The Hillary coalition that never was

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Recent commentary on the presidential election has sought to pinpoint where Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton lost to Republican President-elect Donald Trump. Royal Holloway Doctoral Researcher **Rakib Ehsan** *identifies three key reasons behind the election result: anti-establishment sentiment driving Trump's vote in traditional Democratic Party strongholds, an Obama-Clinton "enthusiasm gap" among African-Americans, and a better-than-expected Republican showing among Hispanic voters who were treated by many actors as a monolithic bloc.*

The populist storm which led to the Brexit vote last summer found its way to the US on November 8th. In one of the greatest shocks in US political history, Donald Trump defied conventional wisdom and was elected the 45th President of the United States.

So why did so many, including myself, reach the conclusion that Hillary Clinton was well on course to sail to 270 Electoral College votes and beyond? It is because of the changing face of America. The 2016 electorate was the most diverse for any presidential election. Racial demographics were meant to pose grave strategic problems for Trump. He associated undocumented Mexican migrants with rape, drugs and general criminality. Questioned the integrity of a federal judge on the grounds of his Mexican ancestry. Insinuated that Black Lives Matter have instigated police killings. Refused an invitation to address the NAACP. And ultimately questioned the very legality of Barack Obama's presidency on the basis of birther conspiracy theories.

This was thought to have done considerable damage for Trump's chances of winning in swing states such as Colorado and Nevada where he lost, but also in key battlegrounds such as Florida, North Carolina, Arizona and Georgia – where he defeated Hillary Clinton.

When looking at the voting patterns for racial groups, three key reasons can be identified in explaining Trump's victory – an Obama-Clinton 'enthusiasm gap' among African-Americans, higher-than-expected Latino support for The Donald, and the 'whitelash' which drove an aggressive Republican breach of Clinton's Midwest 'blue firewall'.

There clearly was an Obama-Clinton 'enthusiasm gap' among African-American voters in this election. This could be called a depressive 'Obama effect', with this being the first time the first African-American US president did not appear on the presidential ballot since 2008. Despite winning 88% of black votes (which is 5 percentage points down from the level of African-American support for Obama when he defeated Romney in 2012), it appears a largely uninspiring Clinton was simply unable to enthuse this base of voters to turn out at a level the Democrats would have hoped for. This may have particularly hurt her prospects in states such as Michigan and Wisconsin. African-Americans were always going to be an essential part of her coalition, but it seems that Clinton campaign really needed to do more in terms of mobilising black voters.

In addition to this, Latino support for Trump (29 per cent) was higher than it was for Romney in 2012 (27 per cent). Considering the string of controversial statements made by Trump in the build-up to the Presidential Election, this definitely comes as a surprise. Indeed, nearly 1 in 4 Latinos aged 18-29 voted for Trump. However, is important to recognise the sheer ethnic diversity within the Hispanic population, which includes people who originate from Central America, South America, Puerto Rico and the Caribbean.

Much like how labels such as 'South Asian' can be redundant in the British setting, assuming the US Hispanic population is some sort of monolithic, one-dimensional voting bloc is simply wrong. The idea of "pan-Latino" offence being taken to Trump's comments directed specifically at Mexicans could well have been overstated in the lead-up to the election. Established legal citizens simply may not have been offended by Trump's remarks directed at

undocumented migrants – indeed, some could well have supported his policies on border security, immigration, and deportation. While Clinton carried states such as Colorado and Nevada, Trump winning around 3 in 10 Latino voters was not part of the script.

Any electoral advantage Clinton did hold over Trump regarding ethnic minority voters was ultimately offset by the fact that the latter won 58 per cent of white voters – including 63 per cent of votes among white men. This helped him break the "blue firewall" by winning what could be labelled "Rust Belt Brexit" states such as Ohio, Iowa, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania which have experienced the economic hardship of de-industrialisation. Places where the market forces of globalisation haven't been kind to.

Trump's protectionist trade proposals inevitably resonated with a large swathe of 'Blue Dog' Democrat voters who blame NAFTA – ironically signed by President Bill Clinton – for the industrial decline witnessed in their states. For Hillary, the crumbling of her Midwest firewall will be particularly difficult to stomach. Striking parallels can now be drawn between the Democrats' weakening relationship with its white working-class core vote in these rust belt states and the issues the British Labour Party have faced with maintaining its traditional socially conservative supporters in its Northern English and Welsh heartlands.

Any demographic shifts along the lines of race and ethnicity which benefited the Democrats for this election were comfortably overcome by Trump's resounding success among white voters. Indeed, Trump beat Clinton among white voters aged 18-29 (48 per cent / 43 per cent), white college graduates (49 per cent / 45 per cent), and white women overall (53 per cent / 43 per cent). While anti-Trump feeling among ethnic minorities was seen by many such as myself as a potential deciding factor in this election, it was anti-establishment sentiment in predominantly white communities which ultimately settled this race for the White House.

However, what this election shows is that the relationship between the Republican Party and many US ethnic minority voters remain significantly strained. How President-elect Trump conducted his presidential campaign, and chooses to manage community relations and address racial inequality issues during his presidency, could yet have long-term electoral implications for the GOP as the face of America's ever-diversifying liberal democracy continues to change and evolve.

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About the author

Rakib Ehsan – *Royal Holloway, University of London*
Rakib Ehsan is a Doctoral Researcher at Royal Holloway, University of London, specialising in ethnic minority socio-political attitudes and behaviour in the UK. His PhD investigates the various inter-relationships between the ethnic composition of social networks, patterns of interethnic experiences, political-institutional and generalised social trust, and personal self-identification in regards to ethnicity, religion and nationality. He has had work published by Canadian independent think-tank MacKenzie Institute, British think-tank Bright Blue, and The Conversation. General research interests include ethnic minority voting behaviour and the social, economic, and political impact of racial discrimination.