

2020 VOTING COMPLEXITIES

Liberals Envisioned a Multiracial Coalition. Voters of Color Had Other Ideas.

Democrats may need to rethink their strategy as the class complexities and competing desires of Latino and Asian-American demographic groups become clear.



Voters in Los Angeles on Election Day. Californians chose not to overturn a state ban on affirmative action despite endorsements from powerful politicians. Credit...Gabriella Angotti-Jones for The New York Times

Michael Powell, *The New York Times* Online Edition, November 6, 2020; updated January 3, 2021.

The proposition seemed tailor-made for one of the nation's most diverse and liberal states. California officials asked voters to overturn a 24-year-old ban on affirmative action in education, employment and contracting.

The state political and cultural establishment worked as one to pass this ballot measure. The governor, a senator, members of Congress, university presidents and civil rights leaders called it a righting of old wrongs.

“Women and people of color are still at a sharp disadvantage by almost every measure,” The Los Angeles Times [wrote in an editorial endorsement](#).

Yet on Election Day, [the proposition failed by a wide margin](#), 57 percent to 43 percent, and Latino and [Asian-American voters](#) played a key role in defeating it. The outcome captured the gap between the vision laid out by the liberal establishment in California, which has long imagined the creation of a multiracial, multiethnic coalition that would embrace progressive causes, and the sentiments of many Black, Latino, Asian and Arab voters.

Variations of this puzzle could be found in surprising corners of the nation on Election Day, as slices of ethnic and racial constituencies peeled off and cut against Democratic expectations.

“We should not think of demography as destiny,” said Professor Omar Wasow, who studies politics and voting patterns at Princeton University. “These groups are far more heterogeneous than a monolith and campaigns often end up building their own idiosyncratic coalition.”



The California proposition that would have allowed affirmative action failed by a wide margin, 57 percent to 43 percent, and was voted down in each majority-Latino county. Credit...Lucy Nicholson/Reuters

Asian-American Californians opposed the affirmative action measure in large numbers. A striking number of East and South Asian students have gained admission to elite state universities, and their families spoke to reporters of their fear that their children would suffer if merit in college selection was given less weight. That battle carried echoes of another that raged the past few years in New York City, where a white liberal mayor’s efforts to increase the number of Black and Latino students in selective high schools angered working- and middle-class South and East Asian families whose children have gained admission to the schools in large numbers.

“There’s more texture to California blue politics than you might think,” said Lanhee Chen, a fellow at the conservative Hoover Institution at Stanford University and policy director for Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential run. “Identity politics only go so far. There is a sense on affirmative action that people resent being categorized by progressives.”

Latinos, too, appear sharply divided. Prominent Latino nonprofit and civil rights organizations endorsed the affirmative action proposition even as all 14 of California’s majority-Latino counties voted it down.

Latinos make up more than half of San Bernardino County’s population, although significantly fewer turn out to vote. More residents there voted on the affirmative action proposition than for president, rejecting it by a margin of 28 percentage points. In rural Imperial County, in the southeastern corner of the state, 85 percent of the population is Latino. The voters there who gave Joseph R. Biden Jr. a nearly 27-point margin of victory went against the affirmative action measure by 16 percentage points.

The results suggest that Democrats may need to adjust their strategy as the complexities of class, generation and experience, and the competing desires of these demographic groups become clear. Since the dawn of the 21st century, it has become commonplace for party leaders to talk of a rising demographic tide that is destined to lift the Democrats to dominance. That liberal coalition is seen as resting on a bedrock of upper-middle-class white voters, alongside working- and middle-class Black, Latino and Asian voters.

In broad strokes, that narrative held. Black voters, along with a shift in the white suburban vote, played a pivotal role in delivering Georgia to the Democratic column (although so closely that [a statewide audit ... \[took\] place](#)). So, too, Black voters in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia voted overwhelmingly for Democrats — as did well-to-do majority-white suburbs — and gave Pennsylvania and therefore the national election to President-elect Biden.

In Arizona, Latino voters piled up large margins for Mr. Biden and [tipped the state narrowly into the Democratic column](#) for the first time since 1996. Representative Ruben Gallego, the Democratic congressman from Phoenix who is a former Marine and a Harvard graduate, noted that several decades of aggressive tactics by Republican governors and white sheriffs had [stirred activism among the young Latinos](#) who dominate politics there.

“The Republicans caught Latino lightning in the bottle in Florida and South Texas, but not here,” Mr. Gallego said. “We are very politicized. It’s just important that white liberals don’t impose their thoughts and policies on us.”

Aside from those successes, however, the election presented complications wrapped one inside another for Democrats. In Texas and Florida, in California and in Colorado (where [New York Times exit polls](#) found that roughly 40 percent of white voters and 38 percent of Latino voters cast ballots for President Trump), the assumption that people of color would vote as a liberal Democratic bloc often proved illusory.



A billboard supporting Proposition 16 in Inglewood. Credit...Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

John Judis is a liberal writer and scholar who in 2002 co-wrote “The Emerging Democratic Majority,” which became a seminal text for those who saw the Democratic Party as a political tide rising. He has since backed off that a touch.

“‘People of color’ is a term that’s been adopted by the cultural left as a way of arguing that if these groups proportionately voted Democratic in the past, they will do so in the future,” Mr. Judis said. “I don’t see how you can make the argument.”

Viewing the Latino vote as monolithic fails, of course, to capture the often sharply varying politics and ethnicities of people hailing from nearly two dozen countries on two continents. The same is true when examining the behavior of Asian-American voters.

Philadelphia offers a snapshot: A record number of Latinos in the city, which is heavily Puerto Rican and Dominican, turned out and buoyed Mr. Biden. Yet exit polls also found that Latino voter support there for Mr. Trump leapt to 35 percent this year from 22 percent in 2016. In Milwaukee, an analysis by Urban Milwaukee reported an uptick in the Latino working-class vote for Mr. Trump, although a majority still favored Mr. Biden.



Supporters of President-elect Joe Biden in Philadelphia. A record number of Latinos in the city voted, with their support for President Trump leaping 13 percentage points. Credit...Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Along the Rio Grande in Texas, where some Mexican-American families, known as Tejanos, have roots that extend back four centuries, the vote margins shifted dramatically in 2020. Latino turnout soared, almost entirely to the benefit of Mr. Trump. Although Mr. Biden obtained more total votes in the four counties of the Rio Grande Valley than Hillary Clinton did in 2016, his margins of victory fell sharply.

The reasons offered for these results include poor field organizing by the Democratic Party, the cultural conservatism of some older Tejano families, and the fact that many in these often-dense counties find good-paying jobs with the Border Patrol.

Many voters, too, worried that Mr. Biden and the Democrats would impose a new coronavirus-driven shutdown, with dire consequences for the many thousands who own and labor for small businesses. Prof. Omar Valerio-Jimenez grew up in the Rio Grande Valley and teaches history at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Several of his old friends and cousins voted for Mr. Trump.

“They faced this challenge: Do they continue to open our stores and restaurants and churches, which lets us pay our bills,” he said, “or do we quarantine and not have the money to pay our bills?”

Muslim voters also confounded Democratic strategists with their support for Mr. Trump reaching 35 percent, [according to The Associated Press](#). This, too, is a constituency difficult to pigeonhole, as it encompasses Africans, Arabs, South Asians and Europeans.

“A sizable number of Muslims have experienced Donald Trump and to the surprise of Democrats they said, ‘We want more of that,’” Shadi Hamid of the Brookings Institution said.

Analyzing vote shifts is a tricky business, particularly when trying to gauge why some Latino, Black or Arab voters moved from supporting a liberal Democratic candidate like Mrs. Clinton in 2016 to voting for a populist authoritarian Republican like Mr. Trump. Some analysts pointed to the appeal among male voters — regardless of color or ethnicity — of Mr. Trump’s masculine persona. Others mentioned the performance of the national economy, which had hummed along until the plague arrived.



Voters of color across the country surprised Democratic strategists with greater support of Mr. Trump than pollsters predicted. Credit...Doug Mills/The New York Times

There were small, intriguing changes in the Black vote as well. The Times’s [exit polls in Georgia](#) found that 16 percent of Black men voted for Mr. Trump. (Compared with 7 percent of Black women there.) And to chart the votes along the so-called Black Belt in Mississippi, which includes 10 counties along the Mississippi River, was to find that although Mr. Biden won handily, his margin in nearly every county was two to three percentage points smaller than Mrs. Clinton’s.

The unanswered question is whether the 2020 election will be a one-off, the voting patterns scrambled by an unusually polarizing president who attracted and repelled in near equal measure. If it signals something larger, political scientists noted, some Latino and Asian voters might begin to behave like white voters, who have cleaved along class lines, with more affluent residents in urban areas voting Democratic while a decided majority of rural and exurban residents support Republicans.

Then there is California, where the sands of change blow in varying directions. In 2018, Democrats swept the Orange County congressional seats. In 2020, the Republicans have rebounded and taken at least two of those seats.

The Republican candidate Michelle Steel, who is Korean-American, came out against the affirmative action proposition, a stance that proved popular with her Asian-American constituents, as well as many white voters. And on election night, Ms. Steel rode that support to a narrow win against the incumbent Democratic congressman, Harley Rouda.

“This is the challenge for liberal Democrats,” Professor Wasow said. “In a diverse society, how do you enact politics that may advance racial equality without reinforcing racial divisions that are counterproductive and hurt you politically?”

Michael Powell is a national reporter covering issues around free speech and expression, and stories capturing intellectual and campus debate. [@powellnyt](#)

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How Democrats Suffered Crushing Down-Ballot Losses Across America

In statehouse races, suburban voters' disgust with President Trump failed to translate into a rebuke of other Republicans, ensuring the party's grip on partisan mapmaking.



Members of Progress PA, a group of suburban women in the Pittsburgh area, rallying for Emily Skopov in Wexford, Pa., last month. Despite Joseph R. Biden Jr.'s victory in her district, Ms. Skopov, a Democrat, lost her State House race. Credit...Ruth Fremson/The New York Times

Trip Gabriel, *The New York Times* Online Edition, November 7, 2020; revised November 28, 2020.

WEXFORD, Pa. — Just a few seats shy of a majority in the State House of Representatives, Democrats in Pennsylvania this year zeroed in on Republican-held suburban districts, where disdain for President Trump ran hot.

One of their prime targets was in the North Hills suburbs outside Pittsburgh, which are home to big brick houses, excellent public schools and “the fastest-trending Democratic district in the state,” according to Emily Skopov, the Democratic nominee for an open seat there, who gamely knocked on the doors of [Republican voters](#) in the days before Nov. 3.

She was half right. Joseph R. Biden Jr. carried Pennsylvania's House District 28, after Mr. Trump had won it by nine percentage points in 2016.

But Ms. Skopov, the founder of a nonprofit group who positioned herself as a moderate, was defeated.

Across the country, suburban voters' disgust with Mr. Trump — the key to Mr. Biden's election — did not translate into a wide rebuke of other Republicans, as Democrats had expected after the party made significant gains in suburban areas in the 2018 midterm elections. From the top of the party down to the state level, Democratic officials are awakening to the reality that voters may have delivered a one-time verdict on Mr. Trump that does not equal ongoing support for center-left policies.

“There's a significant difference between a referendum on a clown show, which is what we had at the top of the ticket, and embracing the values of the Democratic ticket,” said Nichole Remmert, Ms. Skopov's campaign manager. “People bought into Joe Biden to stop the insanity in the White House. They did not suddenly become Democrats.”

That dawning truth is evident in [the narrower majority that House Democrats will hold in Congress](#) next year, and especially in the blood bath that the party suffered in legislative races in key states around the country, despite directing hundreds of millions of dollars and deploying top party figures like former President Barack Obama to obscure down-ballot elections.

This year, [Democrats targeted a dozen](#) state legislative chambers where Republicans held tenuous majorities, including in Pennsylvania, Texas, Arizona, North Carolina and Minnesota. Their goal was to check the power of Republicans to redraw congressional and legislative districts in 2021, and to curb the rightward drift of policies from abortion to gun safety to voting rights.

But in all cases, Democrats came up short. None of their targeted legislative chambers flipped, even though Mr. Biden carried many of the districts that down-ballot Democrats did not. It could make it harder for Democrats to retain a House majority in 2022.

“In 2018 in the Philadelphia suburbs, you had rage voting against Trump,” said Senator Bob Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania, a Democrat. But this year, with Mr. Trump on the ballot, the president brought out many more supporters who are occasional voters, diluting what Democrats had widely anticipated would be another wave election for them. “It may be suburban voters are still ticket splitters,” Mr. Casey said.

In the aftermath, moderate Democrats are [feuding with progressives](#) over whether policies that excite the party's base, such as higher taxes to pay for social programs, policing overhauls and a rapid move away from fossil fuels, are a losing message with swing voters. [Progressives have responded](#) that moderate candidates aren't offering voters an affirmative program to improve their lives.

Ms. Skopov echoed a Virginia congresswoman, Abigail Spanberger, who heatedly told House Democrats on a private call after the election that the party must banish the words “socialism” and “defund the police,” after Republicans defeated moderate Democrats tagged with those positions, often inaccurately, in swing House districts across the country.



Representative Abigail Spanberger of Virginia told House Democrats on a private call after the election that they should stop using the phrases “socialism” and “defund the police.” Credit...Julia Rendleman for The New York Times

On Twitter, Ms. Skopov [wrote](#) that she had been “a casualty/collateral damage of this offensively poor messaging.”

Mr. Biden’s winning margin [of over six million in the popular vote](#) obscured how narrow his Electoral College victory was: He carried three battleground states — Arizona, Georgia and Wisconsin — by fewer than 44,000 total votes.

“One of the big questions is whether a Trumpist 2024 candidate can be a little bit milder so as to not alienate the suburbs, yet still inspire the low-propensity Republicans to vote at 2020 levels,” said J.J. Balaban, a Democratic strategist in Pennsylvania. “If they can pull that off, it’s going to be a very hard environment for Democrats.”

In the run-up to Election Day, the major legislative campaign committees for each party, along with independent groups, poured record sums of money into races. For Democrats, the aim was to take electoral districting power away from Republicans, who after a red wave in 2010, drew gerrymandered maps that favored the party’s candidates.

The blue wave of 2018 left Democrats just a few seats away from a majority in a dozen chambers, including Arizona’s House and Senate; statehouses in Iowa, Michigan, Texas and Pennsylvania; and both the North Carolina House and Senate.

Democrats’ failure to flip any of their targeted chambers means that Republicans will have control next year of 20 state governments that will collectively draw 188 congressional districts, [according to one analysis](#). In a bright spot for Democrats, the

party is closing in on [a supermajority in the New York Senate](#). That outcome would help give Democrats control of mapmaking in states with a total of 73 House districts.

(An additional 167 districts will be in states with divided governments or where independent commissions draw electoral maps.)

Republican mapmakers will seek to dilute the emerging Democratic strength in the nation's suburbs by packing some of those voters into urban districts while joining others to conservative rural districts.

“The most important consequence of the elections is that Republicans prevented a decade of liberal gerrymandering and gave Republicans the chance to take back the House in 2022,” said David Abrams, the deputy executive director of the Republican State Leadership Committee, which raised money for state races.

Texas was Democrats' biggest failure. After flipping a dozen seats in the Statehouse two years ago, the party was just nine seats shy of a majority.

Its most likely opportunities were nine Republican-held districts where former Representative Beto O'Rourke surpassed Senator Ted Cruz in their 2018 Senate race.

Most of these districts were in the suburbs of Dallas and Houston. Yet Democrats failed in all but one of the nine races, although Mr. Biden carried many of the districts. With majorities in both legislative chambers and a Republican governor, Greg Abbott, Republicans will control the drawing of as many as 39 congressional seats next year, when Texas is [projected to gain three House seats after the 2020 census](#), more than any other state.

“I think that there were voters out there who were disgusted with Donald Trump and saw Joe Biden as an alternative,” said State Representative Chris Turner, the chair of the Texas House Democratic Caucus. “They said, ‘You know what, I’m not a Democrat — maybe I’m an independent, maybe I’m a moderate Republican — I’m going to vote for Republicans down-ballot.’”

Mr. Turner said Republicans successfully nationalized the races by accusing down-ballot Democrats of seeking to defund the police, favoring socialism and aiming to ban fossil fuels, even though none backed that agenda.

“I do think the Republican attacks, false as they were, made voters question whether we could be trusted in terms of public safety or the energy industry,” he said.

In Arizona, a state that Mr. Biden won by about 10,500 votes in the latest count, the president-elect became only the second Democratic presidential candidate to win the state since 1948, largely by carrying the demographically evolving Phoenix suburbs.

But Democrats hoping to gain majorities in the State Legislature — where they needed just three seats in the Senate and two in the House — came up short. Republicans retained control.



Ballots were counted at the Maricopa County Recorder's office in downtown Phoenix. Mr. Biden became the second Democratic presidential candidate to win the state since 1948. Credit...Adriana Zehbrauskas for The New York Times

In the Phoenix suburb of Chandler, a Democrat won a Statehouse seat in 2018, in a district no Republican had ever lost.

This year, outside groups spent \$1.3 million trying to unseat the Republican state senator from Chandler, J.D. Mesnard. Although Mr. Biden carried the district, Mr. Mesnard won by an even larger margin than two years ago.

“Those voters, it seems like they registered their protest at the top of the ticket and then reverted back to their typical voting behavior down-ballot,” said Charlie Fisher, the executive director of the Arizona Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee.

Although the State Democratic Party encouraged candidates to run on local issues, Republican messaging in Arizona, too, succeeded in tarring moderate Democrats with threatening public safety.

But Mr. Fisher disagreed that Democrats needed to back off progressive policies.

“I always reject this notion — it’s either we’re all in on progressive policies or on trying to persuade independents and moderates to join us,” he said. “That’s a false choice. What we need to do is both those things. The energy of our party is coming from the progressives. We absolutely need to grow those numbers. But in Arizona we still need to communicate with independent voters.”

Pennsylvania may have been the most frustrating state for Democrats down-ballot.

Two years ago, its candidates flipped a net of five Senate seats and 11 in the House. All of the House pickups came in the Philadelphia suburbs, which were also the key to Mr. Biden's victory this month.

But Republicans retained their majorities in both chambers. Ms. Skopov, the losing candidate in suburban Pittsburgh, was quick to tell voters while knocking on doors before the election: "I'm a fan of our police. I'm not looking to defund police."

Still, she was hammered in mailings by Republicans who portrayed her as having an anti-law-enforcement position, which her campaign manager, Ms. Remmert, said did great damage.

Ms. Remmert cautioned that if Democrats hoped to cement their 2020 suburban gains in a presidential race in which Republicans put up someone less divisive than Mr. Trump, they would need to recalibrate their messaging.

"A lot of the suburban districts that you're trying to flip, you can't win by just turning out your base," she said. "We could get every Democratic vote in those districts and you're still not going to win. You have to be able to turn out independents and Republican voters for your message."

Correction: Nov. 28, 2020

An earlier version of this article misstated the name of a G.O.P. group. It is the Republican State Leadership Committee, not the Republican Legislative Leadership Committee.

Trip Gabriel is a national correspondent. He covered the past two presidential campaigns and has served as the Mid-Atlantic bureau chief and a national education reporter. He formerly edited the Styles sections. He joined The Times in 1994. [@tripgabriel](#) • [Facebook](#)

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