



How the Rising Share of Latino Voters Will Impact the 2016 Elections

By Anna Chu and Charles Posner December 2015



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Introduction and summary

The United States is undergoing a historic demographic shift, with people of color expected to make up a majority of the population by 2044.¹ Despite the seemingly long trajectory of these changes, the political implications are already being felt.

The most significant of these shifts is the sharp increase in the number of Latino voters and their share of the electorate. In the 2012 presidential election, Latino voters—71 percent of whom supported President Barack Obama²—helped create a firewall for President Obama in key states.³ In Colorado, for example, the rising share of Latino voters was enough to win the state for Democrats despite white voters’ support for President Obama dropping by 6 percentage points from 2008.⁴

The rising share of Latino voters in key states may have an even more significant impact on the 2016 presidential election, especially if voter turnout rates are high. To gain a better understanding of the growing Latino influence, the Center for American Progress Action Fund conducted an electoral simulation of the six states with the largest projected share of Latino eligible voters in 2016 and for which 2012 exit polling data are available.⁵ Although we factor in the projected growth of eligible voters of all racial and ethnic groups, in each of the states examined, Latino voters will make up the largest share of the states’ projected eligible voters of color in 2016. These states are Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.

CAP Action conducted three election simulations for 2016, based closely on the methodology used in Patrick Oakford’s report for the Center for American Progress titled “The Changing Face of America’s Electorate.”⁶ Our analysis also utilizes updated eligible voter projections prepared by Ruy Teixeira, William Frey, and Rob Griffin in “States of Change,” a report by the Center for American Progress, the Brookings Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute.⁷ The three simulations represent three different scenarios based on assumptions about party preferences. All three simulations hold turnout at 2012 levels.

- **Simulation 1:** The first simulation assumes that voter turnout and party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups in 2016 will remain the same as in 2012. Because the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Democrats compared with other elections, this simulation is generally the most favorable for the potential Democratic candidate.
- **Simulation 2:** The second simulation assumes that party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups in 2016 will mirror results from 2004, when Republicans enjoyed higher levels of support from voters of color.
- **Simulation 3:** The third and final simulation assumes that white voters in 2016 will vote with the same party preferences as in 2012, while voters of color will vote according to their party preferences in 2004. Because the 2004 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Republicans and the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among white voters for Republicans, this simulation is generally the most favorable for Republican candidates.

Each of the three simulations was performed for each of the six states. Key findings include:

- **A Democratic candidate will have a strong electoral advantage in 2016 if he or she is able to retain high levels of support from voters of color—especially Latino voters.** Under Simulation 1, in which a Democratic candidate enjoyed the same level of support from voters as in 2012 and factoring in demographic shifts, Democrats would expand their vote share in five of the six states examined: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada. These results would lead the Democratic presidential candidate to win five of the six states: California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.
- **A Republican presidential candidate will benefit if voter preferences return to 2004 levels.** Under Simulation 2, the Republican vote share in 2016 would increase from its 2012 level in every state except Arizona. In California, New Mexico, and Nevada, the Democratic candidate would still receive more than 50 percent of the overall vote share and win the state's 66 electoral votes. However, swing states Colorado and Florida would shift, with a Republican candidate capturing more than 51 percent of the overall vote share.

- **Based on demographic projections, Nevada may become more and more difficult—though not impossible—for a Republican presidential candidate to win.** A potential Republican candidate does not win Nevada in any of the simulations, assuming that turnout levels remain the same as in 2012. If Democrats do not retain their high levels of support from voters of color while Republicans regain their higher levels of support from voters of color in 2004 and higher white support from 2012, Republicans will see the presidential race in Nevada tighten up in their favor. However, the state may remain hard to win for Republicans, with 51.8 percent of the vote going to Democrats and 48.1 percent to Republicans.
- **The key swing state of Florida is up for grabs depending on how political parties are able to appeal to voters of color, and particularly, Latino voters.** If Democrats are able to retain the same levels of voter support as in 2012—as they do in Simulation 1—the Democratic candidate would win Florida and its 27 electoral votes. However, if voters of color have the same party preferences as in 2004—as they do in Simulations 2 and 3—the Republican candidate would win the state.
- **White voters will still play critical roles in Colorado and Arizona.** While both states are undergoing rapid demographic shifts, white voters will cast more than 7 in 10 votes in Colorado and Arizona in 2016. Colorado is also a rare state in which white voters have shifted away from Republican candidates, not toward them; simulations show that the electoral outcome in the state could be determined by whether white voters continue to trend toward Democrats or revert back to supporting Republicans at 2004 levels.

Background: The growing Latino population

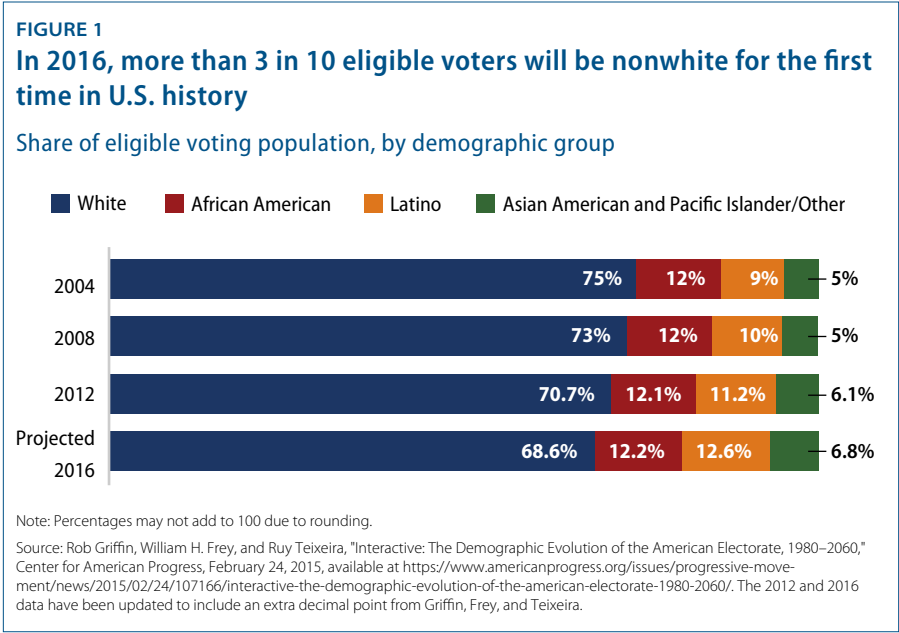
The growing Latino population across the country will exercise increasing electoral clout over the coming decades. In 1980, Latinos made up just 6.5 percent of the total population in the United States.⁸ Today, Latinos make up more than 17 percent of the U.S. population;⁹ by 2060, they are expected to make up approximately 29 percent.¹⁰

Although there is a gap between the Latino share of the broader population and the Latino share of the electorate, the Latino share of eligible voters—those of voting age who are also U.S. citizens—is also rising quickly. By 2016, the fast-paced growth of the Latino voting eligible population and the slow or negative growth among non-Latino white eligible voters—both in terms of population and share of overall voters—will have changed the composition of the U.S. electorate. From 2012 to 2016, the number of eligible Latino voters nationwide is projected to increase by more than 4 million, bringing the total to 27.7 million.¹¹ In 2016, Latinos are expected to make up approximately 13 percent of all eligible voters—a greater share than any other voters of color in the United States.¹² Texas, for example, will add 905,500 new Latino voters, accounting for 58.1 percent of the state’s net increase in total eligible voters.¹³

The importance of the Latino vote is reinforced by estimates of the projected threshold of support from Latino voters that Republicans would have to secure in order to win the presidential race. During the 2004 election, it was estimated that Republicans needed to win 40 percent of the Latino vote to win the presidency.¹⁴ However, an updated projection by Latino Decisions estimates that Republicans may have to win as much as 47 percent of the Latino vote to win.¹⁵

In contrast to the rising share of Latino eligible voters, the share of white eligible voters has been falling since the 1980s. Whites made up 85 percent of all eligible voters in 1980 but have fallen to 70 percent today.¹⁶ By 2060, only 46 percent of eligible voters will be white, while Latinos will make up 27 percent.¹⁷ Although Latino voters will make up the largest percentage of eligible voters of color, it

should be noted that Asian/Other eligible voters are also increasing quickly, from 6 percent of eligible voters in 1980 to a projected 14 percent by 2060.¹⁸ The percentage of African American eligible voters, meanwhile, will remain relatively steady, rising slightly from 12 percent in 1980 to a projected 13 percent in 2060.¹⁹



The simulations by state

Below is a more in-depth look at simulation results, conducted in each of the six states with the largest projected share of Latino eligible voters and for which 2012 exit polling data are available. These states have a combined 115 electoral votes, and three of the states examined here—Colorado, Florida, and Nevada—are considered critical swing states.

Arizona

Arizona has voted for a Republican candidate in the past four presidential elections.²⁰ If Democrats are able to retain high support from voters of color, however, the demographic changes in Arizona may slowly decrease the GOP stronghold on the state over time. The racial and ethnic minority population in Arizona has grown rapidly since 1980. Although whites constituted 83 percent of the population in 1980, they make up only 55 percent of the population today.²¹ By contrast, the Latino population has steadily expanded, from 13 percent in 1980 to 33 percent today.²²

The rapidly growing racial and ethnic minority population in Arizona translates to a corresponding increase in eligible voters of color. The share of Latino eligible voters in Arizona is projected to grow from 22.6 percent of all voters in 2012 to 24.4 percent in 2016.²³ Meanwhile, Asian/Other voters are projected to grow from 7 percent of eligible voters in 2012 to 7.7 percent in 2016.²⁴ African American voters are projected to remain largely the same.²⁵

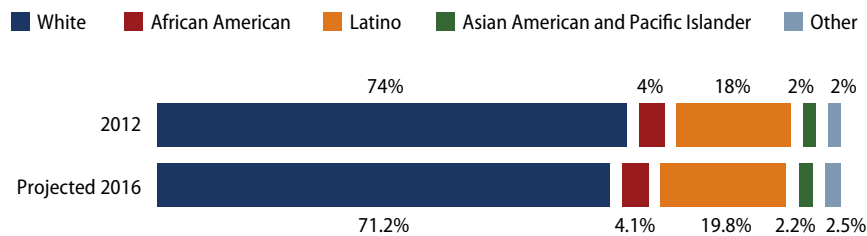
Although the demographic change in Arizona is happening rapidly, whites still constitute the vast majority of voters, due in part to stronger voter turnout. In 2012, whites made up 74 percent of the electorate in Arizona²⁶ despite making up only 66.7 percent of all eligible voters.²⁷ Even with the demographic changes

occurring in Arizona, whites are still projected to make up approximately 70.1 percent of all Arizona voters in 2016. In contrast, there is a turnout gap among Latino voters. Although they made up 22.6 percent of all eligible voters in 2012,²⁸ they accounted for only 18 percent of actual voters.²⁹

FIGURE 2

The impact of demographic changes on vote share in Arizona

Share of votes cast in presidential elections, by demographic group



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

Results of electoral simulations for Arizona

Although Arizona is projected to become a majority-minority state by 2022, the white vote will remain heavily influential for the 2016 election, especially if the turnout gap among Latinos remains the same as 2012. However, the growing share of Latino eligible voters in Arizona could start turning the tides against Republicans in the state should Democrats manage to retain a high level of support among Latino voters.

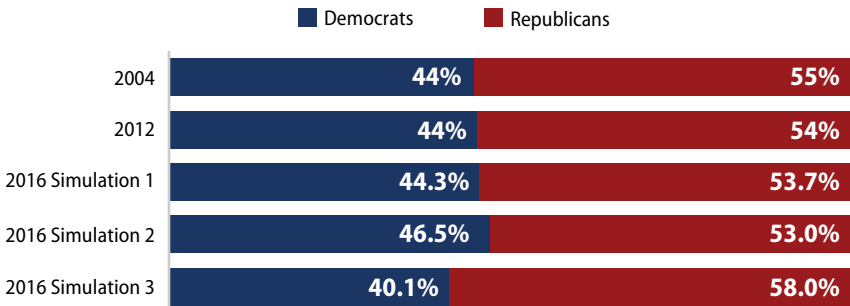
Under Simulation 1, which holds voter preferences at 2012 levels, Democrats would see their vote share in Arizona increase slightly in 2016—by 0.3 percentage points—from 44 percent to 44.3 percent. This would be driven in large part by Latino voters, who could make up close to 20 percent of all Arizona voters by 2016.

Under Simulation 2, which uses voter preference levels from 2004 for all voters—a higher level of support from voters of color for Republicans and a higher white voter preference for Democrats than in 2012—Democrats would see a 2.5 per-

centage point increase in their vote share in 2016 from 2012. This increase would be driven by improved Democratic performance among the large, influential white voter bloc in Arizona. However, Republicans would still win the state with 53 percent of the vote share.

Meanwhile, Republicans fare the best under Simulation 3, which holds white voter preferences to 2012 levels but support levels from voters of color to 2004 levels. The Republican margin of victory would increase by 4 percentage points, from 54 percent in 2012 to 58 percent in 2016.

FIGURE 3
Electoral impact of demographic changes in Arizona
Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections

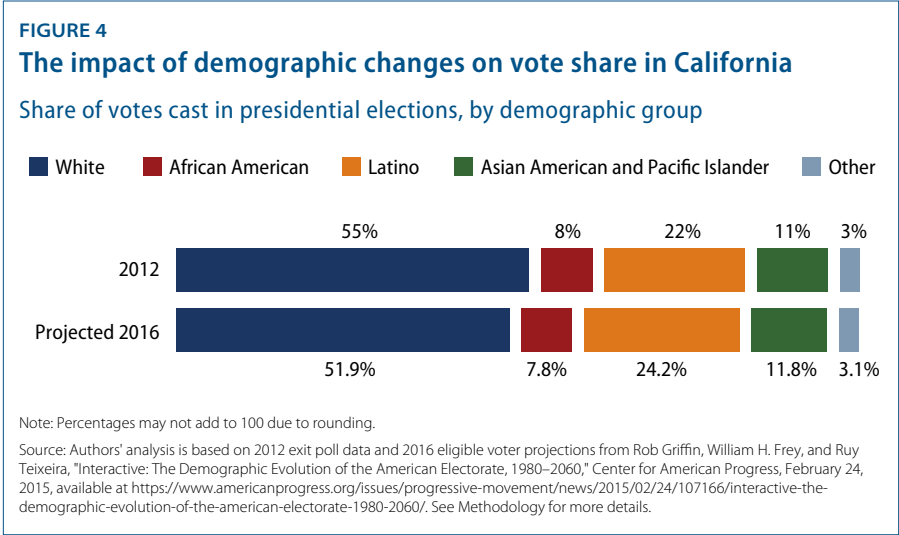


Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

California

California has voted for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1992,³⁰ with the Democratic margin of victory steadily increasing with each year. The growing share of eligible voters of color in California means that, should voters of color continue to support Democrats at high levels, California will only become more entrenched as a Democratic stronghold. Already a majority-minority state where only 40 percent of the population is white, California is projected to become even more diverse over time.³¹ By 2060, whites are projected to make up less than 23 percent of California's population, while Latinos will make up 48 percent.³² Asians/Others meanwhile, will increase from 16 percent of the state's population to 24 percent by 2060.³³

The share of eligible voters of color in California is expected to grow concurrently. Although whites made up 78 percent of all eligible voters in California in 1980, they made up only 51 percent of eligible voters in 2014.³⁴ In contrast, the share of Latino eligible voters increased from 10 percent to 27 percent over the same time period, while Asians/Others grew from 4 percent to 15 percent.³⁵

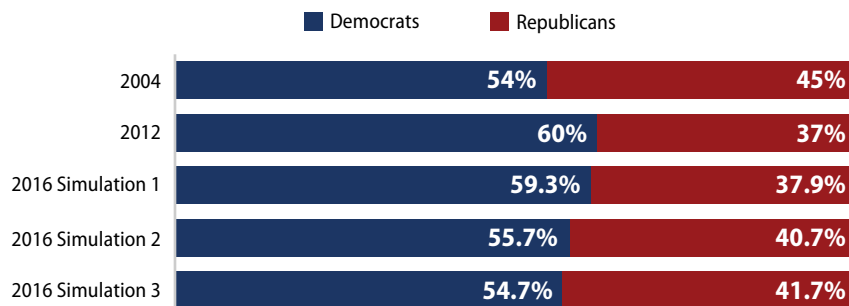


Results of electoral simulations for California

The growing share of eligible voters of color in California means that, should voters of color continue to support Democrats at high levels, California will continue to be a reliably Democratic state. Under each one of the simulations undertaken here, Democrats continue to win the majority of the popular vote in California.

Under Simulation 1, Democrats would enjoy a large margin of victory in California in 2016, albeit at slightly lower levels than in 2012: 59.3 percent instead of 60 percent. Should voters' of color preferences revert back to 2004 levels and white voter preferences remain the same as in 2012—the most optimal scenario here for Republicans—the Democratic margin of victory would fall more significantly. However, Democratic support would still remain high at 54.7 percent.

FIGURE 5
Electoral impact of demographic changes in California
 Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections



Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

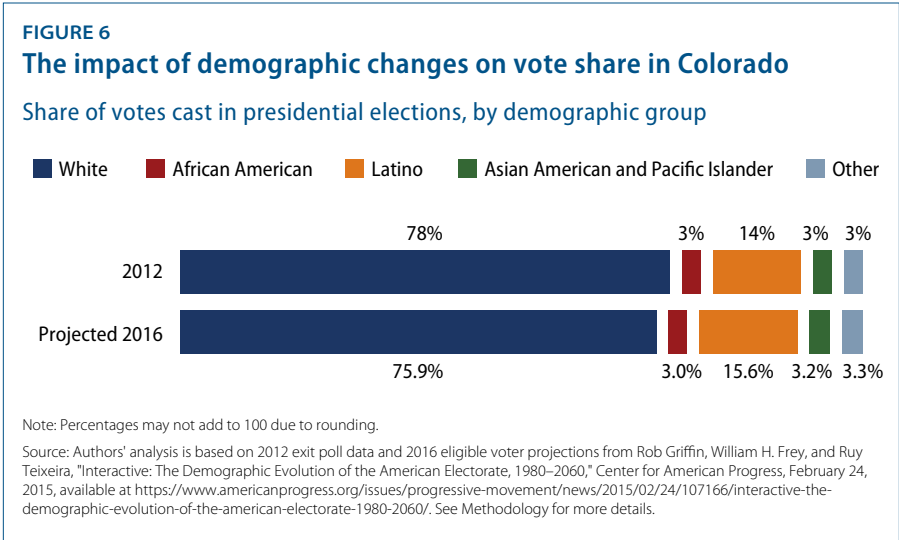
Colorado

Colorado—a swing state that voted for Republican candidate George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004—flipped its support to the Democratic candidate in the past two presidential elections.³⁶ This shift appears to have been driven in part by Latino voters, the largest racial and ethnic minority population in the state. Indeed, Latinos appear to have been a driving reason for President Obama's victory in the state in 2012, when the growing share of Latino voters and the strong Democratic support among them offset the drop in Democratic support among white voters.³⁷ If Democrats are able to retain strong support among Latino voters, along with other voters of color and coupled with the growing share of Latino voters, Republicans will have difficulty retaking Colorado in 2016.

The racial and ethnic minority population in Colorado has steadily increased since 1980. While whites made up 86 percent of the state's population in 1980, the state will achieve majority-minority status by 2050.³⁸ In particular, the Latino population has grown rapidly from 9 percent in 1980 to 22 percent in 2014 and is projected to reach 40 percent by 2060.³⁹ The Asian/Other population has multiplied from 2 percent in 1980 to 6 percent today and is projected to reach 11 percent by 2060.⁴⁰

As the racial and ethnic minority share of the overall population in Colorado has grown, so has the share of eligible voters of color. The Latino share of eligible voters has doubled from 8 percent in 1980 to 16 percent in 2014 and is projected to reach 37 percent by 2060.⁴¹ Meanwhile, the Asian/Other share of eligible voters is now at 4 percent and is projected to reach 10 percent by 2060.⁴² At the same time, the white share of eligible voters has fallen from 88 percent in 1980 to 76 percent in 2014 and is estimated to fall below 50 percent by 2060.⁴³

Despite these rapid demographic changes, Colorado—like Arizona—still has a predominantly white electorate. In 2012, whites accounted for almost four in five, or 78 percent, of all votes cast; in 2016, they are still projected to cast more than three in four, or 75.9 percent.⁴⁴ Interestingly though, Colorado is a rare state where white voters have shifted away from Republican candidates over time rather than toward them. In 2004, whites in Colorado sided with Republican candidate George W. Bush over then-Democratic candidate and current Secretary of State John Kerry by 57 percent to 42 percent.⁴⁵ In 2012, however, these voters picked former Gov. Mitt Romney (R-MA) over President Obama more narrowly—54 percent to 44 percent.⁴⁶

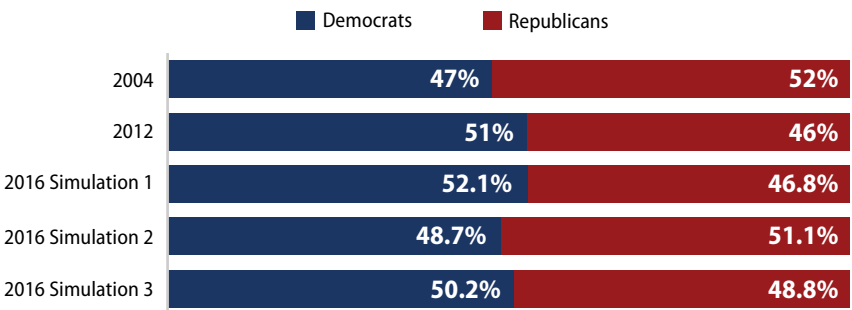


Results of electoral simulations for Colorado

If Democrats are able to retain a high level of support from voters of color in Colorado in 2016—the largest share of which would be Latino voters—as they did in 2012, Democrats could enjoy an even higher margin of victory in 2016. Under Simulation 1, Democrats would increase their margin of victory by 1.1 percentage points, from 51 percent in 2012 to 52.1 percent in 2016.

However, should voters of color support a Republican candidate at higher levels, as they did in 2004, Republicans would retake Colorado in 2016. Under Simulation 2—which applies the voter preferences for all races and ethnicities from the 2004 election to 2016—Republicans would receive 51.1 percent of the vote. And while Simulation 3 provides the strongest electoral outcomes for Republicans in four of the five states examined here, in Colorado it narrowly favors Democrats because white voters were more likely to support the Democratic candidate in 2012 than they were in 2004. While preferences of voters of color would push the results toward Republicans, Democrats would win by a slim 1.4-point margin of victory.

FIGURE 7
Electoral impact of demographic changes in Colorado
Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections



Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

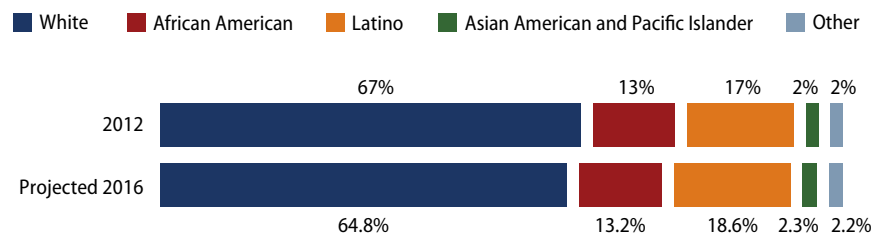
Florida

Florida has long been a powerful swing state in presidential politics. Dating back to 1976, the candidate who has won the Sunshine State has taken the White House in all but one instance—when Republican George H.W. Bush won Florida in 1992 but lost the election to Democrat Bill Clinton.⁴⁷ In 2016, Florida’s 29 electoral votes will make the state almost essential for any feasible electoral path to the Oval Office.

Florida’s rapidly growing racial and ethnic minority population has contributed to a changing electoral landscape. In 1980, 4 percent of eligible voters in the state were Latino;⁴⁸ in 2012, 16.6 percent were.⁴⁹ By 2016, the Florida electorate’s share of Latino eligible voters is expected to increase by another 1.6 percentage points, to 18.2 percent.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, the white electorate dropped from 81 percent of eligible voters in 1980 to 66.7 percent in 2012. It is projected to decrease further to 64.5 percent by 2016.⁵¹

FIGURE 8
The impact of demographic changes on vote share in Florida

Share of votes cast in presidential elections, by demographic group



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

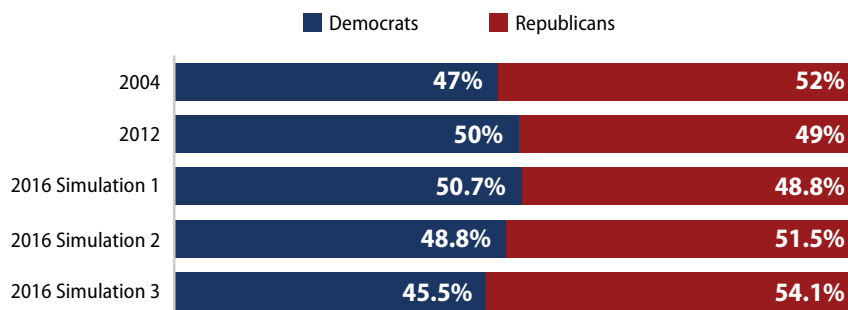
Results of electoral simulations for Florida

The changing party preference among Latino voters was a major contributor in swinging Florida to President Obama in 2008 and 2012. In 2004, Latino voters favored Republican George W. Bush by a 12-point margin, 56 percent to 44 percent.⁵² In 2012, those numbers flipped: 60 percent of Latino voters voted for President Obama, while just 39 percent voted for Gov. Romney.⁵³

Thus, voting preferences among Florida Latinos are an important electoral driver in Florida and, in turn, the outcome of the entire presidential election. Our simulations reflect this importance. Under Simulation 1—in which all demographic groups exhibit the same voting preferences as they did in 2012—a Democrat would be victorious in 2016 by a 2-point margin, or 50.7 percent to 48.8 percent.

Increased support for Republicans among Latino voters and other voters of color, however, could flip the state to the Republican candidate. Simulation 2—in which all demographic groups, including Latino voters, revert to their 2004 preferences—gives a Republican 51.5 percent of the vote and a Democrat 48.8 percent. Simulation 3 widens the gap by shifting white voters even farther toward a Republican candidate: Under this scenario, the margin of victory for a Republican would be nearly 9 points.

FIGURE 9
Electoral impact of demographic changes in Florida
Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections



Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

New Mexico

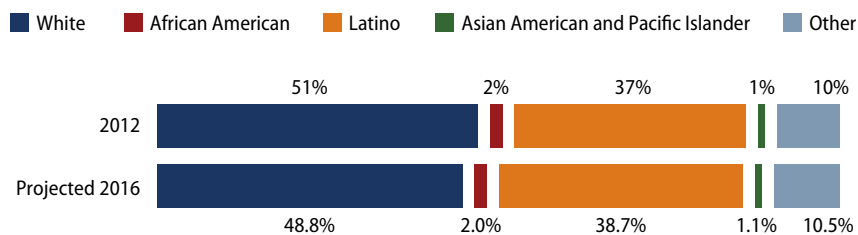
New Mexico has voted for the Democratic candidate in five of the previous six presidential elections, except when it gave its five electoral votes to Republican George W. Bush in 2004.⁵⁴ In 2012, it elected President Obama by a 10-point margin, 53 percent to 43 percent.⁵⁵

New Mexico is unique among the six states analyzed in this report: Its electorate contains the highest proportion of nonwhite voters of any state other than Hawaii and the District of Columbia. In 2012, nonwhite voters made up 49 percent of all votes cast in the presidential election, while Latinos accounted for 37 percent of voters.⁵⁶ New Mexico's eligible voter population is majority-minority, with only 46.1 percent of eligible voters identifying as white.⁵⁷ Projections show that the white share of the electorate will continue to decrease, reaching 43.9 percent by 2016.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the Latino share of eligible voters is projected to approach the same level as the white voter share, increasing 1.7 percentage points from 2012 to 42.3 percent in 2016.⁵⁹

Latinos' voter preference shifted significantly toward Democrats from 2004 to 2012. In 2004, Latinos in New Mexico favored Democrat John Kerry over Republican George W. Bush by 12 points, 56 percent to 44 percent.⁶⁰ In 2012, 65 percent of Latino voters chose President Obama while just 29 percent picked Gov. Romney, a difference of 36 points, or three times the 2004 margin.⁶¹

FIGURE 10
The impact of demographic changes on vote share in New Mexico

Share of votes cast in presidential elections, by demographic group



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

Results of electoral simulations for New Mexico

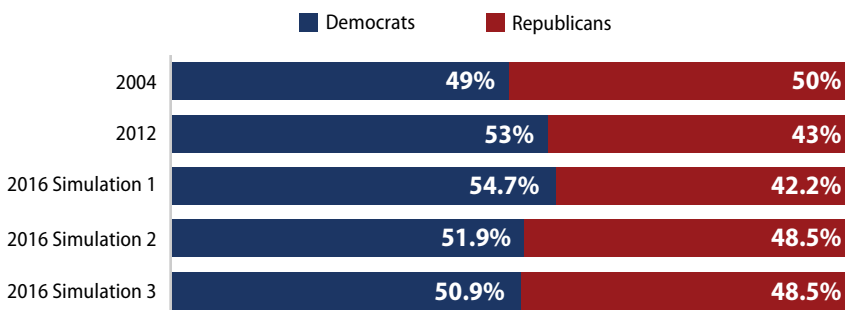
The dramatic shift in voter preference from voters of color—along with the high and growing Latino vote share of the New Mexico electorate—had significant effects on our simulations, none of which have a Republican candidate winning the state.

Under Simulation 1, which holds party preference constant from 2012, the increasing share of Latino and other nonwhite voters drives an increase in the Democratic candidate's margin of victory. This simulation takes the win margin from 2012's 10 points to more than 12 points in 2016, 54.7 percent to 42.2 percent.

Simulation 2, in which party preference reverts back to 2004 levels, produces a major swing back in the direction of the Republican candidate. A Republican would gain 5.5 percentage points in this model, while the Democrat would lose 1.1 percentage points. While this was good enough for former President George W. Bush to take the state in 2004, it would not be good enough in 2016 due to the significant increase in the nonwhite eligible voting population. Even under Simulation 3, in which Republicans have the most advantageous position for party preference among white voters and voters of color, a Democrat would still win the state, though by a narrower 2.4-point margin.

FIGURE 11
Electoral impact of demographic changes in New Mexico

Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections



Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

Nevada

Nevada has voted with the eventual victor in each presidential election since 1980⁶² and is again poised to act as an important swing state in 2016. All of the simulations show that the state's demographic changes—driven by dramatic growth in its Latino voting population and coupled with strong support of Democrats by Latino voters in the state—will make it significantly more challenging, though not impossible, for Republicans to win in 2016.

As the Latino share of the overall population in Nevada has more than tripled, from 6 percent in 1980 to 26 percent in 2012, the size of the Latino electorate has boomed.⁶³ The share of eligible Latino voters also has more than tripled, from 5 percent of Nevada voters in 1980 to 16.8 percent in 2012.⁶⁴ That growth is projected to continue in the 2016 election, increasing by another 2.2 percentage points to 19 percent of Nevada eligible voters.⁶⁵ If the Latino vote share increases proportionally to the growth in Latino eligible voters, for the first time ever more than one in five Nevada voters—21.2 percent, up from 19 percent in 2012—will be Latino.⁶⁶

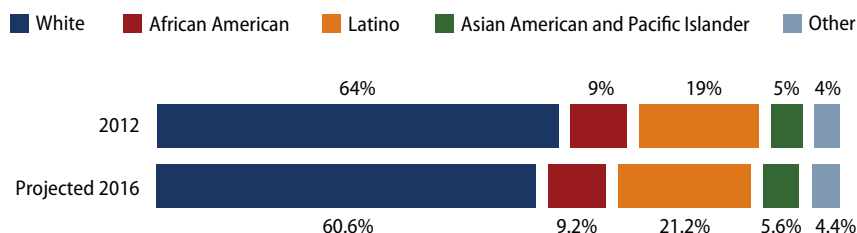
The shares of Nevada voters who belong to other voters of color—those identifying as black, Asian, or Other—also are all projected to increase from 2012 to 2016, though not as markedly as Latinos.⁶⁷ By contrast, the white share of eligible voters is projected to decrease by 3.4 percentage points, from 65.1 percent to 61.7 percent.⁶⁸

As Latinos are casting a larger and larger share of votes in Nevada, they also are trending more toward Democratic candidates. In 2004, 60 percent of Latinos who went to the polls voted for Secretary Kerry, the Democratic candidate, while 39 percent voted for George W. Bush, the Republican candidate—a 21-point advantage for Democrats.⁶⁹ In 2012, Latinos sided with President Obama over Gov. Romney by 71 percent to 24 percent, a 47-point difference and more than double what it was in 2004.⁷⁰

FIGURE 12

The impact of demographic changes on vote share in Nevada

Share of votes cast in presidential elections, by demographic group



Note: Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

Results of electoral simulations for Nevada

Our election simulations show that Nevada is becoming harder and harder—though not impossible—for Republicans to win: None of the simulations conducted would yield a Republican win in 2016. The conditions in Simulation 1 would strengthen Democrats' electoral advantage given the significant increase in the nonwhite electorate. The margin of victory for Democrats would increase from 6 points in 2012 to 10.4 points in 2016.

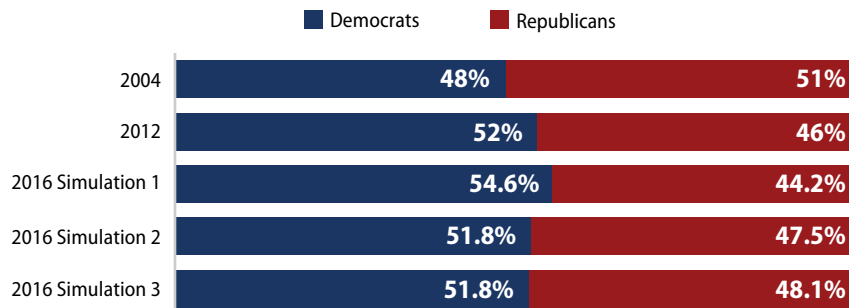
Simulation 2, which reverts voter preferences back to 2004 levels for all races, narrows the gap a bit. But the state remains out of reach for Republicans given the demographic shifts: The margin of victory for Democrats in this instance would be 4.3 points, 51.8 percent to 47.5 percent.

Under the conditions in Simulation 3—in which Democrats are unable to retain their high levels of support from voters of color and Republicans are able to regain their higher support levels from 2004 and the high support from white voters in 2012—Republicans see the presidential race in Nevada tighten in their favor. However, the state would remain hard to win for Republicans, with 51.8 percent of the vote going to Democrats and 48.1 percent going to Republicans.

FIGURE 13

Electoral impact of demographic changes in Nevada

Democratic and Republican shares of votes in presidential elections



Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2012 exit poll data and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

Conclusion

The results of our simulations not only offer a preview of what might happen in 2016 under different sets of conditions but also reinforce the growing political influence and power of Latino voters in the years ahead. This influence will be crucial to the eventual candidates in the swing states of Colorado, Florida, and Nevada.

In Nevada, the rising number of Latino voters could provide a firewall for Democrats. Although Republicans would see the presidential race tighten up in their favor if they were to regain the higher levels of voter support in 2016 that they enjoyed in 2004, Nevada would remain difficult, but not impossible, for Republicans to win. Florida, meanwhile, is up for grabs for the political party that can best appeal to voters of color—in particular, Latino voters. If Democrats were to retain the high levels of voter support they received in 2012, they would win Florida in 2016. If voter support were to revert back to 2004 levels, however, the state would swing back to Republicans. The same will be true of Colorado if Republicans are able to replicate the levels of voter support they received in 2004.

Although election simulations are not election predictions, the simulations conducted here reinforce the importance of voters of color—particularly Latinos—leading up to the 2016 presidential election.

Methodology

Simulations were developed by analyzing the following data sources: 2012 election results as reported by CNN; 2004 and 2012 exit poll data collected by Edison Research and reported by CNN and NBC News; and eligible voter projections published in February 2014 in the report “States of Change” from CAP, the Brookings Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute. For more information on eligible voter projection methodology, please see that report.⁷¹

Our simulations were designed to shed light on how changing demographics in the United States—particularly the fast growth of Latino voters—will affect the 2016 elections. Therefore, the report analyzed the six states with the highest projected Latino eligible voter populations as a percentage of the state’s overall voting eligible population. These states were Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.

The racial and ethnic groups used were limited by the data sources above. These groups were: white; black; Latino; Asian; and Other.

To prepare the election simulations, our analysis used the following steps. First, we calculated the projected change in each state’s eligible voter population as a raw percentage point using data from eligible voter projections in “States of Change.” Second, we applied the raw percentage point change to the vote share by race in each state—according to 2012 exit poll data—to determine the projected 2016 vote share by race. Raw percentage point changes were used because percent changes could exaggerate potential shifts, especially for groups with small vote shares. Third, for each racial or ethnic group, we applied the projected 2016 vote share to the party preference by race for each state, according to exit poll data. In cases where samples were too small and exit poll data could not indicate party preference of a racial or ethnic group at the state level, we substituted national averages. This was done using three separate simulation models—each using a different assumption for party preference—to project electoral results in each of the six states analyzed:

- **Simulation 1:** Party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups are the same as in 2012.
- **Simulation 2:** Party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups are the same as in 2004.
- **Simulation 3:** Party preference among white voters is at 2012 levels, while party preferences among voters of color are at 2004 levels.

These simulations were based closely on the methodology used in a prior analysis by Patrick Oakford for CAP⁷² and provided a range of results. Because the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Democrats compared with other elections, Simulation 1 is typically the most favorable for Democratic candidates. Because the 2004 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Republicans and the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among white voters for Republicans, Simulation 3 is typically the most favorable for Republican candidates. Simulation 2 is typically somewhere in between the other two.

It should be emphasized that these simulations are only preliminary; they should not be taken as predictions of the outcome of the 2016 election in the states analyzed. Rather, they should be seen as a guide for a range of potential outcomes, using the information currently available and given historical and demographic trends.

Additionally, the data used are imperfect, as is frequently the case with any forward-looking analysis. Exit poll data have a margin of error that is not included in the final numbers simulated in this analysis. Eligible voter projections for 2016 are based on rigorous statistical analysis but by their nature are not hard-and-fast numbers. Applying raw percentage point changes from the share of eligible voters to the share of actual voters, while a good approximation, could overstate the voter turnout of certain groups. For these reasons, the results may be slightly exaggerated in either direction.

Appendix

TABLE A1
Electoral impact of demographic changes

Democratic and Republican shares of vote by election year and election simulation

	2004		2012		2016 Simulation 1		2016 Simulation 2		2016 Simulation 3	
	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican	Democrat	Republican
Arizona	44%	55%	44%	54%	44.3%	53.7%	46.5%	53.0%	40.1%	58.0%
California	54%	45%	60%	37%	59.3%	37.9%	55.7%	40.7%	54.7%	41.7%
Colorado	47%	52%	51%	46%	52.1%	46.8%	48.7%	51.1%	50.2%	48.8%
Florida	47%	52%	50%	49%	50.7%	48.8%	48.8%	51.5%	45.5%	54.1%
Nevada	48%	51%	52%	46%	54.6%	44.2%	51.8%	47.5%	51.8%	48.1%
New Mexico	49%	50%	53%	43%	54.7%	42.2%	51.9%	48.5%	50.9%	48.5%

Source: Authors' analysis is based on 2004 and 2012 election results, 2004 and 2012 exit poll data, and 2016 eligible voter projections from Rob Griffin, William H. Frey, and Ruy Teixeira, "Interactive: The Demographic Evolution of the American Electorate, 1980–2060," Center for American Progress, February 24, 2015, available at <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/progressive-movement/news/2015/02/24/107166/interactive-the-demographic-evolution-of-the-american-electorate-1980-2060/>. See Methodology for more details.

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Endnotes

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