

New voters new values

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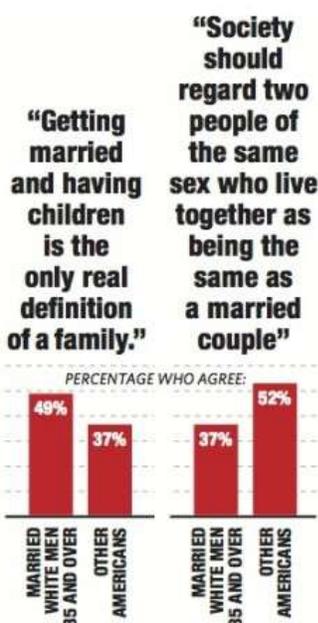
Barack Obama would have lost the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections had a new set of voters not joined the American electorate—voters who brought with them a range of values that differed sharply from those of more traditional voters. These changing values—on such issues as personal social responsibility, the role of government, sexual mores, gender roles, and America’s place in the world—underpin the decisions these voters made on Election Day and provide a basis for understanding Obama’s victory. They also signify profound changes to American politics and pose elemental challenges to both the Republican and Democratic parties in coming years.

As the values of the new American electorate (Latinos, women, the young, the unmarried) clash with those of the old (particularly white married men over 35), the country could see a shift not only in voting patterns but also in public policy. Consider these different groups’ answers when asked if they agreed or disagreed with a question that ascertained their views toward nationalism.

The world that young people, minorities, women, and the unmarried experience has produced sets of values on economic and social issues that vary greatly from those of older white men in particular. The increased influence of these newer groups is not a temporary electoral condition, contingent on a charismatic African American candidate. These Americans who turned out in force for Obama are an increasingly powerful presence in the U.S. electorate—and, like older white married men, they are bringing their values with them to the polls.

Older White Men.

White married men over the age of 35 stand out among Americans on many measures—to begin, by their support for traditional social hierarchies and institutions. They score low on the value “Flexible Definition of the Family.” Asked to agree or disagree that “getting married and having children is the only real definition of a family,” about half (49 percent) of these men agree, compared to 37 percent of the rest of the population. Thirty-seven percent of older white married men also agree that “society should regard two people of the same sex who live together as being the same as a married couple”; among other Americans, 52 percent do.



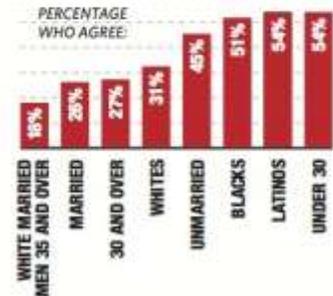
Closely linked to this belief in traditional family is a belief that the family should be a seat of patriarchal authority: Forty-four percent of older white married men agree with the statement “The father of the family must be master in his own house.” Among other Americans, support for this statement is 39 percent.

When it comes to the appropriate size and role of government, an issue that animated much of the recent election campaign, older white married men differ from their compatriots substantially. They are about half as likely (18 percent) as other Americans (39 percent) to agree that “it should be primarily government, not the private sector, that is concerned with solving the country’s social problems.” This disinclination toward governmental responsibility and power is bolstered both by their somewhat weaker sense of responsibility for the fates of people less

fortunate than themselves and a slightly stronger faith in the value “American Dream” (the belief that “it is possible for myself and/or my children to ‘make it’”)—a statement that 76 percent of older white married men support, compared to 69 percent of other Americans.

Similarly, 55 percent of this group endorses the idea that people basically get what they deserve (“Just Deserts”), while 49 percent of other Americans agree. Notably, although we might expect that economic winners would be more likely to see the system as fair, there is in fact no clear pattern by income on either American Dream or Just Deserts. Education makes a difference on the latter value, however: People with higher levels of education are markedly less likely to believe that people basically get what they deserve. As to America’s place in the world, older white married men empathize less than other Americans with people suffering in foreign nations, and just 23 percent say they often or occasionally feel they are “more a citizen of the world than of my country,” while 51 percent of other Americans say that they feel a sense of global citizenship.

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Under 30s

People under the age of 30 made up 19 percent of the electorate in November. Although Obama lost ground with young voters—60 percent of them voted for him in 2012 as compared to 66 percent in 2008—he nevertheless won them by a clear margin.

Young Americans are more at ease with a multicultural society and relatively skeptical of authority and the trappings of tradition (including religion) than older voters. For example, 75 percent of Americans under 30 agree that “I would be happy if someone in my family married someone of a different race,” compared to 57 percent of other Americans. Six in ten Americans under 30 agree that “the spiritual side of my life is not a single belief system; I draw on several faiths and traditions.” Forty-seven percent of Americans over 30 say the same.

But it may be young people’s attitudes toward government that are most notable, and not just because this election cycle featured so much discussion of the appropriate size and role of government. Americans under 30 are twice as likely (54 percent) as those 30 and over (27 percent) to agree that “it should be primarily government, not the private sector, that is concerned with solving the country’s social problems” (see chart below left).

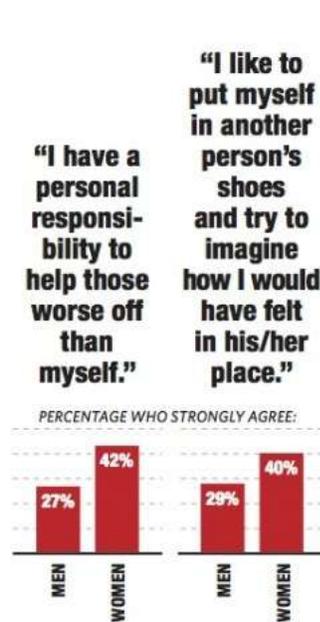
This interest in an active government emerges against the backdrop of serious economic insecurity for students and young workers. Youth unemployment has been a major feature of the post-2008 recession and recovery. Although young people are not especially pessimistic about their financial outlook, they express feelings of vulnerability and insecurity that reflect something deeper than uncertainty about temporary joblessness. Americans under 30 score low on the value “Personal Control,” which gauges a sense of personal efficacy in the face of circumstances. For instance, 51 percent of Americans under the age of 30 (compared to 38 percent of older people) agree with the statement “No matter what I do, I have a lot of trouble changing the course of my life.” Young people also score higher on the value “Anomie--Aimlessness”; they are more likely to believe they have scant value as individuals in society and to feel their life has little meaning.

Although bread-and-butter issues matter to the young, their underlying desire may be for a sense of direction and empowerment, the mingling of personal meaning and collective purpose. An every-man-for-himself orientation to the economy does not resonate as strongly with this group as a government

that seeks to support young people's economic participation and harness young adults' energies for a stronger America.

Women

In the 2012 elections, 55 percent of women voters cast their ballot for President Obama. That gender gap wasn't simply a reaction to Republican candidates' musings about "legitimate rape" and the "gift of God" bestowed as a consequence of rape.



On social issues, women's values do indeed differ from those of men in a number of ways. Women tend to be more at ease with diverse family models, more supportive of gender equality, and more comfortable with flexible gender roles (men and women taking on nontraditional responsibilities and even dressing and behaving in nontraditional ways).

The most interesting difference between women and men, however, is their values divergence on economic issues. In the past couple of years, women have been hit harder than men by job losses, particularly in the public sector. Job loss tends to be as disastrous for women as it is for men; the time when women were second earners whose incomes padded out the family finances is ancient history. Other survey work finds that 41 percent of American women said they were the primary breadwinners for their family at some point in the preceding four years. Women, though, still earn only 77 cents for every man's dollar. These different life circumstances are reflected in the values women and men hold.

Women and men differ in their basic sense of economic fairness. Women score lower on the value Just Deserts; they are less likely (46 percent) than men (55 percent), for instance, to agree that "I feel that people get what they deserve." They are also less certain about the value American Dream, expressing slightly less confidence that they or their children can "make it." Perhaps because women have less confidence that people's outcomes in life neatly match their efforts, they also score higher on the value "Social Responsibility." Forty-two percent of women, as compared to 27 percent of men, strongly agree that "I have a personal responsibility to help those worse off than myself."

Women's higher scores on the value "Introspection and Empathy" may also have some power to explain their differences from men. Four in ten women, as compared to 29 percent of men, agree strongly that "I like to put myself in another person's shoes and try to imagine how I would have felt in his/her place." Whereas men's values profile indicates a tendency to favor clear rules and structures, women's values inscribe greater flexibility.

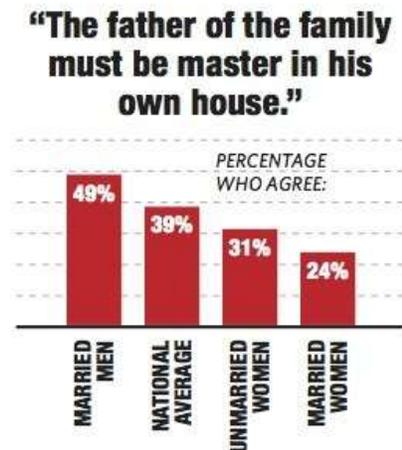
Women are more likely than men to endorse social safety nets and desire a stronger role for the government, which they see as a partner in achieving economic security, education, and a better future. Men are more likely to see government as a meddling hindrance than a supportive partner. For example, a Lake Research Partners survey found that 62 percent of women compared to 49 percent of men say the statement "It's time for government to take a larger and stronger role in making the economy work for the average American" is closer to their own view than the statement "Turning to big government to solve our economic problems will do more harm than good."

The Unmarried

Today, 51 percent of adult Americans are married. In 1960, the proportion was 72 percent. About nine in ten Americans will marry at some point in their lives. Because young people are marrying later in life and divorce is more common, however, a larger proportion of today's voting-age population arrives at the polls unmarried. This year, unmarried women made up 23 percent of the electorate (up from 21 percent in 2008), and two-thirds of them voted for Obama.

The divergence on sexual mores between single voters (especially the never-married, as distinct from the divorced and widowed) and the married voters who largely supported Mitt Romney represented a key value divide in this election. Whereas 34 percent of married Americans strongly disagree, for instance, that premarital sex increases the chances of a successful marriage, just 20 percent of unmarried Americans feel the same way.

Single, separated, and divorced Americans—both men and women—are also more flexible about what constitutes a marriage and a family. So are married women. It is married men who are the outliers on these issues, expressing by far the strongest attachment not only to traditional marriage and family but to a patriarchal model of family. Forty-nine percent of married men agree that “the father of the family must be master in his own house,” compared to 31 percent of unmarried women—and 24 percent of married women.

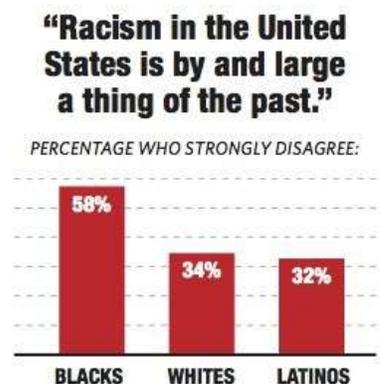


It is not just values surrounding gender and sexuality that drives differences between unmarried and married voters but also feelings about their economic vulnerability. Thirty-nine percent of singles say they are less financially secure this year than last (compared to 34 percent of married Americans); the separated and divorced are especially likely to feel worse off. Although singles overall are about as likely as married people to feel their financial circumstances will worsen in the future, the widowed, separated, and divorced are more pessimistic than average.

Blacks, Latinos, and Immigrants

Race and racism made major differences in voting behavior in both the 2008 and the 2012 elections. Not surprising, we find substantial differences between whites and nonwhites and between immigrants and the American-born on a number of dimensions related to racism, immigration, and diversity.

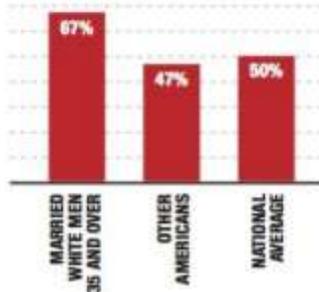
African Americans stand out in believing that racism remains a significant feature of American life. Asked to agree or disagree that “racism in the United States is by and large a thing of the past,” most African Americans (58 percent) disagree strongly, as compared to 34 percent of whites and 32 percent of Latinos.



African Americans may be more likely than whites to expect government to take a leadership role in tackling the racism they see as a persistent part of American life: About half (51 percent) of this group agrees that “it should be primarily government, not the private sector, that is concerned with solving the country's social problems.” Latinos are roughly in line with African Americans, while only three in ten white Americans

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PERCENTAGE WHO AGREE:



agree. This, of course, reflects a variety of attitudes not just on racism but also on the role of government and the state of the economy.

On the question of multiculturalism, opinions vary about the extent to which immigrants should maintain their heritage languages and cultures or “blend in” to an American mainstream. Here, too, older white married men are the outliers: Sixty-seven percent agree that “immigrants of different races and ethnic groups should set aside their cultural backgrounds and try to blend into the American culture,” compared to just 47 percent of other Americans.

Navigating the New Values Landscape

The values cleavages between traditional voters and the emerging constituencies are profound. The different values that women, minorities, the young, and the unmarried bring to their voting decisions are the product of a set of life experiences unlike the experiences of the old electorate. These groups pose different demands on government and political leaders that could point to new directions in public policy.

But while the values shifts we have traced here are profound, their short-term impact on politics is by no means guaranteed. A lot depends on turnout in the next election cycle. In 2012, voters over the age of 50 made up 44 percent of the electorate, but in the 2010 midterm elections, they cast 53 percent of the ballots. The more youthful composition of the 2012 electorate clearly benefited Democrats, but it is notable that Democrats’ performance among older people was actually worse in 2012 than in the 2010 midterms. Democrats lost all over-50 segments in 2012, whereas in 2010 they conceded only senior citizens (not the 50-to-64 age group). Thus, 2014 could once again find Democrats on the defensive if turnout plummets among young, as well as minority and unmarried, voters.

Beyond 2014, both major parties face challenges in adapting to the evolving social-values landscape. The challenge for Republicans is greater, as some of the values around which they have built their party’s base are precisely those that alienate the emerging electorate. Yet Democrats and progressive leaders have work to do as well. While they won this year’s election, they did so with a diverse, multifaceted coalition whose values and priorities may affront some of their older and white blue-collar voters.

Nor have the Democrats transformed politics or public policy in a way that connects more deeply with the emerging values of the country or even guarantees that their supporters will continue to participate in the political process. Some of the same values that so distinctly differentiate the new electorate from the old also pose challenges to their political engagement. Younger generations’ higher scores on the value of Anomie-Aimlessness and their feeling that they have little control over their future could impede their developing the lifelong habit of voting, particularly in non-presidential elections.

The new electorate represents a great opportunity for progressives that is matched by an even bigger challenge of engaging these voters and speaking to their experiences, needs, and desires. Democrats and progressives will need to take a strong stand defending the safety-net programs that are important to their base of women, young voters, people of color, and unmarried voters. They must move aggressively on major immigration reform.

Most important, Democrats and progressives need to define a new economic agenda that promises opportunity, security, stability, and prosperity to their growing constituencies. The successful campaigns in 2012 lacked a comprehensive economic plan or perspective—but by voting in such high numbers, the new American electorate gave Democrats another chance to produce one. Progressives must now make sure that their voters' leap of faith is rewarded.

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