

Is the Republican Party Doomed?

Written by Steven Hurst

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STEVEN HURST, FEB 23 2013

A New Democratic Majority?

The emerging conventional wisdom on the Republican defeat in the 2012 presidential race is summed up in the observation of Senator Lindsey Graham that there are 'not enough... angry white guys' for the Republicans 'to stay in business for the long term'.^[1] Graham's remark was made before the election but it was reiterated by the conservative polling organization *Resurgent Republic* in its analysis of the election result:

'The handwriting is on the wall. Until Republican candidates figure out how to perform better among non-white voters, especially Hispanics and Asians, Republican presidential contenders will have an extraordinarily difficult time winning presidential elections from this point forward.'^[2]

The logic underpinning these conclusions is based on a statistical analysis of the outcome of the presidential election and the demographic realities which underpinned it.

If we look at the data we find that Mitt Romney won the white vote by 20 percent (59-39), had a 7 point lead amongst men and a 12 percent lead amongst those over 65. Obama meanwhile, had overwhelming leads amongst minorities, carrying African Americans by 87 percent, Hispanics by 44 percent and Asian-Americans by 47 percent^[3]. He also won the female vote 55 to 45 percent and he had a 23 percentage point advantage amongst those aged 18-29 and a 7 point advantage amongst those aged 30-45.

The Republican problem, the argument goes, is that while thirty years ago that distribution of votes would have given Romney a landslide victory (59 percent is the proportion of the white vote Ronald Reagan won in 1984) it did not do so in 2012 because whites are a steadily declining proportion of the American electorate, falling 87 percent of voters to 72 percent since 1992.^[4] Moreover, that trend is set to continue, with the United States predicted to become a majority-minority country by 2050.^[5] With Obama also winning amongst the young and those with a post-graduate education the argument can be simply summed up in the following terms: The Republican demographic base, which is overwhelmingly white, predominantly male and aging, is shrinking, while the Democratic base of minorities, women, professionals and the young is growing.

The reason why the Democrats are doing so well amongst these groups, it is argued, is that the worldview and values of this expanding electorate are far more in tune with those of the Democrats than they are with the contemporary Republican Party. These groups have broadly liberal social values and majorities of them are supportive of gay marriage and multiculturalism. They are also much more likely than the typical Republican voter to regard it as appropriate for the government to take the central role in dealing with social problems.^[6] However, the biggest problem for the Republicans in most observers' eyes is their restrictionist stance on immigration and the impediment this presents to their making inroads with Hispanic voters.

The currently prevailing analysis of the 2012 elections and their implications is therefore that there is an emerging majority of voters in the United States whose values and policy preferences are discordant with the conservatism of the contemporary Republican Party and if the latter does not trim its policy positions to that reality it risks becoming a minority party for the foreseeable future.^[7]

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Reasons for Republicans to be cheerful?

Naturally that conclusion is not universally accepted, not least amongst Republicans (though there are a significant number who agree with much of it). Nevertheless, many of the objections made so far have something of a 'whistling in the dark' quality to them, as Republicans latch on to any reason other than their ideology and policies to explain away their defeat. Romney's weakness as a candidate, the Democrats' superior ground game and Hurricane Sandy are all regularly wheeled out for this purpose. Also popular is the 'just wait and see' line of argument which insists that the Republicans must stick to their guns because their policies are right and eventually people will recognise that fact, if only when the Democrats' continued expansion of government and the ever-increasing deficit lead to disaster.[8] Whilst there is a grain of truth in the first three claims and there may yet be in the final one, they remain convenient excuses rather than persuasive arguments at this point.

Which is not to say that there are no good arguments that contradict the emerging Democratic majority thesis. The most cogent of these is that made by Sean Trende in his 2012 book, *The Lost Majority*. [9] Trende seeks to refute the notion that there are ever long-lasting majority coalitions of the kind described above. He argues that all electoral coalitions are essentially fissiparous, with factions falling out with each other almost from the moment the coalition is formed. When you add to that the choices parties do or do not make and the simple fact of contingency – economic cycles, wars, riots and all the other unforeseen events that can dramatically affect the political fates – then, he argues, hardly any group of voters is permanently attached to any party.

In relation to the current situation Trende raises a range of objections to the assumption that the Democrats now have a lock on the minority, and specifically the Hispanic, vote. Above all he objects to the notion that because Hispanics overwhelmingly vote Democrat now they will do so in future. If they follow the patterns established by earlier European immigrants, he argues, then, given their essentially conservative social values, once they become more affluent so more and more of them will shift their allegiance to the Republicans.

Evaluation and Conclusions

Trende's arguments serve as a necessary counter to some of the more hyperbolic statements about a new Democratic majority. His basic point about contingency is unarguable; a demographic advantage amongst voters does not guarantee a party electoral victory since a vast range of unpredictable variables can upset that basic advantage and return the 'minority' party to power. To that extent, the Republicans will always remain capable of winning elections. A majority of the American electorate may currently lean toward the Democrats, but if President Obama proves unable, for whatever reason, to deliver economic growth and immigration reform and to defend the social welfare programmes upon which many of his supporters continue to depend, we are quite likely to see a Republican elected to the White House in 2016.[10]

Nevertheless, no sane political party rests its electoral hopes on chance, which brings us to Trende's argument about the impact of the choices parties make. On the basis of his own analysis, Trende joins those who argue that the Republicans should stick to their guns and not trim to the centre. That analysis, however, is not without its problems. He is of course quite right to say that the loyalty of Hispanic voters to the Democratic Party cannot be guaranteed for decades to come and that projections about their share of the vote in 2050 are in that sense rather meaningless. Nevertheless, he and other conservatives sometimes seem to be resting their hopes on an equally flimsy assumption when they argue that Hispanics are natural social conservatives who, with increasing affluence, will more or less inevitably drift in significant numbers into the Republican camp.

The assumption of Trende and others that Hispanics are natural social conservatives is not borne out by the polling data. The 2012 exit poll results revealed two-thirds of Hispanic voters saying that abortion should be legal in most or all cases and 60 percent in favour of legalizing same sex marriage. Hispanics were also more likely to believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society and 9 percent more likely to describe themselves as liberal than the American population as a whole.[11] Given those social attitudes – attitudes, which are not likely to alter significantly with increasing affluence – Republicans are making a dangerous assumption if they think that a Hispanic migration away from the Democrats is somehow inevitable. Moreover, if they follow the logic of that assumption and do not

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adjust their policy positions to accommodate those social attitudes then they will make that migration even less likely as any group that votes heavily for a certain party over a sustained period of time develops habits and partisan loyalties that take a long time to change.

In sum, the Democrats do currently have an edge amongst the electorate and that edge is likely to continue to grow over the next decade or so. That edge will not automatically translate into election victories but Democratic victories will be much more likely if the Republican Party does not alter its stance on immigration reform and social issues because of a dubious assumption that the demographic trends will ineluctably alter in their favour at some unspecified point in the future.

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[1] Catherine Boyle. 'Secret to Romney's Defeat: Not enough "angry white guys"' CNBC.COM 7th November 2012 2012 http://www.cnbc.com/id/49722937/Secret_to_Romneysquos_Defeat_Not_Enough_IsquoAngry_White_Guysrsquo uo

[2] Resurgent Republic, '2012: The year changing demographics caught up with the Republicans' 10th November 2012 <http://www.resurgentrepublic.com/research/2012-the-year-changing-demographics-caught-up-with-republicans>

[3] Shane Goldmacher, 'Obama overwhelmingly won Asian-American vote' National Journal.com 8th November 2012 <http://www.nationaljournal.com/politics/obama-overwhelmingly-won-asian-american-vote-20121108>

[4] Charlie Cook, 'For Republicans, just doing the math is frightening' *National Journal* 17th January 2013

[5] Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohn, 'U.S. Population Projections: 2005-2050'

Pew research Social and Demographic Trends, 11th February 2008 <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2008/02/11/us-population-projections-2005-2050/>

[6] Celinda Lake, Michael Adams, and David Mermin, 'New voters, new values'. *The American Prospect*. 24.1 (January-February 2013) p 38.

[7] The Republicans did hold on to the House of Representatives, of course, but they did so because of the more efficient distribution of their voters and gerrymandering of electoral districts. They actually lost the popular vote for House seats and in time, if present trends continue, they will lose seats as well

[8] '53 leading American writers and thinkers answer the question: "what is the future of conservatism in the wake of the 2012 election?" A Commentary symposium', *Commentary* 135 (1) January 2013

[9] Sean Trende, *The Lost Majority: Why the Future of Government Is Up for Grabs – and Who Will Take It*, Palgrave Macmillan 2012).

[10] Continued Republican control of the House, and the extent to which they can use this to frustrate Obama's goals without being held responsible for the consequences, will thus be a critical factor over the next four years.

[11] Allison Kopicki and Will Irving, 'Assessing How Pivotal the Hispanic Vote Was to Obama's Victory' *The Caucus* 20th November 2012 <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/11/20/assessing-how-pivotal-the-hispanic-vote-was->

Is the Republican Party Doomed?

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to-obamas-victory/; Harry J. Enten, 'Five reasons Republicans won't win Latino voters with immigration reform' *The Guardian.co.uk* 29th January 2013 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/29/immigration-reform-republicans-latino-voters>

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