

## Cracks in the Rainbow Coalition

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The 2020 election should prompt a reckoning for “antiracist” activists who assume that nonwhites will always pull the lever for progressivism.

The American Left was confident in the months leading up to the 2020 election. High turnout among a diversifying national electorate was supposed to sweep progressives into office, overpowering the stubborn objections of a shrinking conservative constituency. Favorable polls seemed to confirm the unspoken theory of Democratic Party politics: a diversifying America is necessarily a more left-wing one. While the 2016 election challenged conventional wisdom, many considered Donald Trump’s win over Hillary Clinton to be the last gasp of an older, whiter right-wing coalition.

This theory of American politics was defeated on November 3. Yes, Joe Biden won the presidency and Republicans lost their Senate majority, though Biden’s victory was not the blowout that polls had prophesied and Republicans gained double-digit seats in the House. But in an unforeseen shift that dealt a rebuke to the Left’s fundamental beliefs about the relationship between politics and identity in the United States, the GOP gained among nonwhite voters, even as Democrats gained among whites. “For years, the Democratic Party has operated under one immutable assumption: Long term demographic trends would give the party something like a permanent majority as the country as a whole grows less white and more urban,” wrote Zack Stanton for *Politico*. But now? “All those assumptions now seem like total nonsense.”

The thesis that demographic change would yield durable Democratic majorities is not new. Political scientists John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira advanced it in their 2002 book, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, and Barack Obama’s landslide 2008 victory—in which the 44th president earned record-high support from nonwhites—seemed to confirm it. The Left viewed itself as representing a “rainbow coalition” of racial minorities, millennials, unmarried women, who, along with college-educated whites, would together form a governing majority that would expand with continued immigration and intermarriage.

Republicans made inroads among just these “rainbow” voters in 2020. District-level data show that the GOP gained in heavily Hispanic districts; in working-class Asian, Arab, and Eastern European urban neighborhoods; and even in some predominantly African-American inner-city precincts. Trump’s standing with Latinos improved significantly in such states as Florida, Georgia, Texas, and Ohio, and he earned 19 percent of the vote among black men (performing especially well with those under 40). Ironically, the man that the Left derided as the incarnation

of white supremacy and male chauvinism lost ground only with one major demographic group: white men. While Trump's total share of the nonwhite vote was still just 26 percent, the former president's performance reminds us that the future of American politics is far from predestined.

The Left's failure to anticipate these developments is self-inflicted, the result of an orthodoxy on race issues that has taken hold in elite circles. Variably termed critical race theory (CRT), wokeness, or, in writer Wesley Yang's formulation, the successor ideology, this orthodoxy maintains that America is structurally racist, that white supremacy is the driving force behind the disparities between whites and minorities, that whites are collectively guilty of racism and nonwhites are collectively victimized by it, and that coming to terms with our racial history means redistributing status and wealth from guilty groups to victim groups. If this story were true, nonwhite groups—or "BIPOC," for black, indigenous, and people of color—should possess group interests relative to the white majority and should consequently vote in lockstep for progressive candidates.

This strain of identity politics is an increasingly poor frame for understanding contemporary American society. The influence of wokeness in elite institutions means that white liberals are now more likely than blacks to agree that, for example, "racial discrimination is the main reason why many black people can't get ahead these days."

In attributing left-wing social views to allegedly monolithic minority groups, the progressive racial orthodoxy conceals the fact that these groups contain individuals who have long held a wide range of views. In 1986, about 75 percent of blacks in California voted for Proposition 63, which made English the official language of the state. Seven in 10 black Californians voted for Proposition 8, the 2008 ballot measure that overrode the state supreme court's decision legalizing same-sex marriage. A 2014 Pew poll found that 70 percent of African Americans nationwide believed that homosexuality is a sin. For their part, Hispanics express more alarm over illegal immigration than either blacks or whites, with 67 percent saying they worry "a great deal or a fair amount" about the issue. Racial preferences for "underrepresented minorities" in college admissions and hiring are unpopular among Asian Americans; some have filed lawsuits against the practice. And immigrants, an overwhelmingly nonwhite category, are particularly patriotic: according to a 2019 Cato Institute study, first-generation immigrants are more proud to be American, more likely to say "the world would be better if people from other countries were more like Americans," and more inclined to express confidence in our governing institutions than are their native-born counterparts.

The conceit that minority groups are united in a struggle for collective liberation ignores the tensions among and the heterodoxy within them—but reality has a way of intervening. As activists rallied to "defund the police" this summer, 81 percent of black Americans reported wanting the same amount or more police in their communities. No surprise, then, that "Clinton voters with conservative views on crime, policing, and public safety were far more likely to switch to Trump than voters with less conservative views on those issues," in Democratic political consultant David Shor's analysis of 2020. Meantime, California's Proposition 16—a ballot measure that would have permitted government institutions to consider race, gender, and ethnicity in public employment, public contracting, and public education—was defeated, a sign that overtly race-conscious policies are unpopular, even in the most diverse state in the country. Across the board, Shor says, "nonwhite conservatives voted for Republicans at higher rates; they started voting more like white conservatives."

Instead of adjusting their narrative to account for these counterintuitive facts, adherents to progressive racial orthodoxy respond by adjusting the facts to fit their narrative. Reacting to reports that Trump was performing unusually well with Latino voters, *New York Times Magazine* writer Nikole Hannah-Jones tweeted: “Whiteness is not static and it is expandable when necessary. A lot of folks we don’t think of as white think of themselves as white because the lines have never been entirely clear. That’s the beauty of white supremacy — it is extremely adaptable.” Her message appeared to be that Hispanics who supported Trump were not really Hispanic: by bucking the party line, they had become white.

Judis, who argued in 2002 that demographic change would yield long-term gains for Democrats, has since recanted that prediction. Adherents to the progressive racial orthodoxy don’t have that option, since it would require revisiting assumptions they deem morally mandatory. So they attribute the astounding success of Asian-Americans to Asian privilege or “white-adjacency,” deride black conservatives as “Uncle Toms” who have “internalized” their oppression, and refer to Hispanics who vote for Republicans as the worst epithet in the progressive lexicon: white.

But if the racial orthodoxy is so totalizing as to be unfalsifiable, its premises are decreasingly relevant. Amid a mounting cultural obsession with “white privilege,” immigration and intermarriage are projected to render whites a numerical minority by the 2040s. In *Whiteshift*, political scientist and Manhattan Institute adjunct fellow Eric Kaufmann argues that this “browning” of America will likely result in the expansion of the ethnic majority to include people currently considered nonwhite, which, Kaufmann tells us, should “reduce white anxiety—except among race purists—and lower the temperature.” Calling this white supremacy might make sense to *New York Times* journalists, but in reality, Kaufmann says, it “is part of a normal assimilation process of the kind that is a constant feature in human history.”

One might expect progressives to welcome the possibility that race will be deemphasized in U.S. politics. Instead, they resort to abstruse explanations for the persistence of structural racism and insist that overcoming racism requires an endless focus on racial distinctions, abandoning the colorblind humanism of Martin Luther King Jr., even as they try to appropriate the moral gravitas of his era. While King envisioned a country where “the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit together at the table of brotherhood,” contemporary progressive activists prefer to combat racism by emphasizing ethnic differences, even embracing racial segregation with race-specific graduation ceremonies, freshman orientation programs, and dormitories on elite university campuses.

This racialized approach has gained a foothold in elite institutions, but it is deeply unpopular—and conceals the emergence of new, non-racial fault lines. From the shifts visible in the November election, the possibility of a new political dynamic begins to emerge, one in which education, income level, religious affiliation, and cultural background are more determinative of one’s voting habits than ethnic identity. That would be a powerful refutation of the successor ideology.

The 2020 results show that a growing number of racial minorities, whom progressives identify as victims of the American system, are committed to maintaining it. Throughout U.S. history, those at the margins of society have possessed a unique understanding of the universal principles that form the basis of our tradition. Ours is a story not of racial inequality and oppression, but of overcoming such brutal conditions by adhering to those principles. The progressive narrative

inverts this tradition. As long as the Left continues to believe that racism infects the very foundation of the United States, its political blind spots will remain.