

Who Has the Emerging Majority Now?



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*M*y recent book with John Judis, *The Emerging Democratic Majority*, is a long-term kind of assessment of the future of the Democratic Party based on relatively long-term trends. But we still do need to understand what happened in the recent elections because underlying trends do not produce automatic outcomes. They provide the opportunity for certain outcomes. It may take a fair amount of work to get there, though the opportunity exists.

The Republicans had a long trek through the late 1960s and 1970s to the Reagan victory of 1980. They hit a speed bump with Watergate, and Jimmy Carter got elected in 1976. But they kept at it and eventually found an inspirational politician named Ronald Reagan who was able to crystallize the message that appealed to the emerging Republican majority that Kevin Phillips identified in 1969. Ronald Reagan was able to boil it down—make it very specific to the political climate at the time. He became a very popular and successful politician, as we know. His kind of politics dominated America for a while.

Why, then, do we think there now is an emerging Democratic majority? Part of the reason is that there have been shifts in public opinion since the 1980s. These public opinion shifts have included recognition of the failures of the market, a decline in the antigovernment sentiment, the triumph of moderate forms of reform movements (like civil rights, women's rights, and environmental rights) over recent decades, the gravitation of minorities to the Democratic Party, and a return (in a limited sense) of white working-class voters. To complement these public opinion shifts, the economy is changing from the production of manufactured goods to the production of ideas and services. This production has created technically advanced geographic regions in the United States, and the professionals in these regions tend to favor Democrats.

THE MARKET'S FAILURES

There has been a substantial decline in Reaganite antigovernment sentiment—that the government is the problem, not the solution. And in its place, we see the rise of moderate support for government activism, replication of what works, and regulation.

Left to its own devices, the market, of course, just doesn't solve a lot of problems. The market is frequently capable of excesses, of which the corporate scandals of the last several years are egregious examples. Even the Republicans picked up on it. The Republicans don't run like Newt Gingrich ran in 1994 or Ronald Reagan did in the 1980s—as flat-out opponents of government. They run supporting government programs that work, supporting a certain amount of spending in government programs, supporting public education. We don't hear any more about abolishing the Department of Education. The Republicans have a prescription drug plan, and they support a government crackdown on corporate crime. They realize they can't just run on being against government and government programs. They don't even run on being for privatizing Social Security, which was a matter of faith for many Republicans from the mid-1990s.

THE TRIUMPH OF REFORM MOVEMENTS

The second public opinion shift that is important in laying the groundwork for an emerging democratic majority is the triumph of the movements of the 1960s, in moderate forms. The movements of the 1960s—for civil rights, women's rights, environmental protection, consumers and even the anti-war movement—all transformed America in many ways. But in the short term, they set up a period of dominance by the Republicans because there was a backlash to the extreme form of these movements, as perceived by the typical voter. Richard Nixon in 1972, and then Ronald Reagan in 1980 and 1984, ran on that backlash using the movements of the 1960s as wedge issues in the 1970s and 1980s.

But now things have changed. Candidates can't use issues like race and feminism the way they once did. In their moderate forms, respect for civil rights, diversity, tolerance, environmental protection, rights of women, and feminism all have become part of the common sense of America. There are still pockets of resistance where these issues still don't play well, particularly in the South and rural areas, but America has really changed in the last forty years. That is part of the basis for this new majority. But it's not just public opinion shifts. It's shifts in demographics that are important.

THE MOVEMENT OF PROFESSIONALS TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

One important shift is professionals. Professionals used to be the most Republican occupational group. They supported Richard Nixon in 1960, 61 percent to 38 percent. They were even more Republican than managers. But that changed starting with the McGovern campaign of 1972. In recent elections, professionals have supported Democrats, presidentially, by an average of twelve points—52 percent to 40 percent. Managers are still largely Republican, but professionals take a different view. They take a certain pride in their products—teachers want to educate children, doctors want to cure patients, and computer engineers want to write cool code. There's a pride in producing a service that frequently comes into conflict with large institutions and with market profit imperatives.

Professionals are also often children of the 1960s. They come out of the campuses, the hotbeds of the movements of the 1960s. The definition of a professional, to some extent, is a college-educated person who provides a highly skilled service. And professionals are a fast-growing sector of the workforce. They have more than doubled between the 1950s and today—from about 7 percent to 16 percent of the workforce. They are probably about 20 percent to 21 percent of the electorate, nationally. They grew by about 30 percent as workers in the 1990s. This is a fast-growing, politically and culturally significant group of voters who have moved into the Democratic camp. That is an important demographic shift.

THE MOVEMENT OF WOMEN TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Probably more familiar is the movement of women toward the Democratic Party, which started with the election of Lyndon Johnson in 1964. This trend gathered strength in the 1970s, abated in the middle of the 1970s, and then returned in full force in the 1980s. It is led by three groups of women that have become almost base groups of the Democratic party: single women, working women, and highly educated women.

If you look at single working women, for example, they supported the Democratic candidate 67 percent to 29 percent in the 2000 election. And they have grown from about 19 percent to 29 percent of women in the last thirty years. College-educated women were 57 percent to 38 percent for the Democratic candidate, and they tripled, since the 1970s, from 8 percent to 25 percent of women twenty-five and older. What is drawing them toward the Democrats? These women are moving into the workforce and grappling with economic and family problems; they tend to feel that the Democrats, with their emphasis on social support and the rights of women in the

workplace, are, more or less, on their side. The other factor, of course, is the role of the women's movement, feminism, and abortion rights. The Democrats are now the party that is identified with feminism and with the struggle for those kinds of rights.

THE MOVEMENT OF MINORITIES TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

Now the third demographic shift of importance is minorities. If we look at minorities, they have become progressively more Democratic. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, African-Americans used to vote as much as a third for Republicans. Now, it's about nine to one Democratic in a lot of elections—or at least 85 percent. And African-Americans have gone from being about 6 percent of voters in the early 1960s to 10 percent to 12 percent, depending on the election, in the 1990s.

Hispanics have grown from a negligible proportion of voters to about 6 percent in recent elections, nationally. They definitely moved Democratic in the 1990s, as well. And, of course, Hispanic population growth is one of the defining characteristics of change in the U.S. population. In the 1990s alone, according to the census, Hispanics increased to more than 12 percent of the population. So Hispanics are obviously important overall and particularly important in some states, where their growth is concentrated.

Asians are another group that has moved Democratic. And it is really the growth in Hispanics and Asians that drives the increase in the minority population. In the election of 1992, Asians only voted a little bit over 30 percent for Bill Clinton. But, in the presidential election in 2000, they voted 54 percent for the Al Gore. Asians are about 2 percent of voters now. The rate at which they grew in the 1990s was even faster than that of Hispanics—about 59 percent growth.

If you look at the early 1970s, minorities were about 10 percent of voters. In the 2000 election, they were about 19 percent. And if trends continue, they should be about a quarter by the end of this decade. That's a group that, overall, votes 75 percent Democratic. This is a change of extraordinary significance, and it is happening in most states around the United States.

THE RETURN OF THE WHITE WORKING CLASS TO THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY

The final demographic shift has been the return of white working-class voters to the Democratic Party, in a limited sense. It was really the desertion of the white working class from the Democratic coalition that set up the Republican majority that Kevin Phillips wrote about and that Ronald Reagan rode to victory. Ronald Rea-

gan got about 65 percent of this vote in 1984. But in the Clinton years, the Democrats got some of that back. They retained some of this in 2000.

The Democratic Party did very poorly in the 2000 presidential election in rural areas—among rural white working-class voters. However, the party did do well among white working-class workers in one important part of the country: in the more technically advanced, economically advanced areas of the country, in what John Judis and I call “ideopolises.”

ECONOMIC SHIFTS THAT HAVE GENERATED IDEOPOLIS REGIONS

This brings us to economic shifts and how they are advantageous to the Democrats. The U.S. is clearly moving from an economy dominated by the production of manufactured things to an economy that is dominated by the production of ideas and services. Even manufacturing, in many cases, incorporates ideas; it incorporates high technology to an extent that wouldn't have been dreamed of twenty or thirty years ago.

The places in the United States that are the most technically advanced, where this kind of production plays the greatest role, are exactly where the Democrats have been doing well. These are areas where the population tends to be more diverse, where there are a lot of professionals, and where there is a sense of moving ahead that you just don't have in other areas of the country.

These more technically advanced places are all over the United States. They include the Washington, D.C., metro area, New York, Boston, the San Francisco Bay area, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland (Oregon), Austin, the Research Triangle in North Carolina, Chicago, and Tucson. Wherever these areas are springing up and moving ahead, the Democrats have tended to do well. In fact, the Democratic candidate carried these ideopolis areas, these counties, by 55 percent to 41 percent in the election of 2000. If you compare the election of 2000 to the election of 1980, the first Reagan election, you can see that almost the entire shift toward the Democrats in the country since then has been concentrated in these ideopolis areas.

In other words, Ronald Reagan carried both ideopolis and non-ideopolis areas pretty well in 1980—carried them by pretty wide margins. If you look at the 2000 election, the Republicans continued to dominate the non-ideopolis areas, these less technically advanced areas. But the areas that are moving ahead, the postindustrial areas, were dominated by the Democrats in 2000. The ideopolis, postindustrial areas now cover a huge part of the country—about 44 percent of voters. The average population growth rate in these counties is about 23 percent compared to 11 percent among counties as a whole. And they are pretty big—about half a million each, as counties—compared with about 50,000 for counties that lie outside of these areas.

All in all, this is a big set of changes to be moving in the Democrats' direction. We have public opinion shifts, demographic shifts, and changes in the economy. All of them create the opportunity that I mentioned earlier.

REPUBLICAN BARNSTORMING

So what happened in 2002? These changes sound promising—why didn't the voters step up to the plate? September 11 happened, and it really changed politics. You can see that very clearly by looking at the polling data and public opinion data, before and after September 11. Before September 11, the economy was limping along, and there seemed to be low support for the administration and its policies. After September 11, support for the Bush administration skyrocketed. Presidential approval ratings were in the 85 percent to 95 percent range. By the 2002 election, the ratings had declined some, but still were high, in the low sixties. And for pretty much any issue you might want to care to mention, the Bush administration got a bounce and improved its rating—for example, on the economy, health care, the environment, and education, things that had nothing to do, really, with September 11. So, September 11 helped the executive branch dig out of a hole.

The Democrats actually started making headway again over the summer of 2002—with the economy continuing to falter and Republican policies still not popular on taxes, budget priorities, the environment, education, and health care. Democrats were starting to make some headway when, perhaps not coincidentally, in late summer of 2002, the urgent need to deal with the Iraq question was brought to the fore by the White House.

This debate effectively undercut the Democrats' gathering momentum. It took about six or seven weeks to resolve, and in that time it almost totally dominated the headlines. Any issues the Democrats had were basically shoved off the table. And so when the Iraq issue receded for a while, in early October, the Democrats had a very limited amount of time to push their issues. They tried and they were even making some headway—at least as far as we can tell from the polling data.

And that's when the Bush administration's final preelection push took place. Five days before the election, President Bush barnstormed through the key states, the swing states. The Gallup data show very clearly that the Democrats went from about a three-point lead among likely voters about a week before the election to a five-point deficit right before the election—just as the presidential tour was finishing up. So the tour really pushed the debate in the Republicans' direction.

The push was all about September 11. Granted, if you look at the Bush 2002 stump speech, the first seven paragraphs were about how the economy was important and how we had other important priorities, as well. But the next twenty paragraphs were about national security—the Homeland Security Bill, Iraq, the need to beat al Qaeda. Those were big applause lines, and that's what that the barnstorming

tour was all about. It raised the salience of September 11 in voters' eyes. It was about reminding voters why they supported President Bush, reminding them of what was important to accomplish in Washington, and making clear how he needed the support of Senator "X" to deal with these horrible people who were out to get us.

The September 11 push didn't convince everyone, but it did convince enough people to turn some key Senate and House contests in the direction of the Republicans. All you need are a few points at the margin, and they turn a race in which the Democrats had a very good chance into an election in which the Republicans managed to triumph.

DEMOCRATIC INEPTITUDE

So the use of September 11 by the executive branch was one reality in 2002. But another was the Democrats' empty campaign. They cannot be absolved of responsibility for the outcome. The Democratic campaign, as most people who followed it realized, was really about only two things—prescription drugs for seniors and Social Security. That was it. They really had almost nothing else to say. The economy was the biggest issue on voter's minds, according to all the polling data, and the economy was viewed negatively by 70 percent of the people who went to the polls on election day.

The Democrats had nothing to say about the economy other than to remind people that it wasn't doing so well, which they already knew. They didn't offer coherent alternatives to the administration's tax cuts for the rich. The Republicans took advantage of this vacuum to say a lot themselves about, for example Social Security and prescription drugs. They banned the word *privatization* from their campaign speeches, and they developed a drug benefit plan. Polling data collected by Stan Greenberg right after the election showed that most people did not think that the candidates differed on prescription drugs—the waters had been so thoroughly muddied.

Other polling data show that the Democrats had a 25-point deficit among voters who had clear ideas about how to deal with the country's problems. These data also show that 67 percent of voters thought that there were no clear ideas about the economy expressed in the election. Only 25 percent thought there were. The lack of a Democratic message is a huge, huge problem for them.

THE NET RESULT

So what was the result of all the September 11 effect and the empty Democratic campaign? Republicans won key groups of voters.

There was low mobilization on the Democratic side. Democratic counties and areas turned out at rates that weren't high compared with Republican-leaning areas

and groups. Republican mobilization was quite substantial, particularly in rural and exurban areas. However, the key was not just that the Democrats were poorly mobilized, but that they had no ability to appeal to the people who leaned in their direction but needed to have the sale made with them. They couldn't pick up their own swing voters in Democratic-leaning suburbs and these ideopolis areas. They came out of the Democratic-leaning suburbs in places like Minnesota and Missouri with relatively small margins compared with what they picked up two, four, and six years ago. Without the requisite number of votes in areas like those, it becomes easy to be swamped by Republican strength in exurban and rural areas. That's exactly what happened. That is why Jean Carnahan lost in Missouri, and that is why Walter Mondale lost in Minnesota.

So what about the emerging Democratic majority? Fundamentally, the 2002 election didn't change most of the basic things we are talking about. The Republican priorities on tax cuts for the rich, Social Security, and other things—the polling data were very clear on those issues. People were not voting for Republican candidates in 2002 because they wanted to repeal the estate tax permanently or because they wanted Social Security privatized or because they wanted change on social issues like abortion and gun control. The top two issues were to support the federal government in the war against terrorism and to support a strong military.

Demographic shifts remained in 2002. Minorities—Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans—voted very strongly for the Democrats (though there was a problem with mobilization in certain areas). Women tilted Democratic, though the gender gap was somewhat smaller than in other elections. It's harder to tell about professionals because we lack good data, but there is no evidence that they moved heavily in the Republican direction. Finally, economic shifts remained with us. Ideopolis areas continued to vote Democratic, but Republicans were able to pick off some Democratic swing voters in these areas.

THE FUTURE

In his essay on the November 2002 election, *The Weekly Standard's* Fred Barnes rested his case for a new Republican realignment on the effect of September 11 and the leadership of President Bush. Wrote Barnes, "The September 11 attacks produced a new political climate. Bush recognized it. Democrats still don't." That was certainly true enough during the 2002 election, but the effect of September 11 is not likely to be lasting. What was distinctive about September 11? It was a direct attack on the United States, a terrorist Pearl Harbor that depended for its success on total surprise and a breakdown in American intelligence and vigilance. During the 2002 election, the Bush administration, guided by conservatives, convinced American voters that,

by going to war with Iraq, the country would be safer not only against another terrorist assault but against an Iraqi nuclear attack. In other words, the executive branch presented the invasion of Iraq as an extension of the war against terror. But the war and occupation did not confirm that argument. Neither weapons of mass destruction nor links to al Qaeda were discovered, raising questions about the credibility of the White House. And instead of proving to be a “cakewalk,” as the White House had promised, the post-war turned into an expensive, low-intensity guerrilla battle sustained by resistance to the American occupation. By the second anniversary of September 11, popular support for Bush’s leadership—based in part on trust in his word—had begun to erode, and with it the Republicans’ chances of sustaining the special political circumstances of September 11 through the remainder of the decade. Even the increase in popular support for Bush after the capture of Saddam turned out to be temporary, eroding in about a month.

There are two factors that will help the Republicans over the rest of this decade, but they have nothing to do with the party’s innate appeal. One is money, an advantage that has been exacerbated by the campaign-finance reform bill passed in 2002. This advantage in money will translate into electoral advantage, especially in close House contests. In November 2002, Republicans won close House races in Alabama and Colorado largely because their Democratic opponents ran out of money. Conversely, Janet Napolitano’s Democratic victory in Arizona’s gubernatorial race was partly made possible by public financing that equalized spending between herself and her opponent.

But money can still be overrated as a determinant of election outcomes. It is most effective in scaring off competition or in pushing one side over the finish line in an otherwise close race. It cannot defeat a candidate who is reasonably well-funded and whose politics are clearly more popular than their opponent’s. And even the advantages money bestows can cut two ways in elections. In low-turnout congressional elections, it can benefit the big spender in a tight race; but in high-visibility elections, it can dramatize the Republican dependence on wealth and on big business.

Republicans also will enjoy an advantage from redistricting, which the GOP handled more effectively than the Democrats. Too many Democratic votes are concentrated in House districts with overwhelming Democratic strength, while Republican votes are scattered around more effectively to produce House districts with substantial, but not overwhelming, Republican advantages. The 2000 redistricting made this pattern worse and created a difficult challenge for Democrats. But difficult does not mean impossible or even improbable in the right circumstances. And redistricting will affect House races but not races for the Senate or the White House. Republican advantages in money and redistricting are important, but at best they will delay or soften the realignment that began to occur a decade ago.

The pressures for a Democratic realignment, driven by the growth of postindustrial metropolitan areas and by demographic change, are certain to grow over the

decade. The electorate's movement from right to center, which began in the early 1990s, has continued, evidenced by recent Republican attempts to coopt Democratic domestic positions. Just as happened in the last Republican realignment of 1980, it could take a crisis in foreign policy or continued economic uncertainty to end what W. D. Burnham called the "unstable equilibrium" between the parties and to create a new majority. But barring the entirely unforeseen, there is little reason to doubt that before this decade is over the Democratic majority, which began to emerge clearly in the 1990s, will finally succeed the conservative Republican majority that Ronald Reagan created.

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