



## How Democrats and Republicans Can Draw Uncommitted Minorities into Politics

**Zoltan Hajnal**, University of California, San Diego

**Taeku Lee**, University of California, Berkeley

America's demographic future is clear. Sometime around 2050, today's racial and ethnic minorities will become the majority. This change will be one of the keys to future U.S. politics, but not necessarily in the way many pundits assume. Conventional wisdom presumes that a rising tide of minority votes will inevitably buoy the Democratic Party and sink Republicans. But this view overlooks telling realities. Most Asian-American and Latino adults remain ambivalent about the two political parties – and most currently do not vote. Despite the Obama campaign's remarkable mobilization of first-time Latino and Asian-American voters, more than half of citizens in these rapidly growing segments of the electorate stayed home in recent elections. These are people who could be attracted to either party to sway electoral outcomes.

### Democrats Have Gained Support, yet Minorities Remain Up for Grabs

Today's electoral numbers do point toward Democratic ascendance. The Republican Party has effectively become the party of a demographically shrinking white America. More than 90% of John McCain's votes in 2008 came from white Americans, and in 2012 Mitt Romney drew 89% of his support from whites. Of late, the Democratic Party has scored strong majorities not just among African Americans, but among rising minorities too. In 2008 Barack Obama won 95% of the black vote, 67% of the Latino vote, and 62% percent of the Asian-American vote; and in 2012, Obama's percentages were 93%, 71%, and 72% respectively. Obama is not the only Democrat to do so well with minorities. In the 2010 Congressional elections, exit polls show that Democratic candidates garnered 91% of the black vote, 66% of the Latino vote, and 59% of the Asian-American vote.

Putting together demographic trends with such past electoral margins, most analysts project almost certain electoral demise for Republicans. But current data show that much uncertainty remains. In prominent national surveys, most Latinos and Asian-Americans do not identify as Democrats, as the conventional wisdom would suggest, but rather as "nonidentifiers" – who refuse to answer a question about party identification or claim that they do not think in partisan terms. Such nonidentifiers combine with others who expressly state they are "independent" to make up clear majorities. All told, 56% of Latinos and 57% of Asian-American are either independents or nonidentifiers. Even among African Americans, there are signs of ambivalence. Almost 30% of blacks feel that the Democratic Party does not work hard for black interests.

### Both Parties Must Reach Out

Minority people who do not express strong partisan affiliations are neither apolitical nor unreachable. Many racial and ethnic minorities who are currently on the sidelines of U.S. politics will not necessarily stay there. Today's minorities are no different from the U.S. minorities of yesteryear: they are politically approachable and readily mobilized. Recent experimental studies have shown that when politically inactive minorities are contacted and properly approached by representatives of political parties, many of them do become engaged and start to participate regularly. This means that the balance of power in a demographically changing American polity is still very much up for grabs. If either party wants to attain dominance, it cannot ignore minorities. Each party must devise fresh strategies to court many kinds of voters in an increasingly diverse electorate. Targeting the generic typical voter – what political scientists call the "median voter" – is no longer sufficient. The United States is now too diverse, and different groups of voters have many different sets of concerns.

To reach America's increasingly mixed electorate, candidates and political parties must run multifaceted and multiracial campaigns. Rather than ignore race or use racial differences to herd whites together into a largely exclusionary majority, parties should endeavor to build future winning coalitions through a mixed strategy, combining broad and targeted appeals. On the one hand, they can stress broad meat-and-potatoes

approaches to taxes, health care and social supports, strategies for handling the deficit, and approaches to foreign affairs. Such broad appeals brand Democrats as Democrats and Republicans as Republicans. Yet they must be supplemented by diverse, tightly packaged appeals to targeted sub-groups of voters, often groups defined by social identities including race and ethnicity.

This complex strategy requires good focus-group and polling data from each segment of the population, so party strategists can identify issues of particular concern to groups like Latinos and Asian-Americans and devise ways to address them without shedding broad support.

- For Latinos, possibilities for positive immigration reforms need to be addressed – with measures such as allowing the children of undocumented parents a path to citizenship through college or the military. Democrats may champion broader reforms, but it will not work for the GOP to naysay all measures to ease the plight of the undocumented.
- For Asian-Americans, either party could make inroads without offending majorities by strengthening incentives for highly skilled immigrants or by finding non-polarizing ways to carry through existing election laws that accommodates speakers of many languages.
- For African-Americans, now might be an opportune moment for either party to take a strong stand against Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law or against egregious forms of voter suppression or racial profiling.

## **Beyond Zero-Sum Politics**

In short, Democrats and Republicans must work with racial diversity, rather than seek support from one group at the expense of others. Because the unique concerns of one group can often be addressed in ways that do not offend other voters, this multipronged approach can slowly build support from a diverse array of voters. Both major parties are well-advised to leverage racial diversity rather than try to put all their political chips on one group – or try to downplay race and ethnicity altogether. The opportunities are huge. At present, the Democratic Party has an edge with minorities. But the battle to engage and sway uncommitted citizens is far from settled.

**Read more in Zoltan Hajnal and Taeku Lee, *Why Americans Don't Join the Party: Race, Immigration, and the Failure (of Political Parties) to Engage the Electorate* (Princeton University Press, 2011).**