



Backfire

Republican Rhetoric in 2014 Will Be an Albatross for 2016

By Neera Tanden, Gov. Ted Strickland, Arkadi Gerney, and Tiffany Germain
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The close races of the 2014 election are taking place in a variety of states whose demographic makeup is very different than that of the national electorate; 2014 voters are expected to be more white, more rural, and more conservative than those in 2016. While polls predict a low turnout and more conservative electorate, several races are much closer than they were in the 2010 midterms, and control of the Senate may be determined very late on Election Day—or perhaps not for months as run-off elections are waged.

In order to appeal to a more conservative electorate in 2014, Republicans have counted on the structural advantages in participation patterns for the midterm elections and doubled down on their far-right positions on immigration, climate change, voting restrictions, and women's economic and health issues. While these positions may help drive the intensity of the traditional conservative base in the short term, many of the actions and messages risk alienating the rising American electorate of 2016 and beyond—Latinos, Millennials, African Americans, and single women. Republican successes in 2014 will be an albatross for 2016.



Screenshot of Senate candidate Tom Cotton's ad "Southern Border"¹

While Republicans have traditionally relied on illegal immigration to rally the conservative base, this cycle has seen some of the most extreme anti-immigration messaging from Republican candidates and allied groups. During the summer, Arkansas Senate candidate Tom Cotton (R) ran a series of anti-immigration ads, including one titled "Southern Border," in a six-figure buy.² In the ad, a voiceover says, "Our southern border, chaos and crime. Washington made the mess. Sen. Mark Pryor voted for amnesty. Citizenship for illegals. Pryor voted against a border fence three times."³ The ad bases most of its criticism on Sen. Pryor's (D) vote for an immigration reform bill, calling it "amnesty," which many fact-checkers pointed out was inaccurate.⁴ New England Republican Scott Brown employed a similar tactic, running three ads on border security in his quest for a New Hampshire Senate seat, one warning that a porous border leaves the United States vulnerable to the Ebola virus.⁵

These ads are part of a trend by Republicans to use immigration fears as a wedge, linking immigration to the public's concerns on issues such as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, and Ebola. Georgia GOP Senate candidate David Perdue ran an ad titled "Secure Our Borders," which attempts to tie his Democratic opponent Michelle Nunn's position for comprehensive immigration reform to failing to protect the United States from terrorists.⁶ "She's for amnesty, while terrorism experts say our border breakdown could provide an entry for groups like ISIS," the voiceover says.⁷ Perdue's ad, which includes images from ISIS videos, cites a Texas Department of Public Safety bulletin that states "militants are expressing an increased interest in the notion that they could clandestinely infiltrate the southwest border of US, for terror attack."⁸ The bulletin examines "social chatter," which amounted to just 32 social media posts that Texas law enforcement later acknowledged could not be verified.⁹ PolitiFact gave the ad a "mostly

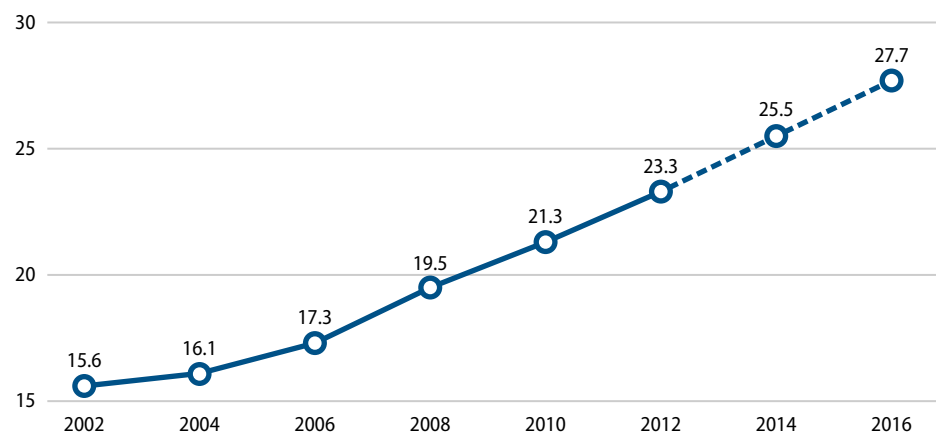
false” rating,¹⁰ and other fact-checkers have had similar responses to claims of ISIS plans to infiltrate through the U.S.-Mexico border.¹¹ The National Republican Congressional Committee, or NRCC, ran attack ads against a House Democrat from Arizona, claiming that “Evil forces around the world want to harm Americans every day. Their entry into our country? Through Arizona’s back yard.”¹² Yet national security officials said they see “no specific intelligence or evidence to suggest at present that [ISIS] is attempting to infiltrate this country through our southern border.”¹³

In deploying these scare tactics on immigration, Republican candidates and allied groups may be putting short-term gains ahead of long-term trends. In an October 2014 Latino Decisions poll, 51 percent of Latino voters said immigration reform was the most important issue they thought the president and Congress should address.¹⁴

Studies show that Latinos are far less likely to vote in nonpresidential years.¹⁵ In fact, Latino turnout has been more than 40 percent higher in presidential elections compared to midterm elections.¹⁶ What’s more, Latino voters play a disproportionately small role in the year’s most competitive races: While Latinos make up 11 percent of all eligible 2014 voters nationwide, they consist of just 4.7 percent of eligible voters in the eight states with the closest Senate races.¹⁷ The only close race in which Latinos make up a significant portion of the electorate is the Colorado Senate race—and Republicans have steered clear of the issue of immigration reform in the state.¹⁸ Finally, the share and raw number of eligible voters who are Latino continues to grow: In 2016, more than 27 million Latinos will be eligible to vote, 4 million more than in 2012.¹⁹

FIGURE 1
The number of eligible Latino voters is growing rapidly

Eligible Latino voters, in millions

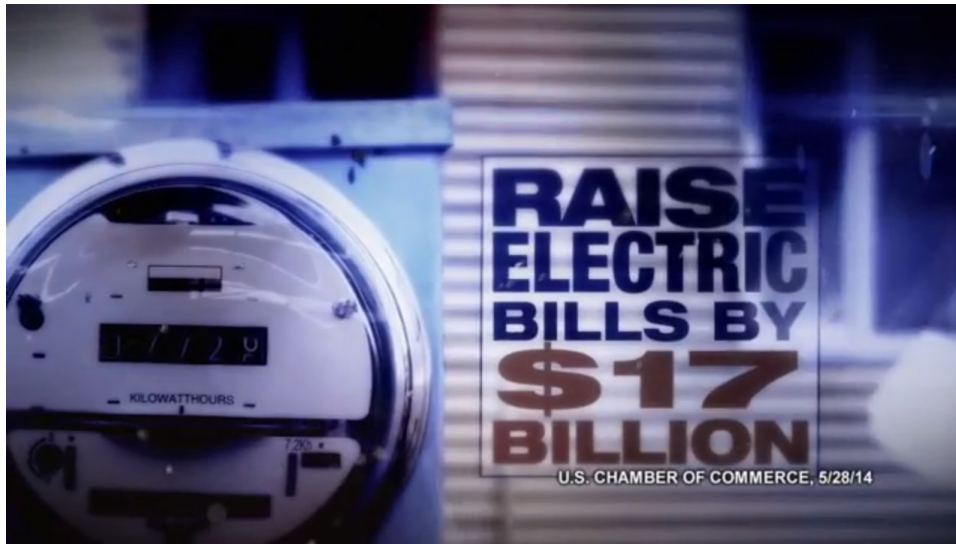


Note: Number of voters for 2014 and 2016 are projected.

Source: For data from 2002 to 2014, see National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Education Fund, “Profile of the Latino Population and Latino Electorate: Election 2014” (2014), available at <http://www.naleo.org/downloads/NALEO-LatinoPopulation-2014-5.pdf>. For 2016 data, see Patrick Oakford and Vanessa Cárdenas, “The Growth of the Latino Electorate in Key States,” February 28, 2013, available at <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/news/2013/02/28/54251/infographic-the-growth-of-the-latino-electorate-in-key-states-2/>.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, conservative strategist Ralph Reed agreed that Republicans are not currently focused on a long-term strategy on immigration. “There is a sense in which, I think, the overwhelming desire to gain control of the Senate has kind of so fixated the party’s strategic brain trust that trying to get a hearing on long-term strategic issues doesn’t seem to be possible at the moment,” Reed said.²⁰

Climate change



Screenshot of Crossroads GPS ad “Good Start”²¹

Climate change, and predicting the economic and climatological effects of particular energy policies, has been an issue in many key races in 2014. Republicans and their allies centered their early campaign attacks on predictions of dire economic consequences associated with the Obama administration’s proposed carbon-pollution standards. Announced in June, these new standards are a cornerstone of President Barack Obama’s Climate Action Plan.²²

For example, Crossroads GPS, a dark-money group advised by Republican strategist Karl Rove, launched two ad campaigns against Sen. Mark Udall (D-CO) for his support of the president’s plan to reduce carbon pollution.²³ One ad, called “Good Start,” accused Sen. Udall of wanting to raise electricity prices by “as much as \$17 billion,” citing a study released by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce that was an attack on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, or EPA, rules.²⁴ The Chamber of Commerce’s flawed analysis was touted by leading Republicans and their allies, including House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-KY), Sen. David Vitter (R-LA), and the Republican National Committee, to name a few.²⁵ However, shortly after its release, a *Washington Post* fact check thoroughly debunked the analysis, giving it a rating of “Four

Pinocchios,” the worst possible rating.²⁶ Climate, energy, and environmental ads have surged in 2014, with more than 125,000 spots running on the Senate side alone as of mid-October—making it the third most-mentioned issue in those races, behind health care and jobs.²⁷ While environmental groups have promised to spend an unprecedented \$85 million,²⁸ Kantar Media/CMAG ad-tracking data collected by the Atlas Project found that Republicans have already spent more than \$127 million on energy and environmental spots this cycle.²⁹ Earlier this year, the billionaire Koch brothers said their secretive network planned to spend \$300 million this cycle, which included an anti-environment effort aimed at EPA regulations.³⁰

Ads and statements from Republican candidates and allied groups express near certainty about their ability to predict the economic consequences of the carbon-pollution standards that are yet to be implemented. But candidates have expressed a remarkably consistent message of ignorance concerning the causes of climate change. The new anti-science climate change denial tactic—instead of flat out climate science denial, which is hugely unpopular among the vast majority of Americans³¹—is more subtle. Over and over, Republicans have been using a variation of the phrase “I’m not a scientist.” Some of the most prominent politicians who have used this new tactic are Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH), Sen. Marco Rubio (R-FL), Florida Gov. Rick Scott (R), Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal (R), and Iowa Senate candidate Joni Ernst (R).³²

Sen. McConnell said “we can debate this forever” in response to *The Cincinnati Enquirer* on whether he agrees with the 97 percent of scientists who say climate change is occurring.³³ “I’m not a scientist. I’m interested in protecting Kentucky’s economy,” he said.³⁴ During a debate, Iowa Senate candidate Joni Ernst said, “I don’t know the science behind climate change. I can’t say one way or another what is the direct impact, whether it’s man-made or not.”³⁵ Ernst, similar to the others who have used this response, actively opposes any policy proposal to fight climate change. In fact, Ernst has even advocated for completely eliminating the EPA, a position she repeatedly defends.³⁶

The chorus of doubt about climate change that Republican candidates have expressed this year may put them at risk with a rising group in the 2016 electorate: young voters. While all American voters are increasingly likely to support a candidate who strongly supports action on climate change,³⁷ the support is even higher among young people. A bipartisan poll found that 80 percent of voters under age 35 support President Obama taking action to address climate change.³⁸ Even among young Republican voters, more than half—52 percent—would be less likely to vote for someone who opposed this climate action.³⁹ In another poll by Harstad Strategic Research Inc., 76 percent of

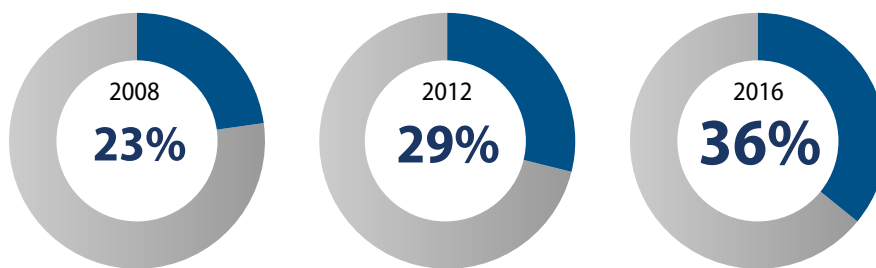
Millennials said the government should be more involved in protecting the environment from pollution, ranking it the highest priority for government involvement in the “social and regulatory issues” category of the poll.⁴⁰

Presidential election years bring a dramatic increase in turnout among young voters. In 2010, turnout among people ages 18 to 29 dropped in half to 24 percent from 51 percent in the 2008 presidential election.⁴¹ In 2012, voter turnout among youth jumped back to 45 percent.⁴² In addition to turning out at higher rates, young voters will also constitute a bigger share of the electorate in 2016. A Center for American Progress analysis on Millennials, defined as those born between 1978 and 2000,⁴³ estimates that the population of eligible Millennial voters will increase by 4 million people per year through 2018.⁴⁴ By the report’s projections, there will be 81 million eligible Millennial voters in 2016, and they are expected to make up 33 percent of all voters.⁴⁵

FIGURE 2

Millennials are becoming an increasingly important electoral demographic

Share of eligible voters that are Millennials



Note: Millennials are defined as those born between 1978 and 2000.

Source: David Madland and Ruy Teixeira, "New Progressive America: The Millennial Generation" (2009), available at http://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2009/05/pdf/millennial_generation.pdf.



Screenshot of New Mexico Republican Secretary of State candidate Dianna Duran's voter ID ad⁴⁶

Stoking fears about voter fraud has been part and parcel of many Republican campaigns around the country in recent election cycles and in this cycle—from claims that illegal immigrants will steal American votes to outlandish charges of registering dogs to vote.⁴⁷ In New Mexico's secretary of state race, Republican Dianna Duran ran a TV ad and sent mailers attacking her opponent, Maggie Toulouse Oliver, for not supporting strict voter ID laws. The ad attacks Toulouse Oliver for ignoring voter fraud and references a 2012 story about a man who registered his dog to vote.⁴⁸ It was later revealed that the man was married to a staffer that was working for Republican Heather Wilson, who was running for Senate at the time.⁴⁹ After his name was revealed, he issued an apology, saying "I made a mistake and I want to apologize to Bernalillo County clerk Maggie Toulouse Oliver [and] my wife, who was not aware of my actions, and the public," he said. "I will take full responsibility for my actions."⁵⁰

Other Republican candidates have echoed a variety of voter fraud claims. In defending his proof-of-citizenship requirement for registering to vote, Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach said, "every time an alien votes, it cancels out the vote of a United States citizen."⁵¹ In Iowa, the GOP candidate for secretary of state's campaign has used threats of voter fraud as a fundraising tactic, sending out emails to supporters accusing Democrats of rigging the 2008 Minnesota Senate race with the power of the secretary of state's office.⁵² The email urges supporters to "Make sure the integrity of Iowa elections never falter" by voting for Republican Paul Pate.⁵³

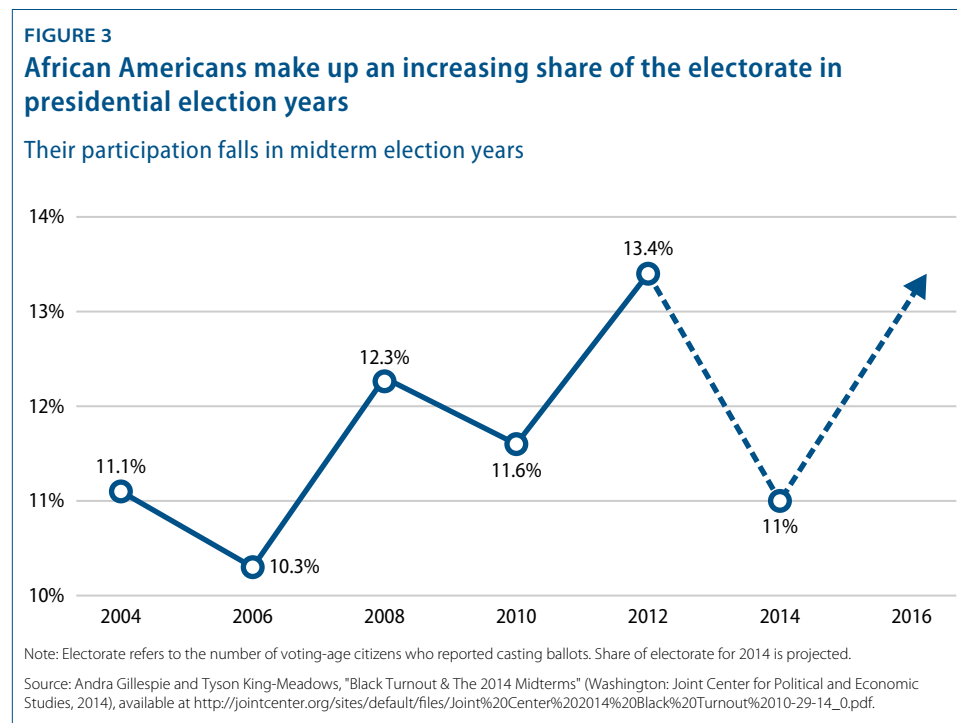
The reality, as numerous studies have proven, is that claims of voter fraud are not supported by the facts. In a comprehensive review of the problem, the Brennan Center for Justice concluded that allegations of widespread voter fraud “often prove greatly exaggerated.”⁵⁴ An analysis of more than 2,000 cases of alleged election fraud from 2000 through 2012 found “in-person voter impersonation ... was virtually nonexistent,” according to *The Washington Post*.⁵⁵ In a recent judicial opinion regarding Wisconsin’s new voter ID law, U.S. Circuit Judge Richard Posner concluded that “voter-impersonation fraud is essentially nonexistent in Wisconsin” and assertions that it exists are “a mere fig leaf for efforts to disenfranchise voters.”⁵⁶

The heated campaign rhetoric has also been matched with a movement in policy. Since the Supreme Court weakened the Voting Rights Act in last year’s *Shelby County v. Holder* ruling,⁵⁷ Republican legislatures and secretaries of state across the country have taken draconian steps to limit access to voting, including implementing voter ID laws, limiting early voting, and manipulating the ballot and registration process. According to a report from the Brennan Center for Justice, “at least 83 restrictive bills were introduced in 29 states whose legislatures have had floor activity in 2014.”⁵⁸ Since the last midterm election, new voting restrictions are slated to be in place in 21 states, with 14 of those states implementing new voter laws for the first time.⁵⁹ The vast majority of these laws were passed in states led by Republican governors and Republican-controlled state legislatures.⁶⁰ Proponents of the voting laws claim they passed these new restrictions to protect the integrity of the voting process, but the result has been an alienation of communities of color, particularly African Americans. Research shows that African Americans—who traditionally support Democratic candidates—are 1.8 times more likely than white voters to lack an acceptable ID needed to cast a vote in states with voter ID laws.⁶¹

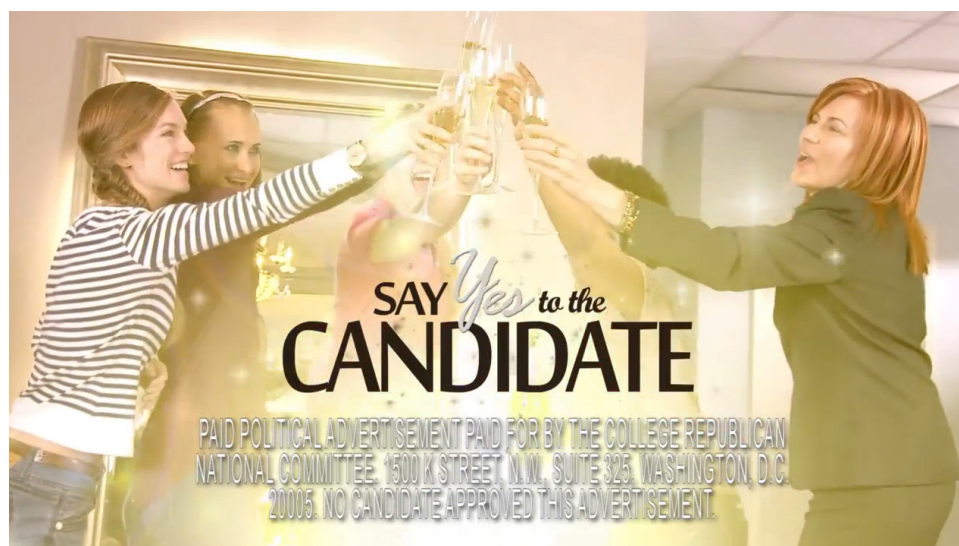
Moreover, a higher percentage of African American voters use early voting than any other demographic, a method that has been curtailed in many Republican-controlled states.⁶² What’s worse, in some cases, Republican politicians who have stoked unfounded election fraud fears are also the same people administering the election. In Georgia, for example, Secretary of State Brian Kemp has been accused of holding onto 40,000 voter registration forms.⁶³ “The Democrats are working hard,” Kemp said, “and all these stories about them, you know, registering all these minority voters that are out there and others that are sitting on the sidelines, and if they can do that, they can win these elections in November.”⁶⁴

Alienating African American voters will continue to hurt Republicans as the community’s share of the electorate continues to grow. In Ohio, where voter suppression laws that were in place in 2012 included limiting voting to weekdays, exit polls found that the laws were “seen by African Americans as efforts to keep them from voting, stirring a profound backlash on Election Day,” according to *The Washington Post*.⁶⁵ From 2000 to 2012, the voting eligible population of African Americans grew by 4.2 million.⁶⁶ And

while African American voter turnout during midterm elections tends to drop significantly, it is playing a bigger and bigger role in presidential years. In 2004, 11.1 percent of voters were African American; in 2012, that number was 13.4 percent.⁶⁷ In fact, a study of the Census Bureau's election survey found that minority turnout determined the 2012 election, and for the first time in history, African American voter turnout rates exceeded those of whites in 2012.⁶⁸



In recent elections, Republicans have done an exceptionally poor job of attracting African American voters. A cynical view may be that Republicans have more to gain in 2014 from deterring African Americans from voting than by appealing to them for votes. Perhaps such a rationale even extends to 2016. But in the long term, this cold calculation would seem to diminish the party's electoral opportunities—and its moral standing—as some Republicans, such as Sen. Rand Paul (R-KY), have argued.⁶⁹



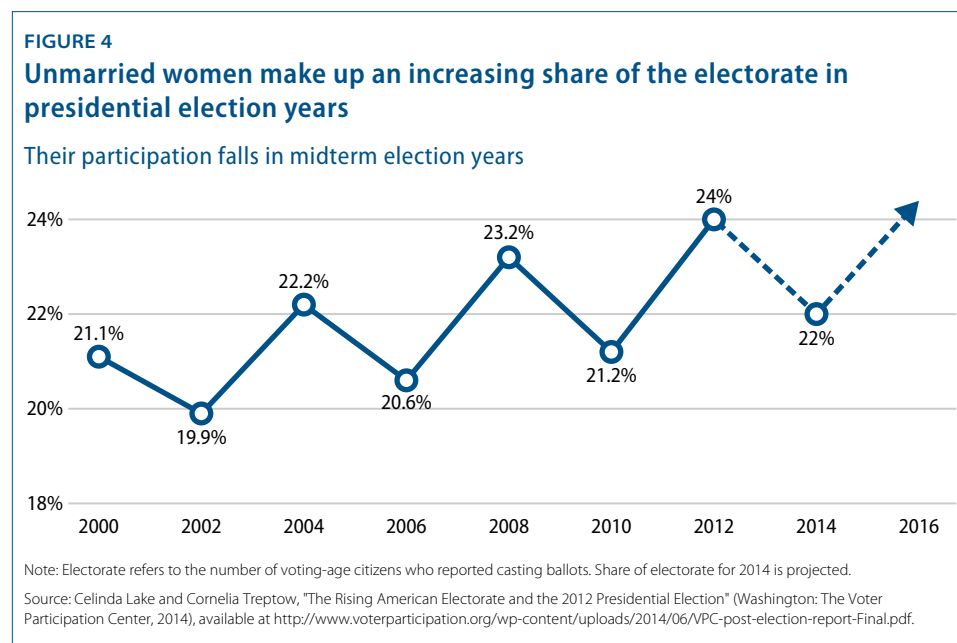
Screenshot of the College Republican National Committee's "Say Yes to the Candidate" ad⁷⁰

The College Republican National Committee, or CRNC, created a series of seven "Say Yes to the Candidate" ads modeled after the popular TLC series "Say Yes to the Dress" in an attempt to target young women voters. The ad campaign released in early October and features young women shopping for the perfect wedding dress and falling in love with the "Republican" design, while mom prefers a dowdy "Democratic" dress. The ads close with the young bride-to-be following her heart and saying yes to the "Republican" dress. CRNC Chairman Alex Smith argues the ads are an attempt to make the GOP seem "culturally relevant," but the ads have been widely criticized.⁷¹ *Time* called the ad "the most sexist Republican ad of the year,"⁷² while *Elle* called it an "attempt at brain-washing." *Elle* continued, "there are words happening, and candidates' names flashing in front of your face, but you're watching someone try on wedding dresses while her bridesmaids and mother emote. It doesn't quite add up."⁷³

The "Say Yes to the Candidate" series is just one example of Republicans' ham-handed efforts to win over women voters with style while ignoring positions that drive such voters away on substance. Republicans oppose equal pay for equal work.⁷⁴ Republicans want to repeal the Affordable Care Act, which has introduced numerous consumer protections for women⁷⁵ and consistently receives higher support among women.⁷⁶ And while nearly two-thirds of minimum-wage workers are women, Republicans do not support an increase in the minimum wage.⁷⁷ An ad by Americans for Shared Prosperity features a young woman comparing President Obama to an abusive boyfriend and features the line "he thinks the only thing I care about is free birth control,"⁷⁸ insinuating that women are single-issue voters. Some Republican candidates, such as Rep. Cory Gardner in Colorado and Thom Tillis in North Carolina, have tried a similar tactic to

appeal to women. Both have platforms that promise over-the-counter birth control—a move that attempts to hide their extreme record on women’s health, including previous support of the personhood amendment, a measure that would ban abortion and could even ban certain methods of birth control.⁷⁹ It is also an empty gesture, as their plan would establish a \$600 annual tax on women by forcing them to pay out of pocket for something offered to them at no cost under the Affordable Care Act, which Republicans want to repeal.⁸⁰

The GOP’s decision to target women voters with this messaging is unlikely to be overwhelmingly advantageous in 2014, and it risks hurting them in the upcoming presidential election. Unmarried women, the cohort that Republicans have the most trouble attracting, are more likely to skip voting in midterm elections. Between 2008 and 2010, the participation of unmarried women fell by 20 points, with similar drop-off rates expected between 2012 and 2014.⁸¹ But in presidential election years, unmarried women have had a huge impact. In 2012, President Obama carried this group by 36 percentage points, winning the overall women’s vote because of this bloc.⁸² And their political power is growing: Since 2000, they have made up an increasing share of the overall electorate in presidential years and are not expected to slow down in 2016.⁸³



As the marriage rate declines, single women will make up a larger percentage of the electorate.⁸⁴ As NPR recently noted, they are “not a constituency that’s in play: They’re extremely reliable Democratic supporters.”⁸⁵ “You have a group that’s growing in size, and becoming more politically concentrated in terms of the Democrats,” said Tom W. Smith, director of the General Social Survey at the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Rather than trying to broaden their base and appeal to a growing and changing electorate, Republican candidates and allied groups have doubled down on narrow, unpopular positions at the expense of their long-term success. The demographic makeup of the United States is shifting to include more of the very voters whom the Republicans have alienated during this cycle. The share of votes cast by white, non-Hispanic voters dropped from 77 percent in 2010 to 72 percent in 2012.⁸⁷ While that share may rise again in 2014, the 2016 election will likely be the first in American history in which fewer than 7 in 10 voters are non-Hispanic whites. Immigration, climate change, voting rights, and women's economic and health issues have proven to be persuasive issues, and as Republican candidates and groups look to 2016, they may have to hope for a case of collective amnesia to erase the memories of their 2014 positions.

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