Latino, African American Political Clout Grows in Florida and North Carolina

By Chris Kromm

The face of the Southern electorate is changing and nowhere is the shift clearer than in Florida and North Carolina. In these two critical battleground states, the share of white voters has shrunk since the 2008 presidential election, while the number of African American, Latino and other people of color voters has steadily grown. However, new voting restrictions could undermine the political potential of this shift towards an increasingly diverse electorate.

According to an analysis of state voter registration data by the Institute for Southern Studies (southernstudies.org), the most rapid change has been in North Carolina, where the percentage of voters who identify as Hispanic doubled between 2008 and 2012. Even more striking, the share of the electorate identifying as “other”—that is, not white, black, Hispanic, or American Indian—rose by 252 percent. Overall, the total number of voters not identifying as white has grown by 5.6 percent in four years, bringing their share of the electorate to 29 percent.

The chart below shows how the North Carolina and Florida voting populations have shifted. (In North Carolina the period is from March 2008 to May 2012. The second row in the chart shows how Florida’s electorate changed between the July 2008 general primary and the January 2012 presidential primary).

These trends have put North Carolina remarkably close to Florida, where voters of color grew a more modest 2.2 percent between July 2008 and January 2012, but still represent 30 percent of all registered voters.

If the number of voter registrations for black, Latino and other communities of color seem lower than expected given recent census data, the reason may lie with the sweeping new restrictions that have forced the League of Women Voters to cease registration drives entirely while the new laws undergo court review.

Restrictions Hamper Voter of Color Registrations

A March 2012, New York Times article—drawing on analysis by University of Florida political scientist Daniel Smith—found that in the eight months since the state’s new laws went into effect, 81,000 fewer new voters had been added to the rolls, compared to the same period four years ago.

Civil rights advocates have argued that the restrictions would hit African American and Latino voters hardest because, as the Brennan Center and others have noted, they are more than twice as likely to register through registration drives as white voters. Additionally, there is concern that bills requiring picture IDs (passed in Florida and likely to be on the North Carolina Republican agenda for the current legislative session), limits on early voting, and attempts to end Sunday “Souls to the Polls” turnout drives can and will disproportionately impact the ability of voters of color to exercise their political clout.

Chris Kromm is the executive director and publisher of Facing South and Southern Exposure, where an earlier version of this article appeared.
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