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May 1, 2008

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## Democrats and Demographics: A Cautionary Note from Texas

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The 2000 census showed the largest changes in the makeup of the American population since the 1910 national count. A combination of low birth rates among native-born whites of non-Hispanic origin ("Anglos"), higher birth rates among minorities, plus surging Latino and Asian immigration, dropped the Anglo share of the U.S. population below 75 percent.

Demographers project a continuation of those trends.

That should be great news for Democrats, right? After all, according to the 2000 Voter News Service exit poll, Al Gore won the Hispanic vote by 67% to 31%, the Asian vote by 54% to 41%, and the Black vote by 90% to 8%. With the continuing population growth in these three groups, and little change in the Anglo share (who gave 54% of their votes to Bush and 42% to Gore), if the 2004 presidential vote division is the same among all major ethnic-racial groups, the Democratic margin in the popular vote should grow from a half million to two million, ensuring an electoral college victory as well as a popular vote lead. Happy days will be here again!

Maybe, maybe not. Even Ruy Teixeira, a prominent promoter of the view that demographic changes will produce a new Democratic majority, concedes the 2002 election was "a poor one for Democrats nationwide." The 2002 results should warn Democrats away from any simplistic assumption that demographic changes, even dramatic ones such as we are currently experiencing, will translate into net political gains for their party.

More specifically, I would remind readers of the experience in my state, Texas, over the last decade. During the 1990s, Texas' population grew at about twice the national average, from 17 million to nearly 21 million. Most of this growth reflected increases in the Latino population (up 54%) and the Black population (up 23%). The Anglo increase was just 6%, and their share of the total state population dropped from 60% to 54%. Given the strong Democratic leanings of both minority populations (Gore got 70% of the Hispanic vote in Texas and 95% of the Black vote), Texas Democrats should be sitting pretty going into 2003.

The reality, of course, is quite different. Ten years ago our state had a Democratic governor, Lt. governor, attorney general, and a majority of other statewide elected officials as well as state legislators. Today, every one of the 29 statewide elected officials in Texas is a Republican, as are 107 of 181 legislators. The lesson should be clear: big increases in minority, Democratic leaning populations do not necessarily lead to greater Democratic success at the polls. The failure of Texas Democrats to benefit from substantial minority growth has several root causes, including a vacuum in party leadership over the last 10 years, an often muddled message, and the superior strategy of Texas Republican leaders who have managed to avoid stirring up minority voters the way California Governor Pete Wilson did in the early 1990s, while simultaneously benefiting from a "backlash" among Anglo voters concerned about growing minority influence in the state.

So heading into 2004, national Democrats should recognize that while growing minority populations might improve the party's fortunes, specific factors pertaining to the

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immediate contest are likely to be far more important in deciding next year's presidential and congressional elections. These include the old staples – the state of the economy, presidential approval, and in this candidate-centered age, the qualities of the nominee the out-party puts up against an incumbent president. One of those qualities, to be sure, will be a sensitivity to the great changes occurring in our population, coupled with the ability to shape an inclusive, positive message for all Americans.

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