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America's Electoral Future

How Changing Demographics Could Impact Presidential Elections from 2016 to 2032

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Introduction and summary

Results from the past two presidential elections provide evidence that the changing demography of the electorate—with its increased racial diversity—can affect election outcomes in ways that could not have been anticipated even a decade ago. A solid case can be made that the nation’s racial minority populations put President Barack Obama over the top in both 2008 and 2012.¹ But racial diversity is not the only demographic change that may have an effect on future presidential elections. In addition to greater diversity—which is primarily affecting the younger part of the electorate—the older part of the voting population is growing more rapidly as the huge Baby Boom generation ages.

These demographic shifts—toward both a more racially diverse younger electorate and a larger older electorate—certainly should change the playing field in terms of how the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as their candidates, appeal to these shifting voting blocs, which often have different interests.² And the pace of demographic change varies across geography, with some fast-growing states such as Arizona, Texas, and Florida seeing the effects of the nation’s rising diversity much more sharply than others. Yet even slow growing states such as Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan will experience significant rising diversity in the coming years and, importantly, an aging of their electorates driven by large contingents of Baby Boom residents. These state-level demographic changes will leave strong imprints on the voting populations captured by the all-important Electoral College, forcing parties and candidates to recalibrate their strategies for success.

This report explores how these demographic changes could shape the electorate, as well as potential outcomes in the next five presidential elections using national and state demographic projections produced by the States of Change project. In a 2015 report and interactive,³ this project presented a time series of long-term projections of race and age profiles for the populations and eligible electorates of all 50 states to 2060. This report focuses on what those projections imply for the presidential elections of 2016, 2020, 2024, 2028, and 2032.

The States of Change: Demographics and Democracy project is a collaboration supported by The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation that brings together the Center for American Progress, the American Enterprise Institute, and demographer William H. Frey of the Brookings Institution. The views expressed in this and other States of Change reports are those of the authors and not the institutions sponsoring the project.

The project's goals are:

- To document and analyze the challenges to democracy posed by the rapid demographic evolution from the 1970s to 2060
- To project the race-ethnic composition of every state to 2060, which has not been done for 20 years
- To promote a wide-ranging and bipartisan discussion of America's demographic future and what it portends for the nation's political parties and public policy

Of course, shaping these outcomes is not the same as determining them. While the force of demography is important, election results also depend on economic conditions, candidates, and the extent to which those candidates are able to generate enthusiasm that can be measured in voter turnout and candidate preference. The analyses presented here build alternative scenarios for the election years mentioned above. Each scenario assumes the same projected demography of eligible voters, or EVs, for that year but makes different assumptions about voter turnout and candidate preference.

This report considers six main scenarios. Scenario A, here called the 2012 Forward scenario, assumes that for each age, race, and state group, voter turnout rates and Democratic/Republican candidate preferences in 2012 will continue for EV populations that are projected into the future. Scenario B, the 2008 Forward scenario, assumes that the even more Democrat-favorable turnout and candidate preference rates by age, race, and state group of the 2008 election will apply to future EV populations. Scenario C, the 2004 Forward scenario, assumes that the relatively Republican-favorable 2004 turnout rates and candidate preferences by age, race, and state will obtain among future EVs.

Scenario D is the Maximum Minority Turnout scenario. Like scenario A, it assumes that the candidate preferences of voters will follow those of 2012. But unlike A, it assumes that the turnout of Hispanics, Asians, and other races by age rises to the turnout level of whites by age in every state.⁴ African American turnout is not adjusted since it was slightly higher than white turnout in 2012. This simulation shows the likely outcomes that would result if efforts to encourage the turnout of newer minorities—Hispanics, Asians, and other nonblack minorities—are extremely successful.

Scenarios E and F adjust scenario A to assume greater Republican voter preferences for different groups. Scenario E, the High GOP Hispanic/Asian Support scenario, assumes that Republican support from voters of each nonblack or new minority group—Hispanics, Asians, and those of other races—will increase by 7.5 percentage points for all age categories of those groups in every state. Note that raising the support rate for Republicans by 7.5 points among new minorities reduces the Democrats' support rate among these groups by the same amount, thereby improving the margin for Republicans by 15 points in total.

Scenario F, the More GOP White Support scenario, changes the voting preferences of the white electorate, adjusting scenario A in order to increase the level of Republican support from white voters of all age categories in every state by 5 points—thereby raising the GOP margin among all categories of white voters by 10 points.

Notably, these are simulations—not predictions. For example, when running the 2016 election simulation as if voter turnout and preferences were the same as in 2012—scenario A—the authors are not expressing the belief that this is a likely event. The goal of this report is to display the potential political effects of demographic change. As such, the results this report presents offer a range of outcomes that can be expected under different assumptions as the nation's demography changes, but they are not predictions about actual future events.

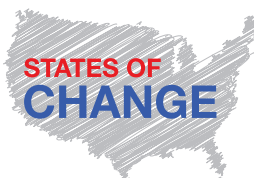
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