U.S. Elections

A Diverse Electorate

U.S. Department of State
Bureau of International Information Programs

Demographic Change

A U.S. voting booth does not ask about race, religion or ethnicity. The ballot carries the names of the candidates but not the name of the voter. The only personal data known about a voter are that the voter is at least 18 years of age and a U.S. citizen.

The composition of the U.S. electorate changes with every election. The voters to whom presidential candidates must appeal in 2012 have changed since Barack Obama was elected in 2008.

"The tectonic plates of American politics are shifting," analyst Ruy Teixeira writes in a paper prepared for the "Future of the Parties" conference at Kenyon College in March 2010. "A powerful concatenation of demographic forces is transforming the American electorate and reshaping both major political parties."

Data from the 2010 census show the minority population in the United States increased over the last decade by 30 percent (Hispanics by 43 percent), while the non-Hispanic white population grew 1 percent. The dramatic difference in growth rates means communities of color accounted for 92 percent of the U.S. population growth between 2000 and 2010. The 2010 minority share of the population was 36 percent, up more than 5 percentage points from 2000.

More Hispanics

Voter turnout varies significantly among races and ethnicities.

Only 42 percent of Hispanic Americans, for example, are eligible to vote, disqualified either by youth or lack of citizenship. In contrast, 77 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 66 percent of African Americans will be eligible to vote in 2012, according to a 2009 report from the University of Michigan's Population Studies Center.

However, the Hispanic portion of the U.S. voting electorate has grown steadily, from 2 percent in the early 1990s to 9 percent in 2008, and exit poll data suggest that the Hispanic participation rate is growing.

Analysts predict that by 2020 more ballots will be cast in U.S. elections by Hispanic Americans than by African Americans.

Asian Americans are another significant contributor to minority population growth, increasing about 26 percent in the past decade. In 2010, Asian Americans made up about 5 percent of the population and 2 percent of voters, according to a 2010 Brookings Institution report.

Top: The electorate is changing as minority populations grow far faster than the white population.
Right: Dallas storefront reflects the surge in Texas' Hispanic population, close to 40 percent of the state.

PHOTOS: ©AP IMAGES

Young Voters

Another key demographic for 2012 is the young-voter group — members of the millennial generation (those born in years 1979–2000). In 2008, they made up 18 percent of voters. That figure should be significantly larger in 2012 as more young people enter the voting pool. About 48 million millennials were eligible voters in 2008, a figure that has increased at a rate of about 4 million a year. Political analysts predict 35 million millennials will cast ballots in 2012, an estimated 26 percent of all voters.

The youth and diversity of the 2008 electorate helped elect candidate Barack Obama in 2008. Record numbers of young people voted in 2008, and 66% of voters ages 18 to 29 voted for Obama.

Even as religious diversity grows in the United States, there also has been a particularly rapid increase in secular voters. The percentage of adults reporting no religious affiliation almost tripled from 1944 to 2004, according to Teixeira, rising from 5 percent to 14 percent. If this trend continues, 20 to 25 percent of U.S. adults will be unaffiliated by 2024.

This trend — combined with growth among non-Christian faiths and race-ethnic trends — suggests that greater diversity will charaterize the U.S. populace.

Top left: Barack Obama's home of Chicago, Illinois, has an increasingly diverse electorate. Above left: A young woman votes in Dearborn, Michigan. Above right: Young voters helped elect Ed Lee as the first Asian-American mayor of San Francisco, California. Left: Voters wait in line to cast ballots in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

PHOTOS: ©AP IMAGES