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Article abstract

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Résumé: Politologue, spécialiste reconnu du mouvement progressiste américain, Ruy Teixeira est actuellement *Senior Fellow* à la Century Foundation et au Center for American Progress. Dans ce texte rédigé à la demande de Sens Public, il explique ce qu'il entrevoit pour le futur du mouvement progressiste américain et l'avenir des États-Unis.

Is there (still) an emerging progressive majority in the United States?[1]

Ruy Teixeira

In the 2008 US presidential campaign, Barack Obama ran on a strongly progressive program that included a promise of universal health care coverage, a dramatic transformation to a low-carbon economy, and a historic investment in education—alongside broad hints that substantial government spending and regulation would be required to deal with the economic and financial crises. He also promised a new, more cooperative approach to international relations. Obama received 53 percent of the popular vote to 46 percent for his conservative opponent John McCain and carried the electoral vote by an even more substantial 365-to-173 margin.

Obama's 53 percent of the popular vote is the largest share of the popular vote received by any US presidential candidate in 20 years. The last candidate to register that level of support was conservative George H. W. Bush, who won by an identical 53 percent-to-46 percent margin. So, separated by 20 years, we have two American elections that are practically mirror images of one another, but with conservatives on the winning end of the first and progressives on the winning end of the second.

What happened? How did conservatives do so well in one election but progressives so well in the other? The answer: In those intervening twenty years a new progressive America has emerged, driven by a new demography and a new geography.

The new demography refers to the array of growing demographic groups in the US that have aligned themselves with progressives and swelled their ranks. The new geography refers to the close relationship between pro-progressive political shifts and dynamic growth areas across America, particularly within contested states.

All this adds up to big change that is reshaping the United States in a fundamentally progressive direction. Consider some of the components of the new demography. Between 1988 and 2008, the minority share of voters in American presidential elections has risen by 11 percentage points, while the share of increasingly progressive white college graduate voters has

[1] French translation on line *("Y a-t-il (encore) une majorité progressiste émergente aux États-Unis ?"):* http://www.sens-public.org/article.php3?id_article=722

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risen by 4 points. But the share of white working class voters, who have remained conservative in their orientation, has plummeted by 15 points.

That's a pattern that's repeated in state after state, helping send them in a progressive direction. For example, in Pennsylvania the white working class declined by 25 points between 1988 and 2008, while white college graduates rose by 16 points and minorities by 8 points. And in Nevada, the white working class is down 24 points over the time period, while minority voters are up an amazing 19 points and white college graduates by 4 points.

These trends will continue. The US will be majority minority by 2042. By 2050, the country will be 54 percent minority as Hispanics double from 15 to 30 percent of the population, Asians increase from 5 to 9 percent and African-Americans move from 14 to 15 percent.

Other demographic trends accentuate progressives' advantage. The Millennial generation—those born between 1978 and 2000--which gave Obama a stunning 66-32 margin in 2008, is adding 4.5 million adults to the voting pool every year. Professionals are now the most progressive occupational group and increase that support with every election. Fast-growth segments among women like singles and the college-educated favor progressives over conservatives by big margins. And the growth of religious diversity, especially rapid increases among the unaffiliated, favors progressives. By the election of 2016, it is likely the US will no longer be a majority white Christian nation. Moreover, by 2040, white Christians will be only around 35 percent of the population, and conservative white Christians only about a third of that—a minority within a minority.

Geographical trends are equally as stunning. Progressive gains since 1988 have been heavily concentrated in not just the urbanized cores of large metropolitan areas, but also the growing suburbs around them. Even in exurbia (the outer suburbs), progressives have made big gains. Only in the smallest metro areas and in small town rural America were progressive gains minimal. And only in the most isolated, least populated rural counties did progressives actually lose ground.

Within states, there is a persistent pattern of strong pro-progressive shifts in fast-growing dynamic metropolitan areas. In Colorado, Obama improved over John Kerry's 2004 margin by 14 percentage points in the fast-growing Denver metro and made his greatest gains in the super fast-growing Denver suburbs. In Nevada, Obama carried the Las Vegas metro by 19 points, which was 14 points better Kerry in 2004 and 35 points better than Dukakis in 1988. In Florida, Obama carried the Orlando metro in the central I-4 corridor by 9 points, a 17 point gain over 2004 and an amazing 48 point shift since 1988. In Virginia, Obama dominated the northern Virginia suburbs of Washington, DC, the growth engine of the state, by 19 points, 15 points better than Kerry and 38 points better than Dukakis. There are many other examples, but the story is the same in state

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after state: where America is growing, progressives have been gaining strength and gaining it fast.

That's how Obama got elected with a progressive majority and a progressive agenda. And since he took office on January 20, 2009, he has accomplished, or made serious progress on, a remarkable amount of that agenda. Start with the $787 billion stimulus bill that included significant investments in education and clean energy. These expenditures, combined with extensive interventions to stabilize the banking system, pulled the US economy back from the brink of a truly catastrophic meltdown and onto a growth path that, while currently slow, should pick up considerably in the future.

And then there's health care reform, something progressives in America have been trying to accomplish for nearly a century. It has been a long, grueling process but final passage of a health care reform bill and its signing by President Obama now seems assured. It will cover more than 30 million people who are now uninsured, reform the insurance market so, for example, people with pre-existing conditions cannot be denied coverage and much, much more. The details are Byzantine, but the most important fact is this: for the first time, the principle that everyone in America should have access to affordable health care will be enshrined in law. The law will have to be extended and modified in the future, but the stunning nature of this accomplishment cannot be denied.

Obama has also delivered on his promise to tackle the climate change issue. Besides the investments in clean energy mentioned above, he has pushed a cap and trade energy bill through the House of Representatives and into the Senate, where it awaits (admittedly difficult) action next year. And Obama traveled to Copenhagen, where he helped negotiate a preliminary agreement that will hopefully lead to a binding international agreement on greenhouse gas emissions in the near future. The contrast could not be sharper with the Bush administration's lack of interest in fighting climate change.

The contrast is sharp too with the Bush administration's approach to international relations. Obama has thoroughly revamped the US approach to working with other countries and international institutions, replacing the Bush administration's unilateralism with an open, cooperative multilateralism.

And Obama is not through yet. One legislative goal he is sure to push this year is a regulatory reform bill for the financial sector, already passed in the House. The bill will be the most significant financial regulation legislation since the 1930s, establishing new federal regulatory powers to police financial markets and protect consumers and reining in the derivatives market that lay at the heart of the financial crisis. He promised to take bold action in this area during his campaign and here again he is trying to deliver and, in my view, will likely deliver.

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That's where we are on the progressive agenda. But what of Obama's progressive majority? Here the news is not so good. Obama's approval rating peaked at 67 percent in the Gallup poll around the time of his inauguration in January of 2009. Since then it has declined considerably, standing at 50 percent in the same poll—slightly lower across all polls—at the time of writing (Christmas, 2009). His approval ratings are lower still on the economy, the budget deficit and health care. And the actual health care bill in Congress tends to get poor ratings, with those favoring the bill considerably outnumbered by those opposing it.

So what happened to Obama's progressive coalition? To begin with, Obama's support, while reduced sharply from its January, 2009 highs, is not that far off his support levels when he was elected in November, 2008 with 53 percent of the popular vote. And, while he has lost support among some favorable demographics, most of the decline he has experienced since the election can be accounted for by fading support among the white working class. Among this group, where Obama was weak to begin with, he has sunk to 35 percent support, down from his anemic 40 percent support in the election.

This makes sense for two reasons. First, this group is very sensitive to economic conditions and those conditions have been terrible. Obama may have succeeded in averting an economic cataclysm but he couldn't prevent the steady rise in the unemployment rate since his election (though there are signs that that rise may finally be abating). In November, 2008, the unemployment rate stood at 6.8 percent. By the following November, it was 10 percent.

Second, the white working class, even more than the American public as a whole, is inclined to be suspicious of government interventions and spending, of which there has been a considerable amount since the election. This hostility toward "big government" was bound to be inflamed by the perceived failure of these government actions (if we're spending so much money to fix things, why is the economy in such terrible shape?) and by the relentless attacks on the Obama administration by the conservative opposition, ranging from the Republicans in Congress to "tea party" activists at the grassroots.

It is also important to stress that opposition to Obama's policies, especially outside the white working class, does not necessarily translate into support for conservative ideas. On the health care front, polls have shown that a significant part of opposition to the reform bill in Congress is driven by a perception that it doesn't go far enough in intervening in the health care marketplace, rather than it goes too far. Indeed, those either favoring the bill or opposing it (at this point) because it doesn't go far enough outnumber those who oppose the bill because it is going too far. And most polls continue to show strong support for key components of the health care reform bill —subsidizing people who can't currently afford health insurance, preventing insurance companies

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from denying coverage to those with pre-existing conditions and so on—even if the bill itself is not popular.

Given all this, what is the prognosis for Obama's emerging progressive majority going forward? In the relatively short run—2010—it seems probable that Obama's coalition will indeed suffer some losses. The economy, while it is recovering, will gain strength only gradually, so the unemployment rate is unlikely to go down far enough or fast enough in 2010 to produce a sunny public mood by election day in November. And the health care reform bill, while it will be passed in early 2010, will not take full effect for several years, delaying most political dividends for the Democrats. Moreover, turnout patterns in 2010 will likely favor the Republicans, both because they usually do in an off-year election and because there may be an "enthusiasm gap" favoring Republicans (who are charged up about opposing Obama's "socialist" policies) over Democrats.

The scale of losses, however, is unlikely to be in the range that would endanger Democratic control of Congress—40 seats in the House and 10 in the Senate. As noted above, Obama retains considerable support among rising demographics and opposition to his policies—as opposed to general discontent over the state of the economy—is not as dire as conservatives like to believe. So losses in 2010 will likely be considerably less, not far off expected losses to a president's party in his first midterm election. At this point, based on historical patterns and standard forecasting models, a loss of 20-25 seats in the House of Representatives and 1-4 seats in the Senate seems plausible.

Over the somewhat longer term—the Presidential election of 2012—I believe prospects for Obama's emerging progressive majority are much brighter. In this regard, the example of Ronald Reagan is instructive. Reagan had to contend with a severe recession, just like Obama—indeed for Reagan, unemployment peaked at 10.8 percent, higher than Obama has experienced. At about this point in Reagan's first term—the beginning of 1982—his approval rating was essentially identical with Obama's current rating. Reagan's approval rating eventually dipped to the low 40s and his party would up losing 26 House seats in the 1982 Congressional election. But 1983 and 1984 were years of strong economic growth and the unemployment rate ticked down over those years, reaching 7.2 percent by election day, 1984. In that election, Reagan won a landslide victory with 59 percent of the popular vote.

I suspect Obama's first term will follow a similar trajectory. His party will lose seats in 2010, largely as a result of the poor economic situation and the historical tendency of incumbent parties to lose seats in midterm elections. But by 2012, the economic situation will be much brighter and unemployment much lower—his version of Reagan's "morning in America". Moreover, Obama will be advantaged by four more years of growth in his rising demographic coalition plus an election (presidential) in which that coalition is likely to turn out at high levels. The result, I believe, will be

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a landslide victory for Obama and a considerable enlargement of the progressive majority we saw in the US presidential election of 2008.

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