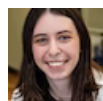
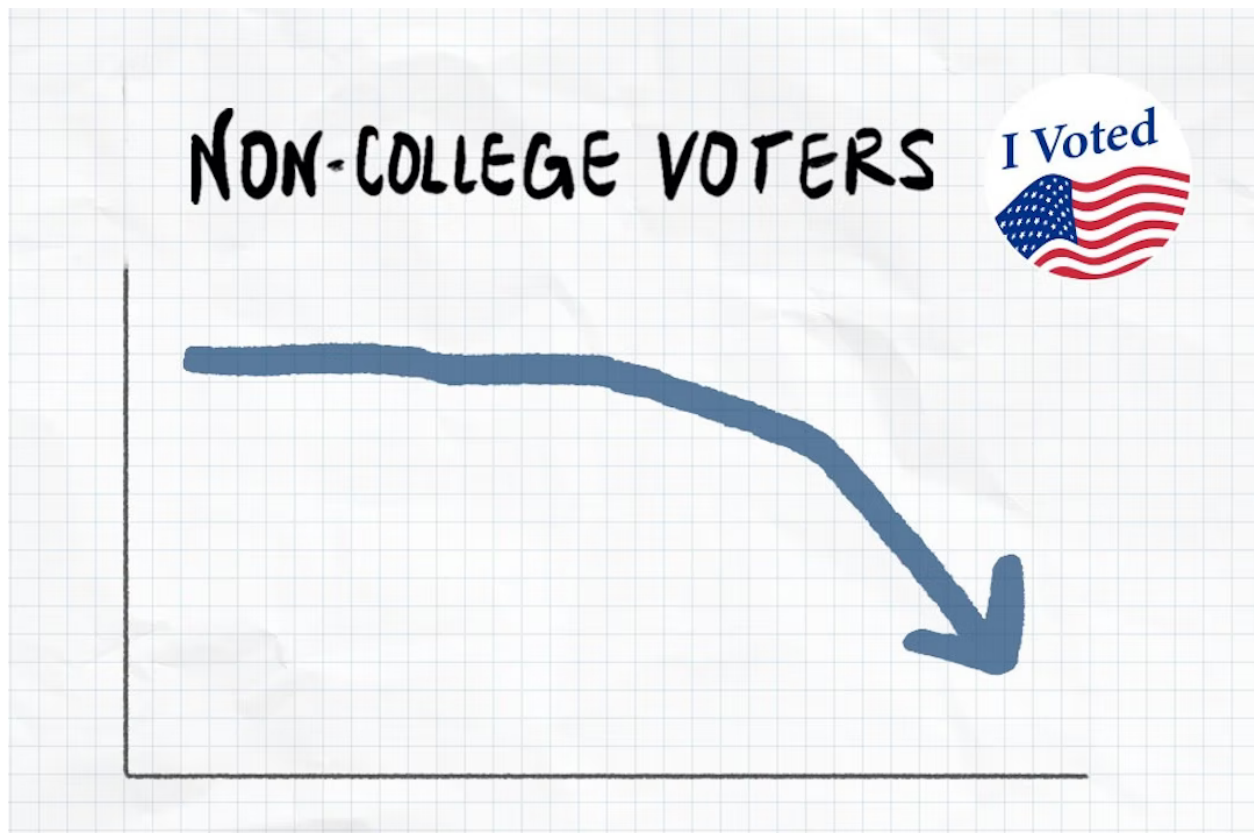


The College Degree Conundrum: Catalyst Edition



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After the 2020 election, exit polls helped identify strengths and weaknesses for Democrats, and they pointed out a crucial vulnerability in the Party’s coalition: non-college voters. Using the data available at the time, we raised warning flags that since 2008, Democrats have lost a significant amount of support with non-college voters. This included worsening losing margins with white non-college voters, as well as a drop-off in support with non-white non-college voters who have been key to the Democratic coalition for decades.

The Democratic data firm Catalyst just released new data that also identifies non-college voters as a vulnerability for Democrats, and it shows which non-college voters had the biggest drop-off in Democratic support last year. According to their data, in 2020, Democrats performed poorly with white non-college voters, but they did not lose more ground. Joe Biden’s support with those voters actually ticked up by one percentage point from 2016. But with non-college voters of color, Democrats endured a sharp drop-off in support: from 81% in 2016 to 75% last year. This new data highlights the seriousness and complexity of Democratic losses with non-college voters and

contrasts with the media narrative from 2016 focusing solely on white non-college-educated voters. Non-college voters of color are a growing share of the electorate. If Democrats continue losing support with them, they will not only struggle in 2022 and 2024, but they will be unable to capitalize on growing diversity in the United States that Democrats have long hoped would contribute to sustainable majorities.

Dems and Non-College Voters: An Overview

According to Catalist's data, Democrats have seen a slight but still noteworthy decline among all non-college voters since Barack Obama's presidency. In the 2012 presidential election, Obama won a slim majority of non-college voters: 51%. In 2016, Hillary Clinton's share fell to 48% with non-college voters, and Joe Biden matched her at 48% in 2020. Down-ballot, Democrats' decline has been slightly more pronounced, as Democrats averaged 51% with non-college voters in 2012 House races and 46% in 2020 House races.

Among white non-college voters, Democrats showed a seemingly slight, but nonetheless significant, decline between 2012 and 2020. In 2012, Obama won 40% with white non-college voters, while Clinton won 36% in 2016. Biden narrowly overperformed Clinton with these voters in 2020, winning 37%.

But among non-college voters of color, Democrats saw their most significant declines, dropping nine percentage points from 84% in 2012 to 75% in 2020. This decline was slightly less pronounced in Senate races, as Democrats dropped six points: 83% in 2012 to 77% in 2020. At a distance, Democratic performance with these voters in 2020 is still impressive, but because of the importance of voters of color to Democrats' winning coalition, these declines are quite serious and merit a closer look.

Non-College Voters of Color: A Deeper Dive

Non-college voters of color are particularly important to the Democratic coalition because of the changing shape of the electorate, and therefore this group requires deeper investigation. Since 2008, white non-college voters have declined from 51% to 44% of the electorate. Non-college voters of color, however, are a stable voting bloc, increasing from 17% to 18% over this time. These voters also increase in turnout significantly between midterm and presidential years, suggesting that there is untapped potential for this voter group's turnout in midterm elections. Maintaining a critical share of white non-college voters remains important for Democrats, as they remain the biggest voting bloc in the country. However, non-college voters of color are particularly important to watch as well, especially as the country grows more diverse.

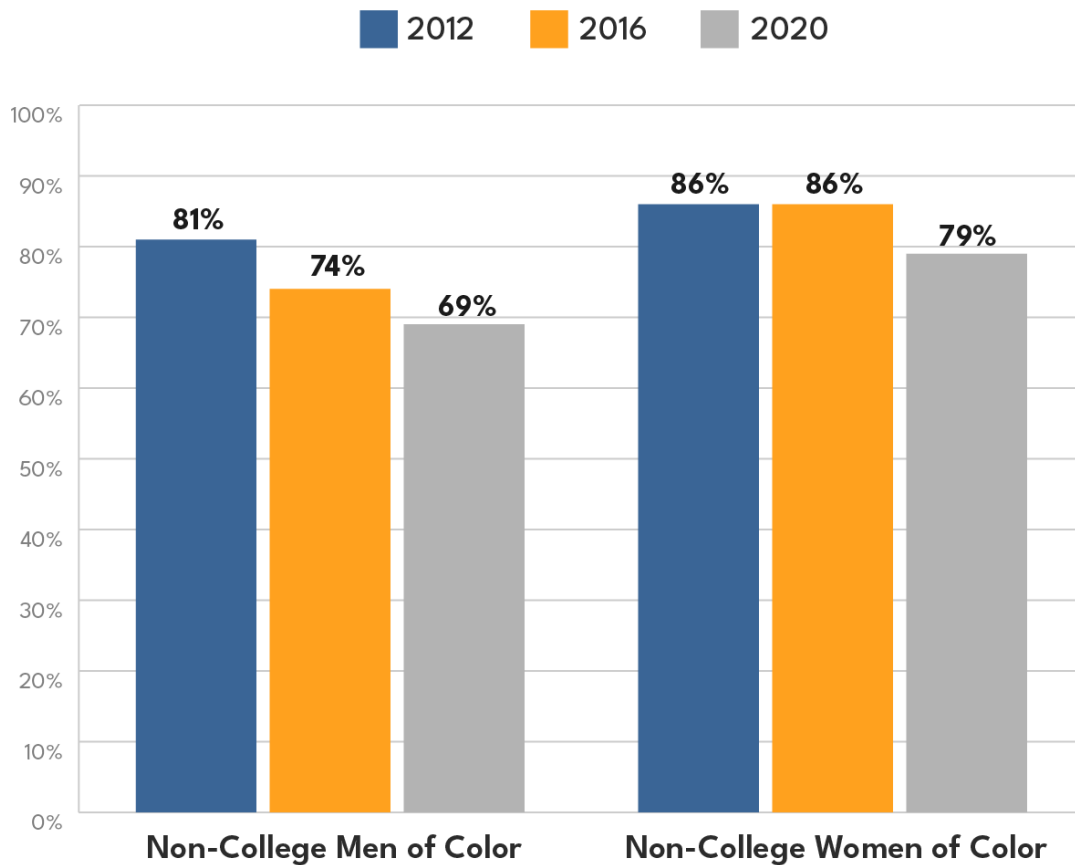
Digging beneath topline numbers, we can see where Democratic losses with non-college voters of color are most pronounced. Among non-college women of color, Democrats held steady between

2012 and 2016, maintaining 86% of the vote. But in 2020, Democrats declined seven percentage points, dropping to 79% of the vote with non-college women of color.

Among non-college men of color, Democratic declines are striking. Democrats dropped a whopping 12 percentage points with non-college men of color between 2012 and 2020. Unlike with non-college women of color, Democrats trended downwards with non-college men of color in 2016, and then bottomed out in 2020. Between 2012 and 2016, Democrats dropped from 81% to 74% with these voters, and in 2020 dropped to 69%.



Democratic Vote Share w/ Non-College Voters of Color by Gender



Source: Catalyst national database of voters and voting-age persons.

It is clear that Democrats are struggling with non-college men of color in particular, but not exclusively. Democrats have lost support with both non-college men and women of color, and they need to invest significantly in reversing these trends if they want to maintain governing majorities.

Conclusion

Democrats have long made wishful claims that “demography is destiny,” meaning that as the electorate grows more diverse, Democrats will inevitably continue winning elections. The 2020 election showed that there is no inevitability to Democrats’ success as the country grows more diverse, particularly if the Party continues to struggle with non-college voters. Last year’s election saw increasing polarization by education and decreasing polarization by race. If Democrats want to build winning coalitions in elections to come, they must take careful note of their losses in support with non-college voters and find ways to turn the tide and reverse this trend.

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