

Tipping the Scales

Immigration and Swing Districts in the 2018 Elections

Introduction

Just one week out from the 2018 midterm elections, the U.S. electoral landscape is in flux. The prevailing narrative out of the 2016 election focused on the power of the white vote, and particularly that of the white working class.¹ However, the swing districts at the center of the midterm elections this year suggest that the narrative come Election Day may be quite different. Using *The Cook Political Report's Partisan Voting Index* (PVI), which measures how strongly each congressional district leans towards the Democratic or Republican Party, New American Economy (NAE) analyzed the 45 districts with the smallest leans.² In the majority of these districts, the white share of the electorate has decreased over the last two years while the share of immigrant, Asian American, and Hispanic American voters has increased—and often dramatically.³ While leading demographers have long noticed this trend nationally, this new brief shows just how quickly this shift is happening in the districts that will play a major role in deciding who controls the next Congress.⁴

Despite frequent declarations among some pundits that “demographics are destiny,” it is far from obvious which party will win the support of the minority and immigrant voters. Some of the key voting blocs discussed in this brief do not have universal or predictable voting patterns. For example, most analysts agree that in 2016 President Trump did no worse among Hispanic voters than Mitt Romney did four years earlier.⁵ Past research by NAE has shown that immigrants have particularly low levels of party affiliation and, on some social issues, tend to lean more conservative.⁶ Voter turnout also matters. While white voter turnout consistently outpaces minority voter turnout, that gap widened in 2016 for some key groups. For example, Hispanic voters, who many expected to turn out in larger numbers in 2016, actually voted at a slightly lower rate than in 2012.⁷ And local factors, national events or crises, and political issues of the day may influence elections more than any demographic shifts. Yet even with all of these factors at play, what we know for sure is that the white share of the electorate will continue to decline, especially in some of the most critical swing states, like Pennsylvania, Nevada, Florida, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

This is the story of the changing American electorate. Looking at the 45 most competitive districts, those with PVI scores between plus or minus 3 percentage points,⁸ NAE analyzed the U.S. citizen population over the age of 18, a group referred to throughout this brief as “the electorate,” to show how markedly more diverse these districts have become over the last election cycle.

These districts vary demographically as much as they do geographically—from highly educated suburban districts, to districts on the border, to inland districts predominated by farms and ranches. But despite these differences, our findings reveal some common threads. In all but one of the districts we surveyed, white voters will have decreased as a share of each district's total electorate between 2016 and 2018 and will further decrease between 2018 and 2020. Meanwhile, between 2016 and 2018, the Hispanic population is expected to increase as a share of the electorate in 37 of the 45 districts, the foreign-born population is

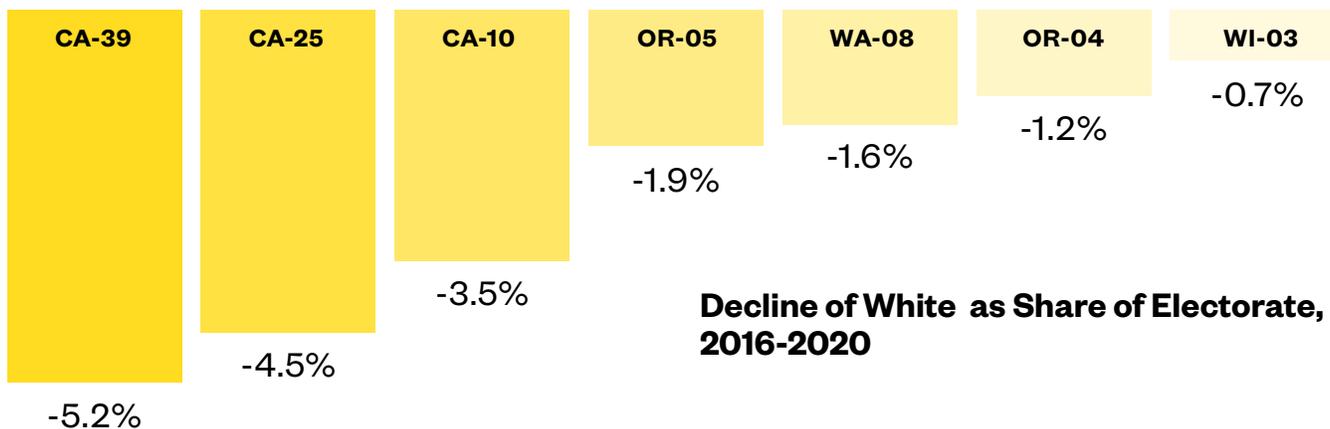
expected to increase in 34 of the 45 districts, and the Asian-American population is expected to increase in 39 of the 45 districts.

Moreover, in the seven districts where the PVI score is zero—in other words, where the congressional races are starting off dead even—the white population is expected to decrease as a share of the total electorate by 2.5 percent from 2016 to 2020—a dramatic change as the country enters the midterm elections and begins to fix its sights on the next Presidential race. Put simply, slight but continuous demographic changes will be an increasingly important factor in the 2018 elections and beyond.

TABLE 1

Changes in the White Share of the Electorate in Districts Where PVI is Even, 2016-2020

Congressional District	Share of electorate, 2016	Share of electorate, 2018	Share of electorate, 2020	Change in share, 2016-2020
CA-39	35.8%	33.4%	30.6%	-5.2%
CA-25	50.4%	47.8%	45.9%	-4.5%
CA-10	54.0%	52.1%	50.5%	-3.5%
OR-05	83.6%	82.7%	81.7%	-1.9%
WA-08	80.0%	79.1%	78.4%	-1.6%
OR-04	88.8%	88.2%	87.6%	-1.2%
WI-03	94.5%	94.1%	93.8%	-0.7%



Meanwhile, increases in the number of residents in each district who identify as non-white or as foreign-born are making the electorate more diverse over time. In past work, we predicted that the Hispanic population will experience especially rapid growth at the national level through 2020.⁹ A closer look reveals that the share of Hispanic voters is growing specifically in some of the most contested races this year. The share of the Hispanic electorate will increase as a share of the electorate in 38 of the 45 districts we surveyed between 2016 and 2018, and in 39 of those districts between 2018 and 2020. Looking at all 45 districts together, we find that the Hispanic population is expected to increase as a share of the total electorate by 1.3 percent over those four years. That amounts to an increase of more than 400,000 (402,233) people. Meanwhile, the Asian-American electorate is similarly poised to shape future elections. Among the 45 districts we surveyed, the Asian-American electorate will increase as a share of the electorate in 39 of the 45 districts we surveyed between 2016 and 2018. Looking again at all 45 districts from 2016 to 2020, we see that the Asian-American population will increase as a share of the total electorate by 0.6 percent, or by nearly 190,000 (187,940) people. Considering that the white vote will simultaneously decrease by nearly 60,000 people (59,412, or 2.2 percent) across these same 45 districts over the same period, the significance of the increase in the share of the Hispanic and Asian American electorates is profound.

TABLE 2

Changes in White Population, Hispanic, and AAPI Population as Share of the Electorate in PVI +/-3 districts, 2016-2020

Eligible voters	Share of electorate, 2016	Share of electorate, 2018	Share of electorate, 2020	Change in share, 2016-2020
White	76.3%	75.1%	74.1%	-2.2%
Hispanic	11.0%	11.7%	12.3%	1.3%
Asian-American	5.1%	5.4%	5.7%	0.6%

Beyond the change in ethnic diversity of the electorate, the change in share of the foreign-born population eligible to vote will add a new dimension to future elections. Among the 45 districts we surveyed, our analysis shows that 34 are expected to see an increase in the size of their foreign-born electorate between 2016 and 2018.

Importantly, much of this increase in foreign-born population is happening in the very districts where the white vote is declining the fastest. Drilling down to the 20 districts where the white population as a share of the electorate is declining the fastest—districts that will most acutely feel the effects of the demographic changes discussed here—we find that over 114,000 foreign-born residents will have either naturalized or turned 18 and gained eligibility to vote between 2016 and 2018. An additional 98,000 will gain eligibility to vote by 2020, bringing the total change over those four years to nearly a quarter of a million (212,597) across these 20 districts alone. These numbers mean that naturalized citizens—a population likely to be profoundly affected by federal immigration legislation in the coming years—will play an increasingly important role in elections in those districts.

TABLE 3

White and Foreign-Born Electorate in Selected Districts Where the Decrease in White Voters is Largest, 2016-2020

Congressional District	Partisan Voting Index (PVI) score	Change in share 2016-2020, white	Change in number 2016-2020, white	Change in share 2016-2020, foreign-born	Change in number 2016-2020, foreign-born
CA-36	D+2	-6.7%	-11,462	1.2%	12,006
CA-39	Even	-5.2%	-23,708	2.5%	13,684
CA-25	Even	-4.5%	-3,208	0.5%	9,891
NY-02	R+3	-4.4%	-12,421	3.9%	22,168
NY-11	R+3	-4.1%	-19,578	3.5%	18,043

The electoral shifts discussed above are coming to a head in a few of what are shaping up to be November's most contentious elections. One need only look at California District 49 (CA-49; PVI R+1), currently held by retiring Republican Representative Darrell Issa. In 2016, Issa won his congressional seat by just 5,328 votes, and that margin of victory could narrow significantly this year.¹⁰ The data shows that CA-49 experienced the largest increase in the foreign-born electorate among the 45 districts we surveyed. In the two years since the 2016 election, the number of foreign-born eligible voters in CA-49 has increased by nearly 14,000 people, and by 2020, we predict the foreign-born electorate there will increase again by more than 13,000. In other words, the increase in foreign-born eligible voters will exceed Issa's 2016 congressional election margin of victory by nearly 9,000 people by 2018, and by nearly 22,000 people by 2020. The Asian-American Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Hispanic electorate in the district, meanwhile, increased by 1,000 (1,078) and 15,000 (15,444) people, respectively, between 2016 and 2018. With Issa set to retire, the new electoral makeup makes the race to replace him even more unpredictable.

A similar situation can be seen in Texas District 23 (TX-23, R+1), currently held by Republican William Hurd. In 2016, Hurd won his seat by a margin of only 3,767 votes. Since then, the foreign-born electorate in Hurd's district has increased by 2,206, while the Hispanic American electorate overall has increased by 17,671 and the AAPI American electorate overall has increased by 1,245.¹¹ In sum, the minority voting eligible population over just two years in this district increased by 18,916 people—more than five times greater than Hurd's margin of victory in 2016.

Representatives Issa and Hurd are not alone in facing a new electoral landscape due to demographic change. In a total of four districts (CA-10; CA-25; CA-49; TX-23), between 2016 and 2018, the estimated increase in the minority electorate will actually exceed the 2016 margin of victory for the Republican

incumbent candidate. By 2020, that will be true for a total of five districts (all of the aforementioned districts in addition to MN-02).

In other competitive districts, increases in minority voters and naturalized citizens do not exceed the 2016 margins of victory. They do, however, signal a diversifying electorate that significantly raises the stakes of leaving minority populations out of future campaign platforms and key policy decisions. New York District 11 (NY-11; R+3), for example, which is currently held by Republican Representative Dan Donovan who won by 56,300 votes in 2016, experienced the largest increase in the size of the AAPI electorate between 2016 and 2018 among districts we surveyed, as well as one of the largest increases in size of the foreign-born electorate. Meanwhile, California District 36 (CA-36; D+2), held by Democrat Raul Ruiz who won by 49,203 votes in 2016, was the site of the largest increase in the Hispanic electorate.

TABLE 4

Changes in Demographics Compared to 2016 Margins of Victory in Select Congressional Districts, 2016-2018

Congressional District	Partisan Voting Index (PVI) Score	Change 2016-2018, AAPI electorate	Change 2016-2018, Hispanic electorate	Change 2016-2018, foreign-born electorate	2016 Congressional Election Margin of Victory
CA-49	R+1	1,078	15,444	13,922	5,328
NY-11	R+3	7,734	2,312	8,445	56,300
CA-10	EVEN	-52	14,455	7,882	10,013
CA-36	D+2	1,311	26,771	6,959	49,203
CA-25	EVEN	6,498	15,387	6,176	17,472
TX-23	R+1	1,245	17,671	2,206	3,767

This brief has explored how, like the nation as a whole, the electorate is experiencing dramatic and sustained demographic change. These changes—white voters decreasing as a share of the electorate as the share of minority voters increases—will make it increasingly difficult for candidates to win elections with the support of only one segment of the population. Of course, elections depend on a number of factors—from voter turnout, to specific candidates, to the issues of the day. However, the bottom line remains that politicians would be remiss to ignore the demographic shifts of the districts they aim to represent after November 2018.

Methodology

For this brief, we rely on data for congressional districts from the American Community Survey, 5-year estimates, from 2013-2016. These data are estimates calculated by the U.S. Census Bureau and made available in aggregate for each district on the U.S. Census' FactFinder data portal.

The data for and each demographic group in each district is then analyzed via linear regression to forecast for the population totals for each group in 2018 and 2020.

Endnotes

- 1 In this brief, we use the shorthand “white” to refer to non-Hispanic whites.
- 2 The Cook Political Report. 2017. “Partisan Voting Index Districts of the 115th Congress (Arranged by State/District).”
- 3 Although each of these three groups are analyzed separately in this brief, it is important to note that there is overlap between the groups. For example, some Hispanic voters are also foreign-born, and some foreign-born voters are non-Hispanic white.
- 4 Griffin, R., Teixeira, R., Frey, W. 2018. “America’s Electoral Future: Demographic Shifts and the Future of the Trump Coalition,” The Brookings Institution, April 2018. Available online: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/2018-19-4_metro_billfrey_electoralfuture-report2018.pdf
- 5 Five Thirty Eight. Nov. 18, 2016. “Trump Probably Did Better With Latino Voters Than Romney Did.”
- 6 New American Economy. Nov. 13, 2014. “Shared Values: How Immigrants Align with the Republican and Democratic Parties on Social Values Issues.”
- 7 The Brookings Institution. May 18, 2017. “Census shows pervasive decline in 2016 minority voter turnout.”
- 8 As of February 5, 2018, 49 districts had PVI scores between +/- 3 points. Two of those districts were located in Florida and two were located in Virginia, both of which underwent congressional redistricting ahead of the 2016 elections. For that reason, FL-07, FL-13, VA-02, and VA-10 were removed from the survey in this report, leaving 45 districts total.
- 9 New American Economy. 2015. “Interactive Voter Map,” available at: <https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/interactive-map-will-new-voters-impact-election-results/>
- 10 Information on margins of victory for 2016 House elections comes from: Politico. 2016. “2016 House Election Results.”
- 11 The Hispanic American and AAPI American voter pools include some foreign-born voters.