



View from the Inside

Political scientists study Congress from many perspectives, seeking to understand, for example, its internal institutional dynamics; its relationships with the other branches; and the incentives and disincentives faced by its members. But the workings of Congress are also a function of its membership, and the members of Congress in turn reflect the characteristics and interests of their constituents. In selection 9.6, reporter Ronald Brownstein analyzes the United States House of Representatives by looking at two simple pieces of demographic evidence: the percentage of constituents in each member's district who are nonwhites, and the percentage in each district who are college graduates. Brownstein finds that Republicans tend to come from districts with lower educational levels and lower percentages of minority voters, while

Democrats dominate in all other districts. Because both the number of college graduates in the country and the percentage of minority citizens are increasing over time, this equation may bode well for the future prospects of the Democrats and poorly for their Republican opponents.

Questions

1. Identify the four quadrants that Brownstein analyzes in this selection. In which quadrants do the Democrats lead? In which quadrant do the Republicans have success?
2. In what ways do the two variables of race and education reinforce each other in terms of the policy choices faced by members of the House? In what ways do these two variables cut in opposite directions?
3. How might these demographic patterns affect the behavior of Republican and Democratic House members?

9.6 The Four Quadrants of Congress (2008)

Ronald Brownstein

In the competition to control the House, demography increasingly appears to be destiny. Across the country, race and education levels have emerged as central fault lines in the division of House seats between Republicans and Democrats, a *National Journal* analysis of recently released census data shows. Although regional differences still matter, demographic factors that transcend region now play powerful roles in shaping each party's representation in the House.

Generally, the greater the district's nonwhite population and the higher the education level of its white residents, the more likely it is to be represented in the House by a Democrat. In contrast, the analysis found, the whiter the district and the lower its number of white college graduates, the more likely it is to elect a Republican.

It's the difference between Northern Virginia and Silicon Valley on the one hand, and the Appalachian corridor and the rural Midwest on the other.

The pattern vividly captures the class inversion that has remade the two parties' electoral coalitions over the past several decades. Since the days of Andrew Jackson, Democrats have viewed themselves as tribunes of the working class, yet they now principally rely on a bifurcated coalition of minorities and well-educated whites. And although Republicans often view themselves as the

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party of business, their most reliable supporters now tend to be working-class whites with conservative views on social, foreign-policy, and spending issues.

If these patterns in the distribution of House seats persist, they should generally benefit Democrats over time because the number of districts that are home to high levels of minorities or to well-educated whites, or both, has been growing, while the predominantly white, largely noncollege districts are diminishing. "It is very clear demographically we are not where we need to be," says Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma, a former chairman of the National Republican Congressional Committee....

DISTINCT POLITICAL PERSONALITIES

To understand the impact of demography on the parties in the House, *National Journal* analyzed two factors: the share of each district's population that is nonwhite and the portion of the white population that holds at least a bachelor's degree, based on the latest three-year average from the Census Bureau's annual American Community Survey. We then divided the districts along two lines: whether the share of the white population with college degrees exceeds the 30.4 percent national average, and whether the district's minority population exceeds 30 percent....

This exercise produced what might be called the four quadrants of Congress: districts that have high levels of racial minorities and high levels of educated whites; districts with high minority levels and low levels of white education; districts that have low minority levels and high white education levels; and districts with low minority levels and low white education.

Each of these four combinations produces a distinct political personality. The results were reflected not only in House contests but also in the 2008 presidential race. House Republicans from all four groups have voted virtually unanimously against Obama's top priorities, but divisions within the House Democratic Caucus largely track these boundaries. Nearly half of the fiscally conservative "Blue Dog" Democrats, for instance, represent districts from the low-minority, low-education sector, with another quarter of them representing districts from the high-minority, low-education group. And 30 of the 48 House Democrats in districts that Republican presidential nominee John McCain carried in 2008 hail from the low-minority, low-education quadrant. The most-vulnerable Democrats represent these low-low districts.

The Democrats' strongest turf brings together their two demographic strengths: racial minorities and well-educated whites. These high-minority, high-education districts, most of them located along the East and West coasts, represent just over one-fourth of the House, 113 seats in all. Democrats dominate these districts in every way. In the House, they hold 84 of them (just under three-quarters). In 2008, Obama carried more than four-fifths of these seats, while winning a commanding 64 percent of their cumulative popular vote.

In this sector, the characteristic districts that Democrats hold are urban areas and affluent suburbs, some revolving around universities, or high-technology hubs

that are racially diverse and bustling with white-collar professionals. They range from Lloyd Doggett's Austin-based district in Texas to Anna Eshoo's and Zoe Lofgren's in California's Silicon Valley, Gerald Connolly's and Jim Moran's in Northern Virginia, and David Price's in North Carolina's Research Triangle.

Price, a former political scientist, is keenly aware that his support follows a pattern that earlier generations of Democrats would not recognize. "I do much better in the more-affluent and better-educated independent or Republican areas than I do in those that are more blue-collar and more tending toward a religious and cultural conservatism," he said.

Although Price says he has worked hard to make inroads among blue-collar white voters, "I have to say I find the receptivity greater in the better-educated, more-affluent areas, and I find the more populist [anti-government] politics we are seeing now correlated with a kind of [blue-collar] cultural conservatism. That's been harder for me to penetrate. You could say on economic grounds that these people ought to be far more sympathetic to Democrats. But it doesn't work out that way."

The next-best quadrant for Democrats is the high-minority, low-education group, which comprises 92 seats, just over one-fifth of the House. Democrats hold almost exactly two-thirds of these districts. Obama won just over three-fifths of them, capturing 56 percent of their vote.

In this group, Democratic seats divide into two clusters. One consists of inner-city, safely Democratic districts with very few whites, such as those represented by Jose Serrano in New York, Jesse Jackson Jr. in Illinois, John Conyers in Michigan, and Lucille Roybal-Allard in California. In the other cluster, minorities are no more than half the population. Their representatives include white Democrats such as Ann Kirkpatrick in Arizona, Larry Kissell in North Carolina, and Dina Titus in Nevada. These districts are often unstable for Democrats because incumbents must do fairly well among noncollege whites to hold on. McCain carried nearly one-fifth of this group's districts that are represented by Democrats, a measure of that vulnerability.

Democrats also hold the edge in the next quadrant of seats: those with few minorities but an above-average percentage of white college grads. Democrats in this low-minority, high-education group represent college towns (think Tammy Baldwin in Madison, Wis., and Jared Polis in Boulder, Colo.), comfortable suburbs (such as the Philadelphia-area seat that Joe Sestak is vacating to run for the Senate), and affluent urban areas (such as Henry Waxman's district in West Los Angeles). In all, House Democrats hold exactly three-fifths of these 75 seats. Obama carried nearly two-thirds of this group and won 53 percent of their vote.

In each of the first three quadrants, Republicans are now a distinct minority of House members. But they maintain a solid edge in the fourth: districts with very few nonwhite voters and a below-average percentage of college-educated whites. This "low-low" group remains the largest of the four, with 155 seats. Republicans hold 89 of them, nearly three-fifths. In 2008, McCain did even better: He won 72 percent of them and a cumulative 54 percent of their vote.

These districts are concentrated in the interior, mostly across the northern half of the country, through the Plains and the Midwest, but also extending down through the Appalachian corridor into such Outer South states as Kentucky and Tennessee. Their population mostly centers on small towns or rural communities. These districts include those of Republicans Mike Pence in Indiana, Tom Petri in Wisconsin, Steve King in Iowa, and Ed Whitfield in Kentucky.

Republicans from low-low areas dominate their party's caucus, representing half of its seats. Each of the other three groups contributes just one-sixth of GOP conference members.

By comparison, Democrats draw their House members from a much broader landscape. The high-minority, well-educated districts contribute the most seats to the Democratic caucus but still account for only about one-third of its members. The low-low districts and the high-minority, low-education districts each contribute about one-quarter of the caucus. The remaining one-sixth of Democratic seats are low-minority but well-educated.

Viewed from another angle, Democrats divide almost exactly in half between low- and high-education seats, while two-thirds of House Republicans represent low-education seats. Similarly, two-thirds of House Republicans represent low-minority seats, while Democrats divide more closely between high- and low-minority seats (57 percent for the former and 43 percent for the latter).

Democrats' racial diversity has been an asset on past Election Days, but it creates special challenges in governing. On key issues in 2009, Democrats from low-education districts defected at much higher rates than those from more white-collar seats. Of the 44 Democrats who voted against the climate-change bill that passed the House in June, half represented low-low districts, and 15 others represented districts that are low in education but high in racial minorities. More than half of the 39 House Democrats who opposed the health care bill represented low-low districts, while another 13 came from high-minority, low-education districts. In each case, very few Democrats from high-education districts (whether overwhelmingly white or not) opposed the bills.

Retiring Democratic Rep. John Tanner, whose Tennessee district sits in the low-minority, low-education group, says that it is unrealistic for party leaders to expect members from areas like his to consistently align with Democrats from urban and suburban districts. "It is irrational in our system for me as a Southern, financially conservative [Democrat] to vote every time with Charlie Rangel, who represents Manhattan," Tanner said. "We don't have the same legislative interest."

On the biggest issues of ... [2008]—the stimulus plan and health care—Republicans from the four quadrants united against Obama's proposals (with the slim exception of one vote for health care). On lower-profile issues, such as federal regulation of tobacco and expanding children's health coverage, the 30 Republicans from predominantly white, well-educated districts voted with Democrats at much higher rates than other GOP lawmakers did. One reason may be that Obama carried one-third of their districts, the highest percentage for Republicans in any of the four groups.

LOW-LOW TARGETS

In 2006 and 2008, House Democrats picked up seats in all four demographic quadrants. Their greatest gains were, somewhat surprisingly, in the low-minority, low-education seats, where the party prospered with a disciplined strategy of recruiting culturally conservative candidates. Those gains also came against the backdrop of widespread public dissatisfaction with President Bush.

These days, though, Democrats representing these low-low districts are being defined by the actions of a Democratic president and congressional majority attempting to implement an aggressive Democratic agenda. And against that framing, the Democrats in these districts may present much easier targets for the GOP. The incumbents must succeed at "proving to voters that they are not a national Democrat," said John Anzalone, a Democratic pollster who often works in these areas. "It makes it more difficult when you have a Democratic president who is an activist."

In low-low districts, Obama's plunging approval rating among whites with less than a college education is jeopardizing both fairly new House Democrats lawmakers, such as Walt Minnick in Idaho and Zack Space in Ohio, and their more senior colleagues, from Alan Mollohan in West Virginia to Ike Skelton in Missouri. Democrats in this group are the most endangered, Anzalone says. "It doesn't matter, the geography," he says. "You can pick every region. No doubt about it."

Tom Davis, now director of federal government services at the Deloitte consulting firm, concurs. "Those are the areas that are coming back to Republicans first," he predicts. "Part of that is cap-and-trade [legislation curbing carbon emissions], part is health care, and part of it is culture...."

Both Davis and Cole, the former NRCC chairs, believe that their party's strong showing in the affluent suburbs of Virginia and New Jersey during ... [the 2008] gubernatorial races demonstrates that Republicans' standing is improving among the upscale voters who moved away from the party in part because they did not share George W. Bush's cultural conservatism. "We have to recapture high-income voters by becoming again the party of innovation, progress, and the ones who are not going to pick their pockets with taxes," Cole says. "Look at this Democratic proposal to put Medicare taxes on dividends and capital gains. That's the beginning of the road back [for Republicans] in [well-heeled] districts."

Republicans could make substantial progress toward regaining the House ... simply by maximizing their opportunities where they are already strongest—the low-low districts without many minorities or white college graduates. But Cole and Davis, like other GOP strategists, agree that to bid for House control cycle after cycle, Republicans must also compete more effectively in well-educated and even in heavily minority districts. "The party right now is not a national party," Davis frets.

The long-term problem for Republicans is that although the low-low districts remain the largest group in Congress, they are shrinking as a share of the total. Precise comparisons with the 1990s aren't possible because census data on

college education among whites wasn't available at the district level then. But it is possible to compare districts from the 1990s and today based on the number of adults of all races with college degrees, as well as the minority share of the population.

Those comparisons reveal that the number of districts with either a substantial minority population, a large number of college graduates, or both, is growing, while the number of districts with neither of these demographic traits is diminishing. From 1993 to today, the number of districts categorized as high-minority and well-educated increased from 11 to 85. The ranks of districts that are high-minority but not well-educated, and well-educated but not high-minority also grew substantially. Meanwhile, the number of low-low districts, with few minorities or college graduates, dropped by half, from 266 in 1993 to 134 today.

In the struggle for House control, the two parties thus face tests with contrasting timeframes. As racial minorities and better-educated whites, or both, become a larger share of the population in more districts, the long-run challenge for Republicans is to compete across a demographically broader range of districts than they do now. Democrats face a more immediate trial: Avoiding a repeat of the huge wave, particularly among working-class whites, that carried Republicans to control of the House in 1994. The increase in the number of high-minority and well-educated districts provides House Democrats defenses that they lacked back then. But if the tide of white working-class discontent reaches high enough or spills over to include enough upscale white voters, even those levees may not protect the House majority that Democrats labored so long to recapture. ■