



The Path to 270 In 2016, Revisited

By Ruy Teixeira, John Halpin, and Rob Griffin October 2016

Center for American Progress



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Introduction and summary

When discussing elections, political analysts and commentators frequently talk about overarching fundamentals—such as the state of the economy, demographic shifts, trends in partisanship, and the popularity of the sitting president—that together indicate the contours and likely outcome of a particular race. In the political science community, these factors are generally believed to matter more than the specific tactics of campaigns or the characteristics of candidates. With the nomination of businessman Donald Trump as the Republican candidate for president, these assumptions are being seriously tested in 2016.¹

With approximately five weeks to go in the campaign, nearly all signs—national and state-level polling; President Barack Obama’s rising favorability; the decent if not great state of the economy; campaign fundraising; and on-the-ground infrastructure—point to a victory for Democratic nominee and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in both the popular vote and the Electoral College. Even with polarization of the electorate along party lines, the strong desire for change among the electorate, and the serious personal doubts many voters have about Clinton, Trump has failed thus far to convince a solid majority of Americans that he is fit to lead the country. On the four major poll aggregation sites, Trump trails Clinton by 3 to 5 percentage points nationally at the end of September after the first presidential debate and has never led consistently at any point in the campaign.²

As outlined in our December 2015 report “The Path to 270 in 2016,” the nomination of Trump, and his subsequent actions as the nominee, strongly suggest a political strategy based upon maximizing white turnout and vote preference, particularly among white non-college-educated voters, rather than trying to broaden the Republican Party’s appeal to reach more diverse voters.³ The Electoral College path for this strategy appears to involve trying to win Florida plus a significant chunk of Midwest states to achieve a narrow victory built on the votes of white Republicans and independents, as well as hoped-for lower Democratic enthusiasm for Clinton.

There is little evidence to date that this strategy is working well enough to produce a solid victory. Although the race has tightened in recent weeks, including in some key states such as Florida and Ohio, Trump is behind nationally and is trailing on average in nearly all of the major battleground states.⁴ He is losing badly with voters of color and—more surprisingly—is underperforming substantially relative to former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney among white, college-educated voters.⁵ In the process of trying to attract disenchanted non-college-educated whites with a tough message on immigration, national security, and global trade, he has driven significant numbers of white, college-educated voters away from the Republican Party and toward voting for Clinton; voting for third-party candidates such as Libertarian and former new Mexico Gov. Gary Johnson; or potentially not voting at all.

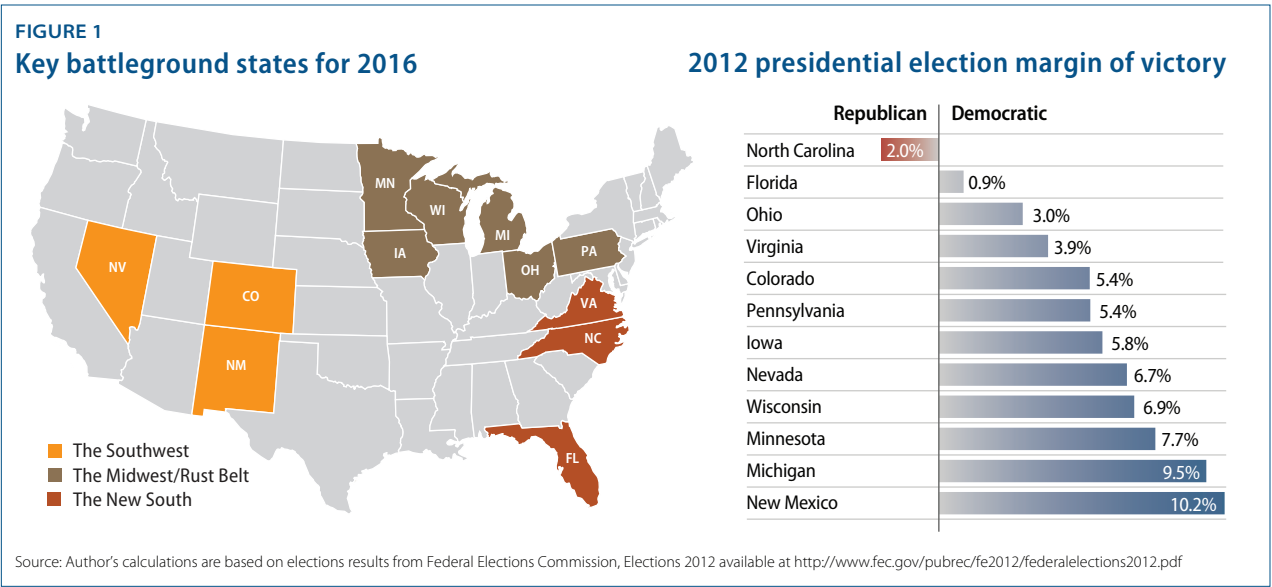
If the election were held this week, Trump would likely lose based on all of the available evidence. But, despite the Republican nominee's seemingly narrow political strategy, the eventual outcome of the race is not yet a foregone conclusion for a number of reasons.

First and foremost, a significant percentage of voters remain discontented with the state of politics overall and with the specific choices they face between Clinton and Trump, both of whom are viewed quite unfavorably outside of their core voting bases. At the end of September, Hillary Clinton's unfavorable ratings remain in the mid-50s and Donald Trump's unfavorable ratings are closer to 60 percent or higher.⁶ This larger dissatisfaction creates uncertainty about overall voter turnout and vote choice. Currently, about 7 percent of voters nationally are undecided about the election and another 10 percent say they will support third-party candidates Gary Johnson or Jill Stein. And the rates of potential third-party support are even higher among younger, Millennial generation voters that the Democrats hope to attract.⁷ These trends are more pronounced at the national level than in the battleground states, but they could alter the outcome of the election in unpredictable ways if they hold through November 8.

Second, it is not clear at this stage whether the Democrats will be fully able to recreate or approximate the electorate that twice elected President Obama to office. To date, there is little evidence of core Democratic voters turning to Trump.⁸ But it is conceivable that lingering questions about Clinton among younger voters and among supporters of Bernie Sanders could reduce turnout levels in ways that amplify the effect of third-party support when coupled with strong turnout from

Trump’s core base. However, there is solid evidence in polling at this stage that the Clinton campaign is offsetting any potential reduced enthusiasm among core Democratic voters with significant inroads into the Republican-leaning white, college-educated bloc, especially women.⁹

This report explores in detail the national and state-level demographic and voting trends as they exist in late September just after the first presidential debate; the possible influence of factors such as a potentially large third-party vote, a widening gender gap, and differentials in campaign effort levels; and the basic strategies both parties need to deploy in order to achieve victory.



	D—2012	R—2012	Projected change in share of actual voters, 2012 to 2016
Minorities	81%	17%	2
White college graduates	44%	55%	1
White working class	38%	60%	-3

Note: Due to rounding error, the numbers in the projected change in share column may not sum to zero.

Sources: 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 from the Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Survey 2014: June* (2014), available at <https://cps.ipums.org/cps/>; data 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/H4T1447> (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 of 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/>.

The demography and geography of the path to 270

In our 2015 report, our national analysis broke down the electorate into three key groups—racial and ethnic minorities, college-educated whites, and non-college-educated, or working-class, whites. Using these three groups, we discussed various scenarios that might result in a Clinton or Trump victory. We found, in brief, that Clinton should be significantly advantaged in 2016 by demographic change, especially a projected increase in voters of color and decrease in white, working-class voters. We further found that if minority support for Clinton in 2016 matches minority support of Democrats in recent presidential elections, she could absorb quite a lot of falloff in her support among white, working-class voters and still win the election. The latter is even more likely if support for Clinton among white, college-educated voters does not diminish relative to that obtained by President Obama.

We will revisit this assessment here, based on polling and demographic data that are now available. In particular, we will consider the following:

- How much demographic change can we expect to see in the 2016 election?
- Will Clinton's racial and ethnic minority support be as high in 2016 as Obama's was in 2012?
- Will Clinton's support among college-educated whites hold up relative to Obama's in 2012?
- Will Trump's advantage among white, working-class voters be large enough for him to win?

How much demographic change can we expect to see in the 2016 election?

As seen in Figure 1, combining observed change in the demographic structure of the eligible electorate with expected turnout rates, we anticipate that the total racial and ethnic minority share of voters will rise 2 percentage points above its 2012 level. This increase will likely be split between a 1 point increase in the share of Latino voters and a 1 point increase in the combined share of voters who are black, Asian, another non-white race, or multiracial.

Conversely, the white share of voters should decline by 2 percentage points. However, the decline is likely to be much sharper among white non-college-educated voters—3.4 points—while the share of white, college-educated voters should actually rise by about 1.4 points.¹⁰

Will Clinton's racial and ethnic minority support be as high in 2016 as Obama's was in 2012?

The minority vote in the polls appears rock solid for Clinton as we head toward November, with Clinton's margin of support among voters of color looking very much like that received by President Obama in 2012. Indeed, the question at this point may be less whether she can match Obama's margin of support than whether she can exceed it.

This starts with Clinton's overwhelming backing from black voters, as Trump's support from black voters is vanishingly small in many polls.¹¹ But the key development is the extreme unpopularity of Trump among Latino voters, which is leading to margins for Clinton among these voters that are frequently larger than those enjoyed by Obama.¹²

It therefore seems likely that Clinton will match or exceed Obama's dominance of the minority vote. The chances of significant falloff in Democratic minority support in 2016 appear small.

Will Clinton's support among college-educated whites hold up relative to Obama's in 2012?

This is perhaps this election's most significant trend detected by polling data. Not only is Clinton not losing ground among white college-educated voters relative to Obama in 2012, she appears to be vastly exceeding the level of support he was able to gain among this demographic. Our estimate is that President Obama lost white college-educated voters by 11 points in 2012; the consensus of polling data this cycle is that Clinton is carrying college-educated whites by 6 points or more.¹³ This is remarkable; Democrats have not carried college-educated whites in a presidential election for 60 years.

Will Trump's advantage among white working-class voters be large enough for him to win?

These developments give Clinton a considerable buffer against expected weakness among white non-college-educated voters. Indeed, if the minority and white college-educated votes hold up as well in November as they have in recent polling, Trump needs to generate a huge margin among white, working-class voters to have a decent chance of winning: 46 points, more than twice the 22-point margin Romney received in 2012.

Trump's problem, however, is that he has not been remotely close to that level of support among white, working-class voters. Instead, he has been only running at or slightly above Romney's performance among these voters in 2012.¹⁴ This is far from what he will need to win, given the size and leanings of the rest of the electorate. Thus, to be successful, Trump needs to vastly exceed his currently observed level of support among white, working-class voters. Either that or substantially improve his performance among people of color or—more plausibly—white, college-educated voters.

This analysis of the national popular vote does not bode well for Trump. Presidents are elected through the electoral votes of the states, however, not the national popular vote—though typically the popular vote is a very good predictor of who wins the election. Looking at trends and demographics of individual swing states, it is easier to see a path for Trump here; however, for the same demographic reasons outlined above, the hill to climb is still steep.

His basic problem is as follows. First, the racial and ethnic minority vote is highly likely to increase in every swing state and highly likely to favor Clinton as it favored Obama in 2012. Strike one.

Second, it appears highly likely that there will be a significant shift among white, college-educated voters in swing states toward Clinton relative to President Obama's support among these voters in 2012. Strike two.

To counteract the effects of these shifts, Trump needs a very large increase in his margin among white non-college-educated voters in a given swing state, who will likely decrease as a share of voters unless there is an unprecedented surge in turnout, relative to that obtained by Romney in 2012. If that increase is not large enough? Strike three.

This does not mean that Trump cannot solve this equation, at least in some states, but it does mean that putting enough swing states together to win will likely be difficult. This is especially the case when states the Republicans won in 2012—North Carolina, particularly, but also Georgia and Arizona—are in play and could potentially subtract from their total.

To illustrate the difficulty, consider the must-win state of Ohio, which was very close in 2012 and has underlying demographics that are relatively good for Trump—that is, a very high level of white non-college-educated voters and a relatively small population of people of color. A reasonable guess from polls is that Clinton will carry white college-educated voters in Ohio by at least 3 points. Given that, Trump will need to carry Ohio white working-class voters by about 30 points—nearly double Romney's performance in 2012. Although this is one of Trump's best swing states and a number of polls have found him with a narrow lead in the state, Trump has not cleared that bar consistently among white non-college-educated voters in Ohio polls. Unless this changes, he will have difficulty carrying the state when the votes are counted in November.

Or take Florida, the closest state in 2012: Trump almost certainly needs to win to get to 270 electoral votes but the demographics are less favorable for him than in Ohio. As in most states, we should see an improvement in Clinton's performance among white, college-educated voters relative to Obama, judging from the polls. Conservatively, assuming that this improvement does not allow Clinton to carry white, college-educated voters but only drops the Democrats' hefty 2012 deficit

down to 5 points, Trump would then need to carry Florida's white non-college-educated voters by 38 points, again about double Romney's margin in 2012. That 38-point advantage is not out of the question, but is larger than that typically attained by Trump in current Florida polls, even those that show him with a slight overall lead in the state. Again, come Election Day he will likely have to do better among this key demographic to actually carry the state.

Finally, the hill gets even steeper when we look at a state like Pennsylvania, coveted by the Trump campaign as part of their Rust Belt strategy but carried fairly easily by Obama in 2012. Polls indicate a very substantial shift of white, college-educated voters toward the Democrats, creating an advantage for Clinton in the low double digits. In such a situation, Trump would have to carry white non-college-educated voters by about 36 points, well more than double Romney's 2012 margin in the state.

That's the situation on the state level for Trump: not impossible but difficult. But if he can reduce the shift of white, college-educated voters toward Clinton in swing states, the margins he will need among white non-college-educated voters will be much more feasible. That is the path he will likely need to follow to achieve victory.

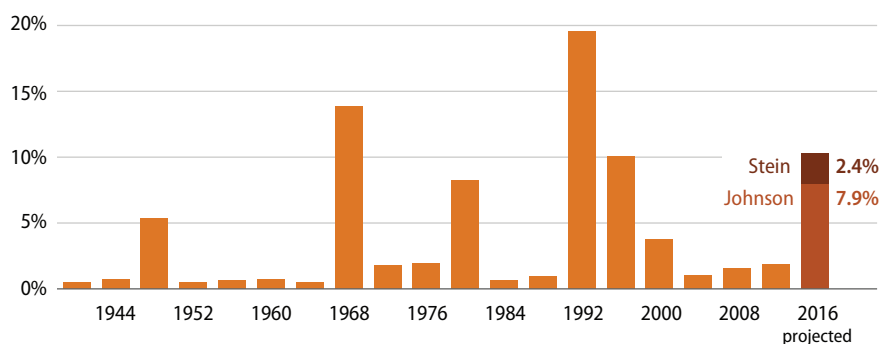
The potential influence of third parties in 2016

Since the American Civil War, the United States has had two relatively stable political parties. As can be seen in Figure 2, only a few electoral cycles in recent history have had third-party or independent candidates receive more than a few percentage points of the national vote. Notably, the revolt of southern Democrats in 1968 propelled George Wallace to almost 14 percent of the national vote and won him 46 votes in the Electoral College. More recently, Ross Perot managed to capture about 19 percent and 8 percent of the vote in 1992 and 1996.

FIGURE 2

High third-party vote expected in 2016

Share of third-party vote in presidential elections, 1940–2016



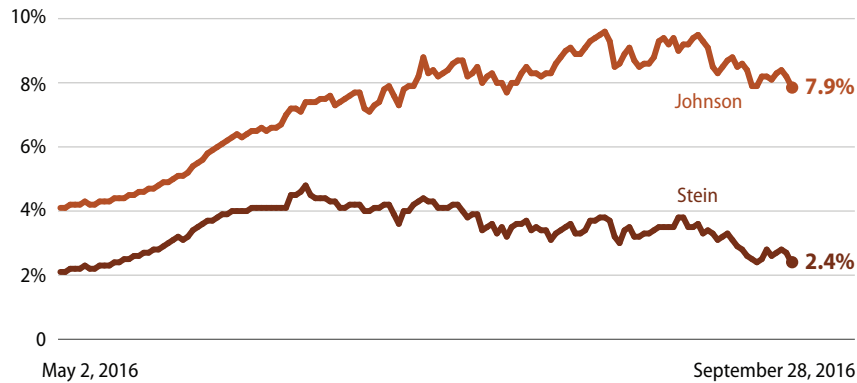
Sources: David Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, "2012 Presidential General Election Results," available at <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/> (last accessed September 2016); authors' analysis of polling data from RealClearPolitics, "General Election: Trump vs. Clinton vs. Johnson vs. Stein," available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton-5491.html (last accessed September 2016).

Although we are still about a month out from the election, it would appear that 2016 will be another high performance year for third-party candidates. As a result of both a contentious primary season and historically low approval ratings among major party candidates, Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson and Green Party candidate Jill Stein are collectively polling at about 10 percent.

Historically, these numbers tend to decline as Election Day approaches and partisan loyalties are activated in the electorate, but 2016 may buck this trend. Looking at Figure 3, we can see that Johnson and Stein's collective standing has increased since early May.

FIGURE 3
Third-party support stable heading into November

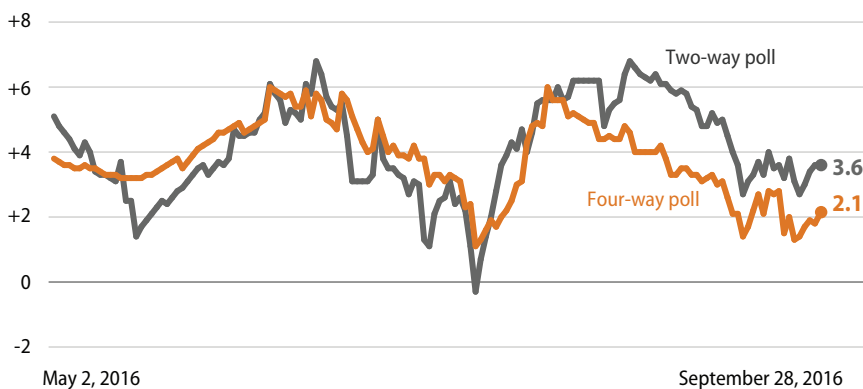
Share of voters supporting Gary Johnson and Jill Stein



Sources: Authors' analysis of polling data from RealClearPolitics, "General Election: Trump vs. Clinton," available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton-5491.html (last accessed September 2016); RealClearPolitics, "General Election: Trump vs. Clinton vs. Johnson vs. Stein," available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton_vs_johnson_vs_stein-5952.html (last accessed September 2016).

FIGURE 4
Clinton's lead affected by third-party candidates

Clinton's lead in four-way polls vs. two-way polls



Sources: Authors' analysis of polling data from RealClearPolitics, "General Election: Trump vs. Clinton," available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton-5491.html (last accessed September 2016); RealClearPolitics, "General Election: Trump vs. Clinton vs. Johnson vs. Stein," available at http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2016/president/us/general_election_trump_vs_clinton_vs_johnson_vs_stein-5952.html (last accessed September 2016).

That said, how are third parties influencing the race so far? Currently, their presence is giving Trump a slight advantage in the polls. In Figure 4, we have plotted out two values—the difference between Clinton’s and Trump’s support in polls that only ask about the two major candidates and the difference in polls that also include Johnson and Stein. The measure is calculated so that positive values indicate a lead in the polls for Clinton and negative values indicate a lead for Trump.

As can be seen, Clinton’s lead in the two-party polls was about 2 points higher than her lead in the four-party polls shortly after the conventions, but coming into September, the differences shrunk. At present, Clinton is polling about 1.5 points better in two-way polls than she is in polls that include Johnson and Stein. If this lead continues to narrow, and more importantly is replicated in key battleground states, the third-party influence could be significant this election.

The gender gap in 2016

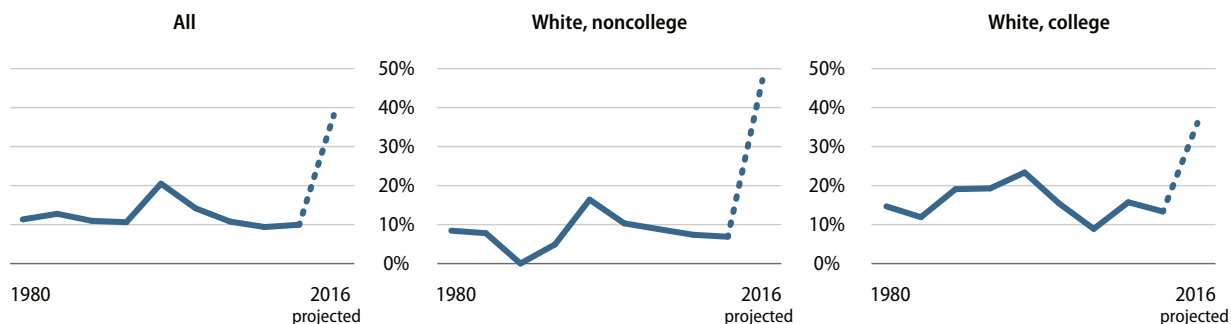
Amid the flurry of idiosyncrasies and singular features that have defined the 2016 election cycle, it is easy to lose sight of its historic nature. It is the first election with a woman running as the candidate of a major political party. In modern American politics, gender has typically been a minor divide compared to other demographic divisions. The turnout rates of men and women are different but not as far apart as the ones between high- and low-income Americans.¹⁵ There are notable gender gaps in party identification but not nearly as large as the ones between racial groups. That said, early indications suggest that this year may be different.

To place this race in context, it is helpful to look at comparable prior elections—races where a candidate from an underrepresented group ran for office for the first time. What we typically find in elections such as these is a higher level of turnout and support among the relevant social groups. For example, John F. Kenney, running in 1960, had a 56-point advantage over Richard Nixon among Catholics—an incredible feat considering that the previous Democratic candidate only won Catholics by 2 percentage points. Similarly, President Obama not only increased the Democratic vote margin among black voters in 2008 but also won the first election—in 2012—in which black turnout surpassed that of whites.

In Figure 5, we have graphed the gender gap in the vote margin for three groups—all voters, white college-educated voters, and white non-college-educated voters.¹⁶ Each value represents the difference between the vote margins of men and the vote margins of women in a given presidential election. Vote margins for each gender are calculated as the percent that voted for the Democratic candidate minus the percent that voted for the Republican candidate. Positive values therefore indicate that women voted more Democratic than men in that election, while negative values indicate the opposite.

FIGURE 5
Historically large gender gap expected in 2016

Gender gap in net democratic support, 1980–2016



Sources: Authors' analysis of polling data from Langer Research, "ABC News/Washington Post Poll: 2016 Election Pre-debate," available at <http://www.langerresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/1182a12016ElectionPredebate.pdf> (last accessed September 2016); American National Election Studies, "Data Center," available at http://www.electionstudies.org/studypages/download/-datacenter_all_NoData.php (last accessed September 2016).

What is clear is that although women have generally been more supportive of Democratic candidates than men, the size of that difference will potentially be larger than we have ever seen in the past several decades. The largest difference on record for all voters, white college-educated voters, and white non-college-educated voters is 20 percent, 23 percent, and 16 percent, respectively.¹⁷ Based on current polling data, the gender gaps for these groups will reach historic highs at 38 percent, 36 percent, and 47 percent, respectively.¹⁸

If turnout among women follows a similar pattern, this may well provide a crucial advantage to Clinton and the Democrats on Election Day, based on these projected gaps.

The influence of campaigns in 2016

The 2016 cycle has been singular in many regards, and the different campaign infrastructures built by both Clinton and Trump are no exception. Well-funded and grounded on the infrastructure and expertise of President Obama's 2008 and 2012 efforts, Clinton is running perhaps the most technically sophisticated and data-driven campaign in American history. In contrast, Trump has eschewed many modern campaign tactics and did not dedicate any significant resources to traditional ground game operations until September.¹⁹ Trump's nontraditional campaign structure has been more successful at generating media attention and in attracting small donors than previous GOP candidates, but it remains to be seen if these developments can overcome deficits in more traditional campaign measures.

So what does this mean in terms of their chances to win?

Political scientists have long debated the efficacy of various campaign tactics. Within the mainstream of that conversation, it is generally agreed that each candidate's campaign has an effect but that the two camps are typically so evenly matched that their efforts only matter during very close races. In short, presidential campaigns matter but typically only at the margins because of a rough parity between the opposing operations.²⁰

However, this is one of the few presidential elections in modern history where that parity condition might not be met. As a single data point, consider the gap between the number of campaign offices Clinton has opened in swing states and the number opened by Trump. As recently as August 29, Hillary Clinton's campaign had more than twice as many offices in Ohio, 13 times the number in Pennsylvania, and an astounding 32 times as many in Florida.²¹

According to a recent study of campaign effects by Ryan Enos and Anthony Fowler, the collective efforts of campaigns increase turnout in competitive states by an average of 8 points.²² As an example, imagine a scenario where Trump's campaign is half as effective as Clinton's at turning out its likely voters, given the evident gaps in resources. Under that scenario, Clinton's superior campaign operations would still allow her to win even in states where she was down by about 3 points.

None of this suggests an inevitable win for Clinton, but it is almost certainly an advantage for her and the Democrats going into November.

What do Democrats and Republicans need to do to win in 2016?

Leaving aside speculative “October surprises,” such as a national security emergency or new revelations about one of the candidates, the necessary strategic decisions of both parties and candidates seem fairly clear based on our analysis of existing empirical trends.

On the Democratic side, Hillary Clinton’s campaign needs to ensure that core Democratic turnout is as high as possible—and at least as high as November 2012 levels—to be relatively certain of victory. The Clinton campaign spent the bulk of the summer criticizing a potential Donald Trump presidency as a means of motivating base voters and attracting independents and Republican-leaning suburban voters. This made sense as part of an overall path to victory. But the Democrats will need to do more in the upcoming weeks, and in the remaining presidential debates, to show their voters and other more skeptical Americans exactly what Clinton’s vision is for the country and what specifically she would do to bring about economic and political change.

The Clinton campaign has developed many policy proposals and ideas they say will bring about change voters want, particularly in areas related to jobs, fair taxation, family economic security, and college affordability. Clinton and the Democrats must now elevate these ideas in ways that make a vote choice for Clinton a clear affirmation of her progressive agenda and policies rather than merely a rejection of Trump’s approach to the country’s problems. Issues of political reform will also be critical for an electorate deeply distrustful of traditional politicians, the role of money in politics, and partisan gridlock.²³

With low personal favorability numbers and concerns about defections to third-party candidates, Clinton and the Democrats need to convince young people, people of color, and other potentially skeptical audiences that they will not only protect President Obama’s legacy but also go further in addressing their remaining desires for economic and political reform.

On the Republican side, Trump's campaign faces a much steeper climb at this point if he wants to achieve victory. To maximize his chances, Trump's campaign will need to abandon its full-throated strategy of vote maximization among conservative white working-class voters—which has been inadequate so far—in favor of one that expands his appeal more broadly to voters strongly desiring change. Given Trump's difficulties in places such as Virginia, Colorado, and even Pennsylvania, Trump will conceivably need to win Florida plus at least three Midwest states, such as Ohio, Iowa, and Wisconsin, plus another state such as Nevada, to garner an Electoral College majority. Conservative white votes alone will not deliver these states.

This is a huge challenge for a campaign built upon personal traits and a policy agenda that appears to cater primarily to white voters.

Trump, even more than Clinton, suffers from extremely low personal favorability ratings, and he cannot bank on white men alone propelling him to victory, no matter how wide the margin may be with this group. In the remaining weeks and through the final two debates, Trump must present more stability and a command of domestic and international issues if he wants to blunt Clinton's gains among college-educated whites. He will need to convince a larger percentage of women, people of color, and young people that his vision of radical change will work for them rather than against them. He must show genuine respect to these voters and offer them real solutions to their problems if he hopes to improve upon his particularly low standing among this important segment of the electorate.

How voters ultimately judge the character, policy prescriptions, and overall stature of the two candidates remains the final wildcard in this election. Our analysis of the existing evidence and the fundamentals points to a victory for Clinton and the Democrats, assuming they deliver their voters. But Trump upended many expectations in the Republican primaries and has a path to victory—however narrow—should he allay voters' worries about his personality and successfully capitalize on their desire for change and disaffection with traditional politics and candidates.

About the authors

Ruy Teixeira specializes in the study of demographic change, voting behavior, and public opinion. He is a Senior Fellow at both The Century Foundation and the Center for American Progress and a co-director of the States of Change project. His books include *The Disappearing American Voter*; *America's Forgotten Majority: Why the White Working Class Still Matters*; *The Emerging Democratic Majority*; and *Red, Blue, and Purple America: The Future of Election Demographics*.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, American Progress can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

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