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How the Rising Share of Latino Voters Will Impact the 2016 Elections

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Introduction and summary

The United States is undergoing a historic demographic shift, with people of color expected to make up a majority of the population by 2044.¹ Despite the seemingly long trajectory of these changes, the political implications are already being felt.

The most significant of these shifts is the sharp increase in the number of Latino voters and their share of the electorate. In the 2012 presidential election, Latino voters—71 percent of whom supported President Barack Obama²—helped create a firewall for President Obama in key states.³ In Colorado, for example, the rising share of Latino voters was enough to win the state for Democrats despite white voters' support for President Obama dropping by 6 percentage points from 2008.⁴

The rising share of Latino voters in key states may have an even more significant impact on the 2016 presidential election, especially if voter turnout rates are high. To gain a better understanding of the growing Latino influence, the Center for American Progress Action Fund conducted an electoral simulation of the six states with the largest projected share of Latino eligible voters in 2016 and for which 2012 exit polling data are available.⁵ Although we factor in the projected growth of eligible voters of all racial and ethnic groups, in each of the states examined, Latino voters will make up the largest share of the states' projected eligible voters of color in 2016. These states are Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.

CAP Action conducted three election simulations for 2016, based closely on the methodology used in Patrick Oakford's report for the Center for American Progress titled "The Changing Face of America's Electorate."⁶ Our analysis also utilizes updated eligible voter projections prepared by Ruy Teixeira, William Frey, and Rob Griffin in "States of Change," a report by the Center for American Progress, the Brookings Institution, and the American Enterprise Institute.⁷ The three simulations represent three different scenarios based on assumptions about party preferences. All three simulations hold turnout at 2012 levels.

- **Simulation 1:** The first simulation assumes that voter turnout and party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups in 2016 will remain the same as in 2012. Because the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Democrats compared with other elections, this simulation is generally the most favorable for the potential Democratic candidate.
- **Simulation 2:** The second simulation assumes that party preferences among all racial and ethnic groups in 2016 will mirror results from 2004, when Republicans enjoyed higher levels of support from voters of color.
- **Simulation 3:** The third and final simulation assumes that white voters in 2016 will vote with the same party preferences as in 2012, while voters of color will vote according to their party preferences in 2004. Because the 2004 election yielded relatively high support among voters of color for Republicans and the 2012 election yielded relatively high support among white voters for Republicans, this simulation is generally the most favorable for Republican candidates.

Each of the three simulations was performed for each of the six states. Key findings include:

- **A Democratic candidate will have a strong electoral advantage in 2016 if he or she is able to retain high levels of support from voters of color—especially Latino voters.** Under Simulation 1, in which a Democratic candidate enjoyed the same level of support from voters as in 2012 and factoring in demographic shifts, Democrats would expand their vote share in five of the six states examined: Arizona, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada. These results would lead the Democratic presidential candidate to win five of the six states: California, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, and Nevada.
- **A Republican presidential candidate will benefit if voter preferences return to 2004 levels.** Under Simulation 2, the Republican vote share in 2016 would increase from its 2012 level in every state except Arizona. In California, New Mexico, and Nevada, the Democratic candidate would still receive more than 50 percent of the overall vote share and win the state's 66 electoral votes. However, swing states Colorado and Florida would shift, with a Republican candidate capturing more than 51 percent of the overall vote share.

- **Based on demographic projections, Nevada may become more and more difficult—though not impossible—for a Republican presidential candidate to win.** A potential Republican candidate does not win Nevada in any of the simulations, assuming that turnout levels remain the same as in 2012. If Democrats do not retain their high levels of support from voters of color while Republicans regain their higher levels of support from voters of color in 2004 and higher white support from 2012, Republicans will see the presidential race in Nevada tighten up in their favor. However, the state may remain hard to win for Republicans, with 51.8 percent of the vote going to Democrats and 48.1 percent to Republicans.
- **The key swing state of Florida is up for grabs depending on how political parties are able to appeal to voters of color, and particularly, Latino voters.** If Democrats are able to retain the same levels of voter support as in 2012—as they do in Simulation 1—the Democratic candidate would win Florida and its 27 electoral votes. However, if voters of color have the same party preferences as in 2004—as they do in Simulations 2 and 3—the Republican candidate would win the state.
- **White voters will still play critical roles in Colorado and Arizona.** While both states are undergoing rapid demographic shifts, white voters will cast more than 7 in 10 votes in Colorado and Arizona in 2016. Colorado is also a rare state in which white voters have shifted away from Republican candidates, not toward them; simulations show that the electoral outcome in the state could be determined by whether white voters continue to trend toward Democrats or revert back to supporting Republicans at 2004 levels.

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As progressives, we believe America should be a land of boundless opportunity, where people can climb the ladder of economic mobility. We believe we owe it to future generations to protect the planet and promote peace and shared global prosperity.

And we believe an effective government can earn the trust of the American people, champion the common good over narrow self-interest, and harness the strength of our diversity.

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We develop new policy ideas, challenge the media to cover the issues that truly matter, and shape the national debate. With policy teams in major issue areas, The Center for American Progress Action Fund can think creatively at the cross-section of traditional boundaries to develop ideas for policymakers that lead to real change. By employing an extensive communications and outreach effort that we adapt to a rapidly changing media landscape, we move our ideas aggressively in the national policy debate.

