



The Demographics That Drive America's Partisan Divide

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THE BRUISING 2016 presidential campaign and the ensuing bitter partisanship could lead Americans to believe the nation is in two immutable camps. There's the blue team, populated by racial and ethnic minorities, younger voters and white people waving around their college diplomas, and then there's the red team, mostly white people without college degrees as well as older voters whose firm conservative leanings make them reliable GOP voters.

Turns out, that's pretty close to the truth, according to a detailed analysis, *States of Change*, a joint study by the Center for American Progress, the Democracy Fund, the Brookings Institution and the Bipartisan Policy Center.

"The 2016 election was the most demographically divisive election in the history of American politics," Robert Griffin, co-author of the report and research director for the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, said at a panel discussion at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Griffin noted that the study does not purport to predict how next year's election or future elections will go, noting that "the future is inherently fuzzy. It's full of unknowns and unknowables." But the report – which focused on how demographic changes are defining the makeup of the two major parties – suggested things are unlikely to change anytime soon.

The voting public is getting less white, younger and more educated, the study said, though the trends vary from state to state. And while the authors caution that "demographics are not destiny," they note that voters are not likely to switch teams easily.

"While shifting turnout and support rates can be pivotal for winning elections, these changes are likely to have a relatively small impact on the overall makeup of the electorate and party coalitions in the future," the report says.

"Thus, most of the effect of demographic change on future party coalitions is already baked in and will reshape party coalitions – in a sense, whether these parties like it or not."

Political strategists pay a great deal of attention to demographics nationally and within swing states, coming up with a campaign and get-out-the-vote effort meant to maximize the power of those demographic groups most devoted to them.

The increasing percentage of minority voters, especially Latino voters, had many strategists predicting a Democratic win for president in 2016, since the GOP base is mostly white – a

shrinking part of the American electorate. But President Donald Trump managed to maximize the white vote, especially in states with higher percentages of older and white voters, such as Wisconsin and Pennsylvania, panelists at the event noted.

The increase in minority populations will affect both parties, the report said: White voters, for example, will continue to decline as a share of both the Democratic and Republican Party coalitions, with the decline happening faster in states like Arizona and Texas, which already have smaller percentages of white voters (Texas is one of five majority-minority states, with New Mexico, California, Nevada and Hawaii.)

The number of white voters without a college education – who made up 76 percent of the GOP base and 60 percent of the Democratic base in 1980, dropping to 60 percent of the GOP coalition and 29 percent of the Democratic coalition in 2016 — will get even smaller in both parties as the population becomes more educated, the report said.

Meanwhile, Hispanic voters, who have favored Democrats in recent elections, will surpass black voters as the largest overall non-white voter group by 2032. And by 2036, black voters – a very reliable Democratic vote - will be a bigger chunk of the electorate than white non-college educated voters, a GOP stronghold, the study said.

Democrats at Wednesday night's debate were clearly cognizant of where their demographic strengths lie: Several spoke some Spanish in their answers and a few of the 10 contenders also underscored their concerns about racial disparities in criminal justice. Immigration, too, was cast as a civil rights issue for Latinos.

The growing Hispanic population could be damaging to the GOP if the party does not reach out more – especially since the Trump administration has alienated many Latinos with its aggressive immigration and border control policy, said panelist Angela Gutierrez, a fellow at UCLA's Latino Politics and Public Policy Initiative.

"The change needs to come from the top," she said. But "I really don't think the Republican Party is going to come around any time soon."

Emily Ekins, a research fellow at the Cato Institute, said part of the problem is that political strategists aren't looking at long-term demographic trends.

"People seem not to actually think about the future much. They're thinking about the next election," she said at the BPC event.