

Voting coalitions in US presidential elections

Has anything changed?

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Beneath the headlines of victory and defeat, what changing voting patterns lie behind recent presidential elections?

EXAM LINKS

- **Edexcel** Component 5 Topic 5.2: coalitions of supporters for each party.
- **AQA** Paper 2 Topic 3.2: links between parties and their core voting coalitions.

Plus synoptic links to many other topics in both specifications, including political parties and constitutional arrangements.

Nearly quarter of a century ago in the year 2000, the US presidential election notoriously delivered the 'wrong' result. Yet the voting itself was remarkably similar to an election result two decades later that gave the 'right' result.

In 2000, the percentage of the vote obtained by both candidates (George W. Bush and Al Gore) was approximately 48%, with 3% going to the Green candidate Ralph Nader. In 2020, Republicans (Trump) again obtained 48%, with the only difference being that Democratic candidate Joe Biden won the 3% that had previously gone to Nader, which ensured his victory.

After 20 years it seems that the overall pattern of US voting has not greatly changed. Almost half

of voters consistently vote for candidates from *both* parties in each election cycle, and during that time the most a winning presidential candidate has polled is 52% of the popular vote. The other clear factors are that the Electoral College favours the Republicans (see *POLITICS REVIEW* Volume 33, issue 3, pp. 6–9), while the actual number of people voting Democrat is growing faster than the Republican vote.

The 2000 election

Republican candidate George W. Bush campaigned in 2000 as a 'compassionate conservative'. He was moderate in his approach and his 'folksy' manner appealed to many Americans. While his Democrat rival Al Gore benefited from the economic progress made under Bill Clinton, he lacked Clinton's charisma and failed to inspire voters. Voting was incredibly tight, with both men winning 48% of the vote. The final outcome was a win for Bush (Box 1), but the voting coalitions were remarkably predictable. Men, white people and rural voters tended to support the Republicans, with the Democrats winning the majority of votes from women, black and minority ethnic people, and those living in urban areas.



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The 2004 election

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 were the key event of Bush's first term, turning him from a moderate conservative to an aggressive wartime commander, with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Bush was presented as the commander-in-chief – the only person who could keep America safe. However, despite this advantage, he only won the popular vote 51% to 48%. White people, men and older voters heavily backed Bush. Women, black people and young people, along with the growing Hispanic population, voted solidly Democrat for the candidate John Kerry.

The 2008 election: a swing to the left?

When he started his primary campaign, Barack Obama was an outsider who, as the most left-wing voting senator, was unlikely to win anything. Charisma, charm and a well-organised campaign propelled him to an unlikely victory in the Democratic nomination over Hillary Clinton. Initially it appeared the election would be close, but gaffes by Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin, the collapse of Lehman Brothers bank and the start of the credit crunch marked the end of Republican John McCain's campaign. Obama won

Box 1 The election of 2000

Al Gore won the popular vote in 2000 by just over 500,000 votes, but the Electoral College all depended on who had won Florida, which was too close to call. The result relied on which votes were valid and which districts should be recounted. This decision went to court in Florida and ultimately to the Supreme Court who, 3 weeks after polling day, voted 5–4 to stop the recount, awarding the election to Bush.

Bush therefore won Florida and hence the presidency by 537 votes. Subsequent investigations suggest a full recount would have awarded Gore the victory. To many Democrats, Bush was never legitimately president.



Protesters in front of the Supreme Court during the oral argument of the Florida ballot

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comfortably 52–46%, the most decisive win in the twenty-first century. The white vote remained solidly Republican, with black voters even more strongly Democrat. The key trends were young people and Hispanic people supporting Democrats 66–32%. The over-65s and the rural vote, however, remained solidly Republican.

The 2012 election: more of the same?

Mitt Romney, the Republican candidate in 2012, initially presented a strong challenge to Obama, including 'winning' the first presidential debate. The economy was still struggling from the effects of the credit crunch and unemployment was high. However, an event in October strongly benefited Obama: Hurricane Sandy hit the USA. Romney was stuck at home unable to campaign, while Obama appeared across the news as the president riding to the rescue with federal aid. The tide turned and Obama won 51–47%. Many of the key voting trends from 2008 were repeated, with the white vote at 59% being even stronger for Romney, but the growing Hispanic vote overwhelmingly supported Obama, along with black people, young people, urban dwellers and women.

The 2016 election: a swing to the right?

It is the norm after 8 years with a president from one party for the USA to want a change. What was unexpected in 2016 was the Republican candidate. From the very start of his campaign, Donald Trump

Box 2 Two October surprises

In 2016, both Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton were beset with allegations of corruption and inappropriate behaviour. Trump faced accusations of sexual misconduct and Clinton was investigated over the use of a private email server while she was secretary of state. One month before the election a video appeared, showing Trump talking about women where he said 'You can do anything... Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything'. It looked like it would swing the election in favour of Clinton. Trump dismissed the video as 'locker-room banter' but it appeared decisive until 11 days before the election, when the director of the FBI announced they were reopening the investigation into Clinton, following the discovery of more emails. She was cleared 3 days before the election, but the tide had turned in Trump's favour.

was unconventional, but his style proved popular with certain groups. It could be argued that both Hillary Clinton and Trump were strongly disliked, not only by the opposing party but by large sections of their own party. Their campaigns were beset with accusations and counterclaims (Box 2), but ultimately Trump won the election by virtue of winning the Electoral College, 306–232, a figure at odds with Clinton winning the popular vote by 2.8 million.

The voting coalitions for both parties were consistent with previous years, with one exception: Trump obtained a 4% increase from voters earning

under \$30,000 — a group that had previously been solidly Democrat. The important issue though was not simply the numbers, but the fact that these were votes in key states such as Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania — the three states that Trump won by very narrow margins, and which enabled him to win the Electoral College.

It seems that white working-class voters felt that they had been losing out to other groups, and they were drawn to Trump's promises about bringing jobs back to America and his appeal as the change candidate.

All other groups followed the previous pattern: young people, women, urban dwellers, black and Hispanic people voting solidly for Clinton, while religious groups and the white, rural, older population voted for Trump.

The 2020 election: shock

Joe Biden won the Electoral College with the same number of votes as Trump in 2016, the difference being that he also won the popular vote by over 6 million. However, a number of states were incredibly close and if around 100,000 people in five key states had voted differently, then Trump would have won the Electoral College. For example, Biden won Georgia by just 0.2% or 12,670 votes. Voting patterns remained remarkably consistent with other recent elections. Perhaps surprisingly, Trump increased the Hispanic vote by 3% but still only managed 32% in that voting sector (Box 3). What probably swung it for Biden was increasing his vote among white non-graduates by 3%, although Trump still won this group overall.

Conclusion

What is clear from US elections in the twenty-first century is that America is strongly divided. Events, personality and the spread of votes seems to determine which party wins the Electoral College, but the popular vote seems increasingly heavily skewed towards the Democrats. The young, urban and non-white vote is growing, while the rural, white, older vote is decreasing.

Box 3 The growing Hispanic vote

In 2000 Hispanic people represented 7% of the US population and George W. Bush obtained 35% of the Hispanic vote. By 2020 the Hispanic population had nearly doubled to 13% and by 2030 Hispanic people are predicted to make up 22% of the US population, with the white population decreasing to 56%. Despite Trump's small increase on 2016, Biden obtained 65% of votes by Hispanic people in 2020. The Hispanic vote could be key to ensuring more Democratic victories.



Billboard advert during Donald Trump's 2016 campaign

The key to future election results will rest on two factors: what happens to the Hispanic vote and whether the white working class can be persuaded to vote Republican in large numbers. Hispanic people are generally anti-abortion and favour small government, so as a group they should be natural Republicans. However, perceptions remain that the Republican Party is insufficiently supportive of social issues that affect Hispanic communities. The white working class are therefore likely to remain key for the next few elections at least – hence the choice of Biden, who is perceived to appeal to that group more than a younger, racially diverse candidate might.

ACTIVITIES

- 1 Make notes on the October surprises (Box 2) and decide how important they were in determining the outcome of the 2016 election.
- 2 Research the Electoral College to understand how Trump could win in 2016 while losing the popular vote.

Class debate

- 3 Can the Republicans ever win the popular vote again?

EXAM-STYLE QUESTIONS

- 1 Explain and analyse three factors that determine the outcome of US elections. (9 marks, AQA-style)
- 2 Evaluate the view that personality is the most important factor in determining the outcome of US elections. You must consider this view and the alternatives to this view in a balanced way. (30 marks, Edexcel style)

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President Obama was able to turn the Hurricane Sandy disaster to his electoral advantage in 2012

