

The Effects of Demographics on Political Party Affiliation in American High School Students

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Abstract - This study analyzes the relationship between demographic factors and political party affiliation in America, and how the addition of American youth to the voting population could possibly change political trends. This study administered an anonymous electronic survey to American high school students in grades nine through twelve, with a qualifier question of never having voted before. Participants were asked demographic identifier questions, including age, race/ethnicity, region, and religion. Participants were asked which political party they aligned with. The survey contained twenty-four questions to identify the participants' alignment with the goals and beliefs of either the Democrat or Republican parties to account for error in the participants' responses to the political affiliation question. The survey questions used a Likert scale, where participants were assigned a score based on their responses. The independent variable of this study was demographics, with the goal being to find its possible connection to political party affiliation, the dependent variable. The results of the survey demonstrated that most minority individuals identified with Democrat or Democrat-leaning ideals. Based on the results, it was concluded that the next political trend will have more Democrat/Democrat-leaning citizens, influenced by the rise in minorities and more liberal mindsets in American youth.

Key Words - Demographics, Politics, High School, Ethnicity

INTRODUCTION

Due to controversy and quickly changing demographics, the political environment in America has been transformed in recent years. America's youth has exhibited a more liberal mindset than older generations, while immigration has also been rising at an exponential rate, adding to the rapidly developing changes in America's political environment (Itkowitz, 2019). This study analyzes how these factors correlate with political party affiliation in America and how the addition of American youth to the voting population could possibly impact political trends in the country.

I. Demographics in the United States

An article by the Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, "Race and Ethnicity Still Play a Role in Political Attitudes," notes that there is a young voter disparity between racial groups for the past 30 years, specifically whites and African Americans (Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, n.d). In an analysis of President Obama's approval ratings, no demographic factor, such as gender, age, religion, or education, was as strong in determining support as race, with his highest support coming from African Americans (Harvard Kennedy School Institute of Politics, n.d). However, Gallup published an article by Frank Newport, a senior scientist with a doctorate in sociology, showing that non-Hispanic whites have generally controlled the political sphere, with the largest percentage in every party (Newport, 2012). When taking population numbers into account, the largest percentage of whites affiliate themselves with the Republican party, while minorities tend to align with the Democratic Party, except for Hispanics, who identify with the Independent Party (Newport, 2012). This demonstrates that although minorities almost all vote for non-Republican parties, whites still have a larger impact on politics in the country. This analysis calls into question how the support for political parties might change, as according to senior demographers Kevin M. Pollard and William O'Hare, "by the middle of the 21st century, non-Hispanic whites will make up a slim and fading majority of Americans" (Pollard & O'Hare, 1999, para. 1).

II. Influences on the Political Behaviors of Minorities

"A Deep Dive Into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education," a Pew Research study, shows the political alignment trends of various groups, by analyzing religion, race, and age as factors (Pew Research Center, 2015). This article further solidified the concept that race and ethnicity have a large impact on political party affiliation, with minorities staunchly supporting both the Democratic and Independent Party instead of the Republican Party, which continues to be mainly supported by the non-Hispanic white majority. Additionally, it notes that younger generations typically tend to lean more Democratic than their predecessors, such as the Silent Generation, consisting of individuals born between 1925 and 1945 (Pew Research Center, 2015).

Aida Just, an associate professor of political science at Bilkent University in Turkey, highlights the various factors contributing to the political behavior of individuals belonging to a minority group in the United States (U.S.). Just notes how ethnic groups tend to stick together and support their group's goals, especially in times when information is short or they perceive a lack of equal opportunity (Just, 2017). Additionally, Just writes that some minority individuals vote for a party with more ethnic officials, simply because they feel represented. If this is the case, it can be assumed that an influx of minority groups into the country may affect the results of votes, with some officials getting elected simply because minority groups feel represented by them (Just, 2017), a concept relating to social interest, defined as "the more you can relate to the sameness you share with someone else, the more belongingness you can feel" (MacMahon, 1997, p. 4). Finally, in a study by Pippa Norris and Robert Mattes on how ethnicity affects political party alignment, it was concluded that ethnicity did affect party affiliation in 12 African nations (Mattes & Norris, 2003), which this study hypothesizes will also be the case in America.

III. Possible Future Effects of Demographics on Political Behavior

It was hypothesized that support for the Democratic Party will increase once the current American youth reaches voting age, due to demographic factors. It is believed that the new wave of liberalism in American youth and the rising diversity in the country due to immigration will further boost the party's support. African Americans are predicted to continue on the current trend of voting for the Democratic party, regardless of socioeconomic standing or education, since the party has traditionally supported the ethnic group's values. Additionally, the majority of whites in high socioeconomic brackets or low education will continue voting for the Republican party. However, it is hypothesized that LatinX/Hispanic groups will move their support towards the Democratic Party in light of anti-immigrant/anti-Hispanic sentiments rising from the Republican Party and incumbent President.

America's political environment has been predominantly controlled by the white population. With the demographic makeup in America rapidly changing, the question of how politics will evolve as more minorities join the voting pool is of interest. Newport states that "the independent and Democratic segments of the U.S. population are now less white than they were in 2008, reflecting the uptick in the U.S. nonwhite population over these five years" (Newport, 2018, para. 12). Data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that the proportion of U.S. children who are immigrants has grown, with the majority of this increase coming from second-generation immigrants, which have risen nine percent from 1994 to 2017 (Child Trends, 2018). In her analysis, Just states that "[by] being born in [the] host country, second-generation immigrants feel more entitled to equal treatment than their foreign-born parents, and therefore become more

involved in politics than either foreign-born individuals or subsequent immigration generations" (Just, 2017, para. 40).

A graph by Pew Research Center illustrates that African Americans overwhelmingly align with the Democratic Party, with 64% supporting the party. The graph indicates that many minority groups tend to support the Democratic party, regardless of socioeconomic status or education. This trend, however, is not reflected in the white population, with the majority tilting Republican, especially those of lower socioeconomic status and education (Pew Research Center, 2015). Taking these factors into account, it is only logical to assume that political trends in America will shift as the demographic groups who are voting undergo a drastic change.

METHODS

This study was conducted by administering an anonymous electronic survey to American high school students in grades nine through twelve under the age of 18. Prior to beginning the survey, all participants were required to sign a consent form explaining possible risks and removing their obligation to participate at any time if they so desired. The first questions were about voting status and age. If the participant was under the age of 18 and had never voted before, then they qualified to partake in the study.

Following the qualifiers, there were five questions about religion, ethnicity, and inhabited region with the purpose of identifying the demographic information of the participants, while also identifying any potential extraneous variables that could influence political party affiliation. Using the example of two Pew Research Center Political Typology Quizzes, a list of 24 questions were created to identify an individual's political affiliation.

In this study, the independent variable was demographics, with the goal being finding its connection to political party affiliation, the dependent variable. Besides explicitly asking for a participant's political affiliation near the beginning of the survey, the questions were geared towards identifying whether participants aligned with the goals of certain parties, aiding to eliminate possible bias, misconception, or conformity.

The majority of the questions used a Likert scale comprising of *strongly agree*, *agree*, *disagree*, and *strongly disagree* with no opportunity to stay neutral. Respondents were sorted into Democratic, Democratic Leaning, Republican-leaning, and Republican groups. The participant's group was decided using the scale where a strongly agree on a Democrat identifier question earned a score of four points, three points for agree, two for disagree, and one for strongly disagree. In terms of Republican identifier questions, a strongly agree earned one point, agree earned two points, disagree earned three, and finally strongly disagree earned four. The range of possible points was from 24 to 96. A response score between 24 to 42 points classified as Republican, 43 to 60 classified as Republican-leaning, 61 to 78 classified as Democrat-leaning, and 79 to 96 classified

as Democrat. These groups were then cross checked with the demographics of the participants to identify whether a correlation existed. Following the political party affiliation questions, there were also two questions asking participants whether they were planning to vote in the 2020 Election, and if so, for which candidate, trying to further identify the next possible voting trend in America’s youth.

RESULTS

After evaluating participant data, the participants were grouped into two categories, Republican/Republican-leaning and Democrat/Democrat-leaning. Figures five, six, and seven show questions from the survey corresponding with liberal social views.

Besides being sorted into groups based on political affiliation, the participants were also grouped based on ethnicity, religion, and region to analyze possible trends. In terms of religion, all unaffiliated/none, Atheist, Hindu, Protestant, and Muslim/Islamic participants identified as fully Democrat or Democrat-Leaning. The other religions were more mixed. However, almost all groups identified as mostly Democrat, with the Jewish participants having only seven Republican/Republican-leaning members out of a group of 40. The Christian and Catholic groups showed similar results, with only seven out of 24 participants identifying as Republican or Republican-leaning. Finally, the Eastern Orthodox and Buddhist groups were predominantly Republican/Republican-leaning, with the only Buddhist participant being Republican-leaning and two out of three Eastern Orthodox participants being Republican-leaning.

As seen in figure four, the researchers also accounted for the four regions in the United States, however, the majority of the participants came from the South. All of the seven participants from the Midwest identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning, all but one out of eight participants in the Northeast identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning, and the two participants from the West were one Democrat-leaning and one Republican-leaning. Finally, the results from the South were mixed, but the majority identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning, and only 16 out of 70 participants identified as Republican or Republican-leaning.

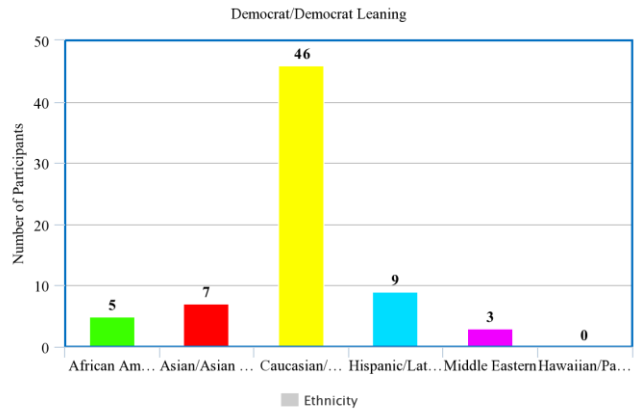


FIGURE 1: The number of participants who aligned Democrat or Democrat-Leaning alongside ethnicity.

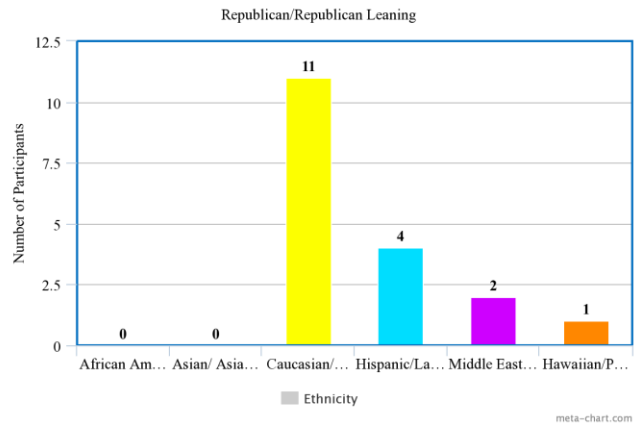


FIGURE 2: The number of participants who aligned Republican or Republican-Leaning alongside ethnicity.

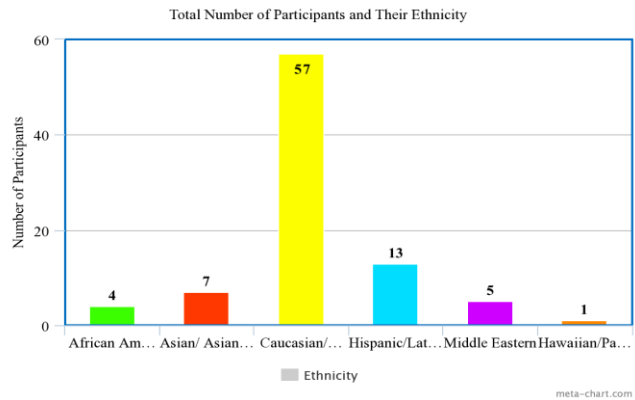


FIGURE 3: Total amount of participants per ethnicity.

Region	Democrat/Democrat-leaning	Republican/Republican-leaning
Midwest	7	0
Northeast	7	1
South	54	16
West	1	1

FIGURE 4: Number of Democrat/Democrat-leaning versus Republican/Republican-leaning participants based on region.

Environmental laws are necessary and should be a priority.

88 responses

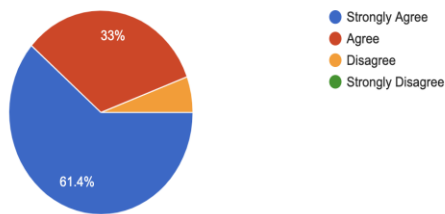


FIGURE 5: A question from the survey that shows liberal social views concerning environmental regulations.

Abortion should be illegal in all cases.

88 responses

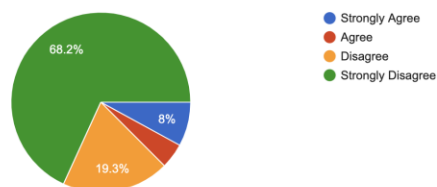


FIGURE 6: A question from the survey that shows liberal social views concerning abortion.

Homosexuality should be accepted the same way heterosexuality is.

88 responses

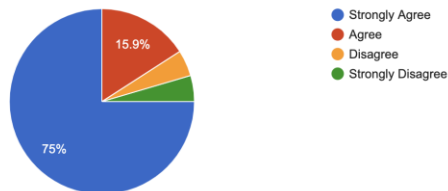


FIGURE 7: A question from the survey that shows liberal social views concerning acceptance of homosexuality.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results, it was implied that the next political trend will have more Democrat/Democrat-leaning citizens due to the rise in minorities and more liberal mindsets in American youth. In terms of region or religion, the data showed that it did not have a major effect on political affiliation, as the results varied widely for both categories. When it comes to region, due to the anonymous nature of the study, the precise location of the participants was unknown, with their broader region being the only identifier for location.

The ethnicity grouping, however, showed much more correlation to political affiliation, with the data showing minorities such as African-Americans and Asian-Americans all aligned with Democrat or Democrat-leaning ideals.

According to Pew Research study, "A Deep Dive Into Party Affiliation: Sharp Differences by Race, Gender, Generation, Education," eighty percent of African-Americans lean Democratically, which is reflected in the data collected by this study and further illustrates the tendency for African-Americans to align with the Democratic Party. Additionally, many participants who marked themselves as Republican in the preliminary identifier questions actually aligned with many liberal social views, causing their score from the survey to push them into the Democrat-leaning group. Overall, even regardless of ethnicity, the majority of the participants identified as Democrat or Democrat-leaning, showing that there is a possibility of a new political trend in America.

As seen in Figure one, all four of the African-American participants were either Democrat or Democrat-leaning, with none affiliating with the Republican party. These findings from the study correlate with previous research, as both a graph from Pew Research and an article by Frank Newport, published on Gallup, showed that minority groups, especially African-Americans, tend to align with Democratic ideals. This idea that minorities generally identify with the Democratic Party is further reinforced by data from figures one and two, which show that in each minority group, the majority of participants are Democratically aligned, with all seven Asian/Asian-American participants, nine out of thirteen Hispanic/LatinX participants, and three out of five Middle Eastern participants aligning with the party. The only minority group opposing the norm was the Hawaiian/Pacific Islander group, where the only participant aligned with the Republican party. This result, however, was attributed to a lack of sample size, as there was only one participant identifying with the Hawaiian/Pacific Islander ethnicity group.

In figures five, six, and seven, it is observed that liberal social views are shared between the majority of participants, regardless of political affiliation. These liberal social views, such as an emphasis on environmental regulations, acceptance of homosexuality, and pro-choice sentiment, although generally held by the Democratic party, appeared in the study's result to be shared amongst the majority of participants. Figure five demonstrates that 94.4 percent of participants either strongly agree or agree that environmental laws should be a priority. Figure six further reinforces this concept of growing liberal views, with 87.5 percent of participants believing that abortion should be legal in all cases. Finally, figure seven shows that 90.9 percent of participants believe that homosexuality should be accepted the same way as heterosexuality, once again driving home the point that American high school students are shying away from more conservative views held by Republicans and older individuals. Overall, eighteen out of eighty-seven participants aligned as either Republican or Republican-leaning, an approximate 20.7 percent. However, a large amount of these participants agreed with typically Democratic ideals, illustrating that the American youth appears to share more liberal social views, regardless of political affiliation.

The findings of this study showed that there is a movement towards more liberal social views by American high school students. This movement could mean a large change in future voting trends, as it appears that the American youth who are soon to be eligible to vote hold much more liberal social views and tend to lean more Democratically than their predecessors. With this in mind, the Democratic Party may be receiving more votes from American youth, overthrowing the relative balance that currently exists between the Republican and Democratic parties. With an election coming up soon, this potential new voting trend may present an advantage to the Democratic Party, as even Republican-aligned youth tend to hold typically Democratic ideals that may sway them to vote for a candidate of the opposing party.

FUTURE APPLICATIONS

Due to the nature of the course in which this study was conducted, there were a variety of time constraints that limited the timeframe in which data could be collected. Additionally, this study had no funding, as it was conducted in a high school classroom setting. The constraints of the course made the dissemination of the survey to a wider sample size difficult, however, the researchers were able to account for the four regions of the United States and a wide variety of ethnic groups.

Future researchers should consider methods to expand the sample size of such a study, including the possible addition of a financial motive for participants. Furthermore, in order to collect a larger array of data, the researchers encourage keeping the survey open for responses for a longer period of time.

Regardless of the limitations of this study, the researchers believe that the sample size of nearly 100 participants from across the United States was sufficient to make a conclusion about the possible future trends in American political party affiliation.

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