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Published: November 7, 2012

Demography meets Elections. The Case of the 2012 Presidential Elections in the US

A couple of decades ago, Prince William County was one of the mostly white, somewhat rural, far-flung suburbs where Republican candidates went to accumulate the votes to win elections in Virginia.

Since then, Prince William has been transformed. Open tracts have given way to town houses and gated developments, as the county — about a half-hour south of Washington — has risen to have the seventh-highest household income in the country and has become the first county in Virginia where minorities make up more than half the population.

If Prince William looks like the future of the country, Democrats have so far developed a much more successful strategy of appealing to that future. On Tuesday, [President Obama](#) beat [Mitt Romney](#) by almost 15 percentage points in Prince William, nearly doubling George W. Bush's margin over Al Gore in 2000, helping Mr. Obama to a surprisingly large victory in Virginia.

He did it not only by winning Hispanic voters, but also by winning strong majorities of the growing number of Asian-American voters and of voters under age 40. A version of his coalition in Virginia — a combination of minorities, women and younger adults — also helped Mr. Obama win Colorado, Nevada and perhaps Florida, which remained too close to call. He came close in North Carolina, a reliable state for Republican presidential nominees only a few years ago that he narrowly won in 2008.

The demographic changes in the American electorate have come with striking speed and have left many Republicans, who have not won as many electoral votes as Mr. Obama did on Tuesday in 24 years, concerned about their future. The Republicans' Southern strategy, of appealing mostly to white voters, appears to have run into a demographic wall.

“Before, we thought it was an important issue, improving demographically,” said Al Cardenas, the chairman of the [American Conservative Union](#). “Now, we know it's an essential issue. You have to ignore reality not to deal with this issue.”

The central problem for Republicans is that the Democrats' biggest constituencies are growing. Asian-Americans, for example, made up 3 percent of the electorate, up from 2 percent in 2008, and went for Mr. Obama by about 47 percentage points.

Republicans increasingly rely on older white voters. And contrary to much conventional wisdom, voters do not necessarily grow more conservative as they age; until the last decade, a majority of both younger and older voters both tended to go to the winner of the presidential election.

This year, Mr. Obama managed to win a second term despite winning only 39 percent of white voters and 44 percent of voters older than 65, according to exit polls not yet finalized conducted by Edison Research. White men made up only about one-quarter of Mr. Obama's voters. In the House of Representatives next year, for the first time, white men will make up less than half of the Democratic caucus.

The [Republican Party](#) “needs messages and policies that appeal to a broader audience,” said Mark McKinnon, a former strategist for George W. Bush. “This election proved that trying to expand a shrinking base ain't going to cut it. It's time to put some compassion back in conservatism. The party needs more tolerance, more diversity and a deeper appreciation for the concerns of the middle class.”

Nothing in politics is permanent, and Republicans may soon find ways to appeal to minorities and younger voters. As Hispanic and Asian voters continue to move up the income scale, for example, more of them may turn skeptical about Democratic calls to raise taxes on the affluent.

And the Democrats may yet confront their own demographic challenges once they no longer have Mr. Obama and his billion-dollar campaign machine at the top of the ticket, guaranteeing record-breaking turnout among his new Democratic coalition. If turnout among blacks, Hispanics and younger voters — groups that have historically had comparatively low turnout rates — had declined slightly, Mr. Obama might have lost.

But the immediate question for Republicans, people in the party say, is how to improve their image with voters they are already losing in large numbers.