

TO: Interested Parties

FR: Lincoln Park Strategies

RE: The Past Ten Presidential Elections in Today's Electorate

DATE: February 18, 2016

With the general election getting closer with each passing primary and caucus, many pundits have widely [analyzed and debated the potential impacts of demographic shifts](#) on the upcoming Presidential election (especially in regards to the declining proportion of white voters in the electorate). Without question, the eventual Democratic and Republican nominees will face a much different electorate in November than they would have if they had run for President even a decade ago.

The demographic shifting has been very advantageous to the Democratic Party given the fact that the Republican nominee for President has only won the popular vote once (George W. Bush in 2004) since 1988. As we have discussed in our report on [demographic changes](#), our read on the data is that the Democratic candidate will be favored to win the [presidency in 2016](#) and for years to come, unless the Republican Party can solve their low performance among minority voting groups. These numbers cannot make rational Republicans feel good about the trajectory of the next few elections, but do demographics have to be destiny or is there something else happening that is moving the scales in favor of the Democratic Party every four years?

To try to answer this question we moved our focus from future elections to the past to see if the current Democratic dominance at the ballot box over the last few decades would have existed if the demographics had shifted earlier or quicker. In order to account for the different make ups of the electorates over the years, we decided to follow the lead of economic studies that adjust dollar figures for inflation and make a comparison of the cost of goods in 1980 (as an example) with today. If the electorates in presidential cycles going back to the 1976 election (the year detailed exit polls are available) looked as the electorate did in 2012, what would the previous results look like? Our hypothesis is that if the Democrats would have won every election (or most), then the gains for Democrats (or the losses for the GOP) are purely demographic in nature, and if not, then there is an additional factor or factors pushing the current advantage.

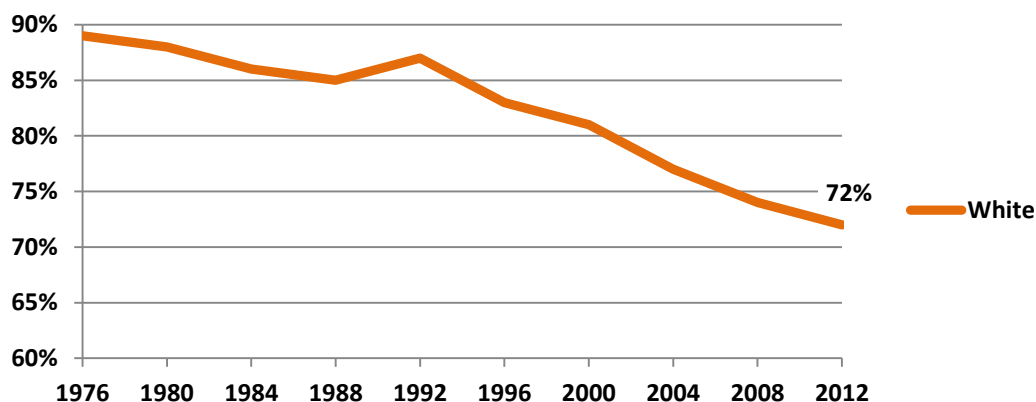
We found the results incredibly interesting.

BACKGROUND

According to exit polls compiled by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research¹, the proportion of white voters in the electorate has dropped 17 percentage points over the last 10 Presidential elections. In 1976, nearly nine-in-ten Americans who cast a ballot were white, while in 2012, white voters represented only 72% of the national electorate. Over the past ten Presidential elections (1976-2012), with the sole exception of 1992, the proportion of white voters has decreased from the previous election.

**Figure 1: White Voters as a Percentage of the Electorate
(Presidential Elections, 1976-2012)**

Source: [Roper Center](http://ropercenter.com)

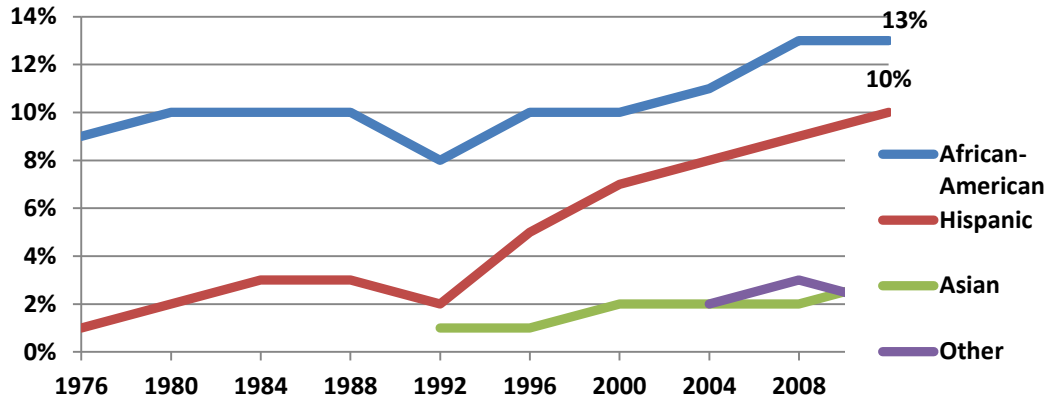


At the same time, the proportion of African American, Hispanic, and Asian voters has either maintained its level or increased (again minus 1992).

¹ Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. <http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/how-groups-voted/>

**Figure 2: Non-White Voters as a Percentage of the Electorate
(Presidential Elections, 1976-2012)**

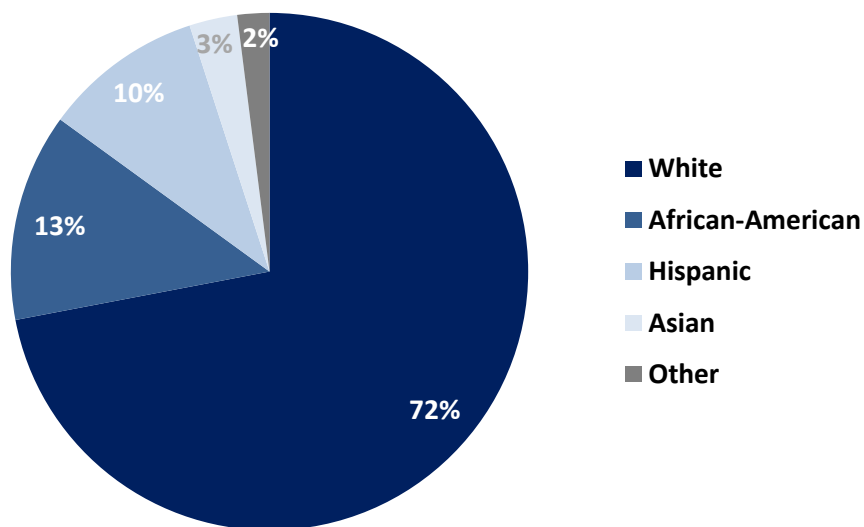
Source: [Roper Center](#)



Using this data set, we then determined what percentage of each racial group supported the Democratic, Republican, and (if applicable) third-party candidates in each given election. Once we calculated the make-up by race of the support each party's nominee had received, we were able to calculate an adjusted national popular vote scenario for each of the past ten Presidential elections using the 2012 electorate's demographics. These calculations were made by holding constant the level of candidate support by race in each election year, while varying the racial makeup of the electorate. In every calculation, we used the racial composition of the 2012 electorate (shown below in Figure 3) as the independent variable.

Figure 3: 2012 Presidential Election Electorate by Race

Source: [Roper Center](#)



In 1976, white voters made up 89% of the electorate and gave 48% of their support to the Democratic candidate and 52% to the Republican candidate. During that same election, African-American voters made up 9% of the electorate and gave 83% of their support to the Democrat and 17% to the Republican. Finally, Hispanic voters made up 1% of the electorate in 1976 and gave 82% of their support to the Democratic candidate and 18% to the Republican candidate. To calculate an adjusted national popular vote scenario in 1976 using the racial composition of the 2012 electorate, the levels of candidate support by race were held constant while the percentage of whites in the electorate was decreased from 89% to 72%, the percentage of African-Americans in the electorate was increased from 9% to 13%, and the percentage of Hispanics in the electorate was increased from 1% to 10% (see Figure 4 for calculations). Using these numbers, we then were able to calculate that if the 1976 electorate had mirrored the racial composition of the 2012 electorate, then the Democratic candidate would have received 54% of the national popular vote while the Republican candidate would have received 41% of the vote during the 1976 Presidential election.

Figure 4: Example of Calculations (1976 Presidential Election)

Source: [Roper Center](#)

	1976 (Actual 1976 Electorate)			1976 (Adjusted using 2012 Electorate)		
	% of Electorate (1976)	% Dem Support (1976)	% GOP Support (1976)	% of Electorate (2012)	% Dem Support (1976)	% GOP Support (1976)
White	89%	48%	52%	72%	48%	52%
African-American	9%	83%	17%	13%	83%	17%
Hispanic	1%	82%	18%	10%	82%	18%
Asian				3%		
Other				2%		

Finally, we then compared these adjusted national popular vote scenarios to the historical national popular vote results for each election (see figure 5).

**Figure 5: National Presidential Popular Vote Percentage by Party
 (Actual and Adjusted with the Racial Breakdown in the 2012 Electorate)**

Source: [Roper Center](#) and [Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections](#)

	Actual DEM %	Adjusted DEM %	DEM DIFFERENCE	Actual GOP %	Adjusted GOP %	GOP DIFFERENCE	Actual OTHER %	Adjusted OTHER %	OTHER DIFFERENCE	
1976	50%	54%	+ 4%	48%	41%	-7%	2%			1976
1980	41%	42%	+ 1%	51%	46%	-5%	8%	7%	-1%	1980
1984	41%	43%	+ 2%	59%	52%	-7%	1%			1984
1988	46%	47%	+ 1%	53%	48%	-5%	1%			1988
1992	43%	46%	+ 3%	37%	35%	-2%	20%	18%	-2%	1992
1996	49%	51%	+ 2%	41%	38%	-3%	10%	8%	-2%	1996
2000	48%	50%	+ 2%	48%	46%	-2%	4%	3%	-1%	2000
2004	48%	49%	+ 1%	51%	50%	-1%	1%	1%	0%	2004
2008	53%	53%	0%	46%	45%	-1%	2%			2008
2012	51%	-	-	47%	-	-	2%	-	-	2012

FINDINGS

Figure 6, below, compares the actual Presidential election popular vote winner (and their margin of victory) to the adjusted popular vote winner (and their margin of victory) if the electorate had the racial breakdown of the 2012 electorate. Interestingly, while we find that past Democratic performance definitely improved, indexing past elections to the 2012 electorate would not have actually changed the ultimate victor of the popular vote in any scenario. However, it would have turned a close Democratic victory in 1976 into a blue landslide and transformed solid Republican victories in 1988 and 2004 into more competitive races. And without a doubt, the contentious 2000 election, in which Al Gore (D) won the popular vote but George W. Bush (R) won the Electoral College, would have been a solid Democratic win.

Figure 6: National Presidential Popular Vote:

Actual vs. Adjusted Margin of Victory

Source: [Roper Center](#) and [Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections](#)

	Actual Winner	Adjusted Winner
1976	Dem + 2%	Dem + 13%
1980	GOP + 10%	GOP + 4%
1984	GOP + 18%	GOP + 9%
1988	GOP + 7%	GOP + 1%
1992	Dem + 6%	Dem + 11%
1996	Dem + 8%	Dem + 13%
2000	Dem + 0%	Dem + 4%
2004	GOP + 3%	GOP + 1%
2008	Dem + 7%	Dem + 8%
2012	Dem + 4%	-

CONCLUSIONS

While demographic changes have made, and will continue to make, a difference in Presidential election outcomes, our analysis shows that there is more to the picture than just this overall shift. Indeed, Ronald Reagan still would have won in 1980 and 1984, and George H. W. Bush would have won in 1988 even if the turnout patterns had matched those of 2012. This fact should give the GOP pause since over the past 30 years they have gone from being able to compete among today's electorate, to having lost the popular vote in 5 of the last 6 elections. The demographic shifts are certainly an advantage to the Democratic candidates, but the data shows that the Republican Party is also suffering from some serious self-inflicted wounds when it comes to minority voting groups.