

The American Democratic Party at a Crossroads

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AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC PARTY*

* It is neither a parliamentary party nor a membership organization, but rather coordinated by a series of committees.

Official website: The Democratic National Committee (DNC): www.democrats.org;
The Democratic Governors' Association (DGA): www.democraticgovernors.org;
The Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee (DSCC): www.dsc.org;
The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC): www.dccc.org;
The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee (DLCC): www.dlcc.org;
The Association of State Democratic Chairs (ASDC): www.democrats.org/asdc

Party leader: Governor Tim Kaine is the Chairman of the DNC.

Founded: 1828

**Electoral resonance
parliamentary elections:** **2008:** Senate: 57; House: 257
2006: Senate: 49; House: 233
2004: Senate: 44; House: 202

Government participation: President Barack Obama was elected 44th President of the United States on November 4, 2008, beating his Republican rival by 365 electoral votes to 173. He assumed office on January 20, 2009, returning the Democrats to the executive branch for the first time in eight years.

Foundations of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party of the United States was founded in 1828 and traces its philosophy back to Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson, both of whom styled themselves as advocates of the »common man.« Despite these origins, the Democratic Party has not always been the most progressive party in the US. For example, the Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln, not the Democrats, took the lead in ending slavery in the country. And in the Progressive Era (roughly 1890–1920), the Republicans, with figures such as Teddy Roosevelt and Bob La Follette, again took the lead in fighting corruption, reforming the electoral process, curbing the power of big capital, and developing social welfare programs.

But since the New Deal era of Franklin Roosevelt, it has been the Democratic Party that has taken the lead in taming the excesses of capitalism, promoting the economic interests of the middle and working classes, and pushing for social justice. The Republican Party, on the other hand, has adopted an emphatic pro-business and socially conservative stance, thereby positioning itself consistently to the right of the Democrats on both economic and social issues.

Current State of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party is not a membership organization, although in 30 of 50 states citizens can register by party when they register to vote. Around 70 million Americans are registered Democrats.

More consequential for gauging the party's strength is the partisanship or party identification of citizens, since this trait is so closely related to voting behavior and is easily measured. For 2009, Democratic Party identification was at 34 percent, compared to 24 percent for the Republican Party.¹ But these figures underestimate Democratic strength, since large numbers of Americans say they are »independent,« but in reality lean towards and consistently vote for one particular party. These »independent leaners« should be considered partisans² and, once they

1. Pew annual average, as reported in Pew Research Center: »Voting Intentions Even, Turnout Indicators Favor GOP;« July 1, 2010. Pew data closely approximate the average of all public polls.

2. See John Petrocik (2009): »Measuring Party Support: Leaners Are Not Independents,« in *Electoral Studies*, 28:4 (December): 562–72.

are taken into account, Democratic strength in 2009 was at 50 percent and Republicans at 37 percent. Moreover, state-level party identification results in 2009 showed the Democrats with a greater than five point advantage over Republicans in 33 states, compared to only five states in which Republicans had such an advantage.³

Although precise spending and organizing figures are difficult to pin down, it is clear that increased funding and commitment to the controversial »50-state strategy« – devised and implemented by the chairman of the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and former presidential candidate, Howard Dean – laid the groundwork for significant gains in Democratic support from 2005 through 2008. By allocating party resources to local and state organizing in difficult environments such as Nevada, Indiana, Colorado, and Virginia, the 50-state strategy offered a radical break from past approaches of using party money almost exclusively in targeted races and states blanketed with expensive advertising.⁴ The basic goal of the 50-state strategy was to rebuild the party from the ground up through online and on-the-ground organizing rather than relying solely on a small class of donors and party elites to win elections in a handful of places. Democrats attempted to find their voters wherever they resided, especially in key conservative strongholds, and forced the Grand Old Party (GOP) into combat in districts and states where the party had faced little opposition in the past. The 50-state strategy proved successful, with the Democratic takeover of the House in 2006 and, more importantly, with the election of Barack Obama with 53 percent of the popular vote and 28 states in 2008.

Underlying these favorable data is an electoral and ideological conundrum for the modern Democratic Party. The party's long-term prospects could not be stronger. The shifting demographic composition of the electorate – with rising percentages of working women, minorities, younger and more secular voters, and educated whites living in more urbanized states – clearly favors »the party of the common man« and has increased the relative strength of the Democratic Party (see next section, »The Demographic Transformation of America«). In contrast, the Republican Party's coalition of older, whiter, more rural and evangelical voters is shrinking and becoming more geographically concentrated and

3. Jones, Jeffrey M. (2010): »Party ID: Despite GOP Gains, Most States Remain Blue,« Gallup Organization (February 1).

4. Bai, Matt (2006): »The Inside Agitator,« in *New York Times* (October 1).

less important in terms of the overall political landscape of the country.

Ideologically, Americans over the past few years have clearly favored a substantial role for government as a guardian against the vagaries of the market economy, as a check on reckless business behavior, and as an important source of public investment in national needs, from renewable energy and updated infrastructure to education and health care. Following the financial crisis of 2008, and the lingering employment crisis that has left nearly 18 percent of Americans either unemployed or underemployed, Americans' faith in free market solutions and deregulation has waned significantly from its heyday in the Reagan and Bush presidencies.

Building on these trends, Democrats put together impressive back-to-back victories in the past two election cycles, flipping control of Congress from the Republicans in 2006 and electing America's first African American president in 2008. Within the first few months of the Obama presidency in 2009, a slew of legislation was passed to address the banking crisis and implement key economic stimulus spending to invest in new energy projects, infrastructure needs, education, and support for working class families. In 2010, the Democrats passed major health care legislation, securing a 100-year progressive battle for universal health coverage, and passed the most significant regulatory changes to American finance since the days of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Despite the advantageous context that has developed over the past few years, the Democratic Party faces significant short-term challenges that could easily alter or dislodge favorable prospects for the future. Almost immediately after Obama's inauguration and early legislative victories, the conservative right mounted a fierce, well coordinated counterattack against the progressive momentum of the Obama presidency. The Republican leadership in the US House and Senate embarked on a cynical, if effective, strategy of obstruction through unified opposition to the president's agenda and through procedural hurdles like the endless threats of filibusters in the Senate and holds on the president's nominees for key governmental posts. The reactionary conservative movement, fueled by the demagoguery of Fox News, talk radio, and leaders like Sarah Palin, Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, and Newt Gingrich, savaged the president's every move as »socialism,« »communism,« and »fascism.« The nascent Tea Party, ostensibly a grassroots resistance movement built on libertarian ideals but in practice another arm of the conservative Republican base, built on this sentiment in opposing the president's push for health care and additional stimulus to help cash-strapped states and the

unemployed. Even the organized business community, which had been somewhat cooperative with Obama's administration on his major legislative priorities, is currently in full revolt against his presidency over a perceived lack of concern for business needs, new regulations, and the prospect of future tax increases.

In the midst of the ongoing economic crisis that has seen the wealthy and Wall Street recover nicely while working- and middle-class Americans continue to suffer from job losses and wage erosion, the conservative and GOP assault on the Obama presidency has clearly taken its toll. President Obama's job approval numbers have declined steadily from around 70 percent when he was inaugurated in early 2009 to 45–47 percent by the middle of 2010. And where the Democrats had been running a solid lead on the generic congressional ballot, they are now no better than tied with the Republicans. As for the Democrats' party identification advantage, that too has narrowed to seven points (49–42) from 13 points at the end of 2009.⁵

Moreover, public dissatisfaction with government continues to rise, fed by doubts about its performance on the economy, on the BP oil spill, and on spending and deficits. The president's legislative proposal on energy and climate change faces grim prospects along with congressional action to reverse the Bush tax cuts or create another round of stimulus spending. Progressive activists and the emerging Obama coalition are far less energized for the mid-term elections than their Tea Party counterparts.

What happened? How did the Democratic Party find itself in such a precarious state after enjoying some of the most favorable trends in American politics?

First, despite the general tendency of Americans to support progressive goals and policies, as documented in an extensive survey by the Progressive Studies Program at the Center for American Progress in 2009,⁶ the early steps by the Administration to protect the country from financial collapse produced understandable confusion and anger among many Americans. Ongoing bank and auto bailouts and a massive stimulus package aimed at reviving aggregate economic demand and helping distressed homeowners and the unemployed unfolded at a rapid

5. Pew Research Center: op. cit.

6. John Halpin/Karl Agne (2009): *State of American Political Ideology, 2009: A National Study of Political Values and Beliefs*, Center for American Progress (March).

clip without adequate explanation as to why these steps were necessary and how they would fit into the overall vision of change promised by progressives and Obama. The nearly year-long health care debate did little to alleviate people's confusions about what exactly the government plans to do over the next decade in this critical area. Given the apparent lack of economic coherence, long-standing American skepticism of government intervention in the economy on both the left and the right reared its head in force.

Second, and more importantly, the objective and subjective measures of the economy continue to drag. Growth is steadily rising in the US, but unemployment and underemployment remain stubbornly high. Steps to address the financial crisis have not significantly improved lending to small businesses and the housing market continues to suffer. Americans and their government are massively indebted and looking to pay down their obligations at a time of reduced overall demand. America faces uncertain economic times ahead and the American people remain justifiably angry and fearful of the future.

Third, the Obama administration and the Democratic Party failed to recognize the rising damage to their leaders and agenda and, consequently, did not mobilize against the conservative forces seeking to undermine their position. The president's continued insistence upon trying to find common ground with a party that sees his failure as their gain allowed the right-wing propaganda machine to completely dominate the terms of public debate for far too long. Rather than seeing and learning about the real progress Obama has made in fixing the problems of the Bush years and setting the nation on a new economic footing – what he calls a »house upon a rock«⁷ – Americans have been subjected to non-stop vitriol and lies about his motives and policies. The Democratic Party successfully challenged the Bush-Rove electoral machine in the 2008 campaign, but has not been prepared to counteract the agenda-setting capabilities of conservative media in the United States once in office.

Thus, the short-term problems facing the Democrats are real and cannot be ignored. The Democrats face the probability of large losses in the November 2010 elections – losses that could be large enough to lose control of one arm of Congress, the House of Representatives. Moreover, without noticeable improvement in the economy through

7. Obama, Barack (2009): Remarks on the Economy, Georgetown University (April 14).

2011, President Obama will face a serious challenge from any credible Republican candidate. Despite this grim prognosis for the near term, our analysis of electoral, demographic, and public opinion data suggests that these short-term trends may represent the last gasp of a slowing eroding conservative and Republican majority in America in favor of a steadily rising progressive and Democratic majority over the next two decades.

In the next two sections, we will explore these emerging trends and then offer some thoughts on how the Democrats might take advantage of these conditions, both strategically and ideologically.

The Demographic Transformation of America

To understand how a progressive and Democratic majority was possible in 2006–2008 and how it may continue in the future despite the conservative counterattack, it is necessary above all to understand the demographic transformation of America. This transformation is driven by a number of large-scale trends that have turned Reagan-era (1980–1988) conservative America into a very different and more progressive place.

Minorities

The minority vote – blacks, Hispanics, Asians – in the United States has been steadily rising. Overall, the minority share of voters in the national exit poll rose to 26 percent in 2008 from 23 percent in 2004. Back in 1988, that share was just 15 percent. That's a rise of 11 percentage points over 20 years, or about half a percentage point a year.⁸

The advantage Democrats have derived from minority voters should continue to grow, since there is no sign this growth is slowing down. In 10 battleground states studied by Teixeira and demographer William Frey (Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Michigan, Missouri, Pennsylvania, and Virginia),⁹ the percentage of minority

8. The Current Population Survey (CPS) November Voter Supplement and the exit polls agree that minorities represented 15 percent of the vote in 1988 but disagree slightly on how much the minority vote has gone up since then. According to the CPS, the minority vote rose nine points between 1988 and 2008, reaching 24 percent in the last election.

9. The Political Geography of Pennsylvania: Not Another Rustbelt State; The Political Geography of the Intermountain West: The New Swing Region; The Political

voters grew in every one between 2000 and 2006, including spectacular growth of a percentage point a year in Nevada. Nationwide, minorities grew by around 20 percent between 2000 and 2008, accounting for more than four-fifths of US population growth.¹⁰

This was mostly driven by Hispanic population growth. Hispanics grew by 31 percent in this period, and they accounted for over half of US population growth.¹¹ Of course, it's true that Hispanics' population strength is not currently matched by their voting strength due to the large proportion of Hispanics who are not citizens and therefore cannot vote or are simply too young to vote. As a result of these factors, only 42 percent of Hispanics overall are eligible to vote, compared to 77 percent of non-Hispanic whites and 66 percent of African Americans.¹²

Nevertheless, the Hispanic proportion among the voting electorate has grown steadily and will continue to grow. They represented only two percent of voters in early 1990s, but they stood at nine percent in 2008 and will likely surpass the level of black voters sometime in this decade.¹³

Asians are the other significant contributor to minority growth. In the 1990s their growth rate was actually slightly higher than Hispanics. And in the 2000–2008 period they were not far behind (26 percent versus 31 percent for Hispanics).¹⁴ Right now, they make up about five percent of the population and two percent of voters.¹⁵ Both figures will increase in the next 10 years due to this group's fast rate of growth, but because they start from a much smaller base than Hispanics their impact on the population and voting pool will be far more limited.

In a longer-term perspective, the US is rapidly approaching a majority-minority nation. People tend to think of 2050 as the year America will become majority-minority. But it could be closer than that – the 2008 US census projections put the tipping point dates at 2042 for the entire

Geography of Ohio, Michigan and Missouri: Battlegrounds in the Heartland; The Political Geography of Virginia and Florida: Bookends of the New South.

10. Frey, William (2010): Analysis of 2000–2008 Census Population Estimates Data for State of Metropolitan America, Brookings Institution.
11. Frey: op. cit.
12. Frey, William (2009): »How Did Race Affect the 2008 Presidential Election?«, Population Studies Center Research Report, University of Michigan, September.
13. Authors' analysis of CPS and exit poll data.
14. Frey, State of Metropolitan America.
15. Authors' analysis of CPS and exit poll data and Frey, op. cit.

population and at 2023 for the population under 18.¹⁶ By 2050 the United States will actually be 54 percent minority.

Hispanics will drive minority growth above all. Their numbers will triple to 133 million by 2050 from 47 million today, while the numbers of non-Hispanic whites will remain essentially flat. Hispanics will double as a percentage of the population from 15 percent to 30 percent. Asians will also come close to doubling, going from five percent to nine percent. Blacks, however, will grow only from 14 percent to 15 percent of the population, making them only half the size of the Hispanic population by 2050. The foreign-born percentage in the population will also grow, reflecting the growth of non-black minorities. By 2050 about one in five Americans will be foreign born, up from one in eight today.

These trends indicate that the voting electorate's race-ethnic composition will continue to evolve rapidly. Political scientist and author Alan Abramowitz has projected that minorities will represent 34 percent of voters by the 2020 election.¹⁷ If minorities retain their current political leanings this shift in the distribution of voters should substantially advantage the Democrats.

16. In 2009, the Census Bureau issued a set of projections that are »supplemental« to the 2008 projections. What this means is that, even though the 2008 projections remain the recommended data series for general use, the 2009 supplemental projections can be used to assess the effects of different immigration scenarios on future population levels and distribution. Of the scenarios provided, the »low net international migration« or low NIM, which projects the number of immigrants per year to increase slowly to 2050, is fairly close to the original 2008 projections and quite similar to the projections produced by demographers Jeffrey Passel and D'Vera Cohen for the Pew Research Center (»US Population Projections: 2005–2050«, February 11, 2008), based on a constant *rate* of immigration relative to population size. The low NIM scenario puts the majority minority crossover point at 2045. Some argue (see William Frey [2010]: »Immigration and the Coming »Majority Minority.«, Brookings [March 19]) that the constant NIM scenario (where the number of immigrants per year remains constant to the year 2050) should be preferred, since it corresponds well to recent US experience with immigrant flows. The constant NIM scenario has a majority–minority crossover date of 2050, corresponding to the date frequently cited in popular accounts of rising diversity.

17. Abramowitz's projection is based on an exit poll data series that begins in 1992, when the proportion of minority voters (13 percent) appears to have been anomalously low, leading to a possible overestimate of the minority share growth rate. Starting in 1988 instead of 1992 would produce a slower growth rate and therefore a lower estimated minority share in 2020 – perhaps 32 percent instead of 34 percent.

White College Graduates

Democrats fare much more poorly with white voters. But they are doing much better among some white voters than others. They have been gaining particular strength among white college graduates, for example. Obama only lost white college graduates by four points in 2008, compared to an 11-point deficit for Democrat John Kerry in 2004 and a 20-point deficit for Democrat Michael Dukakis in 1988.

Moreover, white college graduates are a growing constituency, especially in the suburbs of America's most dynamic metropolitan areas, where they are characterized by relative social liberalism and strong interest in effective public services. Their share of voters has gone up by four points since 1988, even as the share of white voters overall has declined.

Recent trends suggest that white college graduates should continue to increase as a share of voters in the immediate future, which should benefit Democrats. In the ten 2008 battleground states Frey and Teixeira studied the percentage of white college graduate voters grew in every one of them between 2000 and 2006.

But the durability of this trend – in contrast to the minority voter trend – is open to debate. The basic issue is how long the white adult population's educational upgrading will continue to outweigh the decline of whites overall, producing a net increase in the white college graduate share of voters. The population's educational upgrading depends on two factors. The first is whether and at what rate younger whites' educational credentials – in this case, attaining a four-year degree or more – are increasing. The second is the rate at which younger, more educated whites replace older, less-educated ones.

Inspection of Census Bureau data indicates that both factors continue to be relevant: the educational credentials of younger whites are still rising (albeit more slowly than in the 1990s),¹⁸ and generational replacement is still exerting significant upward pressure on educational credentials. It therefore seems likely that the white college graduate share of the adult population will continue to increase for quite some time,¹⁹

18. There are two reasons for this. First, higher percentages of recent cohorts of white 25–29 year olds have attained a college degree (37 percent in 2008 CPS data, up from 34 percent in 2000). Secondly, some in these cohorts who have not attained a college degree by 25–29 complete the degree later in life.

19. This assessment is consistent with that of a Census Bureau study from the beginning of this decade; (Jennifer Cheeseman Day/Kurt J. Bauman (2000): »Have

which, amplified by the group's relatively high turnout, should result in significant ongoing increases in the white college graduate share of voters.

Moreover, since college completion rates can potentially be boosted by public policy – and there is plenty of economic room to do so, as Massachusetts Institute of Technology labor economist Paul Osterman points out²⁰ – these projected increases in white college graduate voters could be even stronger than they appear today.

White Working Class

Democratic Party performance among white working-class voters (defined here as whites without a four-year college degree) has improved little in contrast to white college graduates. These voters tend to be more socially conservative and to blame government for their long-term economic difficulties.

Obama lost the white working class by a very large – 18-point – margin in 2008, which is somewhat better than Kerry's 23-point deficit in 2004 but actually a little worse than Democrat Al Gore's 17-point deficit in 2000. Moreover, Democrats' continuing difficulties with the white working class are thrown into stark relief if we look back to 1988. The Democratic deficit in that year among the white working class and white college graduates was identical: 20 points. The respective deficits in 2008 were 18 points and four points. Obama thus only improved over Dukakis by two points among white working-class voters but by 16 points among white college graduates. Quite a contrast.

Democrats' continuing difficulties with white working-class voters are, however, considerably mitigated by the fact that there are now far fewer of them in the voting pool. According to the exit polls, the proportion of white working-class voters is down 15 points since 1988, while, as discussed above, the proportion of white college graduate voters is up four points and the proportion of minority voters is up 11 points. This general pattern – a sharp decline in the share of white working-class voters accompanied by increases in the shares of minority voters

We Reached the Top?: Educational Attainment Projections of the US Population,« Census Bureau Population Division: Working Paper Series No. 43 (May), which predicted continued educational upgrading through 2028.

20. Osterman, Paul (2008): »College for All? The Labor Market for College-Educated Workers,« Center for American Progress (August).

and white college graduate voters – has been replicated in state after state since 1988, including many critical states in the 2008 election.

Since 1988, for example, the share of white working-class voters in Florida has declined 17 points, while the white college graduate share has risen four points and the minority share is up by 12 points. Even more spectacularly, in Pennsylvania white working-class voters are down 25 points over the time period, while white college graduate voters are up 16 points and minorities have increased by eight points. In the key swing state of Ohio the share of white working-class voters fell by 15 points between 1988 and 2008, while white college graduates rose by eight points and minorities by six points. And in Nevada, white working-class voters are down 24 points since the 1988 election, while white college graduate voters are up four points and minorities an amazing 19 points.

Millennial Generation

Other demographic trends accentuate the Democrats' advantage. The Millennial generation (those born 1978–2000) gave Obama a stunning 66–32 margin in 2008. This generation also leans heavily Democratic on party identification. The difficult 2010 political environment for the Democrats has seen their overall party identification lead slip considerably, but they have retained a double digit lead (14 points) among Millennials.²¹ Millennials also hold a raft of progressive positions in various issue areas that should continue to propel them toward the Democrats.²²

On social issues, Millennials support gay marriage, take race and gender equality as givens, are tolerant of religious and family diversity, have an open and positive attitude toward immigration, and generally display little interest in fighting over the divisive social issues of the past. They are also notably progressive on foreign policy issues, and favor a multilateral and cooperative foreign policy more than their elders. And Millennials, more so than other generations, want a stronger government to make the economy work better, help those in need, and provide more services. These views extend to a range of domestic policy issues including education, clean energy, and, especially, health care.

21. Pew Research Center (2010): *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, Washington DC (February).

22. For data and discussion, see David Madland / Ruy Teixeira (2009): *New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation*, Washington, DC (May). See also Pew Research Center: op. cit.

Millennials were around 20 percent of the vote in this election. This figure will steadily rise as more Millennials enter the voting pool. About 55 million Millennials were of voting age in 2008, and roughly 48 million were citizen-eligible voters. Millennials of voting age will increase by about 4.5 million a year between now and 2018. And in 2020 – the first presidential election in which all Millennials will have reached voting age – this generation will be 103 million strong, of which about 90 million will be eligible voters. Those 90 million Millennial eligible voters will represent just under 40 percent of America’s eligible voters.²³

These trends mean that every election up until 2020 will see a bigger share of Millennial voters – both because more of them will be eligible to vote and because the leading edge of the Millennials will be aging into higher turnout years. In 2012, there will thus be 74 million Millennials of voting age and 64 million Millennial eligible voters, 29 percent of all eligible voters. Assuming that Millennials’ relatively good turnout performance continues (but doesn’t get any better), that should translate into roughly 35 million Millennials who cast ballots in 2012 and an estimated 26 percent of all voters.

There will be 93 million Millennials of voting age by 2016, and 81 million Millennial eligible voters, making them 36 percent of all eligible voters. This should produce an estimated 46 million voting Millennials, which represents 33 percent of all voters. And in 2020 those 90 million Millennial eligible voters should translate into 52 million Millennial votes, representing 36 percent of all votes cast in that election.

Other Demographic Trends

Professionals are now the most Democratic, as well as fastest-growing, occupational group in the US and that support increases with every election. In 2008, they gave Obama an estimated 68 percent of the vote. By the middle of this decade, professionals will account for around one in five American workers.

Democrats generally do better among women than men in the US and they do particularly well among growing subgroups of women like the unmarried and the college-educated. In 2008, unmarried women

23. Estimations in this and subsequent paragraphs are based on the authors’ analysis of 2008 Census National Population Projections by single years of age, 2008 NEP exit poll sample composition, and 2004 Census Voter Supplement data by single years of age.

voted 70 percent for Obama and 57 percent of college-educated women supported Obama. Unmarried women now account for almost half of adult women, up from 38 percent in 1970. College-educated women are an especially rapidly growing population group. They have more than tripled in recent decades, from just eight percent of the 25-and-older female population in 1970 to 28 percent today.

The growth of religious diversity, especially rapid increases among the unaffiliated (who voted 75 percent for Obama), also favors Democrats. Unaffiliated or secular voters, together with non-white evangelical Protestants, are the fastest-growing »religious« group in the US. From 1944 to 2004, the percentage of adults reporting no religious affiliation almost tripled, rising from five to 14 percent. Projections indicate that, by 2024, 20–25 percent of US adults will be unaffiliated. This trend, combined with growth among non-Christian faiths and race-ethnic trends, will ensure that by the election of 2016, the US will have ceased to be a white Christian nation. Looking even farther down the road, by 2040 white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population and conservative white Christians, who have been such a critical part of the Republican base, only about a third of that – a minority within a minority.

Relationship between the American and the European Situation

This demographic transformation is a clear and unambiguous boon to the Democratic Party. The reason for this is simple: these emerging constituencies lean progressive and in America there is only one progressive party, the Democrats, for which these constituencies can vote. Thus, as these constituencies grow, it is the Democrats and no other party that receives a potential boost in support.

In Europe, however, the situation is quite different. The simple American two-party system exists nowhere. Instead, European party systems ensure that social democrats typically do have competition for the progressive vote. Indeed, in many countries they have competitors in three different parts of the political spectrum: greens, far leftists, and liberal centrists. And not only do they have competition, but these other parties, on aggregate, typically over-perform among progressive emerging demographics, while social democrats generally under-perform (with the exception of immigrants in most countries).²⁴

24. See Browne/Halpin/Teixeira (2009): *The European Paradox*, CAP Progress.

The ability of social democracy's center-left competitors to attract emerging demographic groups has allowed these parties to capture a larger share of the vote in the past several decades, in contrast to social democracy, whose vote share has been declining. Across 13 traditional European social democratic parties, the average vote has been just 27 percent in this decade. This figure represents a four-point drop from the 1980s. But the rest of the center-left in these countries has increased their average vote share by five points over this time period, bringing them up to 32 percent. Collectively, they are now larger than social democracy, constituting about 55 percent of the center-left vote. That about reverses the situation back in the 1980s, when social democrats still represented 53 percent of the center-left vote.²⁵

Social democrats have therefore been caught in a kind of electoral pincer movement. On the one hand, the traditional working class is declining as a share of the electorate and is also giving less of its support to social democrats over time, with that lost support generally going to the right (occasionally to the far left). Since the 1960s, for example, working class support has declined by 20 percentage points for the Swedish social democratic party, by 17 points for the Danish social democratic party, and by 12 points for the British Labour party.²⁶ On the other hand, social democrats are not getting their fair share, as it were, of progressive emerging constituencies, with much of that going to their center-left competitors. This concatenation of trends, so central to social democracy's current problems, is not clearly captured by any of the seven theses on social democratic decline advanced in the FES background document on the »Current State and Prospects of Social Democratic Parties in Europe.«

But these trends are critical. Among other things, they suggest that the future of progressive politics in Europe cannot simply be equated with the fate of social democrats. As a rich tapestry of new political parties, be

25. Based on 13 European social democratic parties for which continuous data are available since World War II: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Analysis by authors of data in Gerassimos Maschonas: »The Electoral Dynamics of European Social Democratic Parties (1950–2008),« in J. Cronin, G. Ross, and J. Shoch (eds.): *Futures of the Left*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press (forthcoming) and on the Parties and Elections in Europe website (<http://www.parties-and-elections.de/countries.html>).

26. Authors' analysis of data in Gerassimos Maschonas (2008): »Lower Classes or Middle Classes? Socialism and its Changing Constituencies in Great Britain, Sweden and Denmark,« presentation to Council for European Studies (March 5).

they green, liberal, red or other, increase their share of the electorate, the future of progressive politics in multi-party systems will be determined by the total share of votes or seats won by a coalition of progressive forces with overlapping – if differentiable – values and programs, and thus the ability of these parties to forge a governing coalition. This coalitional challenge is absolutely central to reconceptualizing the role of European social democrats.

The seven theses also generally fail to shed much light on the problems currently bedeviling American Democrats and progressives (though some, such as the »dominance of public discourse« thesis have at least some modest purchase). For example, the »Dahrendorf« thesis, which posits that progressive politics in the guise of social democracy has fulfilled its historical purpose and thus become superfluous, does not apply to the US. Consider President Obama's pledge and action to deliver universal healthcare to all Americans, which could be regarded as a step toward the completion of the nation's welfare state. Similarly, the current Administration's proposals to promote green industrial jobs and growth blends the promise of social advancement with a post-modern industrial agenda for economic growth.

Nor, for that matter, as the analyses above illustrate, has the political space for the Democratic Party »narrowed.« Unlike in Europe, where many Christian Democratic and center-right parties have adopted the core tenets of social democratic thinking, or have at least sought to colonize them, the Republican Party in the US has become increasingly more right-wing. While the birth of the Tea Party may suggest that an increasing number of disillusioned voters are being attracted to this new populist movement, this is far more likely to split the Republican vote than the Democratic one – 80 percent or more of Tea Party supporters are Republicans or lean Republican.

Future Prospects of the Democrats

A more fruitful way to conceptualize American Democrats' problems and future prospects, we would argue, is to look at two big challenges they currently face. These are *the organizational challenge* and *the definitional challenge*. We would also argue that these two challenges, along with the aforementioned coalitional challenge, provide a useful way of conceptualizing the similarities and differences between American Democrats and European social democratic parties.

Organizing for America

Consider first the Democrats' organizational challenge. All great political movements swell the numbers of those engaged in the political process, encouraging either a new generation to participate or inspiring anew those previously disengaged. This was most certainly the case during the 2008 Presidential campaign. In the time since, much has been written about the innovations in Internet campaigning, the use of social networking tools, and the fundraising and organizing capacity they generate. While it is true that technology played a more decisive role than in any previous election cycle – Obama raised almost three-quarters of his 687 million US-dollars online from four million people; 13 million people signed up to receive regular e-mails; and countless neighborhood events and campaign operations were organized through the social networking tool, MyBarackObama.com – one should not forget that Obama's tactics were essentially of an old-fashioned variety. The primary focus was on grassroots mobilization, canvassing, and saturation advertising. The success of the Obama campaign resided in the fact that his team could build a »sui generis« structure informed by the latest organizational and information management tools, and married to a classical community organizing model to achieve this.

Prior to taking office, there was much speculation about how these new campaigning and organizing techniques – and Obama's infamous e-mail list – would be applied to, and hopefully transform, the political process in Washington DC. Many expected that the newly inspired movement would be harnessed to pressure Congress – particularly those Representatives and Senators unsupportive of the President's reform program – to toe the line. With the establishment of a new unit within the Democratic National Committee – *Organizing for America* – there was also hope that the insurgency and momentum of the campaign could be institutionalized within the Democratic Party.

Why, then, has the transition from campaign to governance proved more difficult than some had hoped for? Why has the new President found it so hard to maintain and mobilize the sense of insurgency within the wider progressive movement that carried him to office?

For one thing, rallying against the incompetence of the previous Administration did not require that all those disappointed and frustrated by their failures agree on what should be done to rectify the problems they caused – it was a simple matter of »kicking the bums out.« Once

governing began, and thus the policy-making process too, small details could sow the seeds of division amongst previously allied and aligned forces – for example, with regard to the public option in the healthcare debate – regardless of whether or not they shared the same values or long-term policy goals. The same techniques utilized in the campaign to mobilize turnout seem to be less attuned to building consensus within – and then calling to arms – the progressive movement. While the extra-party progressive infrastructure continues to be far more developed in the United States than is currently the case in Europe, at times the White House has appeared quite isolated.

Second, the need to seek consensus on the reform agenda with different strands of legislators within the Democratic Party proved more difficult than could have been imagined, particularly given – or perhaps because of – the large majorities the Party held in both House and Senate. When combined with a desire to build, at least in the early days of the Administration, cross-party support for the stimulus package, health care reform and a broader legislative agenda, the net result was a more pragmatic approach to governance that also entailed a return to the more traditional style of Washingtonian politics – including bargaining and backroom deals – that many had not expected from President Obama.

Ironically, then, while the legislative achievements of the first 18 months of the new Administration are very substantial – if not historic – enthusiasm among Democratic activists and voters is at an all-time low. The implication seems to be that for the broader progressive movement part of President Obama's mandate was not just to change what government did, but also how it was done.

There are, of course, multiple benefits from including such movements more closely in policy-making discussions. Not only do they commonly provide expertise on the specific policy challenges in question, but the inclusion of such groups also gives them a better understanding of the compromises that must be made while governing, part-ownership of these decisions, and thus an improved basis of knowledge on which these movements can rally their members to campaign for and support the Administration's policies.

For right or wrong, the feeling of exclusion – and consequent disappointment – some activists and opinion-formers within the progressive community are currently feeling is undoubtedly contributing to and feeding the currently low levels of enthusiasm among Democratic voters ahead of November's mid-term elections. Given that these movements

often do not feel ownership of the legislative achievements of the Democrats, they are also less likely to be staunch advocates of them. Today's activists are less deferential than their predecessors. This was a lesson the Obama campaign had learnt, as embodied in its organizing motto – Respect, Empower, Include. Those same activists now want to be part of the governing process. The Democratic Party and Administration need to remain open to just such a possibility, and indeed should actively invest the time and technology needed to facilitate this.

Defining Progress

The second key challenge that the Democrats need to address in order to harness and truly benefit from the demographic shifts identified above is the definitional one. As noted earlier, President Obama entered office at a time when the global economy was on the brink of collapse, the domestic and international financial markets were in turmoil, and the American automotive industry on the verge of bankruptcy; the list could go on. These national and global crises required urgent and immediate responses. As decisive action was taken in all of these areas, and health care too, there was little time either to define or set benchmarks for what would amount to progress, or indeed to lay out a broader progressive vision for American society in the twenty-first century. The consequences of this have been particularly acute when it comes to the nation's understanding of the President's vision of state–market–society relations and the management of the economy.

We noted in the introduction the tensions that currently exist between recent trends in public opinion that tend to favor a stronger role for government, and the deeper historical skepticism about the role of government in American society. Thus, in the US, the issue of the credibility and performance of progressive politics is more nuanced than in Europe, where a decline in the social democratic vote can be linked to social democrats' inability to use the state and government policy to effectively pursue socially just social democratic policies. Today, many of the legislative battles fought in the United States – be they over health-care, energy or financial regulation – are effectively proxy battles about whether government can *ever* be used as a force for good in American society, regardless of the performance of any particular party.

While each of these battles will need to be fought on a case by case basis, and won or lost on the respective merits of each argument,

embedding each of them in a grand narrative that clearly articulates the case for modernized government could, over time, shift the center ground of common sense and make each battle progressively easier to win. Moreover, the very absence of such a narrative has created a vacuum in which opponents of the President and the progressive movement have been able to define their vision for them. While the accusations of the reactionary conservative movement, and their attempts to label President Obama's agenda as »socialist,« »communist,« or »fascist« are irresponsible and disappointing, they have also been effective, and cannot be left un-counteracted. In this regard, in the US, the credibility – although perhaps »legitimacy« is a more appropriate term – of government action is intimately tied to issues of the dominant public discourse.

There is now an urgent need for progressives to articulate a coherent vision of state–market relations in the twenty-first century. This vision must clearly outline both what the new, vibrant American economy will look like in the years to come – that is, the end goal – and explain the role of government in assisting and enabling this transition. This vision must also be made in language and values that resonate with most Americans. It is not anti-American to promote opportunity, prosperity and fairness, nor is it anti-American to use the tools of government to do so.

However, simply articulating why a new and improved role for modern government is necessary to ensure America's future prosperity – be that through the transition towards a low carbon economy, investment in research and technology, keeping Wall Street and Corporate America in check, or enabling American workers to re-skill and train for the jobs of the future – will be insufficient to rehabilitate the role of the state in the eyes of most Americans. The re-assertion of the necessity of government action must be accompanied by an agenda that also seeks to reform and modernize government, to ensure that government delivers on its commitments and goals as effectively and efficiently as possible. The next phase of progressive politics in America must seek not only to reform the market, but also the state.

As we head into the 2010 election season, progressives in the United States would do well to keep these challenges in mind. If they wish to harness the long-term demographic trends that seem to be working in their favor, they will also need to take a long-term perspective on the arguments they make during the day-to-day grind of campaigning. It is time to remake a coherent and long-term case for American government as a force for good.

Conclusion: Prospects for a Transatlantic Progressive Dialogue

Through the lenses of the organizational and definitional challenges progressives face, the prospects of a future transatlantic dialogue may be better than some had thought. Indeed, we would argue, progressives are as likely to benefit from discussing the differences in the challenges faced on either side of the Atlantic as they are from discussing the similarities.

Organizing Insurgency

When it comes to the organizational challenge, for example, at first glance one might assume that the fundamentally different natures of the Democratic Party – which is essentially a maze of electoral committees and bodies – and the European parliamentary parties would provide little basis for fruitful discussion. On reflection, however, there is much to learn from the relative strengths and weaknesses of each other's organizations.

As argued above, the Democratic Party needs to work to institutionalize – or at the very least more effectively collaborate with – the wider progressive movement. Here, then, there may well be lessons that US progressives can learn from the more disciplined and structured nature of social democratic parties in Europe. In the US system, it has proved hard to transform the momentum and sense of insurgency of the progressive movement witnessed during the campaign into an aid to governance – and a greater degree of institutionalized or structured collaboration between the party and the movement could very well help with this.

Conversely, in Europe, there is a growing debate about whether parliamentary parties need to become more flexible. The advantage of the European system is that both a shared memory and movement of common purpose is – or at least was – institutionalized within a structured body. It has, however, become increasingly apparent how difficult it is to open parties up so that they can appeal and reach out to new groups or respond to new issues. There is now a need to rethink how to accommodate new technologies and organizing techniques, both of which often require a fundamental rethink with regard to how to do and organize politics. The internet, interest groups, and social networking cannot be simply »bolted on« to existing structures, at least not if they are to be used effectively.

It would seem to us, then, that investigating how progressives might achieve a happy medium between the flexibility, innovation, and vibrancy of American campaign committees, and the discipline, structure, and hierarchy of European parliamentary parties is a worthy endeavor.

A New Progressive Agenda

Similarly, it is high time that deeper discussions began on the formation of a common progressive policy agenda. Nowhere is this more urgent than with regard to a vision for post-crisis economic renewal.

Eighteen months ago, progressive parties across Europe were struggling to distinguish themselves from their Christian Democratic and center-right opponents, many of whom had sought to respond to the global financial crisis by adopting the Keynesian economic stimulus packages and unemployment and social protection policies commonly associated with the social democrats. As the center-right and Christian Democrats colonized the social democrats' political terrain, progressives effectively found themselves squeezed out by their opponents on the left and right. At the G20 summit in London, leaders of all political persuasions embraced the call for concerted and coordinated global stimulus packages.

Fast forward a year and the political and policy poles have reversed. Across Europe a series of harsh spending cuts are now on the agenda. These programs are being implemented by progressive governments in Spain and Greece with the same conviction as the newly elected conservative-liberal coalitions in the UK and Germany. Mimicking the politics of Herbert Hoover, it appears that all Europeans are now betting that raising taxes and cutting spending will expand their economies.

In the US, however, President Obama has continued to pursue an ambitious, stimulus-led, pro-growth agenda. Both President Obama and Treasury Secretary Geithner have warned of the long-term economic dangers associated with diverting from this course and prematurely implementing fiscal austerity measures. In both Europe and the United States, long-term unemployment remains persistently high and the threat of a deflationary trap is ever present. The resurgence of this old economic orthodoxy in Europe puts long-term job growth and economic recovery at risk – both in Europe and the US. Worryingly for progressives, it also promotes a thoroughly unprogressive style of leadership, one that glorifies the ability to impose suffering on other people in tough times.

On this issue, more than any other, the tectonic divide between Europe and the United States seems to be getting ever wider. Today, US progressives are the ones that find themselves being squeezed. Isolated internationally, the new Administration has been unable to build a new global consensus for the further stimuli necessary to ensure continued economic recovery. At home, they also face opposition to their state aid package from conservative Democrats and Republicans in Congress. Now, more than ever, it is essential for progressives in Europe and the US to work in partnership to define a progressive growth model as an alternative to conservative economic orthodoxy. It is not overstating the case to say that the future of progressive politics depends on our ability to craft such an alternative.