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Generic Congressional Vote	
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Republicans	44.3
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March 17, 2009

For Dems, Demographics Are Not Destiny

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Into the early 1930s, Republicans took for granted that black voters would stay with the party of Lincoln. After World War II, many liberals believed increasing unionization ensured sustained white working class support for Democrats. By 1960, Republicans were coming to count on women's loyalty. More women backed Richard Nixon than John. F. Kennedy. In politics, over the long term, demographics are not destiny.

Last week, in a Center for American Progress report, the influential liberal analyst Ruy Teixeira returned to the 2008 vote and exit polls. Teixeira focused the first two thirds of the paper on demographics. "A new progressive America is on the rise," he concluded.

By now, the political class is familiar with the trends Teixeira highlighted. The mountain west turned blue. Democrats won the industrial Midwest. Hispanics and youth voted two-to-one for Democrats. Nearly every black voter backed Barack Obama. Democrats won college graduates for the first time since Ronald Reagan came to Washington.

The nation's two big demographic trends, the browning of America and the educating of America, are boding badly for Republicans. That's the horizon of American politics today. But the catch about looking over the horizon is that you can't be quite sure of what you've seen until you get there.

Hispanics' support for Democrats may, in fact, have peaked. This White House is certainly in no rush to traverse the political minefield of immigration reform. Obama's historic levels of black and youth support will almost surely lessen when Obama is no longer atop Democratic ballots.

The Democratic dominance of the millennial generation may prove especially fleeting, if taken for granted. George W. Bush and the war in Iraq were strong incentives for voters under age 30 to ditch the GOP. But Bush is now gone. Americans have turned their focus from national security to the economy. And in time the millennial generation will get married, have a family and struggle to pay the bills--a generation likely poorer than their parents. The GOP will still have issues ranging from tax policy to cultural anxiety to woo millennials back. And lest Democrats forget, youth is not always a synonym for progressive politics. In 1984, Republicans won six out of 10 young voters.

Political parties also do not live in a vacuum. Andrew Jackson would not have recognized George McGovern's Democrats. The GOP majority of the early 20th century--Northeastern, Protestant and old money--never conceived of the southern orientated culturally populist GOP of the second half of the century, collecting blue-collar Catholics by the millions.

Between those two GOP majorities were men like Richard Nixon and Joe McCarthy. McCarthy's hearings on communism and Nixon's "Checkers Speech" reached the white working and middle class. FDR's coalition was cracking.

It was at the dusk of the FDR era that Nixon-man Kevin Phillips wrote that 1968 was a "repudiation visited upon the Democratic Party" for "its ambitious social programming, and its ability to handle the urban and Negro revolutions" that was "comparable in scope to that given conservative Republicanism in 1932 for its failure to cope with the economic crisis of the Depression."

Republicans seem to be reliving their Great Depression mistakes. They're offering scant government solutions at a moment when the private sector is failing, only further surrendering the near term demographic patterns that do indeed favor Democrats. It need not be this way for the GOP. It was, after all, not fated that Democrats lose millions of middle and working class voters by 1980.

Now Democrats' again control Washington. But they seem confused between their long-term ambitions, like national health care and alternative energy, and the economic crisis they inherited and must now tame. The confusion may be rooted in misinterpreting Obama's mandate. Many progressives still fail to recognize, as I detailed in a past [essay](#),



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Teixeira's nearly 50-page report ignored the economic crisis impact on the electoral map. By the Gallup Poll's tracking, Democrats were winning about 55 percent of the Hispanic vote before the first stock market crash. McCain was winning the college graduate vote. By September's close, Democrats were winning roughly 65 percent of the Hispanic vote and college graduates.

Obama won nine states Bush took in 2004. But in six of those states, including Florida and Ohio, John McCain was ahead or tied prior to the first stock market crash on September 15. Nearly to the day of the dive, Obama rose in all nine states to soon sustain a national majority for the first time.

Looking back, FDR's coalition was not fated. The Great Depression only gave Roosevelt his chance to govern. It was action-- the New Deal--that won Democrats their enduring majority. Programs from the National Recovery Administration to the Social Security Act would bond working Americans to Democrats. Photographs of FDR hung in homes, restaurants and offices. During the Great Depression, reporter Alistair Cooke recalled getting thrown out of a motor lodge by a clerk after he mocked a poor rendering of Roosevelt.

Democrats understandably hope that Obama's slated programs will deliver the same long-term loyalty.

Last week, when I asked a top Democratic strategist about the demographic tailwinds at his party's back, he shrugged. "Americans are incredibly practical people," the strategist said. "The only ideology they are going to be loyal to is what works."

A member of Roosevelt's administration, Thurmond Arnold, was once asked to explain liberalism. Arnold replied, "Liberalism is deuces wild."

Obama's gambles, favoring many legislative battles over only one, will eventually need to pay out. Democrats' hope for a sustained majority rests on it. Demographics change. But political success has always depended on practical success.

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