

# Executive Summary: A Dynamic Approach to Understanding the New American Electorate



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It seems to be an article of faith at this point: we are a nation bitterly divided into Red America and Blue America, and those two camps are completely isolated from one another—on everything from where they shop and what beer they prefer to where they live and what values animate their lives.

In our latest report, we challenge the dominant view of a hopelessly polarized nation—and the understanding of political identity that underlies that perspective. Instead, we posit that political identity is dynamic and evolves over time. We offer a new framework for understanding political identity, one that sees identity as complex and context-dependent—not simply the automatic output of a formula made up of a person's demographic characteristics. We then apply our framework to Hispanic, Asian, and Millennial voters, three key pillars in the Democratic coalition, arguing that the political identity of those groups is not locked in for all time. Our analysis harbors deep repercussions for politics going forward: both promising the possibility of change and questioning Democratic assumptions of automatic loyalty from the new electorate.

## Divergent Views of Political Identity

Among political scientists, there are two traditional explanations of political identity—both of which have shortcomings when it comes to explaining the changing face of American voters. Under the first approach, political identity is established early on and simply reflects a person's social group membership, and it is viewed as stable and unchanging, as if woven into our DNA. Many theories of American politics implicitly view identity in this fashion, yet they often fall short in accounting for change, assuming a relatively static process of identity adoption and reproduction across generations and within diverse groups. In fact, the

data show that while devoted partisans exist on both sides of the spectrum, party attachment for the majority of voters appears shallow and in flux, rather than deep and lasting.

According to the second view, instrumentalism, political identity results from a strategic alignment with a party or candidate, which is presumed to provide some kind of tangible benefits to the individual voter. While some citizens may behave in this fashion, rationally assessing the pros and cons of each party's or candidate's policy stances and analyzing how each policy would affect, for example, their own personal economic situation, this understanding of political identity and behavior ignores the historical importance of issue framing and party branding, among other factors.

Instead, we offer a new frame through which to consider the changing American electorate. We conceive of political identity as rooted in a complex and evolving combination of pre-existing social group membership, values and beliefs, and personal experiences. Identity is not frozen at a certain moment in life but rather is fluid and responsive to political context and moods, as well as new experiences. Modern campaigns are thus about identity construction—weaving a thread of commonality through disparate communities, often by linking history, the present, and a shared vision of the future with political values and issue positions in ways that resonate within voters from diverse communities.

## **Hispanics**

Although Hispanic voters have overwhelmingly supported Democrats in the last two presidential elections, fully half identify as Independents. They are internally heterogeneous, divided on issue positions as well as political values. But since 2006, immigration has been a unifying factor for many within the community. In 2012, the Obama campaign capitalized on the failures of the Romney campaign by actively engaging this community and supporting key goals—such as the *DREAM Act* and comprehensive immigration reform—and ultimately won the Hispanic vote. However, in 2004, then-

President Bush embraced the Hispanic community and won 44% of the Hispanic vote—and reelection. Are Hispanics a Democratic lock? If Republicans embrace immigration reform and reject the anti-immigrant language of their recent past, these voters could be up for grabs in future elections—from President on down.

## **Asians**

As with Hispanics, Asian voters have supported Democrats overwhelmingly in recent presidential elections, but their attachment to the party appears shallow rather than deep, with nearly half eschewing partisan labels altogether. Asian voters are heterogeneous, with the label “Asian” actually ascribed by outsiders. While Asian voters supported Republicans historically, they have solidly backed Democrats in recent presidential elections. However, they are rarely contacted during campaigns, about half view themselves as Independents, and they are prone to party switching, especially in gubernatorial elections.

## **Millennials**

The Millennial Generation is the most diverse cohort and has been described as Democrats’ electoral salvation, as they supported President Obama by wide margins. But Millennials are much less brand-loyal than other generations. They are technologically more engaged, have greater access to information, and have higher levels of education than previous generations. But they have also come of age in a time of daunting problems (e.g., September 11th, Hurricane Katrina, two wars, and a recession). While the Obama campaign targeted younger voters on key issues and through relevant mediums, the Republican strategy appeared to be hoping that disillusioned younger voters would not turn out to vote. Going forward, both parties will need to adapt and respond to their concerns if they want to retain Millennial support.

## **Conclusion**

What are the stakes in this debate? If we are a society divided by tribal partisan allegiances, then room for compromise and negotiation in our political system is permanently stunted. Politics becomes a zero-sum game. The space for bipartisan problem-solving shrinks. If voters are simply fighting for individual material gains, then we deny the existence of anything more than a thin veneer of genuine political beliefs and values and assume they are incapable of supporting something that doesn't directly benefit their own needs. Politics would be nothing more than handing out gifts to co-opt different groups. We believe a dynamic approach offers a more accurate understanding of the fluid nature of political identity in the modern era, as well as a path for making change in our political system.

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