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# The Democratic Party's Transformation

## More Diverse, Educated, and Liberal but Less Religious

By Daniel A. Cox

### Key Points

- The number of white Americans identifying with the Democratic Party collapsed during Barack Obama's presidency. In 2009, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of Democrats were white. Today, only 56 percent of Democrats are white.
  - Over the past two decades, the Democratic Party has become much more liberal. Half (50 percent) of Democrats today identify as liberal, while only 28 percent did so in 1998.
  - Democrats are far less religious today than they were a generation ago. Only 43 percent of Democrats today say religion is a very important part of their lives—a roughly 20 percentage point drop from the late 1990s.
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Amid widespread dissatisfaction with President Joe Biden's job performance and pervasive negativity about the economy, the Democratic Party is facing increasingly improbable odds of retaining its congressional majorities in 2022.<sup>1</sup> Even if the Democrats' poor performance is largely attributable to structural factors, large losses will inevitably spur renewed discussions about the party's electoral strategy and political priorities. In fact, these conversations are already happening. Activists and informed observers have engaged in sometimes contentious debates over whether the party should concentrate on promoting policies with widespread public appeal—a strategic position known as populism—or a robust progressive agenda even if it is at odds with public preferences.<sup>2</sup>

But these debates frequently ignore how the Democratic Party's electoral fortunes, political trajectory, and current priorities are tied to changes in the party's membership. Surveys have found little change in the number of Democrats in the adult public. Roughly one in three

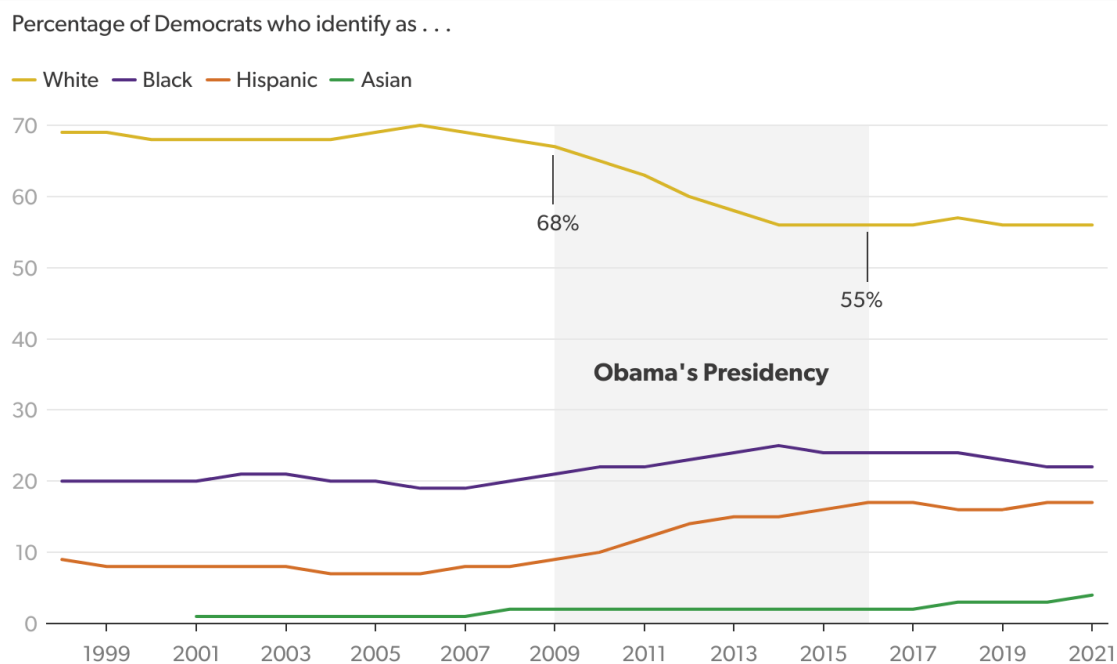
Americans identify as Democratic today (and about one in four are Republican)—numbers that have been fairly constant since the mid-1990s.<sup>3</sup>

But the stable size of Democratic Party membership among the public belies large changes in its composition. Over the past 20 years, while the balance of Democrats and Republicans among the public has remained much the same, the Democratic Party's demographic profile has undergone a remarkable transformation. Today, the party is more racially and ethnically diverse, includes a larger share of college-educated adults, and has more people who self-identify as liberal. It also includes far fewer religious people.

### The Racial Transformation of the Democratic Party

The Democratic Party's racial composition has undergone a dramatic transformation over the past couple of

**Figure 1. Democratic Racial Identity Changed Dramatically During Obama’s Presidency**



Note: Individuals who identified as being from another racial category are excluded from this analysis. Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. The values represented are moving averages.

Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

## Data Sources

The data in this report are based on the Gallup Poll Social Series, a collection of surveys administered 12 times per year on a variety of different topics.<sup>4</sup> The telephone surveys are conducted among US adults age 18 and older living in the United States. The Gallup surveys use a dual-frame design that incorporates landline telephones and cell phones. Each survey included a minimum of 70 percent cell phone respondents and 30 percent landline telephone respondents.

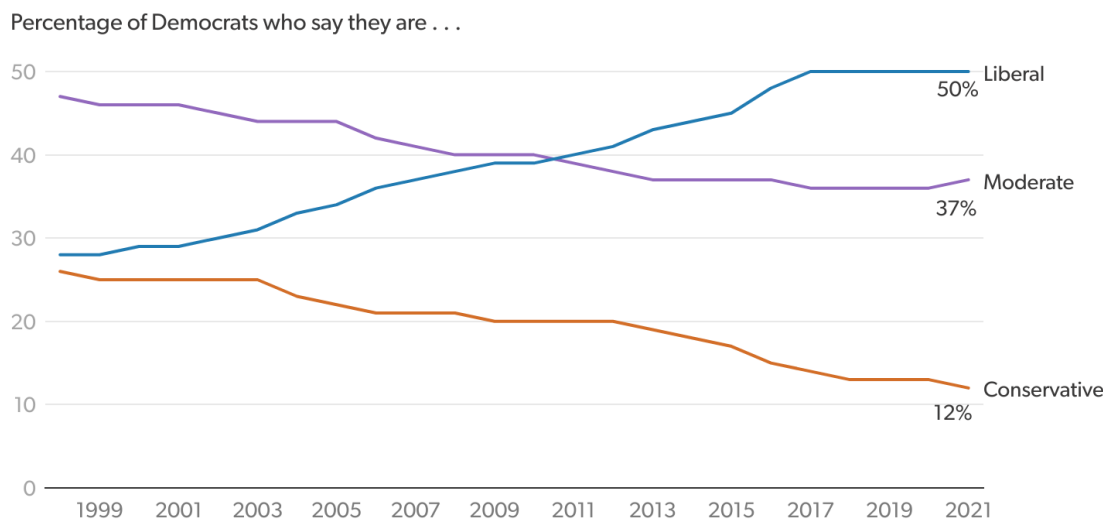
Samples were derived from Survey Sampling International. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and English. Each Gallup survey was weighted to match the US population using the following demographic benchmarks: gender, age, race and ethnicity, education, region, population density, and phone status. The demographic weighting targets were derived from the most recent Current Population Survey. The combined data file includes over 600,000 respondents, and, except for 1998, every year includes a minimum of 12,000 respondents.

decades. Today, 56 percent of Democrats are white, roughly one in five (21 percent) are black, 18 percent are Hispanic, and 4 percent are Asian or Pacific Islander.<sup>5</sup> In 1998, 70 percent of Democrats identified as white and non-Hispanic, while black Americans made up 19 percent of the party. Eight percent of Democrats were Hispanic.<sup>6</sup>

The Democratic Party’s racial and ethnic changes have not been uniform over time, nor have they tracked the larger demographic shifts occurring among the US population.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the racial and ethnic composition of the Democratic Party underwent a remarkable transformation during the eight years of the Barack Obama presidency (Figure 1). The proportion of Hispanics increased dramatically during the Obama years, rising from 8 percent in 2009 to 18 percent in 2016. The proportion of black Americans who belong to the Democratic Party also increased during the Obama years, although more modestly, topping out at 25 percent in 2014.

Conversely, the white population of the Democratic Party cratered during Obama’s presidency. In 2009, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of Democrats were white. By the end of the Obama presidency, only 55 percent of Democrats were white.

**Figure 2. Half of Democrats Identify as Liberal**



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

Looking across the aisle, the racial composition of the Republican Party has experienced comparatively little change over the past two decades. Roughly nine in 10 (89 percent) Republicans in 2021 identify as white and non-Hispanic, nearly identical to the number that did so in 1998 (90 percent).

## A Liberal Party?

Over the past couple of decades, Americans have become modestly more liberal in their politics, although conservatives still outnumber liberals by a considerable margin. As of 2020, one-quarter (25 percent) of Americans identify as liberal, 36 percent identified as conservative, and nearly 35 percent were politically moderate.<sup>8</sup> As recently as the early 2000s, there were two conservatives for every one American who identified as liberal.

For at least a generation, the GOP has been defined by its ideological conservatism. The Democratic Party, by contrast, included a more ideologically diverse coalition of liberals, moderates, and conservatives. But over the past couple of decades, the Democratic Party has grown more consistently liberal, mirroring the GOP's partisan-ideological alignment.

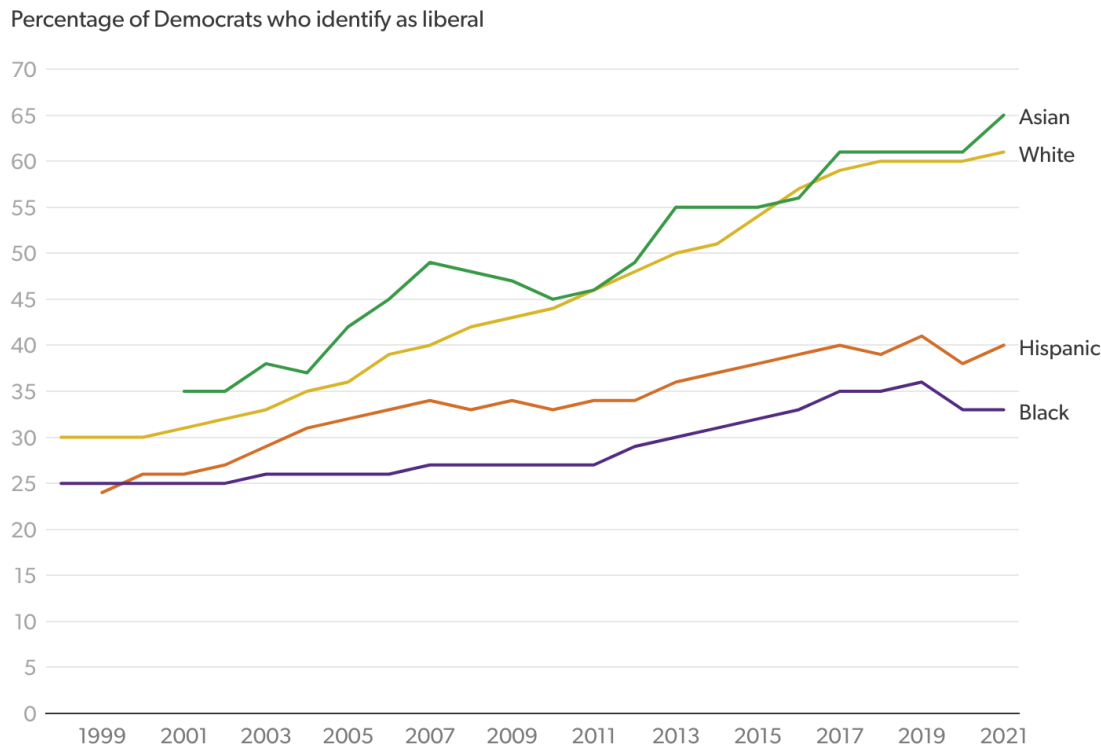
In the late 1990s, roughly as many Democrats identified as conservative (25 percent) as liberal (28 percent). But the ideological character of the Democratic Party has changed dramatically. As of 2021, half (50 percent)

of Democrats identify as liberal or very liberal (Figure 2). Liberals now outnumber conservatives in the Democratic Party by more than four to one. Still, the party retains important ideological diversity. Thirty-seven percent of Democrats say they are moderate, and 12 percent identify as conservative.

However, the ideological shift leftward among Democrats is primarily concentrated among white, non-Hispanic members of the party and those with at least a four-year college degree (Figure 3). Since the late 1990s, the percentage of white Democrats who identify as liberal has doubled, rising from 30 percent to 61 percent. But black and Hispanic Democrats are only somewhat more liberal today than they were in the late 1990s.

In 2021, roughly one in three Hispanic (36 percent) and black (32 percent) Democrats identify as liberal, compared to about two in 10 Hispanic (22 percent) and black (23 percent) Democrats in 1998. Notably, Asian Democrats have followed an even steeper trajectory than white Democrats in becoming more liberal over time. In 2001, 31 percent of Asian Democrats identified as liberal, compared to 65 percent in 2021. The rate of ideological change among Democrats also varies significantly along lines of educational attainment. College-educated Democrats—who represent a growing proportion of the Democratic Party—are experiencing a far more dramatic liberal shift than are those with lower levels of educational attainment.

**Figure 3. A Growing Ideological Divide Among Democrats**



Note: The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

More than six in 10 (63 percent) college-educated Democrats identified as politically liberal in 2021, a rapid 21-point increase over roughly 20 years: In 1999, only about four in 10 (42 percent) Democrats with a college degree identified as liberal. That year, the majority of college-educated Democrats were moderate or conservative in their politics. Democrats without a college education have also shifted leftward in their ideology over the past two decades, although to a more modest degree. Roughly one in three (33 percent) Democrats without a college education identified as liberal in 2021, compared to 21 percent in 1999.

Ideological sorting is not occurring among Democrats only. Republicans have experienced a significant ideological shift over this same period. Today, nearly three-quarters (74 percent) of Republicans are politically conservative, a considerable increase from 1998, when 57 percent identified this way.

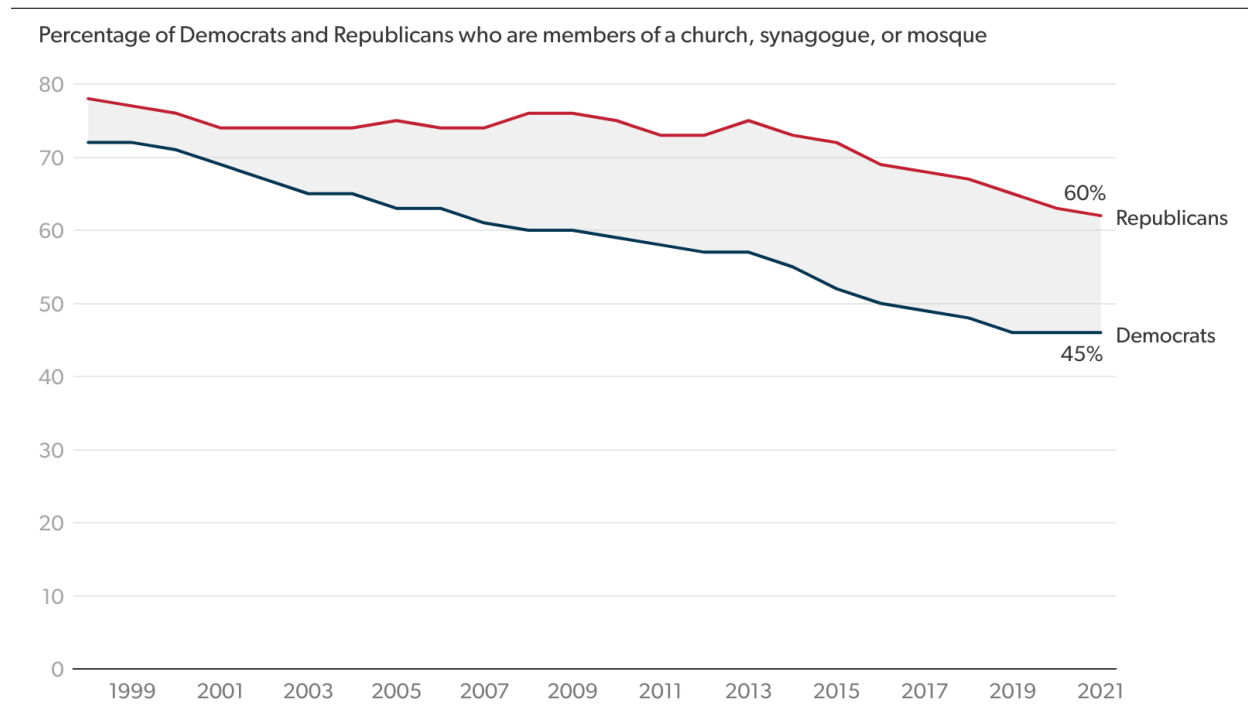
### Fewer Parents and More Singles

American society is experiencing a dramatic decline in marriage rates, driven in part by a rising age of first marriages.<sup>9</sup> The number of unmarried people in the US has been climbing steadily over the past couple of decades. A Pew Research Center study found that the number of “un-partnered” Americans increased to 38 percent in 2019, up from 29 percent a couple of decades earlier.<sup>10</sup>

Today, Americans who have never been married represent a growing share of the Democratic coalition: 26 percent of Democrats have never been married, up 9 percentage points since 1999. Unmarried Americans make up a much smaller part of the Republican Party; 14 percent of Republicans today report never having been married. In contrast, 58 percent of Republicans are currently married.

Relatedly, fewer members of the Democratic Party are parents who have children under age 18. Fewer than one in four (24 percent) Democrats are parents today. In 1998, more than one in three (35 percent) Democrats were parents with children under age 18.

**Figure 4. Religious Membership Plummets Among Democrats**



Note: The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

## Religious Decline and Polarization

During just a single generation, the landscape of American religious belief and behavior has undergone sweeping changes. A growing share of the adult public abstains from regular religious practice. They profess greater doubts about the existence of God and no longer identify with any established religious tradition.<sup>11</sup> A recent survey found that young adults have far less robust religious experiences compared to previous generations.<sup>12</sup> And although surveys vary in the exact rate of religious decline, there is no disagreement about the trajectory of American religion.

Among both Democrats and Republicans, there are signs of weakening religious attachments, and nonreligious Americans have increased in number. However, the religious decline is occurring much more rapidly among Democrats than Republicans. Across measures of membership, salience, and affiliation, Democrats have experienced a steeper drop in their level of religious commitment.

Religious membership among the public has plummeted over the past decade, but the decline has proceeded unevenly (Figure 4).<sup>13</sup> Democratic religious membership has fallen further than among Republicans,

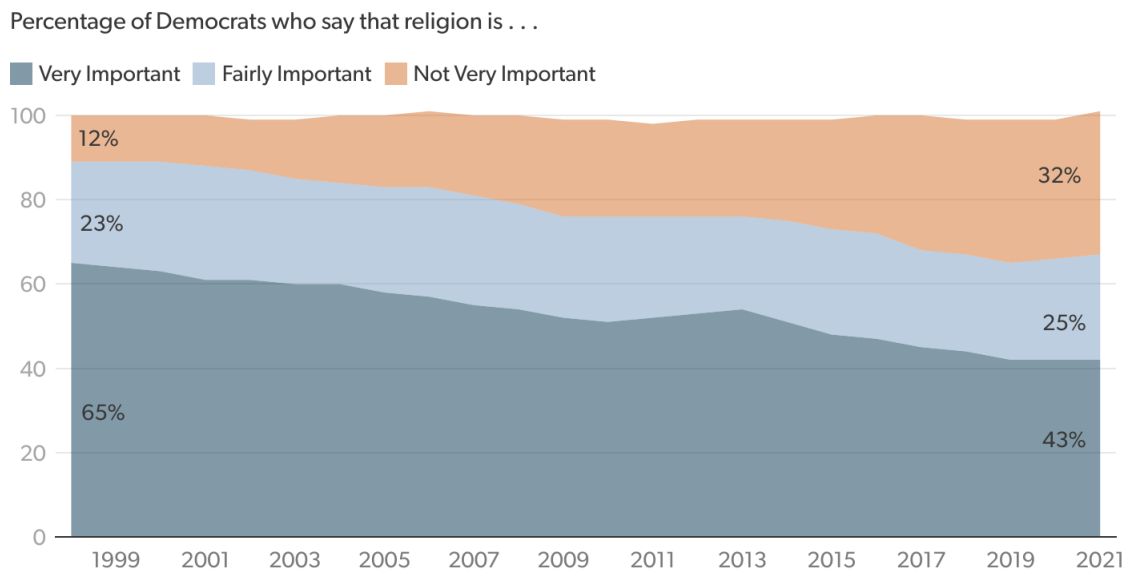
more than doubling the partisan gap in religious membership over the past two decades. Today, less than half (45 percent) of Democrats report being a member of a church, synagogue, mosque, or other religious congregation. In the late 1990s, more than seven in 10 (71 percent) Democrats reported that they belonged to a church or other place of worship.

Republican religious membership has also fallen in the past couple of decades, although not nearly as far. Sixty percent of Republicans say they are members of a religious congregation, compared to 77 percent two decades earlier. This differential rate of decline has substantially widened the partisan gap in religious membership over the past two decades.

The rate of change when it comes to the personal importance of religion in Americans' lives reveals a similar partisan gap. Only 43 percent of Democrats today say religion is a very important part of their lives—a roughly 20 percentage point drop from the late 1990s (Figure 5). In 1998, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of Democrats said religion was personally very important to them.

The drop in religious salience among Democrats stands in marked contrast to Republicans, whose views of religion have not changed over the past two decades. From 1998 to 2021, at least six in 10 Republicans have

**Figure 5. Fewer Democrats Say Religion Is Important to Them**



Note: Figures may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

reported that religion is very important to them. Today, 65 percent of Republicans say that religion is very relevant in their lives.

The past 20 years have also witnessed growing religious diversity among the Democratic Party. Today, Democrats include a growing number of non-white Christians and people who belong to non-Christian religious traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Until recently, the Democratic and Republican parties were composed of a majority of white Christians.<sup>14</sup> In 1998, nearly six in 10 (57 percent) Democrats identified as white Christians, but, roughly 20 years later, white Christians account for only about one in three (31 percent) members of the party.

### A College-Educated Party?

A record number of Americans are graduating from college. In 2021, the number of Americans 25 and older who hold a bachelor's degree rose to 38 percent from 30 percent only a decade earlier.<sup>15</sup>

Today, college-educated Americans are overrepresented in the Democratic Party (Figure 6). Nearly half (48 percent) of Democrats over age 24 have a degree from a four-year college or university, and nearly one in four (23 percent) have a postgraduate degree.<sup>16</sup> In 1998,

only 23 percent of Democrats had a college or postgraduate degree.<sup>17</sup>

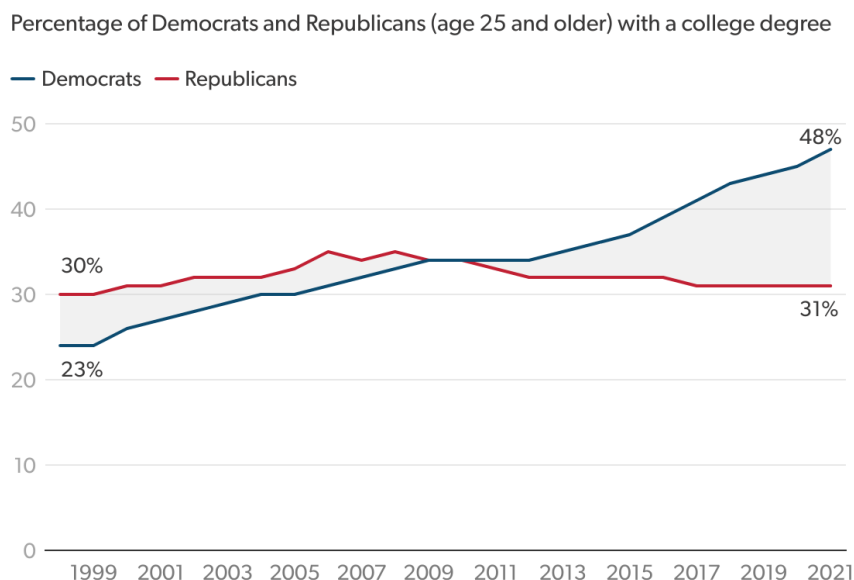
The Republican Party has not experienced similar growth among those with a college education. In 2021, fewer than one in three (31 percent) Republicans had a college education, nearly identical to the number (30 percent) who had a degree in 1998.

Not only does the Democratic Party have a disproportionate number of college graduates, but it includes an outsize number of college-educated women. College-educated women represent nearly one in three (30 percent) Democrats, more than doubling their share since 1998, when 13 percent of Democrats were college-educated women. College-educated men have increased their share in the Democratic Party as well, but far more modestly. Today, 17 percent of Democrats are college-educated men—a slight uptick from 10 percent in 1998. In comparison, the Republican Party includes roughly equal numbers of college-educated men (15 percent) and college-educated women (16 percent).

### A Constant Gender Divide

While the demographic profiles of the Democratic and Republican parties have undergone seismic changes over the past two decades, one important way in which the

**Figure 6. Rising Rates of Educational Attainment Among Democrats**



Note: The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

parties have not changed all that much is in their gender composition. Women continue to be overrepresented among Democrats, while men make up a slightly larger share of Republicans.

As of 2021, 62 percent of Democrats are women, identical to the proportion in 1998. Gender patterns in the GOP are remarkably stable. They are also far more evenly divided. Slightly more than half (52 percent) of Republicans are men—a proportion that has been roughly consistent for the past 20 years. In 1998, 51 percent of Republicans were men.

## The Democrats' Racial Divide

Compared to the Republican Party, the Democratic Party is far more diverse in terms of its members' racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious identity, and ideological commitments. But of the many competing interests and diverse perspectives in the party, the racial divide in the Democratic Party is perhaps the most notable because it is so closely aligned with the growing educational, religious, and ideological rifts.

White Democrats—and increasingly Asian Democrats—are distinct from black and Hispanic Democrats

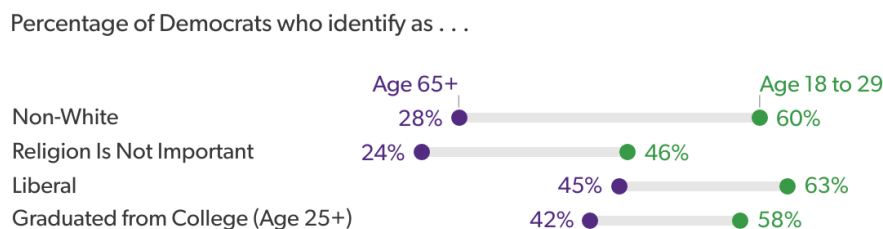
in their comparatively low levels of religiosity, liberal politics, and higher levels of education. For instance, a majority (54 percent) of white Democrats and roughly three-quarters (73 percent) of Asian Democrats have a college degree, compared to 35 percent of black Democrats and 21 percent of Hispanic Democrats.

The religious profile of the Democratic racial and ethnic groups reveals similar cleavages. Only 30 percent of white Democrats (and 18 percent of Asian Democrats) say religion is very important in their lives. In contrast, nearly half (49 percent) of Hispanic Democrats and nearly eight in 10 (78 percent) black Democrats say religion is very important to them (Figure 7).

There are notable differences in parental status as well. Hispanic Democrats are nearly twice as likely as white Democrats to be parents of children under age 18 (37 percent vs. 20 percent).

The generational patterns within the party also vary substantially across racial and ethnic groups. White and black Democrats tend to be significantly older. Only 40 percent of white Democrats and less than half (46 percent) of black Democrats are under age 50. In contrast, more than seven in 10 (71 percent) Hispanic Democrats and 83 percent of Asian Democrats are under age 50.

**Figure 7. Young Democrats More Liberal, Less White, Less Religious**



Note: The values represented are moving averages.  
Source: Gallup Poll Social Series, 1998–2021.

## Generational Divergence

And yet, race and ethnic identity are not the only fissures within the party. Over the past couple of decades, the Democratic Party has gotten significantly older. In 1998, roughly six in 10 (59 percent) Democrats were under age 50. This dropped to less than half (48 percent) by 2021. The median age increased from 44 years old to 51 years old.

At the same time, the Democratic Party is facing a growing generational divide. Younger Democrats are more liberal, secular, and racially diverse compared to their older co-partisans. More than seven in 10 (72 percent) senior Democrats identify as white and non-Hispanic, compared to only 40 percent of young Democrats. Six in 10 young Democrats are non-white.

Younger Democrats are far more secular as well. More than half (52 percent) of senior Democrats say religion is very important to them personally, but only half as many (25 percent) young Democrats say the same. Close to half (46 percent) of young Democrats say religion is not important to them.

There is a notable but somewhat smaller difference in the ideological leanings of younger and older Democrats. More than six in 10 (63 percent) young Democrats identify as liberal, compared to less than half (45 percent) of senior Democrats, the majority of whom identify as moderate or conservative.

## The Consequences of Demographic Change and How It Influences Political Values and Priorities

The Democratic Party's racial, ethnic, religious, socio-economic, and ideological character has undergone a

dramatic transformation over the past 20 years. In some instances, these changes came about in response to elite policy preferences and an evolving issue agenda. But demographic realities may also constrain Democratic policy choices and influence party priorities, often in ways that complicate its political goals.

The growing racial and ethnic diversity in the Democratic Party has likely contributed to the party's commitment to pluralism, spurring a more concerted pro-immigration platform and an emphasis on racial inequality.<sup>18</sup> It may prompt the party to prioritize policy solutions that have an outsize benefit for its members.

The Democratic push on student loan forgiveness makes a lot more sense given the party's large and engaged college-educated base. The aging membership of the party also means it's likely to prioritize policies—such as Social Security and health care—that are particularly important for older Americans while investing less political capital on issues such as climate change.

The party's distinct demographic background may also influence its orientation toward certain institutions. The growing number of Democrats who are not religious members will invariably influence the party's approach to public expressions of religion and the role of faith in public life. For instance, less than half of Democrats believe that churches and religious organizations do more good than harm in American society—a view most of the public rejects.<sup>19</sup>

The outsize number of unmarried Americans may similarly influence how the party considers policies aimed at encouraging marriage. Most Americans believe society is better off if couples who want to stay together long term decide to get married, but only 40 percent of Democrats agree.<sup>20</sup>

The evolving demographic character of the Democratic Party presents some immediate political challenges as well. In the long term, the Democratic Party represents a



changing America but one that has not arrived yet. Policy proposals that appeal to growing or emerging constituencies, such as unmarried people or the nonreligious, may not serve the party's immediate electoral interests.

What's more, the Democratic Party has changed far faster than the country as a whole. For instance, while the country has become slightly more liberal over the past 20 years, the Democratic Party has moved much further to the left much more rapidly.

The changes in the party's composition present a challenge as the party's membership becomes more demographically distinct from large swathes of the country. Nationally, the US has experienced an extensive degree of demographic change in its religious composition, racial and ethnic diversity, and educational attainment, but many of these changes are not evenly distributed across the country. Democrats differ in demographically important ways from the broader public, which can lead to cultural gaps not easily smoothed over by even the most popular policies.

Finally, while the modern Democratic Party often extolls the benefits of diversity and the party today embodies greater racial, ethnic, and religious diversity than ever, it comes at a cost. Party leaders are forced to negotiate among competing groups with distinct experiences and preferences, making it more difficult for the party to develop a coherent identity and a governing agenda that appeals to the varying factional interests. It also reveals stark divides in political priorities.

A recent poll found that reducing crime was a far more important priority for black and Hispanic Democrats than

it was for white Democrats. Seventy percent of black Democrats and a majority (56 percent) of Hispanic Democrats said reducing crime should be a top priority, but only 34 percent of white Democrats agreed.<sup>21</sup> Similar divisions are evident on the issue of abortion as well. Democrats who believe abortion should be illegal are disproportionately non-white; 61 percent of pro-life Democrats are Hispanic, black, or Asian.<sup>22</sup>

In politics, demography is not destiny. Our demographic attributes do not predetermine our political preferences or electoral behavior, but they are not irrelevant either. Our personal background shapes the political information available to us, the type of people we know, and the communities we inhabit.

When it comes to political parties, the issues they champion and the leaders they select cannot be decoupled from the personal characteristics and experiences of the people who belong to them. If we want to know more about the future of the Democratic (and the Republican) Party, we would certainly benefit from having a better understanding of the people who make it up.<sup>23</sup>

## About the Author

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## Notes

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23. I am not suggesting that personal characteristics of Democrats exert a completely exogenous influence over the party’s politics, given that shifting political orientations will attract different types of people and repel others. However, the party’s current demographic background incentivizes certain political decision-making and constrains others.

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