How America’s Diversity Explosion Is Changing the Political Landscape

By
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Friday, July 1, 2016 at 12:00 AM

The sweeping diversity explosion now underway in the U.S. will continue to impact the political landscape as the racial profiles of the electorate and voters continue to change. Testament to this is the election of the nation’s first black president, Barack Obama, which can be attributed, in large part, to a growing minority electorate both nationally and in previously Republican-leaning Sun Belt states. This article reviews the nation’s new racial demographic shifts with an eye to how it has changed the electorate and outcomes of the past three presidential elections, and suggesting what it may mean for the future.

About the author

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Rising Racial Diversity Among the U.S. Population and Voters

The increased growth of new minorities—Hispanics and Asians and persons of two or more races—has begun to make its mark on the nation’s electorate by reducing the white portion of total voters. As recently as the 1980 presidential election, racial minorities comprised less than 10 percent of voters, compared with fully 26 percent in 2012. Yet the minority share of voters was still lower than its share of the total U.S. population, which was 37 percent.

The reason for this discrepancy between the racial makeup of voters and the population might be termed a “voter representation gap.” A large part of this gap for Hispanics and Asians is attributable to two factors. First, compared with whites, more Hispanics in America are under 18 years of age and are, therefore, too young to vote. Second, even among those Hispanics and Asians who are old enough to vote, a smaller share have become citizens, even if they reside in the United States legally.

As a consequence, the portion of all Hispanics and Asians who are eligible to vote—citizens age 18 and above—constituted only about one-half or less of their total populations. (See Figure A.) This contrasts with blacks and whites, of whom 69 percent and 79 percent of their respective
populations were eligible to vote.

Figure B illustrates the lag in translating the Hispanic and Asian representation in the total population (left panel) to the population that is eligible to vote (middle panel). For example, the Hispanic portion of the total population increased from 14 to 17 percent between the 2004 and 2012 elections. Yet, its portion of eligible voters increased from just 8 to 11 percent, respectively. In contrast, whites are more highly represented among eligible voters compared with the total population (71 percent versus 63 percent in 2012).

The representation gap for Hispanics and Asians that existed between the total population and eligible voters is even further widened among actual voters (Figure B, third panel). This is because, compared with whites and blacks, fewer Hispanics and Asians who are eligible to vote actually show up at the polls. Because of their recent residence status or lack of information, Hispanics and Asians are less likely to register to vote and to cast ballots. Thus, Hispanics represented only 8 percent of voters in the 2012 presidential election despite constituting more than twice that share of the population. Whites, on the other hand, are far more highly represented among voters than in the population as a whole.

Higher Minority Turnout Impacted the 2008 and 2012 Popular Vote

Although the nation’s electorate still lags behind its population with respect to its racial makeup, the minority population made the difference in electing Barack Obama in the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections. A key reason for this was the improved turnout of racial minorities, which magnified their clout among voters.

Minority turnout is important for Democrats in presidential elections. Since the mid-1960s, minorities (as a whole) favored Democrats and whites favored Republicans for president in the national popular vote. The black population as shown the most consistent voting patterns, favoring Democratic presidential candidates since the 1936 second-term election of Franklin D. Roosevelt. While not as strongly favoring Democrats as blacks, Hispanics and Asians also have voted primarily for Democratic candidates in recent elections.

The higher voter turnout of minorities in 2008 and 2012 is shown in Figure C. Black voter turnout increased to a point where nearly two-thirds of black eligible voters cast ballots in 2008 and 2012. Along with the decline in white voter turnout, the 2012 black voter turnout exceeded white voter turnout for the first time since such statistics have been recorded. Although lower than voter turnout for blacks, Hispanic and Asian turnouts were higher in both Obama elections than in 2004. This higher turnout among all three groups enlarged the size and effect of these voters on the final election outcome.

Obama’s two victories followed the 2004 election in which Republican George W. Bush was reelected by 3 million votes—gaining a net of 16 million white votes and losing 13 million minorities. In the subsequent two elections, Obama versus John McCain in 2008 and Obama versus Mitt Romney in 2012, the sizes of minority gains rose to 21 million, and then 23 million votes, respectively. Meanwhile, Republicans showed a decline in white gains, down to just 12 million in 2008, before registering an insufficient gain of 18 million votes in 2012.

Obama’s continued gains in the minority vote were attributable, in part, to the rise in the portion of eligible voters who were minorities (shown in Figure B). But it was also attributable to higher turnout rates for minorities—increasing their share of all voters—as well as the stronger tendency for these minorities to vote Democratic.²
Race and the Nation’s Battleground States
The increased minority influence on the popular vote outcomes of the 2008 and 2012 elections were magnified in the Electoral College vote outcomes as the nation’s racial demographic shifts dispersed across regions and states. In particular, the Sun Belt region is becoming part of an enlarged battleground of states as minorities become increasingly represented there.

Figure D portrays the racial makeup of eligible voters by state at the time of the 2012 election. Clearly, racial minorities make up a sizable presence in many states including those not in traditional coastal settlement areas. Minorities constitute nearly one-half or more of the electorates in Hawaii, New Mexico, California, Texas and D.C., and at least one-third or more in a swath of additional states in the South and interior West. (See Table C."

Hispanics embody substantial and increasing portions of the electorates in many Western states as well as Connecticut, Florida, New Jersey, New York and Texas. The Hispanic population may soon approach the black population in electoral clout. Minorities constitute more than one-quarter of the electorate in most Southern states and blacks are the largest group except in Florida, Oklahoma and Texas. Blacks still dominate the small minority populations in whiter heartland states such as Michigan, Ohio and Pennsylvania, though their much smaller Hispanic populations are rising as in other parts of that region.

Although the nation’s electorate is still divided somewhat between whiter heartland states and heavily minority coastal states, states in the Sun Belt stand in the forefront of racial electorate change. These include fast-growing Western interior states that are receiving Hispanics and other minorities, and prosperous Southern states that are attracting blacks along with Hispanics from other regions.

The geographic dispersion of new minorities and southward migration of blacks advantage the Democrats by enlarging the number of available battleground states. This allowed Democrats to cut into a new electoral turf that republicans held steadily for a long period, and these trends should pave the way for new state battlegrounds in the future.

In the 2004 election, as in the election four years earlier, George W. Bush won by taking a nearly clean sweep of the interior West and South, along with Great Plains and several Northern states—most notably Ohio—that were then dubbed battlegrounds (See Figure E). This Sun Belt sweep was not new to Republicans. Although they lost some Sun Belt states when Southerner Bill Clinton ran in the three-way elections of 1992 and 1996, and when Southerner Jimmy Carter ran in 1976 and 1980, Republicans held fairly firm control of the South since the Civil Rights years when white Southerners started voting in large numbers for Republican candidates. With very few exceptions, the mostly white conservative-leaning interior West states voted for Republicans continuously from 1968 to 2004, aside from the three-way elections of the 1990s.

The Democratic strongholds for the two elections prior to 2008 consisted of urbanized, racially diverse coastal states such as California and New York and a swath of New England, Northeastern, and Midwestern states with industrial or farming histories. Although these states held constituencies reflecting both new and old strengths of the party—minorities, union workers, progressive professionals and women—they did not represent the most rapidly growing parts of the country.
This geographic map changed with both the 2008 and 2012 elections owing to the changing racial demographics of a number of New Sun Belt states. This can be seen in Figure E, which shows that, in contrast to 2004, Obama won new West and South battleground states of Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Virginia and, in 2008, North Carolina.

The effect of the changing demography along with the heightened minority enthusiasm for Obama is illustrated in Nevada. In 2004, Nevada’s voters were 80 percent white, 8 percent Hispanic, 6 percent black, and 6 percent Asian or another race. Nevada’s white share dropped to 73 percent in 2008 and to 67 percent in 2012 such that, in the latter year, the voters included 15 percent Hispanics, 9 percent blacks, and 9 percent Asians or another race. Aside from demographics alone, the Democratic voting margins (percent voting Democrat minus percent voting Republican) continued to increase particularly for Hispanics from 21 in 2004 to 54 in 2008 and 47 in 2012.

Shifts in this direction were evident in most of the other Sun Belt states that Obama won in 2008, where a rise in the minority Democratic vote overcame the Republican white vote. (See Table B) For most of these South and West battleground states (North Carolina is the exception), Obama’s minority support was strong enough to overcome an increased white Republican margin in 2012. This was especially crucial in Florida, where the white Republican margin increased from 14 to 24 between 2008 and 2012. But due to a larger minority turnout and increased Democratic margins, Obama won this key battleground state again.

Racial minorities were responsible for winning five Southern and Western states designated as “battlegrounds” in 2008 (Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, North Carolina and Virginia) and a similar number in 2012 (excluding North Carolina but including Colorado)—besting the white Republican advantages for these states. This means that the growth of Hispanics, Asians and other new minorities as well as the southward migration of blacks was opening the door to greater future Democratic prospects in the Sun Belt.

Among such states are Arizona and Texas, which are among the five states with the highest minority voter representation gaps, (See Table A) due largely to their substantial and younger Hispanic populations. While both states have voted solidly Republican in past elections, this could change if current race-related Republican and Democratic voting proclivities continue. In these and other states, this representation gap should eventually close—albeit gradually. The “too young to vote” share of the Hispanic population is projected to decrease over time and, as more in the population turn 18, it has been estimated that they will add up to one million new voting-age Hispanic citizens annually for the foreseeable future.¹

Moreover, the ceiling for greater “new minority” voter participation will increase for two reasons. First, there will be higher rates of naturalization among Hispanic and Asian permanent residents who are eligible to become citizens. Naturalized citizenship rates have increased in recent years, though there is room for further growth. Second, voter turnout rates among Hispanics and Asians, discussed below, will increase as members of these communities become more familiar with registration and voting practices with the help of local government and civic organizations.

It is highly likely that the continued dispersion of minorities to many of the interior Sun Belt states will continue into the future. This would make the longstanding “solid Republican” South and much of the Mountain West become more open to gains by Democrats.⁴

Still, this longer-term prognostication makes some strong assumptions. First, that longstanding white, Republican preferences and minority, Democratic preferences continue into the future. Second, that many of the nation’s industrial Midwest states, which will continue to remain “whiter” than the rest of the country, shall remain Democratic. At least in the short term, the latter assumption may not hold, given that recent Democratic wins were fairly small in Ohio and Pennsylvania, and that Republicans could also be competitive in Iowa and Wisconsin and perhaps Michigan. This is because largely white Republican-leaning baby boomers and seniors could turnout heavily for a popular candidate in these states and could, at least in the short run, counter the growing Democratic-leaning minority populations in the Sun Belt. Still, in the long run, both parties will come to recognize that the larger minority shares of the electorate will not only continue but also need to be reckoned with by adjusting their messages and policy agendas appropriately.

Notes