



# The Path to 270 in 2016

## Can the Obama Coalition Survive?

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# Introduction and summary

One year out, the presidential election of 2016 appears wide open. Over the past four election cycles, American voters have yet to render a decisive verdict on partisan control of the federal government. President Barack Obama won solid margins in both 2008 and 2012, expanding the Democratic hold on the Electoral College map and building a strong and diverse coalition of voters. In turn, Republicans won impressive victories in both the 2010 and 2014 midterm elections, solidly retaking the House of Representatives, obtaining majority control in the Senate, and extending their hold on the majority of state legislatures and gubernatorial offices. Currently, Republicans hold 31 of 50 state governorships and have unified control of 31 state legislatures—compared to just 11 for the Democrats.

Democrats—relying on a growing coalition of young people, people of color, unmarried women, professionals, and secular voters—hold clear advantages in national elections, as well as in the most important battleground states that determine the presidency. As America has changed demographically, the Democratic Party has increasingly changed with it, enabling the party to grow markedly at the national level in terms of both vote share and partisan identification. In five of the last six presidential elections, the Democrats have won the popular vote and regularly lead the GOP by around 8 points in terms of party identification.<sup>1</sup> The main challenges for Democrats in 2016 are: first, low turnout and a lack of passion among core voters and, second, wider voter fatigue and historical patterns working against the party winning a third consecutive term in the White House.

The Democratic Party has won three consecutive elections only twice since 1828: when Martin van Buren followed Andrew Jackson into office in 1837 and when Franklin Roosevelt won an unprecedented third term in 1940 before the passage of the 22nd Amendment, which limits presidents to two terms.<sup>2</sup> More recently, as the National Constitution Center has noted, Democrats have failed to win a third consecutive term four out of the five times they have had the opportunity since 1920. James Cox, Adlai Stevenson, Hubert Humphrey, and Al Gore all failed to

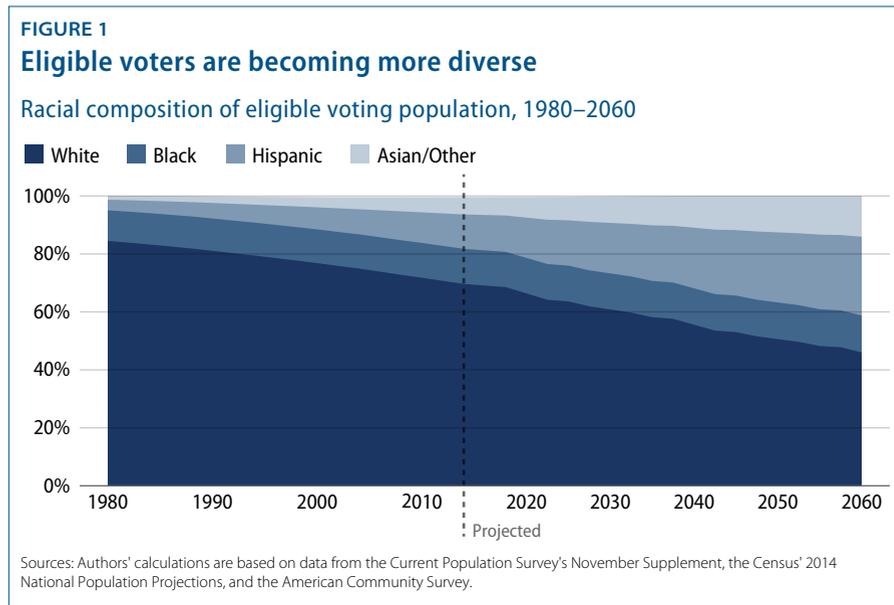
capitalize on the victories of their Democratic predecessors.<sup>3</sup> Republicans have historically been more successful than Democrats at extending their hold on the presidency for a third consecutive term,<sup>4</sup> most recently with the election of George H.W. Bush in 1988.

If Democrats are to retain the presidency in 2016, they will need to successfully transfer the enthusiasm and support of the Obama coalition to a new candidate and overcome the wider belief that the party had its shot for eight years and that it is now time for a change. Finding a candidate and agenda that can successfully motivate core progressive voters—while simultaneously convincing a wider cross-section of less ideological voters that they have new ideas to address lingering economic and social problems—will be paramount. The party must also take seriously the need to knit together its more diverse coalition with a larger share of working class whites if it wants to be competitive in congressional and state-level elections.

The Republican Party—relying on a core base of support from older, whiter, more male, more geographically dispersed, and more religious voters—benefits from a constitutional system with multiple levels of elections and shared power. Although the party’s coalition may be less diverse than Democrats’, Republican voters are typically more active and more reliable in terms of voting in midterm and sub-national elections that determine the balance of power in government. The main challenges for Republicans in 2016 are twofold: first, an overreliance on white votes at the expense of building a broader demographic coalition in battleground states and, second, an agenda and political tone that is too conservative and exclusionary for a national electorate.

Recent social trends present significant headwinds for Republicans, particularly as they relate to demographic shifts in the country. For years, Republicans could rely on white voters—and, in particular, working-class whites—to constitute a decisive proportion of the electorate and deliver victory. This is no longer the case. As documented in the 2014 “States of Change” report<sup>5</sup>—published jointly by the Center for American Progress, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Brookings Institution—the percentage of white voters in the actual electorate dropped 15 percentage points, from 89 percent in 1976 to 74 percent in 2012. The percentage of white working-class voters dropped even more, decreasing by 26 points over the same period. Future projections in the “States of Change” report suggest that the percentage of eligible white voters in the American electorate will

drop to 46 percent by 2060. (see Figure 1) Compounding the problem nationally for Republicans, the decline in the white percentage of the electorate has coincided with stronger Democratic identification and voting patterns among nonwhite voters, as well as increasingly more liberal social views among higher-educated white professionals.<sup>6</sup>



For Republicans to win the presidency in 2016, they must either expand their support beyond their conservative base or hope for a low-turnout election on the Democratic side, magnifying their advantages among white voters. This is a tricky strategic proposition for the party that involves significant tradeoffs in terms of the type of candidate nominated and agenda pursued. Republicans can cross their fingers that the 2016 election is similar to 2004, when turnout was higher among white voters and conservatives and lower among people of color. Alternatively, they can try to carry out the recommendations of the Republican National Committee after their 2012 loss and widen the party's appeal as a means to reach more minority voters, women, and young people.<sup>7</sup> Given the recent voting and partisan identification trends among people of color, Republicans would clearly need to take the latter approach in order to deal with the longer-term demographic issues facing the party.

Compounding the specific challenges for Democrats and Republicans, both parties must contend with an increasingly unpredictable and unsettled electorate. American voters are angry, distrustful of establishment politics, and open to seemingly out-of-the-mainstream candidates and movements that channel these concerns and anxieties. Despite improvements in the overall economy over the past seven years, many Americans remain economically stressed and have a rising sense that the government is run for the benefit of a few wealthy and well-connected interests rather than the middle class.<sup>8</sup>

Rising populist sentiment has upended electoral politics across advanced democracies. This sentiment has given rise to both untraditional candidates and parties gaining votes and support—often fleeting but in ways that are now influencing the decisions of mainstream parties. Examples include the rising vote totals for, on the right, parties such as the National Front in France; the True Finns in Finland; and the Danish People's Party in Denmark. On the left, such populist parties include Syriza in Greece and Podemos in Spain.

In the United States, left-wing populism is driving Democrats to offer more far-reaching solutions to problems such as inequality and structural racism, while right-wing populism is driving Republicans to more forcefully confront immigration and government spending across the board. Populist forces in both parties are increasingly hostile to global trade, militarism, money in politics, and political compromise with opponents. It remains to be seen whether these populist forces will determine the nominations of either party, but it is clear that the animating issues and the candidates representing these movements will have an effect on the eventual platforms and messages of the two general election campaigns.

However, examining national demographic and voting trends—especially in 12 important battleground states—it is clear that Republicans have a much higher hill to climb than Democrats in terms of amassing a coalition capable of delivering 270 electoral votes, or EVs. The Democrats have successfully achieved this goal in the past two presidential elections, demonstrating resilience in the face of a bad economy and strong Republican opposition.

Even if Republican presidential candidate and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney had won Florida, Ohio, and Virginia in 2012, he still would have lost the presidency to President Obama. Given the predicted increases in the minor-

ity share of the vote across all of the battleground states, a Republican winning these states—plus another vital state such as Colorado or New Hampshire to put them over the top—will require one of two scenarios: a significant decline in Democratic turnout and a surge in Republican turnout that produces an electoral landscape more like 2000 and 2004 than 2008 or 2012; or a widespread outreach effort by Republicans to attract significant numbers of Democratic-leaning voters such as Latinos, women, and younger people. The sobering reality for Republicans is that the Democratic candidate will be able to absorb mild levels of defections or lower levels of turnout from its core voters in the general election and still capture an Electoral College majority. If Democrats manage to hold President Obama's base and expand their reach into the Republican-leaning white working class, they could win by substantial margins.

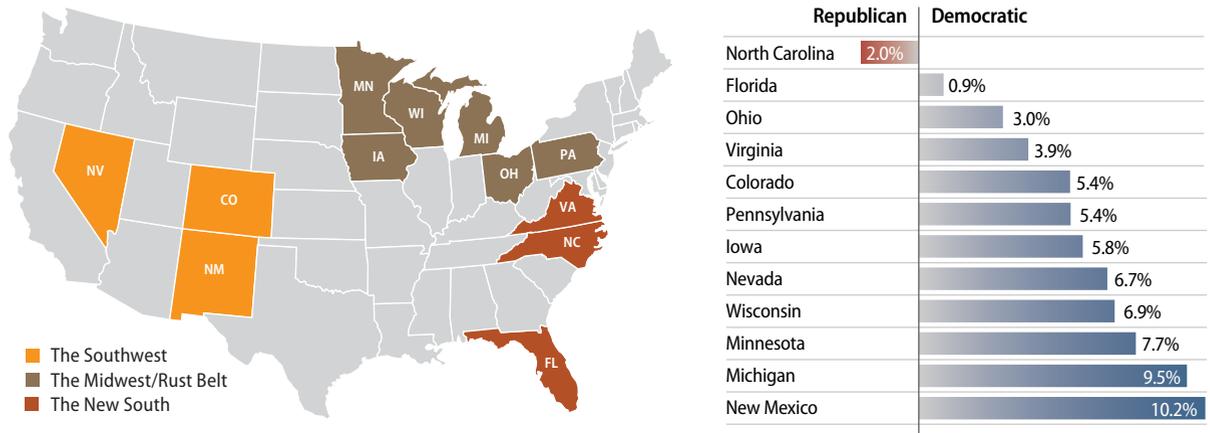
Based on our projections, minority eligible voters—African Americans, Latinos, Asians, those of other race and mixed-race individuals, combined—are expected to rise 2 points nationally during the 2012 to 2016 period, with a similar 2-point projected increase in the minority share of actual voters. (see Methodological Appendix) This includes a roughly 1-point increase in the Latino share of actual voters, as well as another 1-point increase distributed among African Americans, Asians, those of other races, and multiracial voters. Democrats may or may not match the 81 percent support the party received from communities of color in the past two elections. A more conservative estimate is that voters of color will support Democrats at around the 78 percent level—the average level of minority support for Democrats from 2000 to 2012.<sup>9</sup> Putting our estimates on electoral share and support together, we anticipate that voters of color will rise 2 points to make up 29 percent of the national presidential electorate in 2016, with around 78 percent of those voters supporting the Democratic nominee.

Republicans, meanwhile, are expected to continue to hold strong advantages among white voters—particularly white non-college-educated voters—although the share of these voters in the overall electorate is likely to continue to decline. Based on our conservative estimates,<sup>10</sup> non-college-educated whites are projected to fall 2.3 points as a percentage of the national electorate, while white college-educated voters are projected to increase by .4 percent as a share of actual voters. This shift in the white vote continues a trend slightly favoring Democrats given the voting patterns of both white groups.

FIGURE 2

Key battleground states for 2016

2012 presidential election margin of victory



Source: Author's calculations are based on elections results from Federal Elections Commission, Elections 2012 available at <http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/fe2012/federaelections2012.pdf>

	D—2012	R—2012	Projected change in share of actual voters, 2012 to 2016
Minorities	81%	17%	2
White college graduates	44%	55%	0
White working class	38%	60%	-2

Note: Due to rounding error, the numbers in the projected change in share column may not sum to zero.  
 Source: Authors' calculations based on data from the Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey 2012: November Supplement* (2012), available at <https://cps.ipums.org/cps/>; data taken from the Bureau of the Census, *American Communities Survey, (2008–2013)*, available at Steven Ruggles and others, "Integrated Public Use Microdata Series: Version 5.0" (Minneapolis: Minnesota Population Center, 2010), available at <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/>; CCES Dataverse "CCES Common Content, 2012," available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7927/H4TQ6693> (last accessed November 2015); Roper Center, "National Election Pool Exit Polls" (2012), available at <http://ropercenter.cornell.edu/polls/us-elections/exit-polls/>; projections from Ruy Teixeira, William H. Frey, and Robert Griffin, "States of Change: The Demographic Evolution for the American Electorate 1974–2060" (Washington: Center for American Progress, 2015), available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/report/2015/02/24/107261/states-of-change/>.

If the Democrats receive their 2012 levels of support among these three groups in 2016—an 11-point deficit among white college graduates; a 22-point deficit among white working-class voters; and a 64-point advantage among minority voters—the party will easily win the popular vote by a 6-point margin. If support for the Democrats among minorities declines to our more conservative estimate of 78 percent, they would still win the popular vote by 4 points. If, on top of that diminished minority support, white working-class support replicates the stunning 30-point deficit congressional Democrats suffered in 2014, while support among white college-graduates remains steady, the Democratic candidate would still win the popular vote—albeit by a slender margin. If, however, white college-graduate support also replicates its relatively weak 2014 performance for the Democrats—a 16-point deficit—Republicans would win the popular vote by a single point.

In 2012, President Obama carried 26 states, as well as the District of Columbia, for a total of 332 EVs. Democrats have carried 18 of these states, plus D.C., for a total of 242 EVs in every election since 1992—a group that journalist Ronald Brownstein has termed the “Blue Wall.”<sup>11</sup> Of these 18, the Democratic candidate in 2016 is almost certain to carry 14 of them<sup>12</sup>—California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington—plus D.C.—for a total of 186 EVs.

These are the Democrats’ core states, won easily by the Democratic candidate for six straight elections and unlikely to be seriously contested in 2016. But these core states are far short of an Electoral College majority—the Democratic candidate will still need 84 more EVs from some combination of other states to actually win the presidency.

In 2012, Republicans carried 24 states—Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, Georgia, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, West Virginia, and Wyoming—for a total of 206 EVs. They are almost certain to carry all of these states in 2016, with the exception of North Carolina, for a total of 191 EVs. This is far short of a majority: Republicans will need 79 additional EVs to capture the presidency.

Outside of New Hampshire, both Democrats and Republicans will need to focus on a collection of Midwest, Southwest, and so-called New South states in order to prevail in 2016. These states—Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, Florida, North Carolina, and Virginia—were all carried by President Obama in 2012, except for North Carolina, which he won in 2008 but narrowly lost in 2012.

Both the structural demographic changes and geographic patterns of support in the electorate suggest slight advantages for Democrats in 2016. In no way, however, do these factors preclude Republicans from taking the right steps to amass a national majority and Electoral College victory.

One year out, the dynamics of the 2016 election can be distilled to a few core questions. Will the Democrats’ demographic advantage in recent elections hold? Can a new Democratic candidate gain the support of President Obama’s voters without the president on the ballot? Can Democrats build a cross-class coalition that unites its diverse core with a larger segment of white working-class voters?

On the Republican side, will displeasure with President Obama and uncertainty among the electorate give Republicans an opening to reach more voters? Can Republicans defy long-term demographic trends and pull out a victory by maximizing turnout from its base and support from whites in a potentially low-enthusiasm election? Can Republicans reach across the ideological divide to bring in some Obama voters and those disengaged from politics?

The remainder of this report examines the known contours of the 2016 election by providing in-depth overviews of these national demographic trends; specific breakdowns of 12 battleground states in the Midwest/Rust Belt, Southwest, and New South regions; and a concluding analysis of what each party must do to achieve victory in 2016.

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