



## Research Report

William H. Frey

How Did Race Affect the 2008  
Presidential Election?

Report 09-688  
September 2009

# How Did Race Affect the 2008 Presidential Election?

William H. Frey

Population Studies Center  
University of Michigan

Metropolitan Policy Program  
The Brookings Institution

***Population Studies Center Research Report 09-688***

September 2009

William Frey is Research Professor, University of Michigan Population Studies Center, and Senior Fellow, Metropolitan Policy Program, the Brookings Institution, Washington DC

Presentation made at the conference “What we have learned in 2008? What it means for 2010 and 2012” at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington DC, June 12, 2009. The conference is a follow-up to the pre-election conference “The Future of Red, Blue and Purple America” held at the American Enterprise Institute on Feb 28, 2008. Dr Frey’s presentation at the earlier conference draws from the report: William H. Frey, “Race Immigration and America’s Changing Electorate” University of Michigan: [Population Studies Center Research Report 08-635 \(April 2008\)](#).

The author wishes to thank Ruy Teixeira for providing access to polling information. He is also grateful to the University of Michigan Population Studies Center and Institute for Social Research for providing US Census and survey data, and to Cathy Sun of the University of Michigan for assistance with programming and data preparation.

## Introduction

Now that we have the polling results and US Census statistics on voter turnout from the 2008 elections,<sup>1</sup> we can begin to address the question: How did race affect the election of Barack Obama as President? When this group convened some eight months prior to the election, Barack Obama was well on his way to securing the Democratic nomination, and John McCain was already the presumptive nominee of the Republican Party.

Back then, I correctly predicted that Obama would pick up most of the black vote in the general election. I was less certain about the Hispanic vote because Hispanics tended to go with Hillary Clinton in the primary. I also thought that older whites might be resistant to vote for the somewhat exotic young fellow who the Democrats were likely to nominate. Geographically, I predicted that the so-called “fast growing” purple states, places like Nevada, Colorado and New Mexico would be picking up the new minority voters for Obama but that older, whiter battleground states like Ohio, Michigan, and Pennsylvania and such might be open to McCain.

Bear in mind, this was before Sarah Palin’s fortunes rose then fell, before the Dow Jones index dropped 40%, and before John McCain made a few stumbles on the campaign trail. Of course, Obama won. So the question now is: What role has race played in determining the final outcome?

To shed light on this, I am going to discuss the following: First, I will look at the minority turnout and voting changes between 2004 and 2008. Second, I will examine the race demographics of the “fast growing” and “slow growing” purple states. Third, I will examine where minorities won the election for Obama. And finally, I will say a few words about the role race will play in future elections.

## Minority Turnout and Voting

There is no doubt that minorities played an important role in Obama’s victory. With respect to voter margins (percent voting for Obama minus percent voting for McCain), he won blacks, Hispanics and Asians. (See **Figure 1.**) In each case, he did better in 2008 than Kerry did in 2004. Moreover, whites voted Republican less than was the case in 2004.

These voting margins become magnified when we consider that minorities comprised a larger part of the voter base in 2008. Two million more blacks voted in 2008 than in 2004, as well as almost 2 million more Hispanics and close to a million more Asians. (See **Figure 2.**) About a half million fewer whites voted in 2008 than in 2004. So the composition of the voting population shifted more to minorities.

Nonetheless, there still is a population-to-eligible voter “translation gap” among minorities. (See **Figure 3.**) Among 100 whites in the population, 77 of them were eligible voters as the rest were either too young to vote or non-citizens. However, among 100 Hispanics in the population only

---

<sup>1</sup> The polling data presented here for 2004 and 2008 were collected by the National Election Pool, collected by Edison Media Research and Mitovsky International for a consortium of news organizations. The data on voters, eligible voters and voter turnout are drawn from the US Census Bureau’s Current Population Survey supplements on voting and registration for the elections of 2004 and 2008.

42 of them were eligible voters because a much higher share of Hispanics are under 18 and a significant share are non citizens. This is also the case for Asians, and somewhat less so the case for blacks. Thus, when one translates the racial composition of the population into the racial composition of the eligible voters, the latter has a larger share of whites (73% of eligible voters versus 65% of the population) and a smaller share of minorities. (See **Figure 4.**)

Yet minority voter representation has increased since 2004 because of an increase in the turnout rates (voters per eligible voters) for Hispanics, blacks and Asians with the 2008 election. (See **Figure 5.**) Twenty six states had a higher Hispanic turnout in 2008 than in 2004 with notable increases for Georgia, North Carolina and Florida. Thirty states had higher black turnout in 2008 than 2004, with big gains for Nevada and Georgia. There was actually a slight decline in the turnout rate for whites in 2008 compared to 2004. As a result of these developments, there was a much higher growth rate in voters than in eligible voters for minorities, and a smaller growth rate in voters than in eligible voters for whites. (See **Figure 6.**)

What does this all mean? If we look at the racial composition of the voting population, there were almost 1 in 4 voters who were minorities in 2008. (See **Figure 4.**) And Hispanics accounted for 7.4% of all voters compared with 6% in 2004. This, of course, differs across states. Displayed on **Figure 7** are states with the highest Hispanic shares of their total populations along with corresponding Hispanic shares of their voter populations. Clearly, some states do a better job of translating their Hispanic population representation into their voter representation. They tend to be states like California, Florida and New York, where Hispanics have been around for a long time and fewer of them are recent immigrants. On the other hand, in states like Arizona, Nevada and Colorado Hispanic representation in the population is much higher than it is among voters. Nonetheless, Hispanics made up a non-trivial share of voters in each of these states.

### **Minorities and Purple States**

Now I want to focus on how minority voters impacted the results in purple states—both fast-growing and slow-growing ones. The 20 purple states as I have defined them appear in **Map 1**, which depict Democratic purple states (those which Obama carried) and Republican purple states (those which McCain carried). Purple states are those wherein one of the two major candidates won by a 10 point margin or less. Three additional states, which have been close in recent elections, Nevada, New Mexico and Wisconsin are also considered purple. The remaining states on the map are classed as Solid Blue or Solid Red depending on whether they were carried by Obama and McCain.

I also classed the purple states as either “Fast Growing” or “Slow Growing” based on their 2004-2008 population growth. These are depicted in **Map 2** and **Map 3**. This is to test my hypothesis that it would be the Fast Growing purple states wherein minorities would do the most for Obama. These 10 states are located in the mountain west and in the southeast; and Obama won in 6 of these ten. Among the 10 Slow Growing purple states, 7 went for Obama.

The racial contrast among voters in these two states groupings is stark. (See **Figure 8.**) More than a quarter of voters (27.5%) in Slow-Growing purple states are minorities, compared with

only 11.5% in Fast Growing purple states. Moreover, the minority population is growing much more rapidly in the Fast Growing purple states. (See **Figure 9**.)

To get a sense of how the changing racial composition and voting of minorities and whites affected the 2008 results, I focus on selected states in different regions of the country:

**Nevada and New Mexico.** These are two Fast Growing purple states in the mountain west which flipped from voting Republican (for Bush) in 2004 to Democratic (for Obama) in 2008. **Figure 10** provides a comparison of their voting populations' race ethnic profiles for 2004 and 2008. Over this period, Nevada increased both its Hispanic and black representations such that the white share of its voters was reduced from 80 to 73 percent. Compared with Nevada, New Mexico showed a greater representation of minorities in each year. Both states now have a sizeable Hispanic voter presence.

Moreover, in both states, minorities, especially Hispanics, showed significantly higher support for the Democratic candidate in 2008. (See **Figures 11 and 12**.) This has exerted an impact on both states' Democratic victories, particularly in New Mexico with its large Hispanic population. In Nevada, blacks, as well, showed notable Democratic gains. But just as important here was the shrinking of Republican support among Nevada's sizeable white population.

**Florida and Virginia.** These two southern Fast Growing purple states also flipped from Republican to Democratic support in the 2008 election. The minority share of Florida's voters increased from 24% to 29% where Hispanics comprise more voters than blacks. (See **Figure 13**.) In Virginia, blacks make up the dominant portion of minority voters. Though, buoyed by high turnout rates, blacks, Hispanics and Asians each increased their shares --such that minorities as a whole comprised more than a quarter (26%) of the state's voters in 2008., compared with 19% in 2004.

With this backdrop of changing race voter profiles, minority voting patterns, more favorable to Democrats in 2008, became amplified in both states (See **Figures 14 and 15**.) In Florida, the Democratic margin for blacks increased considerably in 2008, and Hispanic margins flipped from Republican to Democratic support. In Virginia, the black Democratic margin also increased. But just as important there is a shrunken Republican margin among Virginia's whites. The latter was associated with a shift in allegiance in Northern Virginia which sustained sharp demographic shifts. Thus increased minority shares and greater minority Democratic margins in 2008 had much to do with the "red to blue" shifts in Florida's and Virginia's 2008 results.

**Ohio and Pennsylvania.** These are Slow Growing purple states, wherein the former flipped from Republican to Democratic with the 2008 election, and the latter voted Democratic in both 2004 and 2008. The voting populations in both remain predominantly white, along with small minority populations dominated by blacks. (See **Figure 16**.) In both states, there were notable increases in black Democratic margins in 2008. (See **Figures 17 and 18**.) And while these contributed to Obama's wins, these wins were also made possible by significant declines in white Republican margins.. More so than in Fast Growing states, the Democratic reliance on minority support in these two Slow Growing states, was dependent on reduced GOP support among their large Republican-leaning white electorates.

### How and Where Did Minorities Elect Obama?

How and where did minorities affect Obama's victory? In 2004, John Kerry took 20 states, in 11 of which (including DC), whites voted for Democrats. Yet because whites voted for Republicans in the other 9, minorities carried those states for John Kerry. Moving to 2008, Obama carried 29 states. Among these, whites voted Democratic in 19 states; and in the remaining 10 of these states, Obama's victories depended on minorities. (See **Figure 19.**)

Yet the 10 states where minorities made the difference for Obama, were largely different than the 9 where minorities made the difference for Kerry. This can be seen by comparing **Map 4**, which shows the "blue states", that Kerry carried in 2004, with **Map 5** which shows the blue states, that Obama carried in 2008. Each map depicts those states where whites made the difference for the Democratic candidate and those where minorities made the difference for the Democrat.

The 3 states where minorities made the difference for both Kerry and Obama were Pennsylvania, Maryland and New Jersey. Yet, the 7 new states where minorities made the difference for Obama (and which also voted Republican in 2004) included Fast Growing purple states, Nevada, New Mexico, Virginia, North Carolina, and Florida as well as the Slow Growing purple states of Indiana and Ohio.

So, did minorities really win the election for Obama? As shown above, they were responsible for his wins in several Fast Growing purple states in the mountain west and southeast. In addition, they made a difference in key Slow Growing purple states like Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana where the white Republican margin shrunk enough to allow strong Democratic leaning minorities to prevail.

Thus, the minority support for Obama was instrumental in his success, but not just because it occurred in Fast Growing purple states with rising Hispanic populations. It also required shrinking white Republican margins along with large minority Democratic margins in states with smaller minority (largely black) populations. The latter is not something that I predicted far in advance of the election, but came about because of low white turnout and enthusiasm for the Republican candidate, McCain. These circumstances set the stage for minorities to make a substantial contribution toward the election of Barack Obama.

### Minorities and Future Elections

What does this imply for the future? Certainly the upcoming younger generations of voters will be more racially diverse than in the past. This is evident from **Figure 20** which depicts the race-ethnic profile of the 18-29 age group through the year 2020. Much attention was given to these voters in 2008 by virtue of their strong support for the multiracial, Democratic candidate Obama. By 2020 this age group will be nearly half minority and is moving in that direction for the elections of 2012 and 2016. Thus, one might expect that especially in the more youthful, fast growing parts of the country, the momentum may swing toward the Democrats or at least toward candidates who appeal to a broad spectrum of racial groups.

Yet a contrasting voter bloc is the "65 plus" population, an age group that the bulging baby boom voters will begin inhabiting over the next several elections. Not only will the voters in

this age group increase dramatically in numbers, and show characteristically high turnout rates, but they will also remain predominantly white up through at least 2020. **(Figure 21)**. They will also comprise disproportionately large shares of voters in slow growing parts of the country.

With issues like the viability of social security and medical care on the horizon, as well as the need to provide quality educations for future generations of workers, there are almost certain to be region and generation specific fissures between these young and old voting blocs, which will differ from each other along racial and cultural fault lines. The challenge for both parties will be to select national candidates who can successfully appeal to these distinct generations and the regions they reside in.

**[Figures and Maps follow]**

Figure 1

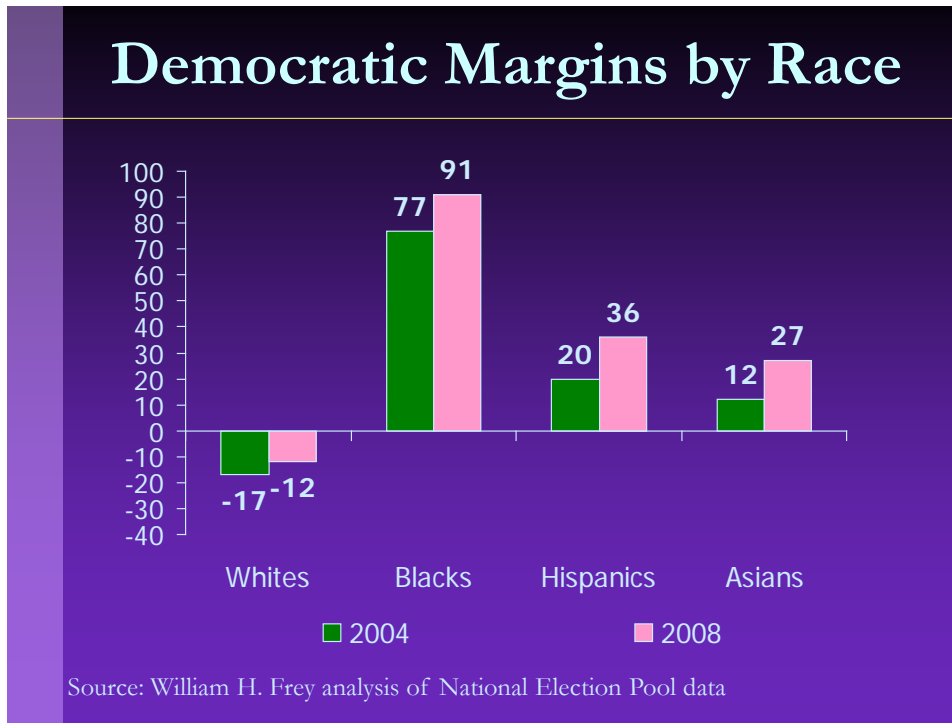


Figure 2

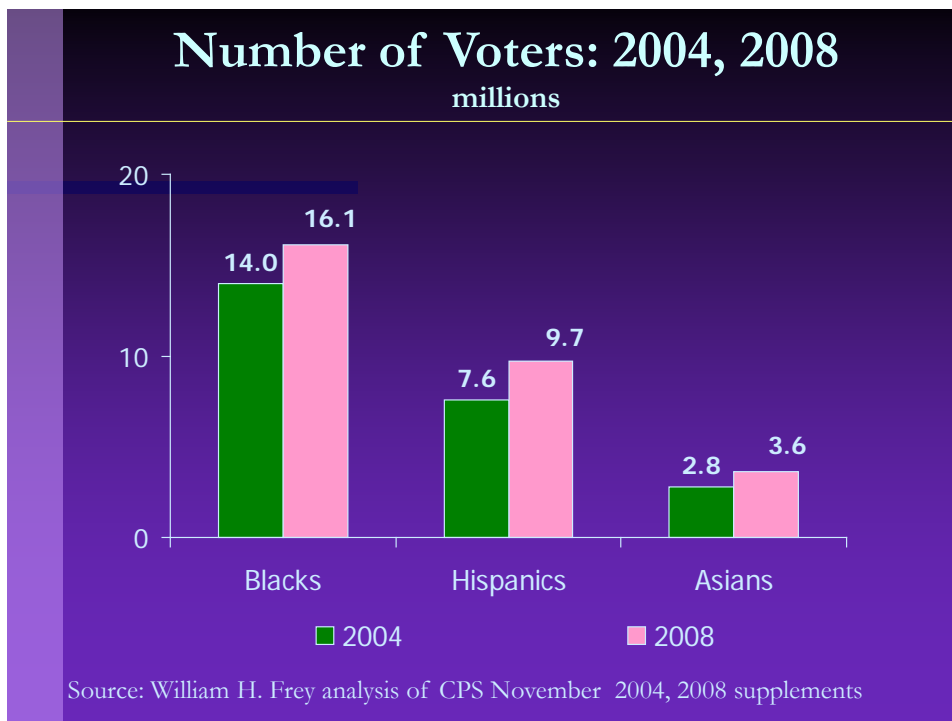




Figure 3

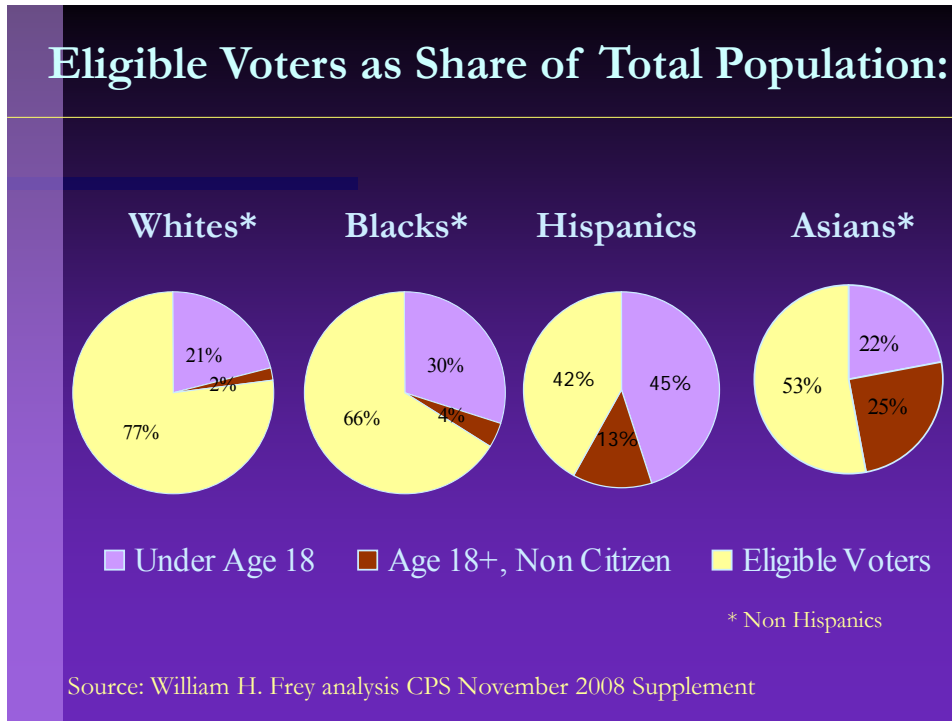


Figure 4

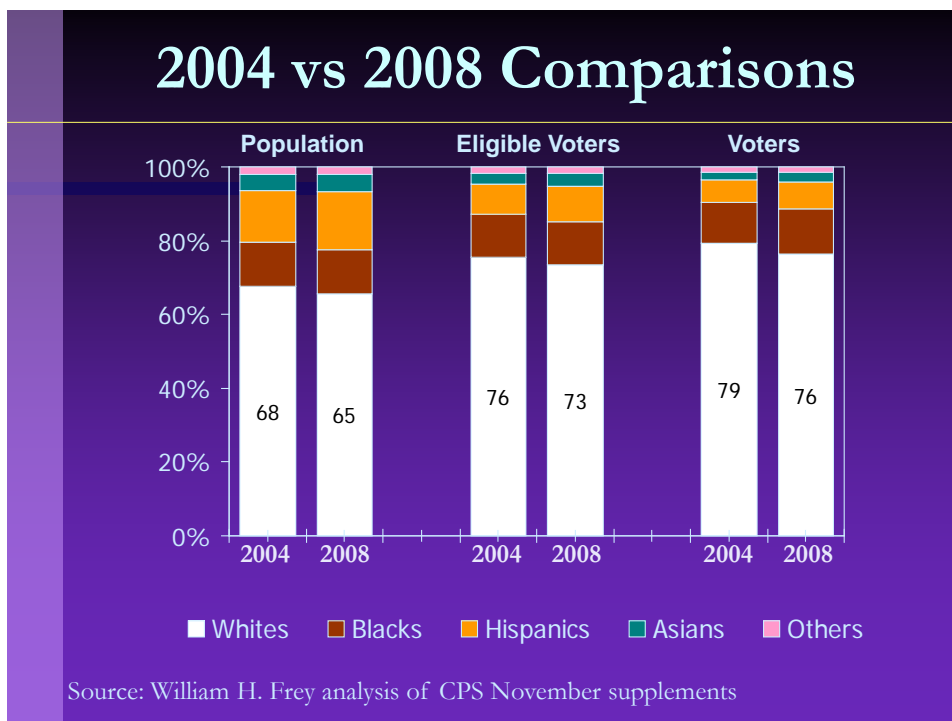


Figure 5

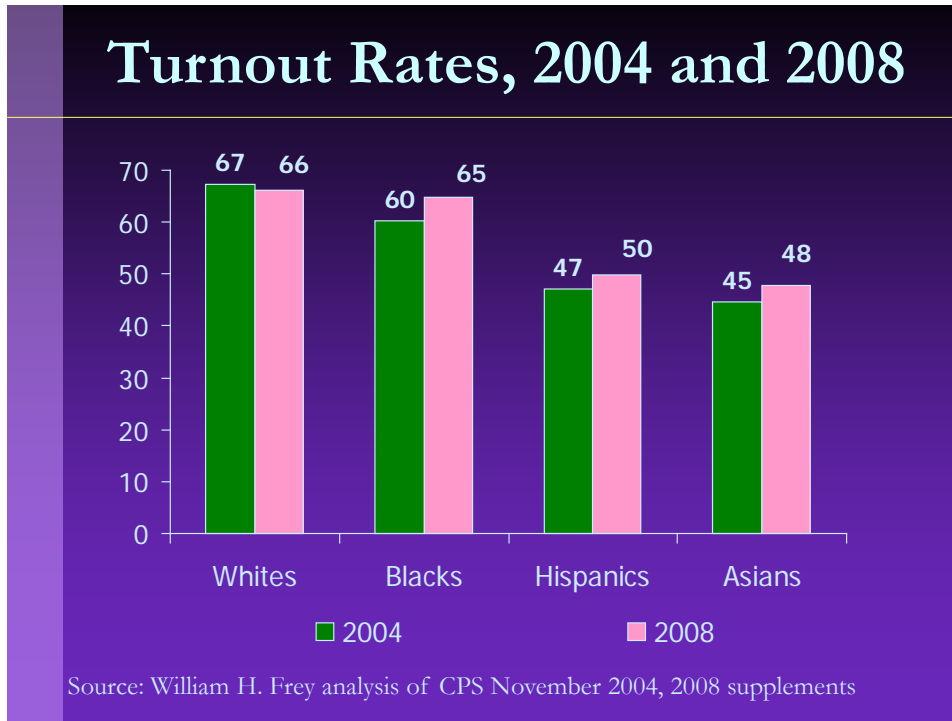


Figure 6

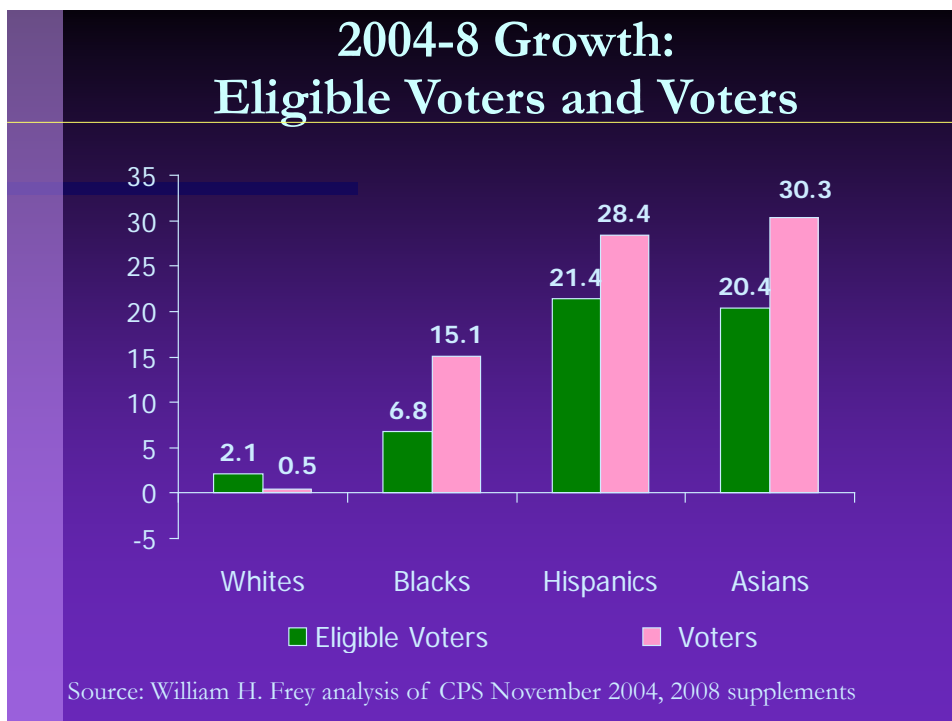


Figure 7



Figure 8

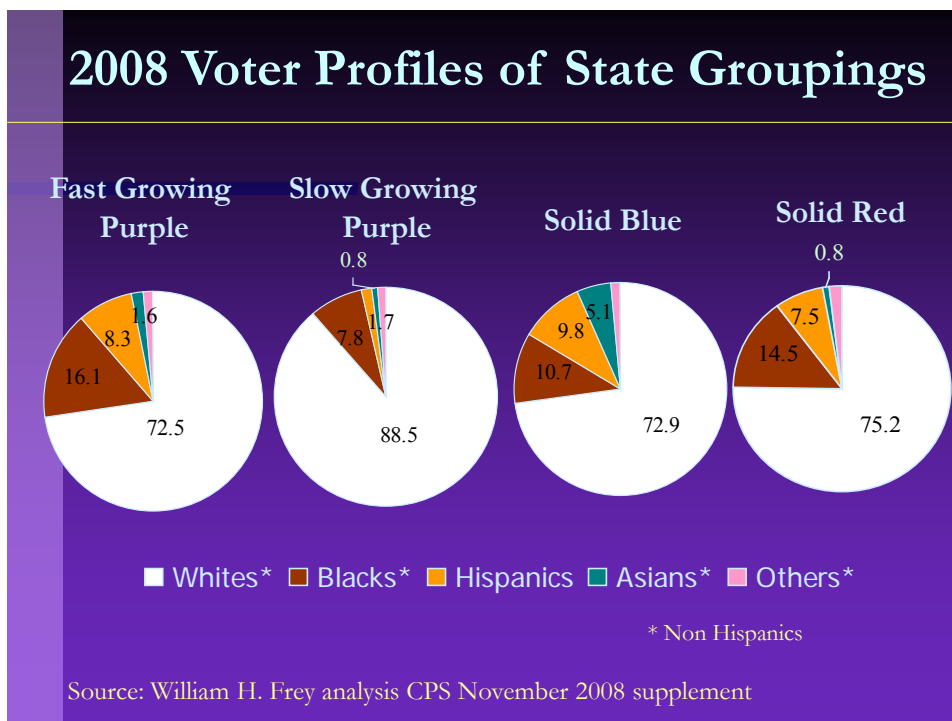


Figure 9

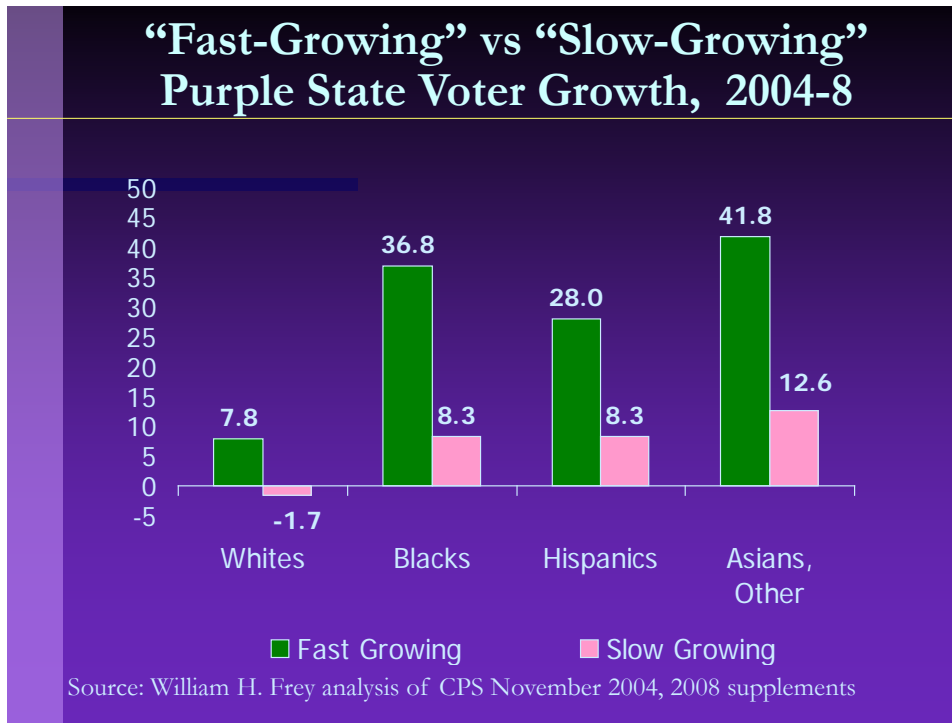


Figure 10

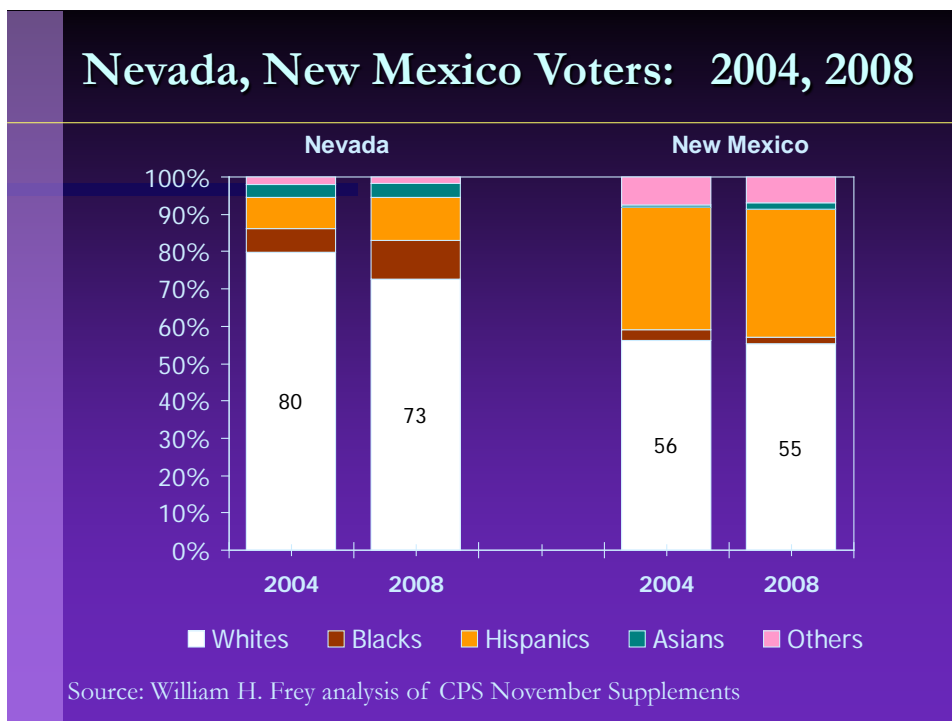


Figure 11

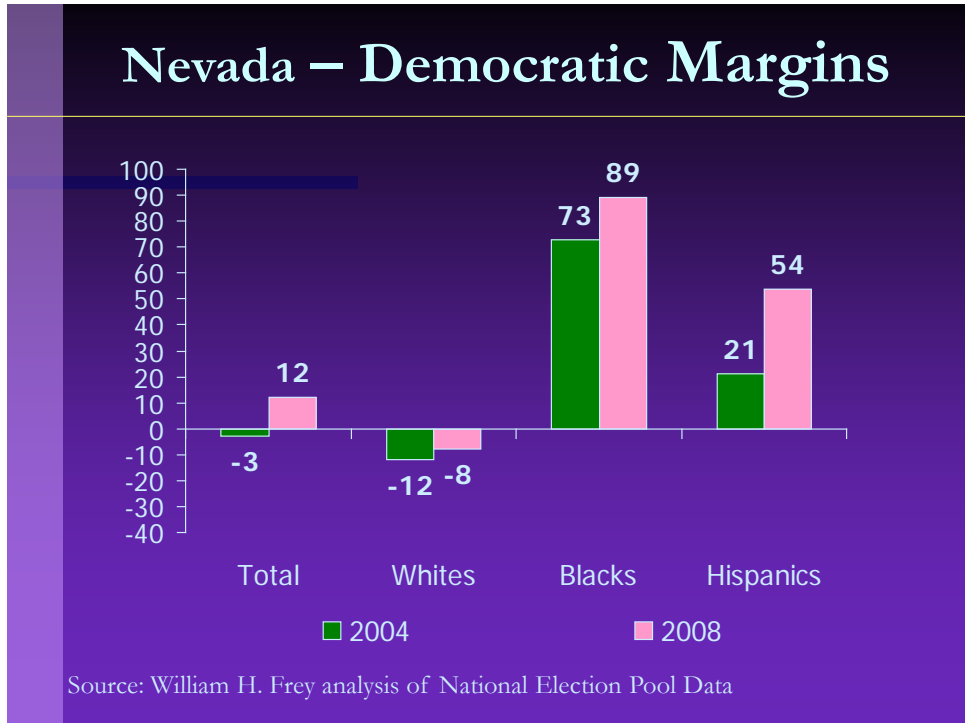


Figure 12

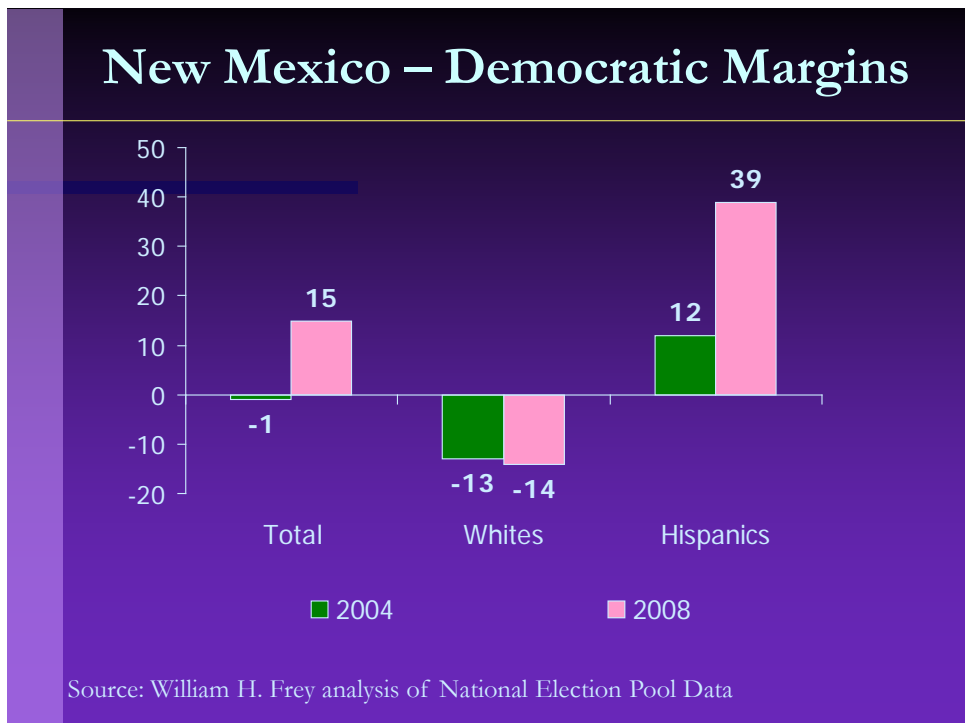


Figure 13

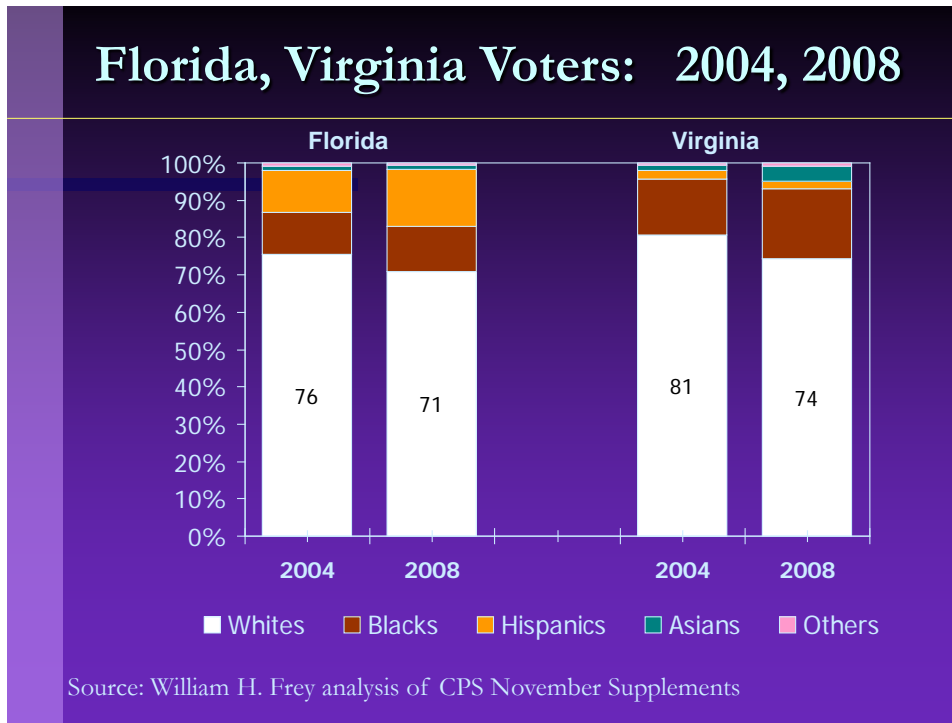


Figure 14

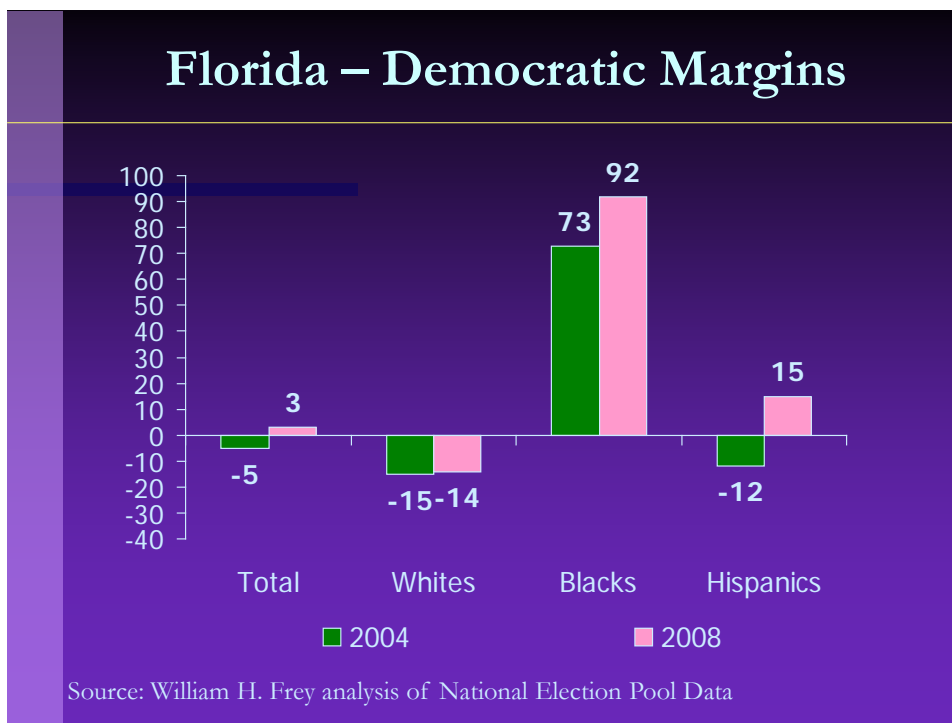


Figure 15

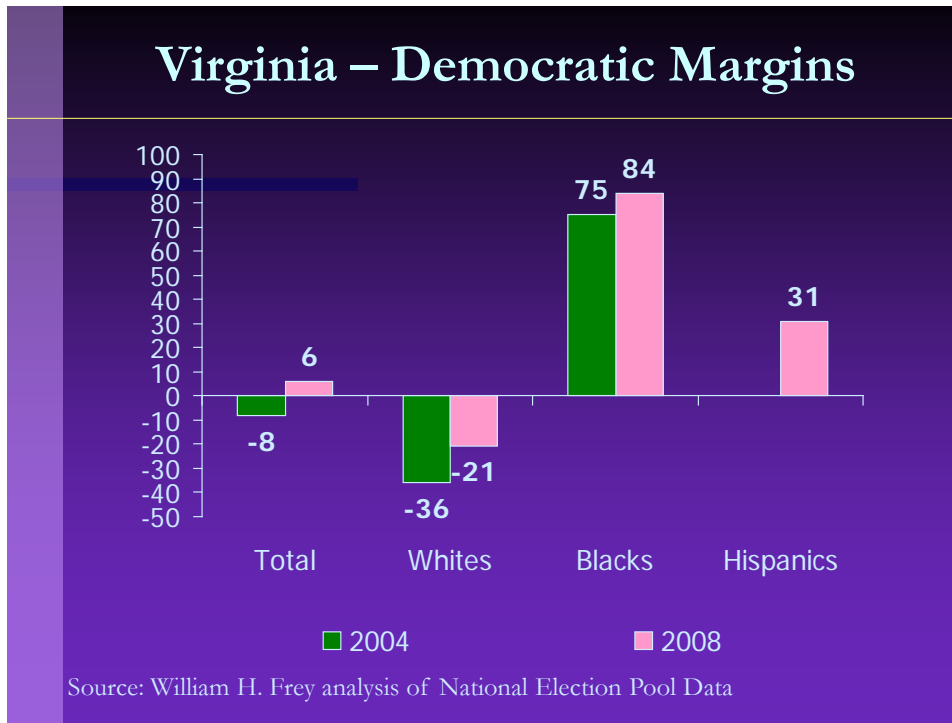


Figure 16

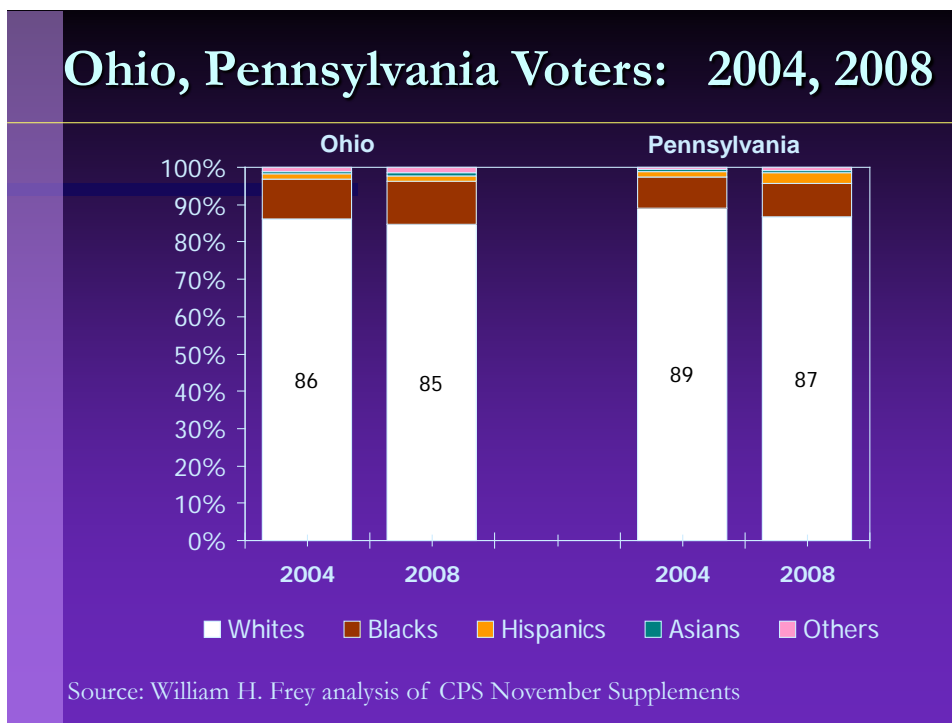


Figure 17

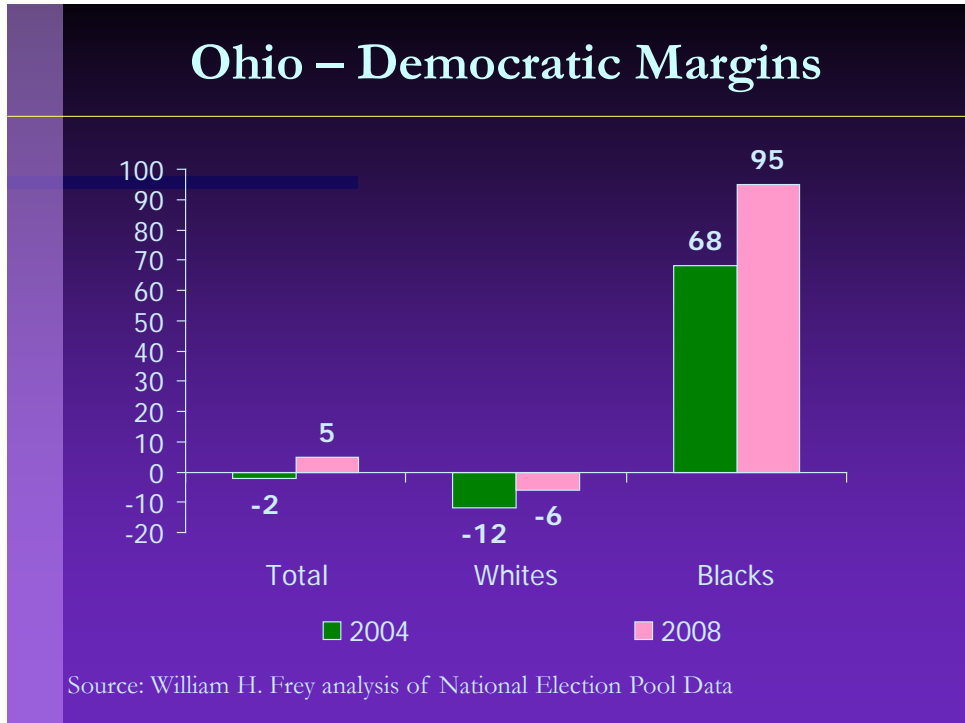


Figure 18

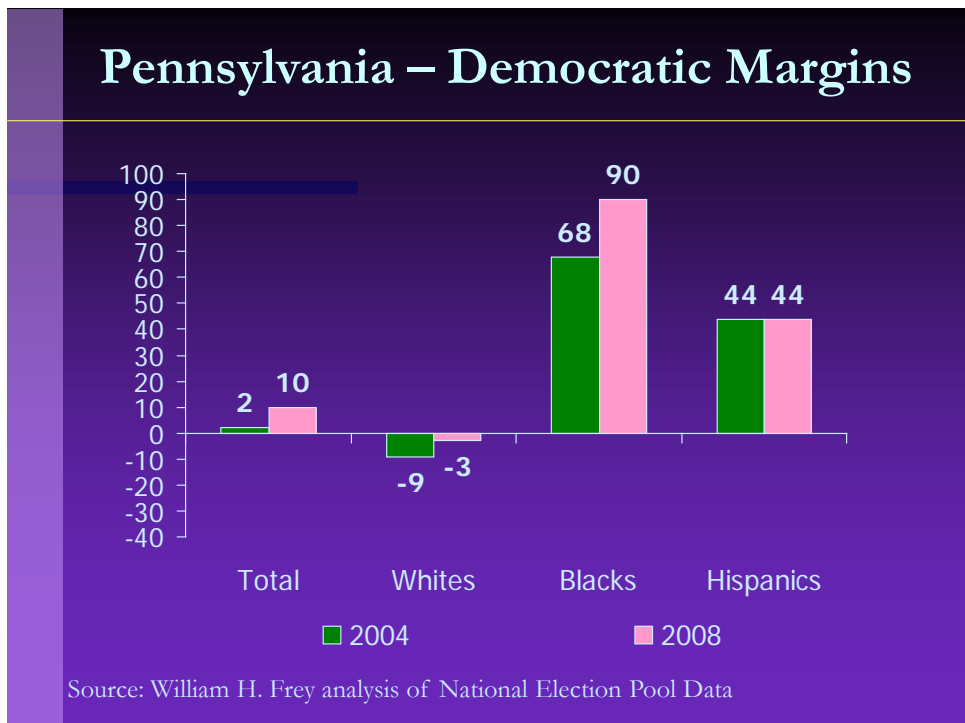




Figure 19



Figure 20

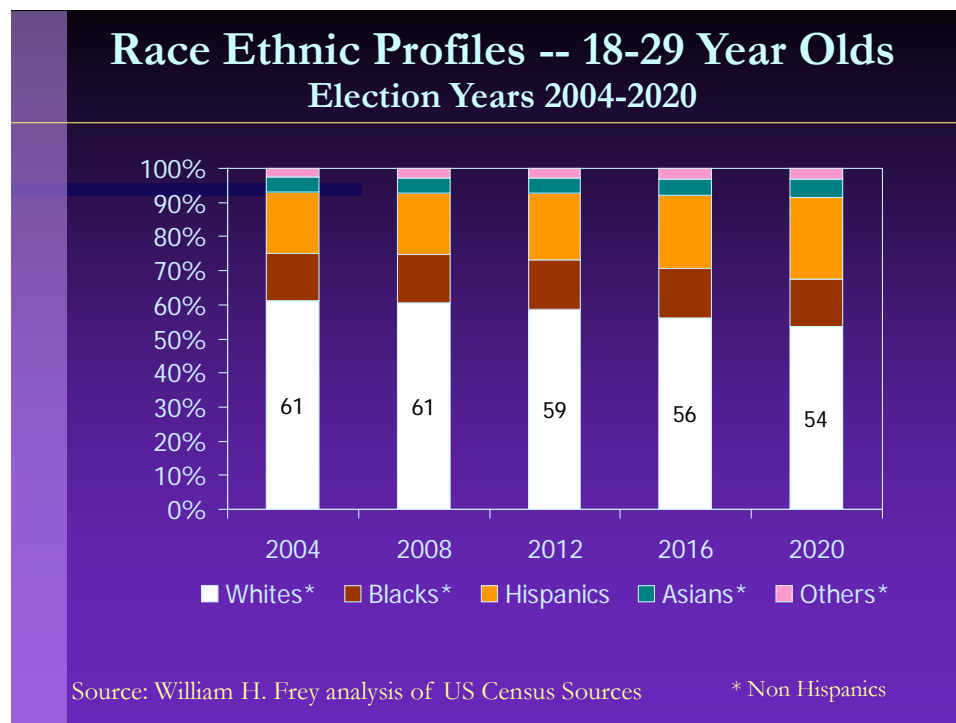
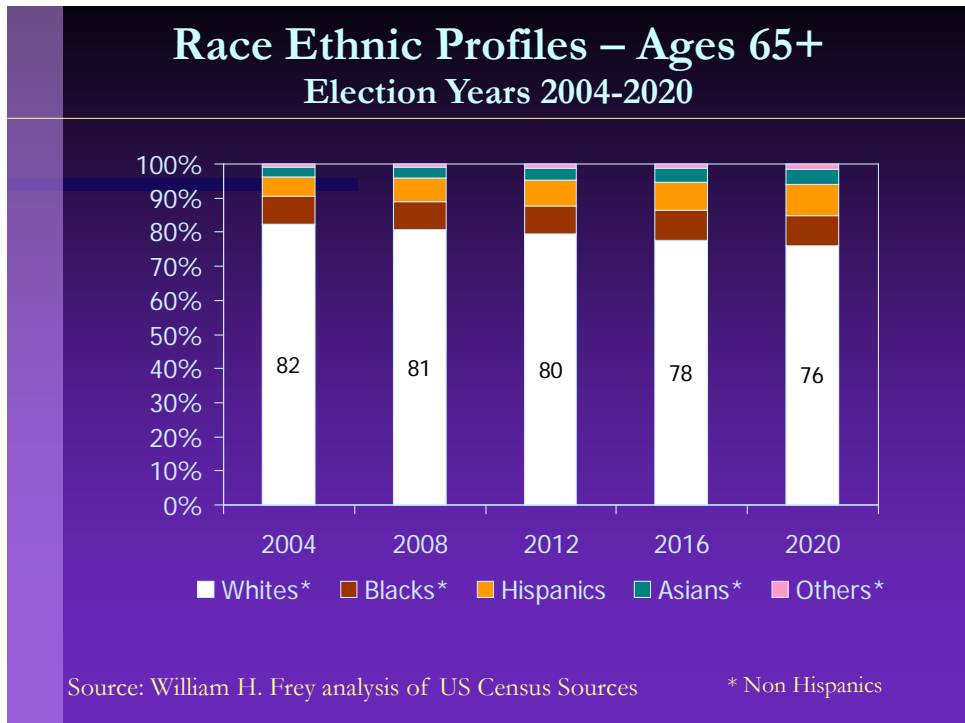
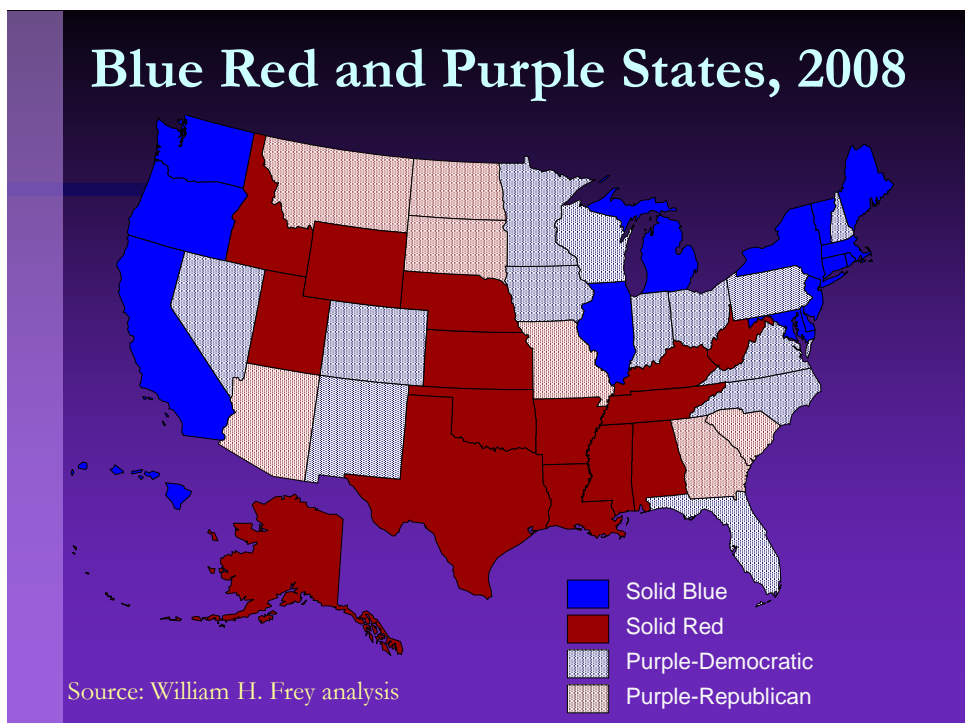


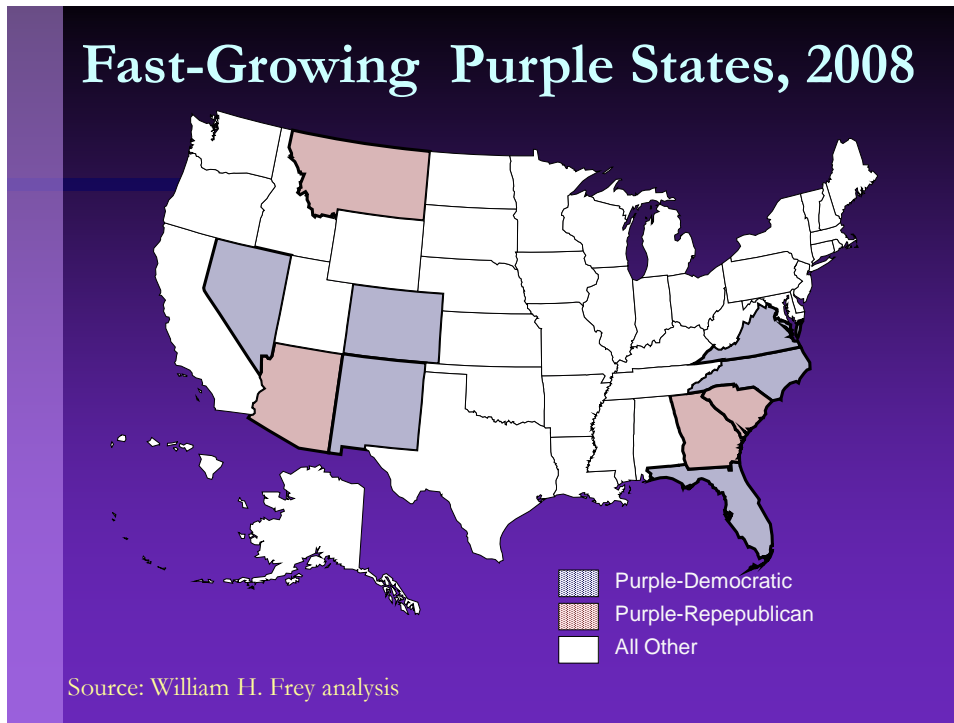
Figure 21



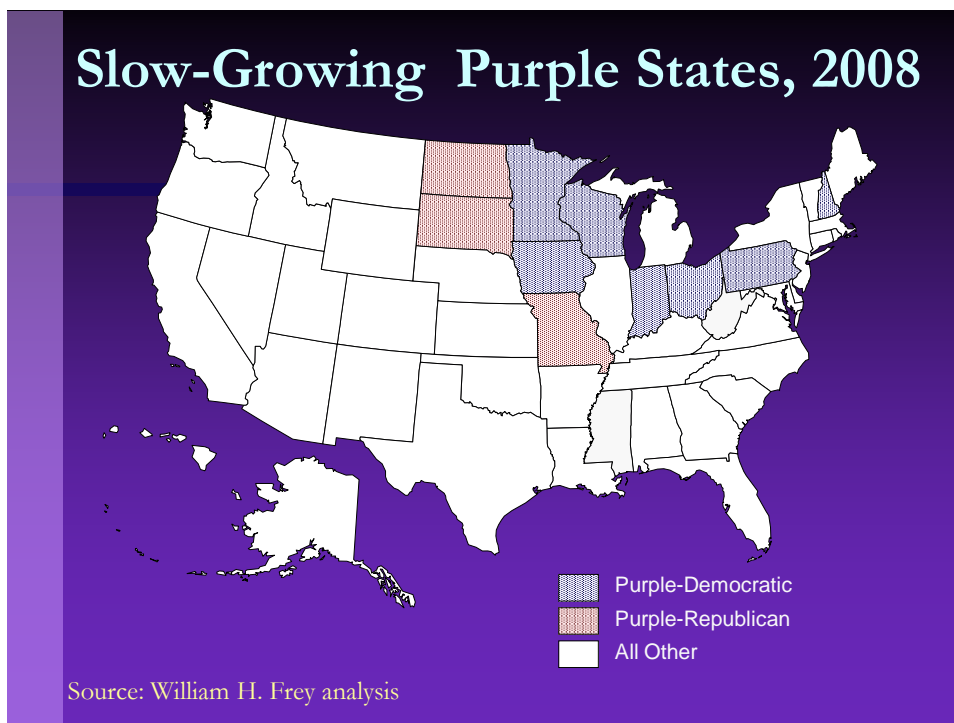
Map 1



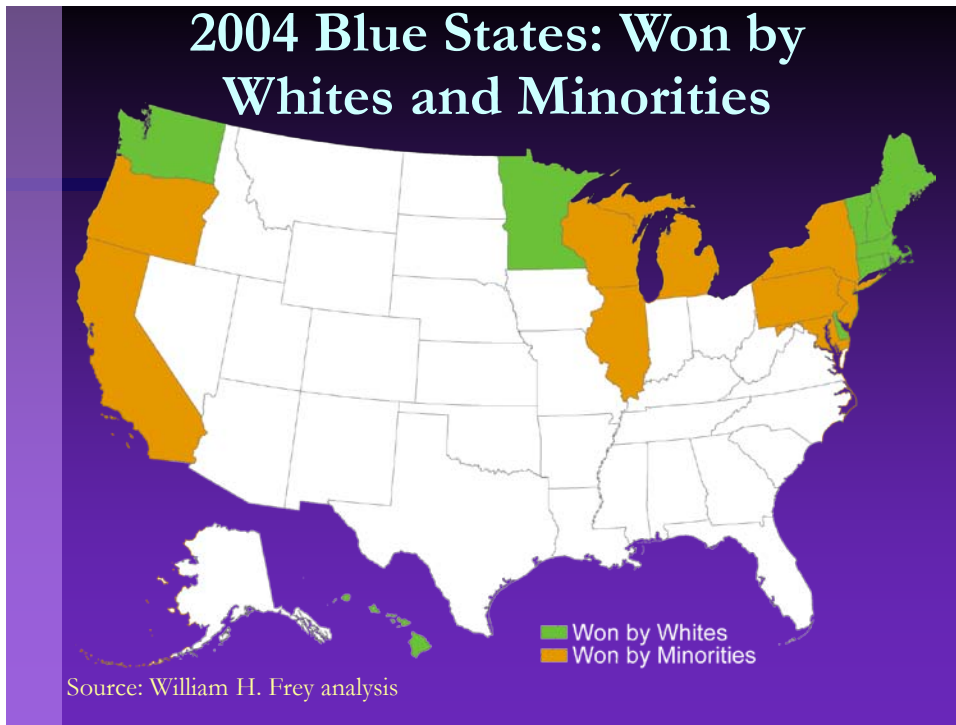
Map 2



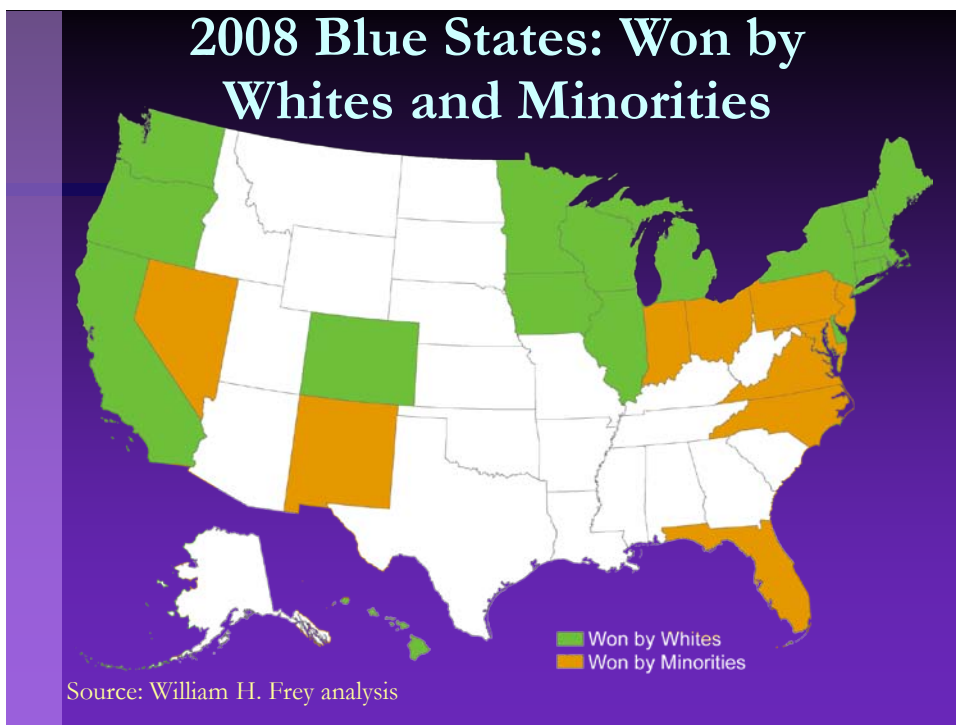
Map 3



Map 4



Map 5





# Population Studies Center Research Reports

The **Population Studies Center (PSC)** at the University of Michigan is one of the oldest population centers in the United States. Established in 1961 with a grant from the Ford Foundation, the Center has a rich history as the main workplace for an interdisciplinary community of scholars in the field of population studies.

Currently PSC is one of five centers within the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The Center receives core funding from both the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R24) and the National Institute on Aging (P30).

PSC Research Reports are **prepublication working papers** that report on current demographic research conducted by PSC-affiliated researchers. These papers are written for timely dissemination and are often later submitted for publication in scholarly journals.

The **PSC Research Report Series** was initiated in 1981.

**Copyrights for all Reports are held by the authors.** Readers may quote from this work as long as they properly acknowledge the authors and the Series and do not alter the original work.

Population Studies Center  
University of Michigan  
Institute for Social Research  
PO Box 1248, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248 USA  
<http://www.psc.isr.umich.edu/pubs/>