

# Why Demography Does Not Equal Destiny

*by Lanae Erickson Hatafsky and Jim Kessler*



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For the past decade, the Democratic Party has been enthralled by the notion that it can win elections mostly by turning out a growing base of young and minority voters—the so-called “Rising American Electorate.” This theory posits that demographic characteristics are the most important feature of political behavior and can authoritatively predict both political values and voting choices. Proponents of this philosophy described President Obama’s victory in 2008 as a progressive triumph that embodied and cemented a 20-year shift in American politics and demographics.<sup>1</sup> By his 2012 reelection, their proclamations heralded the era in which the “McGovern coalition” had come of age and could finally reign.<sup>2</sup> Demographics are so decisive, their narrative goes, that the 2010 census might have been “the most significant event of this presidential contest.”<sup>3</sup> In short, demographic changes equal destiny for Democrats.

The foundation of this argument—based initially on John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira’s 2002 book *The Emerging Democratic Majority*—is that the proportion of voters who are non-white, college graduates, professionals, single and working women, Millennials, or infrequent church attenders is increasing, and these voters tend to support Democrats by greater margins than the general population. Conversely, white voters (especially the white working class) are declining in their proportion of the electorate—and these voters increasingly support Republicans.<sup>4</sup> Finally, older generational cohorts—who tend to be more conservative and vote Republican by greater margins—are being replaced by the Millennial generation, which proponents say is more progressive than other generations.<sup>5</sup> The result, according to many, is “an array of growing demographic groups that have aligned themselves with progressives and swelled their ranks,” leading to an inevitable progressive majority at the ballot box.<sup>6</sup> Unlike Democratic dominance in other eras, this one is marked, they argue, by a “more stable ideological plurality.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, a “true” progressive coalition is at hand, obviating the need for a big tent party or a more ideologically diverse progressive movement.

The case that Democrats could expect changes in demographics to deliver a permanent majority was bolstered specifically by the political emergence of Millennials.<sup>8</sup> Proponents of this theory posited that Millennials are a progressive generation and will exert a profoundly liberalizing influence over politics for three reasons. First, they are large in size (by 2020, 90 million Millennials will be eligible to vote, which could comprise up to 40% of all eligible voters).<sup>9</sup> Secondly, they are the most diverse American generation to date (now 40% non-white, which proponents predict would rise to 44% by 2020, a shift that they posit “should make the Millennial Generation even more firmly progressive as it fully enters the electorate, since minorities are the most strongly progressive segment among Millennials.”)<sup>10</sup> Third, they support progressive views on some benchmark issues at levels higher than the rest of the population—in particular, a handful of issues like gay equality that had previously divided the rest of the country.<sup>11</sup> So under this viewpoint, the demographic changes taking place in the electorate will conjure a stable and dominant progressive majority long-term.

While the initial formulation in the *Emerging Democratic Majority* was more nuanced and called for a pragmatic progressive approach to winning elections and governing, this core idea that voters are *born this way* became sloganized on the Left. Demographic change became viewed as electoral destiny for Democrats. And Democrats who bought into it felt they could pursue a base-only strategy without worrying about persuading a broader swath of voters to support them, including the ones who have delivered big tent victories of the past.

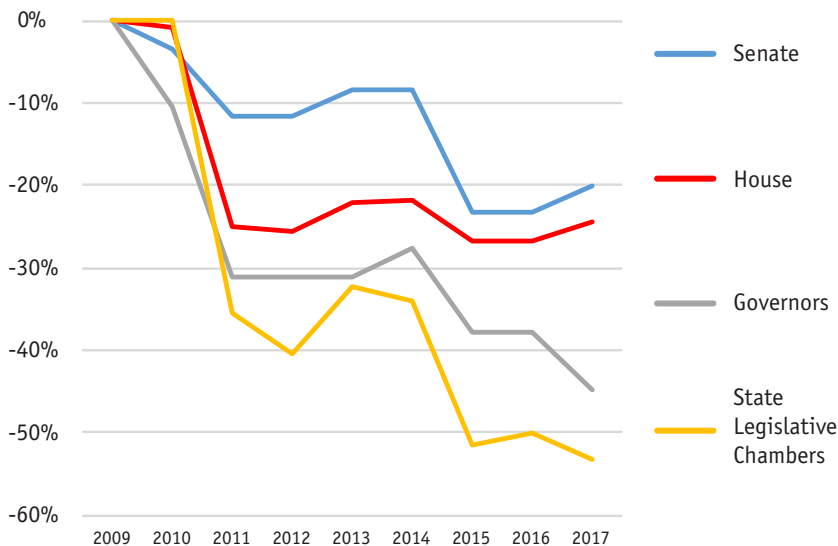
But this model for winning elections has failed, both at the state and local level and in the most recent presidential contest.

To be sure, the presidential election in 2016 was close. Changing the minds of enough folks in three states would could fit into Lambeau Field for a Packer game—a flip of fewer than 80,000 votes combined in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin—would have given Democrats a third term in the White House. Clinton won the popular vote by nearly three million. Serious concerns about voter disenfranchisement, fake news, scandals, Russian influence, and other factors could cast Trump’s victory as more of a fluke than a rebuke.

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But Democrats' dismal electoral fortunes cannot be denied. The Democratic presidential loss in 2016 was simply the final thumping in a long string of crushing defeats. From the 2009 high water mark for the Party, Democrats have lost 20% of their Senate seats, 25% of their House seats, 45% of their governors, 53% of their state legislative houses, and now the White House.

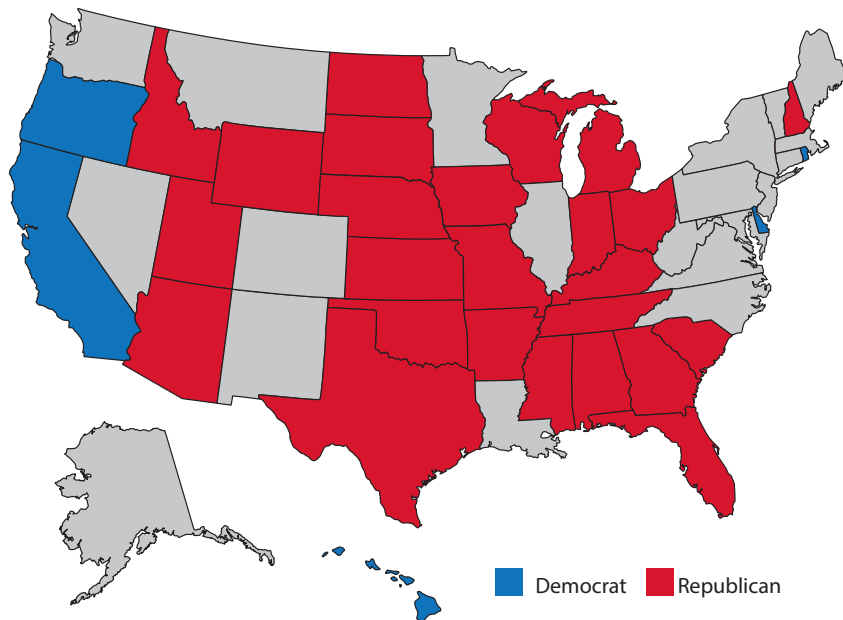
### Democratic Decline Downballot



Republicans are now just one state legislature short of being able to call a constitutional convention to consider amendments to our founding document.

Traditionally blue states like Illinois, Maryland, and Massachusetts now have Republican governors. The Minnesota state senate was under Democratic control for nearly twenty years—now Republicans are in charge. Republicans hold the governors' mansions and both houses of the state legislature in 25 states, while Democrats control all levers of power in just five (a Democrat in Washington State's Senate caucuses with the Republicans, so the latter party controls that chamber). And three of those states rank 47th, 49th, and 50th in geographic size. In fact, Republicans are now just one state legislature short of being able to call a constitutional convention to consider amendments to our founding document.

## States With Unified Party Control



Democrats, by contrast, now resemble a regional, not a national, party—competitive in mostly coastal and urban enclaves. Along the wealthy, highly-educated Acela Corridor and Pacific Coast, Democrats hold a 98-33 advantage in U.S. House seats. In the other 40 states, Republicans hold 208 seats to Democrats' 96. In these same 40 states, Donald Trump won 306 electoral votes to Hillary Clinton's 80. California, Massachusetts, and New York have become so blue that Clinton outperformed Barack Obama by more than a million votes there (no surprise then that those 3 states make up a third of the Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives). But she underperformed Obama by 3 million votes everywhere else.

If Democrats wish to regain majorities that last more than the blink of an eye, they will need a new theory of the electorate to replace demography-is-destiny, so they can carve an electoral path out of the wilderness.



# THREE REASONS WHY DEMOGRAPHY IS DESTINY DIDN'T WORK

Why did demographic change not deliver for Democrats? After all, as the authors of the book predicted, the non-white population in America has steadily increased. These non-white voters, as predicted, cast their ballots overwhelmingly for Democrats. Millennials are indeed the most ethnically, racially, and culturally-diverse generation of all time. Religiosity in America has lessened. If all this is true, why has electoral success not followed for Democrats?

This theory falls short for three reasons:

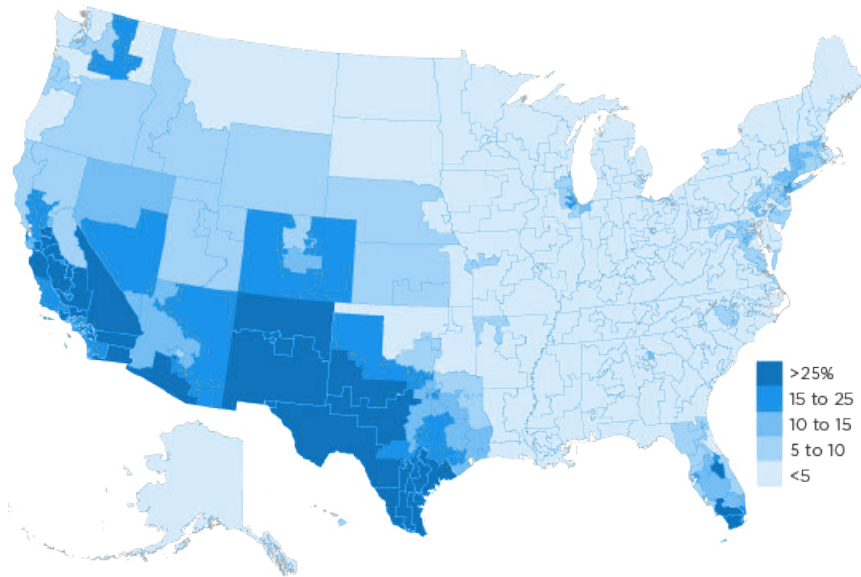
1. Demographic change is not evenly dispersed in states and voting districts throughout the country.
2. Voting behavior is not static. Voters more readily change which party they support than the demography-is-destiny models anticipated.
3. Despite the large change in the demographic composition of the electorate, most voters still do not self-identify as liberals. In fact, liberals remain bronze medalists in the ideological breakdown of the electorate—ever since the question was first asked decades ago.

## #1: THE RISING AMERICAN ELECTORATE IS NOT EVENLY DISTRIBUTED

Demographic change is happening in America; it's just not evenly spread across the country.

Take Latinos, one of the fastest-growing groups in the Rising American Electorate. They comprise 10% or more of eligible voters in only 11 states and are less than 5% of eligible voters in 27 states.<sup>12</sup> There are only nine Congressional districts where 50% or more of all eligible voters are Latino. By contrast, in 275 congressional districts, Latinos comprise less than 10% of voters.<sup>13</sup>

## Concentration of Latino Voters



Map Source: Pew Research Center, [Mapping the Latino Electorate by Congressional District](#)

Looking more broadly at Latino voters as well as African American, Asian American, and mixed-race voters, we see the same pattern of uneven distribution. Drawing upon partisan ratings from the Cook Political Report, we compared the demography of swing Congressional districts to safe Democratic and Republican ones.<sup>14</sup> While safe Democratic House districts are 45% white, 70% of the population in the swing districts are white. In fact, these swing district more resemble Cook's red districts, which are 75% white, than they do the districts from which the vast majority of the current House Democratic Caucus hails.<sup>15</sup>

A strategy based on appealing to non-whites and Latinos can succeed only in the places those voters reside. But when those voters are concentrated, it is challenging to create electoral majorities. For example, in the 2016 presidential election, Clinton beat Trump by 6.9 million votes in California, Massachusetts, and New York and by an aggregate margin of 65-35% in those three states. Each has a high proportion of various groups that make up the Rising American Electorate. But in the other 47 states (plus the District of Columbia), Trump received 4 million votes more than Clinton, winning 52% to 48%.

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The Rising American Electorate also tends to be concentrated in urban centers. Yet when building an electoral path to majorities, our Constitution gives immense power to sparse places. Large and diverse California and sparse and homogeneous Wyoming each get two Senators and one governor. And because each state is assigned electoral votes based on their number of both House and Senate members, Wyoming's 600,000 people and California's 39 million people each get two electoral votes for their Senators in addition to the ones based on their number of House members, which is more tightly linked to population size. It is simply not possible for a party to gain significant power in our system without winning in some of the non-urban areas.

There was a time not too long ago when Democrats fared well in these sparser regions. The Dakotas, for example, had four Democratic Senators as recently as 2004. Now it is a rarity to see a Democrat from most of these places. Cook rates 23 states as having safe Republican Senate seats and only 13 as safely blue. That means Republicans start with 46 Senate seats that most likely will go to them, compared to Democrats' 26 safe blue seats. Waiting for those 23 red states to change demographically to the point where Democrats are competitive could take a very long time indeed—especially since they have one-sixth the population density of the blue.

## #2: VOTING IS DYNAMIC, NOT STATIC

One of the foundational concepts in believing that demographic change would create a durable Democratic majority is the notion that voting groups are stable over time. But evidence suggests otherwise. And while party identification is often a good predictor of vote choice, partisan attachment is on the decline. Instead of viewing voters as stable fixtures who are “born that way,” we should recognize that they are only stable *until they're not*, and all indications point to expecting more fluctuations over time, not less.

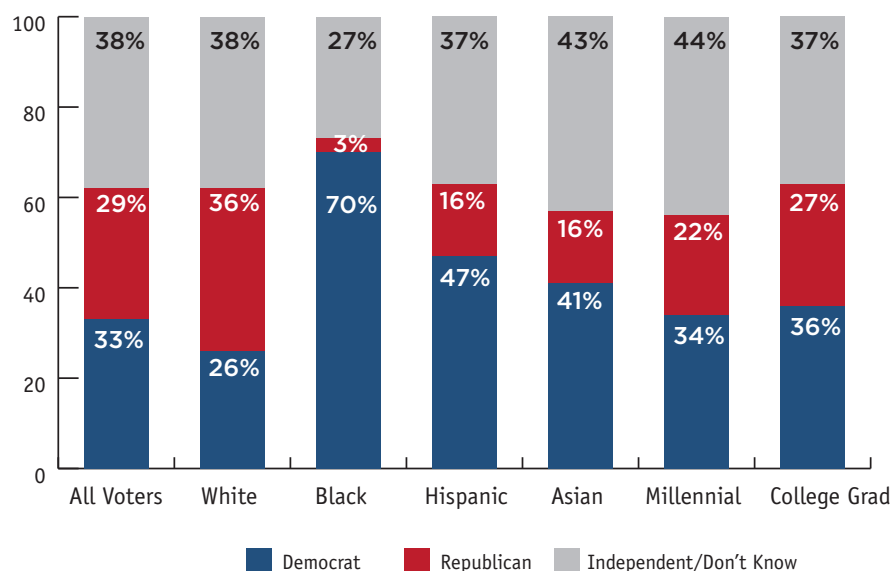
The 2012 and 2016 presidential races provide an excellent example of how dynamic voting behavior can be—and how much voter fluctuation actually occurs underneath the surface of national poll numbers.



In the popular vote, the Clinton and Obama performances were nearly identical as both won about 65.9 million votes.<sup>16</sup> Clinton had a 2.1% popular vote margin to Obama's 3.9%. But below the surface of these relatively stable numbers is a cauldron of volatility. 403 counties shifted from Obama to Trump. 93 counties flipped in that direction in the three surprise states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin alone. And Clinton fared better than Obama in many wealthy, highly-educated counties, while faring markedly worse in working-class, white counties. This suggests far greater voter volatility than is built into recent Democratic assumptions about winning elections.

The precursor of this volatility was evident in the fact that Independent enrollment has been on a steady rise. From 2008 to 2016, Independent enrollment increased by 30% in presidential battleground states, while Republican enrollment increased by 6% and Democratic enrollment fell by 1%.<sup>17</sup> A near record high 38% of Americans now call themselves a political Independent, with 33% identifying as a Democrat and 29% a Republican.<sup>18</sup> And key groups in the Rising American Electorate have a high proportion of Independents, particularly Millennials and Asians.<sup>19</sup>

## PARTY IDENTIFICATION IN 2016



Source: Pew Research Center, [2016 Party Identification Detailed Tables](#)

Those who dismissed this historic rise in Independent voters during the Obama years argued that Independents were merely partisans in disguise, but the increase in politically-unaffiliated voters has resulted in dramatic swings in Congressional elections. In 2006, Democrats won Independents by 17 points—and took the majority in the House. In 2010, Republicans won Independents by 18 points—and wrested control of the House back from Democrats.<sup>20</sup> *That’s a 35-point swing* in back-to-back midterm Congressional races. In 2008, Obama won Independents by eight points; in 2016, Trump won them by six—a 14-point swing. Over the past 40 years, Republican presidential candidates have won Independents by as much as 28 points and have lost them by as much as eight—a 36-point swing. It’s clear from these massive swings that Independents aren’t simply acting like partisans.

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Voters may cruise along voting as they have in the past for a certain period of time, but then they make abrupt changes. Models that don’t account for voter volatility ignore the past and are sure to come up wanting.

We saw an example of this volatility in the 2016 exit polls, where Clinton won just 37% of white voters, the smallest share for a Democratic candidate since the 1984 election—an election in which the Democratic nominee, Walter Mondale won only a single state (and 34% of the white vote). Among whites without a college degree, Clinton garnered 28%, compared to Obama’s 36% in 2012.

## Independent Voting in Presidential Elections

Election	Size of Independent Vote	Margin	Election Winner
1976	41%	R+4	D
1980	23%	R+25	R
1984	26%	R+28	R
1988	26%	R+14	R
1992	27%	D+6	D
1996	22%	D+7	D
2000	26%	R+2	R
2004	26%	D+2	R
2008	29%	D+8	D
2012	29%	R+5	D
2016	31%	R+6	R

Source: National Exit Polls

The static demography-is-destiny theory did not account for the notion that a rising electorate may impact a sinking electorate. It assumed that Democrats would maintain a certain historic level of support even among the groups that weren't a part of the "New American Majority." But Clinton's dismal performance among white voters (many of whom had reliably voted Democratic in the past) meant that winning black voters 88% to 8% and winning 65% of both Latino and Asian American voters was simply not enough.

### #3 MOST VOTERS AREN'T LIBERAL (EVEN IN GROWING GROUPS)

The promise of demography-is-destiny was not simply that a rising progressive electorate would guarantee Democratic wins, but that the Party could appeal only to its base, impose ideological litmus tests, and still prevail. One frequently-offered proof point: liberals registered their highest shares of the electorate in history in 2012 and 2016 exit polls. But that movement did not signal a leftward shift—because it is also true that conservatives in 2012 and 2016 exit polls registered their highest shares of the electorate in history. The two ideological wings of America essentially offset each other. And more fundamentally, even with their recent uptick, liberals do not represent a majority of either the electorate or even the Democratic coalition. By discarding the concept of a big tent and concentrating on purity and base enthusiasm, this theory undercut the coalition that had delivered majorities to Democrats in the past.

#### Ideology of Presidential Voters

Election	Liberals	Moderates	Conservatives
1976	20%	49%	31%
1980	17%	46%	28%
1984	16%	42%	33%
1988	18%	45%	33%
1992	21%	49%	30%
1996	19%	47%	34%
2000	20%	50%	29%
2004	21%	46%	34%
2008	22%	44%	34%
2012	25%	41%	35%
2016	26%	39%	35%

Source: National Exit Polls

Moderates were an absolute majority of Democratic presidential voters until the 2012 election. And it wasn't until 2016 that liberals (46%) slightly surpassed moderates (43%) among Democratic voters (though obviously that coalition was not a winning one). Even then, a combination of conservatives and moderates still formed the majority of the Democratic coalition—54%, to be precise. Republicans, by contrast, are more ideologically homogenous. About 60% of their presidential election voters have been conservatives over the past three elections, and among Republicans more generally (not just voters), about 70% describe themselves as conservative. In the electorate as a whole, moderates are still the biggest bloc, and conservatives significantly outnumber liberals.<sup>21</sup>

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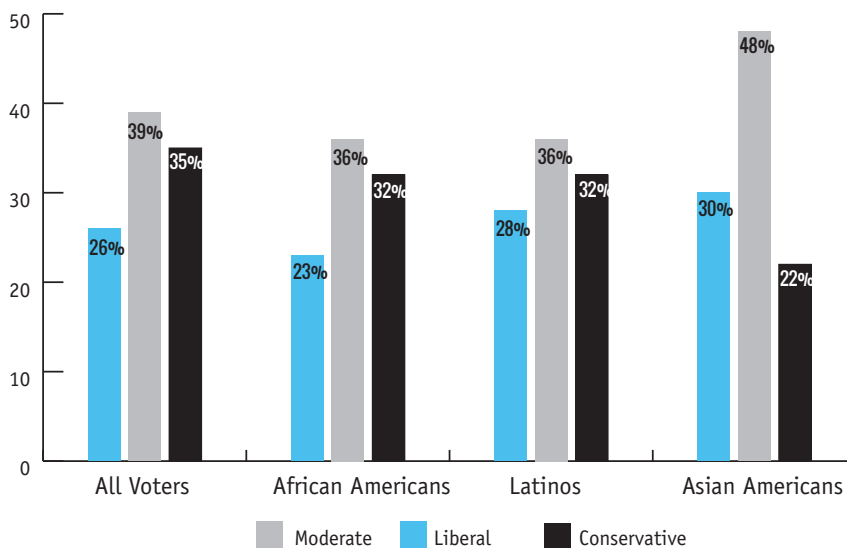
### Democratic Presidential Coalitions

Election	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
1976	30%	52%	19%
1980	28%	54%	18%
1984	31%	53%	16%
1988	34%	52%	14%
1992	33%	54%	13%
1996	31%	55%	14%
2000	34%	56%	10%
2004	37%	52%	11%
2008	37%	50%	13%
2012	43%	46%	12%
2016	46%	43%	11%

Source: National Exit Polls

More pointedly, even among the groups that form the Rising American Electorate of Hispanic and non-white voters, none have an outright majority of self-described liberals. Twenty-six percent of voters in the 2016 exit polls called themselves a liberal, strikingly similar to the 23% of African Americans, 28% of Latinos, and 30% of Asian Americans who are liberal. Thirty-nine percent of voters in the exit polls described their ideology as moderate, nearly the same amount as among Latinos (36%) and African Americans (36%), but below the same figure for Asian Americans (48%).<sup>22</sup>

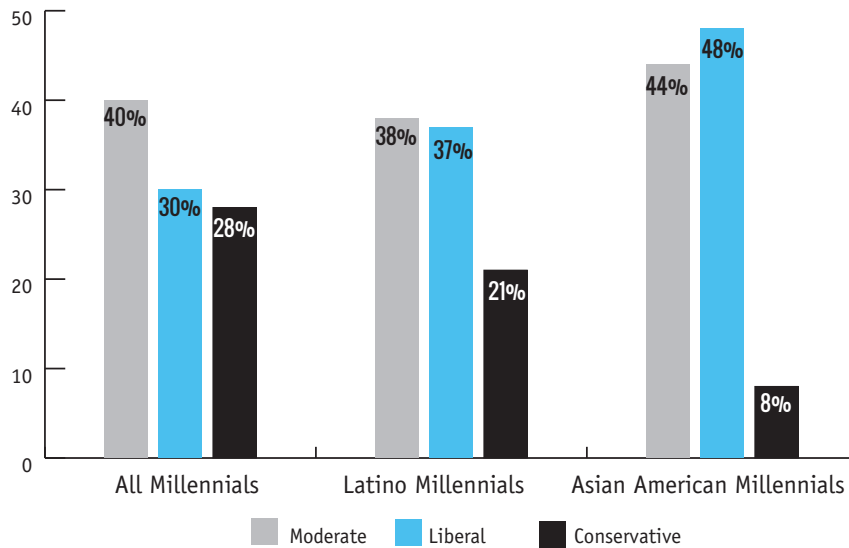
## Moderates Dominate Among Non-White Voters



Sources: APIA Vote, [Inclusion, Not Exclusion](#); Pew Research Center, [Latinos and the Political Parties](#); Pew Research Center, [A Religious Portrait of African-Americans](#)

The Millennial Generation is often described as a liberal generation, and compared to their elders, they are indeed more likely to be liberal and less likely to be conservative. But moderates still prevail, with 40% of Millennials saying they are moderate, 30% liberal, and 28% conservative.<sup>23</sup> Among Latino Millennials, 38% are moderate, 37% are liberal, and 21% are conservative, and among Asian American Millennials, 44% are moderate, 48% are liberal, and 8% are conservative.<sup>24</sup> Those numbers also may change over time, perhaps growing more conservative as the generation ages, as many have before them. (While most political commentators tend to view ideology as static, data suggest that over time, ideological self-identification varies by up to ten points within a generation.<sup>25</sup>) But even the current breakdown makes perfectly clear that a major shift in a generation's views on a handful of issues (i.e. LGBT rights and climate change) is not a proxy for a wholesale embrace of orthodox liberal ideology.

## Moderates Dominate Among Millennials



Sources: Gallup, [U.S. Baby Boomers More Likely to Identify as Conservative](#); APIA Vote, [Inclusion, Not Exclusion](#); Pew Research Center, [Latinos and the Political Parties](#)

Last year, in hopes of energizing the so-called “emerging majority” which would deliver inevitable Democratic victory, Democrats approved what Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT) rightfully called “the most progressive platform in the history of the Democratic Party.”<sup>26</sup> The assumption of the loud proponents of demography-is-destiny was that an ideologically-pure, liberal set of values and policies was what Democratic voters wanted, and what would appeal to the ascendant Rising American Electorate. What they didn’t realize was that neither the country, nor the growing demographic groups they so doggedly targeted, describe themselves as liberal.



## CONCLUSION

With all of these problems, how did this electoral theory gain such popular esteem? For some, it was particularly easy to believe that changing demographics would deliver perpetual victory to Democrats because it simply meshed with what they wanted to hear. It posited that there was no need to do the hard work of building a coalition or holding up a big tent, and it strengthened the hand of those who advocated for less ideological diversity within the Party. After the 2014 midterms, some cheered the loss of moderate Democratic House and Senate members—calling them “a pile of suck”—because their departure left a more ideologically homogenous caucus.<sup>27</sup> But most of those moderate Democrats were replaced with Republicans, who now control both legislative chambers. That’s not exactly a winning formula.

Politics is a process of push and pull. This is the crux of the problem with viewing voters—be it their ideology, partisanship, or voting behavior—as static. Both the terrain for fighting and who lines up where can shift. Assuming long-term stability has led to strategic errors and costly electoral losses, leaving the Democratic Party at its weakest level of representation up and down the ballot in modern history.

To regain majorities, Democrats will need to lay out new paths to building a fulsome and ideologically diverse coalition. That strategy should maintain the commitment and alliances Democrats have built with current supporters, particularly those in the Rising American Electorate, but also appeal to those people and places that have left the Party—or feel the Party has left them.

It is likely that this new path back to a majority will require winning more white voters. They may be college educated, non-college educated, young, elderly, professional class, or working class. Given the place-based rules by which our political system is governed, a strategy that relies only on changing demographics will show at best fleeting moments of success. But more fundamentally, a new path to the majority will require targeting communications, policy ideas, and appeals based on values, beliefs, and experiences—not simply age or race. By doing so, Democrats could better respect and represent the diversity of experiences, interests, and opinions among the groups in the Rising American Electorate and also make room for voters who fall outside those growing demographic groups. And that is a challenge all wings of the Party should embrace.

Given the place-based rules by which our political system is governed, a strategy that relies only on changing demographics will show at best fleeting moments of success.

## ENDNOTES

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