

After every presidential election, it is tempting, and easy, to create a storyline to explain what just happened, why the winner won and why the winner lost. In 1980, the story was that America was moving back to the right. In 1992, the story was largely one of generational shift as America's first baby boomer president prepared to take office. This year, the story has been demographic change. The Republican Party, according to this story line, lost the election because it could not compete for the younger and more heavily non-white vote.

There is obviously some truth to this story. President Obama won big among Latino, Asian and African American voters. Importantly, his margins were not much bigger, and in some cases, less than those of previous Democratic nominees, but there were more of these non-white voters in the electorate than in previous years. Similarly, although losing badly among white voters, Obama did better among young and unmarried white voters, particularly young, unmarried female voters.

This is all good news for the Democratic Party, but it should not be mistaken for a demographic inevitability that will doom the Republican Party to decades, or even years of failure. That said, the current Republican Party, a rump collection of the very wealthy, religious extremists and older white voters, will not be competitive until it changes. This change, however, can come quickly. It is not hard to imagine that if the economy does not turn around in the next two to four years, voters will be willing to try anything and will have lost most hope in the Democratic Party. In 2012, the argument that Obama inherited a very tough economic situation was still convincing to enough voters, but that will not be the case in 2016.

Similarly, while the fundamentalist Christian orientation of a large segment of the Republican Party, makes that party unpalatable to many voters, it is easy to imagine those fundamentalists losing the battle for control of the party and being pushed to the fringes of the Republican Party. In that scenario, the religious right will become like much of the far left, marginalized within their party, but still supportive because they have nowhere else to go. The power of this is clear. If Mitt Romney and Paul Ryan had simply never mentioned contraception, rape or marriage equality, they might well have won the election. The incentive for the Republican Party to change, or at least reframe its rhetoric and emphasize different things is extremely high. It is possible that the Party will be unable to adapt to this, but counting on that would be a mistake on the part of the Democratic Party.

The bad news for the Republican Party is that in this recent election, they lost so many demographic groups, such as Latinos, LGBT voters, Jews, African Americans and young unmarried women by margins ranging from substantial to enormous. The good news for the Republican Party is that they do not need to win any of these groups, but just need to do a little better. For example, winning 40% of the LGBT, Latino or Jewish vote would make the Republican Party much more competitive. Closing the gap among young unmarried women would have a similar effect.

The Democratic coalition may look strong, but the critical role played by President Obama in assembling and maintaining this coalition should not be overlooked. Today's Democratic Party

base primarily consists of people of color and white liberals. The former category includes people who vote Democratic for economic reasons as well as because of the Democratic Party's positions on issues including civil rights, immigration and equality. The latter category includes mostly people whose political views, framed in some cases by their sexual orientation, religion, or life experience, have pushed them to the Democratic Party. The next Democratic nominee might not be quite as well positioned for this coalition as Obama has been and encounter problems maintaining it. A southern moderate Democrat, for example, might not generate the enthusiasm among white liberals which Obama has enjoyed. Similarly, a white candidate might not hold on to Latino voters as well as Obama, particularly if the Republicans nominate a Latino in 2016.

Elections, even decisive ones, frequently do not have staying power. The Republicans were shellacked in 1964 only to regain the presidency four years later. In the late 1980s, the Democrats were a largely moribund party outside of their base among people of color and in urban America. In 1992, they nominated a ticket with a strong appeal in the suburbs and in the border states and have won or come very close to winning every election since those years. Today the Democratic victory looks impressive, but a swing of a few points among one or two demographic groups, or a decline in enthusiasm among African American voters is all it will take for the Republicans to be very competitive again.