

Executive Summary: The New Electorate and the Future of the Democratic Party



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The dominant belief on the left is that Democrats will have a natural electoral advantage in the future based on demographic trends. Is that true?

Our report debunks that theory and should serve as a wake-up call for those who believe demographic changes will mean dominance for Democrats. It unearths 7 illusions that underlie this perspective, and it illustrates that while the demographic makeup of the country is indeed shifting, it is not transforming us into a nation of 1960s liberals. In fact, among three key groups—Hispanic, Asian, and Millennial voters—we find that they are not predominantly liberal, their ideology is not stable, and they don't display deep loyalty to the Democratic brand.

Illusion #1: The new electorate is predominantly liberal.

- A 2011 Pew survey found that Hispanics are ideologically divided, with 32% identifying as a conservative, 31% as a moderate, and 30% as a liberal.
- In a 2012 Pew survey of Asian Americans, moderates form the largest bloc, with 24% self-identifying as conservative, 37% as moderate, and 31% as liberal.
- Pew found that only 28% of Millennials identify as a liberal. Another 28% call themselves conservative and a plurality (38%) identify as moderate.

Illusion #2: Millennials' ideology will be stable over the course of their lives.

- Ideological self-identification among Millennials has fluctuated recently. Between 2003 and 2011, the share of conservatives and moderates fluctuated by 4 points each and the share of liberals changed by 5 points.
- In 2000, more Gen Xers said they were conservative (30%) than liberal (24%). By 2011, those trends grew, resulting in a 15 point conservative edge.
- This pattern of fluctuations in ideology is visible throughout generational groups. The percentage of Baby Boomers identifying as a conservative fluctuated by 10 points; that figure is 9 points for the Silent Generation.

Illusion #3: Hispanic, Asian, and Millennial voters will remain loyal to the Democratic Party.

- Key demographic groups may have voted Democratic in 2012, but most voters in those groups don't identify with the Democratic Party. And while Independents may lean, they don't remain stable like self-described partisans.
- In 2012, half of all Hispanics identified as an Independent. Less than a third (32%) called themselves a Democrat, and 13% identified as a Republican.
- Among Asian voters in 2012, as many identified as an Independent (34%) as a Democrat (33%), while 18% called themselves a Republican.
- A plurality of Millennials (45%) described their affiliation as Independent in 2012—up 6 points since 2008. Thirty-one percent identified as a Democrat.

Illusion #4: Millennials deeply believe in and support an activist government.

- People's views about the size and role of government fluctuate as much as the temperature. In 1980, voters favored a smaller government by 22 points, but by 1989 they favored a bigger government by 8 points.
- Millennials are no different. In 2007, they supported a bigger government by 38 points, but that dropped an astonishing 17 points just four years later.
- In 2003, 31% of Millennials said government was usually inefficient and wasteful; that rose to 42% in 2009 and 51% in 2011. Millennial trust in government fell from 44% in 2004 to 26% in 2011.

Illusion #5: The culture wars are over.

- Not all culture war issues are the same. In 2011, Millennial support for marriage for gay couples outpaced the Silent Generation by 26 points and Baby Boomers by 17 points.
- Simultaneously, Millennial support for legal abortion outpaced Silents by 2 points, but trailed Gen X by 2 points and Baby Boomers by 3 points.

Illusion #6: Hispanic and Asian voters are homogenous.

- Fewer than 25% of Hispanics and 20% of Asians identify with the labels "Hispanic" and "Asian," respectively. Assuming internal homogeneity masks diverse experiences, languages, traditions, and political opinions.
- The longer a family has been in the U.S., the more likely their members are to display attitudes in line with the national average. For example, 81% of recent Hispanic immigrants and 72% of 2nd generation Hispanics support a bigger government with more services, but only 58% of the 3rd generation concurs.

Illusion #7: The new electorate controls the presidential map.

- Even if the first six illusions held true and these were the values and behaviors of the new American electorate, presidential victory would still be tenuous for Democrats. The demographic trends evident in some purple states aren't as prominent in many traditionally blue states, and in some cases the opposite trends are occurring.
- While the Hispanic population nationwide increased by 3.8 points between 2000 and 2010, that growth rate is not nearly as pronounced in several key states, including Iowa, New Hampshire, and Ohio.
- Many states that have been reliably Democratic at the presidential level for 20 years have recently elected Republican governors, including New Jersey and Wisconsin, suggesting voters there are open to both parties.