

# Is the Electoral College Becoming Fairer?

The Republican Party's advantage is shrinking in the Electoral College.



By David Leonhardt

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The Electoral College has been very kind to Republicans in the 21st century. George W. Bush won the presidency in 2000 despite losing the popular vote, and Donald Trump did the same in 2016.

But over the past few years the Republican advantage in the Electoral College seems to have shrunk, as Nate Cohn, The Times's chief political analyst, points out in his newsletter. Republicans are no longer faring significantly better in the states likely to decide the presidential election — like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — than they are nationwide. Instead, a 2024 race between Biden and Trump looks extremely close, with a tiny lead for Biden both nationally and in the swing states.

## A Shrinking Electoral Advance

Election	National vote	Tipping-point states	Electoral College advantage
2016	D +2.1	R +0.8	<b>Republicans +2.9</b>
2020	D +4.5	D +0.6	<b>Republicans +3.8</b>

2023      D +1.3      D +0.6      **Republicans +0.7** 

Note: 2023 indicators are based on New York Times analysis of midterm results, demographics and polling. • By The New York Times

What’s going on here? Democrats have lost some ground in comfortably blue states like New York while gaining some in swing states like Pennsylvania. “At this point,” Nate writes, “another large Trump Electoral College advantage cannot be assumed.”

In today’s newsletter, we’ll examine the main reasons for the trends.

## An unexpected shift

One surprising feature of American politics since Trump’s 2016 victory has been the decline in some forms of polarization. Many political analysts (including me) assumed that Trump’s presidency would aggravate racial gaps in voting, given Trump’s embrace of white nationalism. We were wrong. Instead, the racial gaps have narrowed.

White voters have moved toward the Democratic Party, while Asian, Black and Hispanic voters have moved to the right. Voters of color still lean clearly Democratic, and white voters clearly Republican, but the shifts are big enough to matter. White voters have helped Democrats win recent elections in the Midwest and Georgia, while voters of color have helped Republicans keep their hold on Florida and Texas.

Nobody has come up with a comprehensive explanation, but there are some plausible theories. In much of the world, left-leaning parties are increasingly attractive to college graduates. The U.S. — where the Republican Party denies climate change and spreads conspiracy theories — is a good example. And college graduates are disproportionately white.

On the flip side, polls suggest that some voters of color have been influenced by economic trends. After years of weak performance, the economy fared better while Trump was president. (How much credit he deserves is another matter.) Covid interrupted that boom, but some voters evidently appreciated the Republican emphasis on reopening the economy. In an analysis of the Republicans’ unexpectedly strong 2020 showing in Texas, Equis Research, a research firm that focuses on Latinos, cited voters’ frustration with lockdowns.

Social issues probably play a role, too. Many voters of color are moderate on these issues. The most progressive segment of the American public, by contrast, is disproportionately white, the Pew Research Center has documented. As the progressive left has become bolder — on gender,

immigration, policing and other subjects — it has alienated some of the voters of color for whom it claims to speak.

Whatever the full explanation, the decline in racial polarization has diminished the Republicans' advantage in the Electoral College. That advantage has existed partly because swing states like Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin are heavily white, Nate notes.

## Blue states, less blue

In addition to race, polarization has declined in another way: Some blue states have become a little less blue, while some once-reddish swing states have turned blueish.

In both types of places, Nate suggests, voters are unhappy with what they consider the excesses of their own party. In swing states, the Republican Party has damaged itself by trying to ban abortion and spreading lies about the 2020 election.

In solidly blue states, however, an overturned election or abortion ban is implausible. Instead, some voters have apparently grown dissatisfied with Democratic politicians who have been in charge while other problems have mounted. Crime remains elevated. Cities are struggling to handle a surge of migrants. Education issues, including new admission policies for magnet high schools, have hurt the party in some places.

“Moderate voters in a blue state — say around Portland, Ore. — have no need to fear whether their state's conservatives will enact new restrictions on transgender rights or abortion rights, but they might wonder whether the left has gone too far pursuing equity in public schools,” Nate writes. “They might increasingly harbor doubts about progressive attitudes on drugs, the homeless and crime, as visible drug use among the homeless in Portland becomes national news.”

If one voter in solidly blue Oregon flips to the Republicans and another voter in swing-state Arizona moves to the Democrats, the Republicans' Electoral College edge shrinks.

Nate emphasizes that these trends are not guaranteed to continue. Perhaps the Republicans' edge will re-emerge by 2024. Or perhaps the election will be so close that even a tiny Republican edge will decide the outcome. For now, though, a key feature of recent American politics has receded.

*Nate's newsletter, called [The Tilt](#), is free for Times subscribers, and you can sign up here.*

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