and Rush has been my treasured companion on many a long trek along the interstate highways. As a result, I have heard him repeat, more times than I can count, his assertion that if 4 million Republican voters hadn't sat home in the 2012 presidential election, Mitt Romney would have beaten Barack Obama.

I am puzzled as to how he arrived at that statistic and that conclusion. If he is referring to so-called Republicans who registered as young adults in 1948 to vote for Dewey, and have rarely voted since, then I can see it. The voting rolls of both major parties are loaded with slugs who cannot really be called voters. But if he means those who normally vote, but who deliberately sat out the 2012 election, presumably because Romney wasn't conservative enough for them, then I fear that he may have gotten it wrong.
Romney received 60.9 million votes in 2012, about 1 million more than the 59.9 million votes cast for John McCain, the previous GOP candidate, in 2008. Meanwhile, Obama received 65.9 million votes in 2012, down 3.6 million from the 69.5 million he polled in 2008. It would appear that Democrats, not Republicans, were the principal stay-at-homes.

That there was a significant number of normally active voters who decided not to vote in 2012, for whatever reason, is beyond dispute. The total votes cast for the two major-party candidates declined by 2.6 million from the 2008 election, which is not what you might expect in a country where the population keeps growing. But no matter how hard I massage the stats, I cannot make them tell me that 4 million genuine Republican voters stayed away from the polls specifically to

spite Romney.

Let's look first at the 3.6 million voters who deserted Obama in 2012. Most of this group actually did stay home, rather than vote instead for Romney. It seems fair to surmise that the group was composed largely of independents or loosely committed Democrats, who became disillusioned with the President during his first term.
There may have been some soft-core Republicans in the group, who had switched sides in 2008 to participate in a victory of historic importance, but such people would be unlikely to abstain from voting entirely in 2012. They would be more likely to account for Romney's slight increase over McCain in the number of votes received.

The mysterious 4 million recalcitrant Republicans whom Limbaugh chides so often for not voting must have sat out the 2008 campaign as well, considering that McCain got fewer votes than Romney. Again, no doubt, because the candidate wasn't conservative enough. But that brings us back to the question of how you define the term "voter". If someone sits out two (or more) consecutive presidential elections, is he really a voter, much less a Republican?

Let's take a closer look at the actual voting statistics, not phantom ones.
In only 14 states did Romney receive fewer votes than McCain, and of those 14, six gave their electoral votes to Romney anyway. So in those six cases, as Hillary Clinton might say, What difference did it make?

In seven of the remaining eight states where Romney lost ground — California, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont — he never stood a chance. Only if all the graveyards in those states had spewed up their dead Republican voters — the kind of improbable event that actually seems to occur, with parties reversed, in Illinois and other Democratic strongholds — would Romney have had even the most

meager prospects of winning.

The one remaining state where Romney lost ground is Ohio, that most crucial of swing states, which Obama won twice. Romney in 2012 received 16,387 fewer votes in Ohio than McCain did four years earlier, but Obama received a whopping 112,334 fewer votes in Ohio the second time than he did the first. In Ohio, the stay-at-home problem was more Obama's than Romney's.

Finally, let's try a statistical experiment, based on Limbaugh's theory that 4 million genuine Republicans opted to watch soap operas, rather than vote, on that fateful November day in 2012.

If the alleged 4 million Republican no-shows had been added to Romney's actual total of 60,933,500 votes, that would have amounted to a 6.6 percent increase. It is unlikely that the increase in every state would have been exactly 6.6 percent. In some it would be more, in some less, but there is no point in speculating about what the exact totals might have been.

Instead, let's just increase Romney's actual vote totals in each state by exactly 6.6 percent. Would that have caused Romney to win any states that he lost in the real world?

As a matter of fact, yes. He would have won Florida and (here it comes again) Ohio. That's the good news. The bad news is that those two states would have brought his electoral-vote total to just 253, or 17 shy of the amount needed to win the election.

The influential Rush Limbaugh serves a worthy purpose when he prods all Republicans to vote for the party's candidates. And he may be correct in his supposition that conservative candidates would stand a better chance than moderates like Romney, McCain and Bob Dole (who ran and lost in 1996).

But, alas, Obama won the 2012 election, and there are no plausible what-ifs that could have changed that.