

TUESDAY OPINION

EUGENE ROBINSON

The party that wins Hispanics will win elections

Memo to both Democrats and Republicans: The party that forms a durable, long-term governing coalition in this country will be the party that most fully embraces, understands and speaks to the needs of Hispanic voters. And that won't happen simply by assuming that demography is political destiny.

Much of the coverage of the 2020 Census data released last week focused on the unprecedented decline in the nation's White population, which since 2010 fell not just as a percentage but in absolute numbers. Yet though the overall rate of growth was slower than it's been in decades, the overall population of the nation grew by 7.4 percent. Half of that increase was due to growth in the number of Hispanic Americans.

Hispanics now account for 18.7 percent of the U.S. population. Hispanics make up 25.7 percent of the youth population, representing 1 in 4 voters of the future.

Narrowing the political focus, in Texas — long heralded as a potential swing state — the Hispanic population grew by nearly 2 million over the past decade and Whites now outnumber Hispanics by a mere handful of residents, 11,584,597 to 11,441,717. By the time the 2024 election rolls around, if current trends hold, Hispanics will hold a small plurality in a state that Republicans must win to have any chance of an electoral college majority.

All of this would seem to bode well for Democrats, who have been winning the Hispanic vote comfortably nationwide. Yet, I see clear warning signs for Democrats (which they may or may not heed) as well as potential opportunities for Republicans (which they seem determined to ignore).

President Biden beat Donald Trump among Hispanics by a comfortable margin, 59 percent to 38 percent. Yet four years earlier, Hillary Clinton won Hispanics in her contest against Trump by a landslide, 66 percent to 28 percent. Despite all his "build the wall" rhetoric against Hispanic immigrants — whom he called rapists, drug smugglers and "bad hombres" — Trump grew his share of the Hispanic vote markedly.

In part, this reflects the fact that Hispanic Americans are not a monolith. Cuban Americans, for example, have long been more likely to be Republicans than Hispanics of other national origins. In 2020, according to an analysis by the Pew Research Center, 58 percent of Cuban Americans identified with or leaned toward the GOP — while 65 percent of non-Cuban Hispanics identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party.

This likely means that Cuban Americans prioritized Trump's hard line stance toward the communist government in Havana over his policies regarding the U.S.-Mexico border. And while Cuban Americans are relatively small in number compared with Mexican Americans, they are a huge voting bloc in Florida — and much more likely to turn out to vote than other Hispanics.

The result: Cuban Americans helped Trump win Florida comfortably last year, and the state looked more red than purple. The lesson: just because demographers and political analysts group Hispanics together doesn't mean their political values are monolithic.

Biden not only has declined to revisit the punishing sanctions against the Cuban regime that Trump put in place, but also imposed tough new sanctions against Cuban officials and institutions that participated in a brutal crackdown on peaceful protests last month. If the policy impact of sanctions is debatable, Biden's political wisdom is not: Democrats would dearly love to put Florida back in play, and Biden's toughness may help.

The Democratic Party also sees a golden opportunity in Texas, where Mexican Americans are by far the dominant Hispanic group. But there, too, Trump outperformed expectations with Hispanics and easily won the state. Democratic strategists urgently need to figure out why, rather than waiting around on the assumption that demographic trends will do their work for them. A swing state doesn't only have to vacillate in one direction.

According to a study by the UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Initiative, Hispanic voters helped Biden eke out his narrow wins in Arizona, Wisconsin and Georgia — without which Trump would still be president. But the report's authors characterized Hispanics not as an in-the-bag Democratic constituency but as a "swing electorate" to whom both parties must appeal not just with words but also with deeds.

There is a clear opportunity here for the Republican Party, if it would temper its anti-immigration rhetoric and embrace the nation's largest minority group. Instead, the GOP continues with the short-term policy of voter suppression and harshly anti-immigrant rhetoric. The restrictive new election law that Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R) wants so desperately to sign seems unlikely to deter many African Americans from voting but may have that intended effect on Hispanics — for an election or two.

Demography does not determine election outcomes, but it does shape the political landscape, if not always in predictable ways. Ignoring what Hispanic voters really want is the road to obsolescence.



JOHN LOCHER/ASSOCIATED PRESS

A nursing student administers the Moderna vaccine at a vaccination center in Las Vegas in April.

The deadly decision my father's nursing home made

BY LOUISE DUBIN

Most of the residents at my father's nursing home are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus. But many of the staff members there — as at many other facilities across the United States — refuse vaccines. The results last month were lethal.

On July 7, a staff member tested positive for the coronavirus, forcing my father's facility into lockdown. Residents had assumed that the staff was fully vaccinated and were no longer wearing masks. Within a week, 19 out of about 70 skilled nursing residents had tested positive for the disease. Eighteen of these infected residents were vaccinated; two died of covid-19 and a third was hospitalized for serious illness. Genomic testing identified that alpha and delta strains were brought into the facility around July 4.

A total of six staff members tested positive for the coronavirus, four of whom were unvaccinated. Despite the outbreak, 13 percent of the staff remain unvaccinated. This is, in fact, better than at most facilities; last month, Medicare data showed that around 41 percent of nursing home staff refuse to be vaccinated.

My father, like most nursing home residents, has health conditions that forced him to surrender significant freedoms and cash in exchange for care to keep him safe. Yet he now depends on some staff who refuse to be vaccinated and who are permitted to hide their vaccination status.

The vaccinations that residents received certainly prevented the death count from being much higher. But even without underlying health conditions, people older than 80 have been shown to have weaker immune system responses to coronavirus vaccinations. Now that the delta variant accounts for more than 90 percent of the country's infections, facilities

such as my father's are petri dishes primed for outbreaks.

Breakthrough infections and deaths are no longer rare in these communities, and most are thought to be brought in by unvaccinated staff. In April, the New York Times reported on an outbreak set off by an unvaccinated worker in Kentucky. The same thing seems to have happened in facilities in South Dakota, Indiana and Missouri, resulting in the deaths of nursing home residents from breakthrough infection. More such deaths may be ascribable to unvaccinated staff: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has yet to publish the results of its investigation of four nursing home breakthrough deaths in Grand Junction, Colo., and an assisted-living facility in Toms River, N.J., is now on lockdown, with dozens of staff members and vaccinated residents having tested positive.

The United States leaves vaccine mandates up to states. Most states leave it up to counties, and most counties punt to individual employers. Many employers mandate coronavirus vaccinations for on-site workers, but most nursing homes have yet to take this step.

What do our laws say about an unvaccinated worker whose mask falls below her nose while she removes a bed pan or performs other intimate tasks? Unfortunately, infection control regulations are lagging behind the current data on breakthrough infections.

On Aug. 6, I spoke to the nurse in the state health department who oversees licensing for all skilled nursing facilities in my father's county. She asked what vaccine my father had received. When I said Pfizer, she said, "He should be fine." When I reminded her that the outbreak last month had killed and hospitalized other Pfizer-vaccinated residents at his facility, she said, "They had co-morbidities." But most people confined to nursing

homes have co-morbidities!

On July 21, 28 residents and their family members sent a petition to the chief executive of my father's elder-care chain requesting an immediate vaccine mandate of the staff and other contractors. He responded that unvaccinated staff members remain on the job and that no mandate can happen now due to "privacy issues, concerns over labor shortages, and appropriate and legal protocols for monitoring."

Labor shortages in skilled nursing facilities are a problem. If a nursing home is understaffed, it can face \$50,000 fines. But incentives such as higher pay and vacation days could accompany any vaccination deadline for those whom encouragement has failed to persuade. If the mandate is statewide — or better yet nationwide — nursing homes won't lose many employees, since all employers would need to comply.

Some states have already acted. This month, California became the first state to require all health-care workers to be vaccinated, setting a deadline of Sept. 30. Massachusetts and Connecticut also recently issued vaccine mandates for all long-term care facility staff. Other states have enacted mandates while allowing workers to opt out and submit to testing once a week instead. This is a start, but it falls far short; this same protocol was being followed at my father's residence during the July outbreak.

As long as our country permits unvaccinated nursing home workers to hide their vaccination status and work with fragile residents, there will be more deaths. How many more sacrificial lambs have to die? And how many more month-long lockdowns will our parents have to endure, if they survive?

Louise Dubin is a cellist and writer based in New Jersey.

Big Oil should help pay for its climate mess

BY CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

Global warming has reached "unprecedented" levels and is causing catastrophic damage across America and the world, according to a new report from the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

That report, based on more than 14,000 peer-reviewed studies, makes two things clear: Fossil fuel pollution is driving this crisis, and we have no time to waste in transitioning to a clean-energy future. This shift will require considerable resources, and it is only fair that the corporations that have profited from dirty energy should help fund the solutions to this dire situation.

That's why this month, I led a group of fellow senators in announcing new federal legislation that would require the biggest polluters — mostly mega-wealthy oil companies — to begin helping foot the bill to address the climate crisis. The Polluters Pay Climate Fund Act is based on a simple premise: Polluters should pay to help clean up their mess, and those who pollute the most should pay the most.

The idea is similar to the Superfund legislation Congress passed in the 1980s to clean up concentrated hazardous waste sites. Many of my Republican colleagues support that program, voting just last week to increase fees on companies that contribute to that waste as part of the bipartisan Senate infrastructure bill. Now, our very atmosphere is a de facto Superfund site. My bill requires that the largest greenhouse gas pollut-

ers — such as companies that deal with hazardous waste — must help pay to address the harm they have caused.

Because of the pollution these companies have spewed into the air, our planet is hotter than ever recorded — with extreme heat waves, widespread wildfires, rising seas, historic floods and prolonged droughts. Without rapid cuts in fossil-fuel use, these disasters will become more frequent and severe. The IPCC report called it a "code red for humanity."

My legislation would require the 25 to 30 biggest fossil-fuel polluters doing business in the United States — led by oil corporations such as ExxonMobil, Chevron, Shell and BP — to pay a tax based on a percentage of their global emissions. This would be determined by publicly available data.

The collected funds — set at \$500 billion over 10 years — could then be reinvested to address various efforts designed to tackle climate change within the Senate's proposed \$3.5 trillion budget reconciliation bill. Investments could include bolstering electric-grid resilience against extreme weather and cyberattacks, supporting the electricity sector's transition to net-zero emissions and strengthening our infrastructure to protect against rising seas. Funds could also be used to accelerate renewable energy research and deployment, as well as workforce training.

To address historic injustices, at least 40 percent of the funds would be directed toward communities hit hardest by climate disasters as a result of discriminatory policies that have resulted in

economic, environmental or health disparities.

President Biden and my colleagues in the House and Senate are closer than ever to making historic and necessary investments in America's ability to combat climate change and speed up the transition to clean energy. But taxpayers shouldn't have to foot the bill for these necessary costs alone. After all, Americans are already paying an ever-increasing price for fossil fuel-driven catastrophes, from lives lost and properties destroyed to the enormous costs communities face to protect themselves. At the same time, some of the richest corporations on the planet have made trillions of dollars off these very same fossil fuels. Yet the corporate polluters and their shareholders — led by Big Oil — have never been asked to pay for any of the societal costs of their climate pollution. Instead, perversely, their damaging business model has actually been rewarded for generations with federal subsidies from U.S. taxpayers — and in some years paying no tax themselves.

This financial calculus must change in every way. The urgency of the climate crisis demands congressional action aimed at those most responsible. With the Polluters Pay Climate Fund, the very biggest fossil fuel companies will finally pay to address some of the harm they've done to our environment, and help transition to a cleaner, healthier and more resilient society for all.

The writer, a Democrat, represents Maryland in the U.S. Senate.

MEGAN MCARDLE

Goodbye, Chocolate City

For more than 50 years, Washington, D.C., was "Chocolate City" — the nation's first major majority-Black city, a center for Black arts and culture and a hub of Black political power. But that title has officially been erased, new 2020 Census data reveals.

The latest figures show that D.C. residents who identify as White, alone or in combination, now outnumber those who identify at least partly as Black. While every other ethnic group increased in number between 2010 and 2020, the Black population actually fell by almost 10,000.

This is obviously a story about gentrification and the structural economic disadvantages that left many Black families unable to compete with Whiter and more affluent newcomers for a limited supply of housing in the urban core. But the numbers also tell a more complicated story — one that might have had a happier ending if we made different policy choices.

D.C. became majority-Black in 1957, part of a larger national phenomenon that Alan Ehrenhalt has dubbed "the Great Inversion." Historically, Ehrenhalt notes, the affluent tended to live in urban cores, where everything was conveniently close, pushing less affluent workers to the urban fringe. But American cities abruptly reversed that pattern mid-century.

This "White flight" was partly driven by court-ordered desegregation of housing and schools. But there were other, non-racist reasons that people left for the suburbs. First was a decades-long crime wave. People also liked single-family homes with yards, and cars made it possible to have one while working in the city.

White people, who didn't face labor market discrimination or the legacy of slavery, got there first. But plenty of Black people wanted houses with yards and disliked crime, too. As the Civil Rights Act increased economic opportunity, D.C.'s Black population peaked in 1970 at 537,712, then began declining. Decades before any significant increase in the city's White population, nearby Prince George's County became the wealthiest Black-majority county in the nation.

Some of the departing residents were replaced by Hispanics, owing to an immigration wave in the 1990s. Meanwhile, America's Great Inversion began to revert as crime fell and young people stayed single longer. Since 2000, Washington's population increased by more than 20 percent and diversified so that no racial group had a majority.

Diversity is good; the problem is that economic recovery came at the cost of displacement. And while some of that was probably inevitable, a lot was because of policy choices.

Because housing is an unusually long-lived asset, declining demand can drive rents extremely low for decades. During the Great Inversion, that meant Black families with modest incomes were able to afford sizable homes in urban cores. During the Great Reversion, however, they were disproportionately the ones being displaced. That wouldn't be good no matter who it happened to, but the stark racial aspect makes it particularly intolerable.

Ideally we'd fix it by ending structural racism. Unfortunately, no one seems to know how to do that. We do have a pretty good idea of how to fit more people into the same space, which is less a matter of social engineering than simple geometry.

Unfortunately, our housing affordability debates tend to focus on replicating what's been lost: the ultralow rents that occur when a city's population falls dramatically. It would be extraordinarily difficult to replicate that glut by building since developers won't want to build more houses than there is demand for. Meanwhile, government attempts to mimic the effects of such a surplus are constrained by the same rising real estate costs as private development.

Buying expensive central real estate for affordable housing means fewer such units will be built overall. Force the cost onto the private sector through inclusionary zoning or rent control, and you may actually make the affordability crisis worse.

That's not to say that we're powerless to prevent displacement. We could certainly alter tight zoning, building height restrictions, parking mandates and various NIMBY-enabling legal chokepoints that drive up the price of multifamily housing. We could also make it easier to use the housing we have more efficiently.

In 1950, D.C. accommodated more than 800,000 citizens — 110,000 more than the city currently holds. How? By putting more people in each house. Looking at the census reports from my own neighborhood during the early 20th century, I'm struck by how many families had one or more people rooming with them.

As in so many other places, D.C. policy discourages people from operating rooming houses or turning their basements or attics into apartments. Stringent construction codes, inspection requirements and eviction protections, while well-intentioned, make it more expensive and riskier to rent out part of a dwelling. The result is a city full of very nice, not-very-crowded housing increasingly occupied by the well-off.

Different policy choices wouldn't have saved the Chocolate City as it was. But it would have let us keep all the chocolate while still adding a rainbow's worth of other flavors.