Bernie Sanders can beat Trump, here's the math

Whatever you think about Bernie Sanders as a potential president, it is wrong to dismiss his chances of winning the office. Not only does most of the available empirical evidence show Mr. Sanders defeating President Trump in the national popular vote and in the critical Midwestern states that tipped the Electoral College in 2016, but his specific electoral strengths align with changes in the composition of the country's population in ways that could actually make him a formidable foe for the president.

Almost all of the current polling data shows Mr. Sanders winning the national popular vote. In the most recent national polls testing Democratic candidates against Mr. Trump, Mr. Sanders beat him in every single one, with margins varying from 2 percent to 6 percent. This has been the case for nearly a year now, with Mr. Sanders outpolling the president in 67 of 72 head-to-head polls since March 2019.

As 2016 proved when Hillary Clinton defeated Mr. Trump in the popular vote by nearly three million votes, however, the Electoral College is what matters most. There, Mr. Sanders also does well, outperforming Mr. Trump in polls of the pivotal battleground states of Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. In the one poll showing significant Trump strength in Wisconsin (Quinnipiac), Mr. Sanders still fares the best of the Democratic contenders.

In addition to the polling data about how voters might act in the future, there is now the much more valuable information of actual voter behavior in the first three nominating contests, in Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. It is not just the fact that Mr. Sanders won the popular vote in all three states, it is *how* he won that portends hidden and underappreciated general election strength.

Exit polls and precinct analyses show that Mr. Sanders runs strongest with some of the most overlooked and undervalued sectors of the population — young people and Latinos in particular. In all three early states, he received twice as much support from voters under 30 than his closest competitor. In Nevada, he received about 70 percent of the vote in the most heavily Latino precincts.

These particular strengths matter because the composition of the electorate in 2020 will be appreciably different than it was in 2016. Pew Research projects that this will be the most racially diverse electorate ever, with people of color making up fully one-third of all eligible voters. The share of eligible voters from Generation Z (18-23 year olds) will be more than twice as large in 2020 as it was in 2016 (10 percent versus 4 percent).

Notably, the expanding sectors of the population are much more progressive and pro-Democratic than their aging and white counterparts. Mrs. Clinton defeated Mr. Trump by nearly 20 points among voters under 30, and the anti-Republican tilt of that demographic was even more pronounced in 2018, when 67 percent of them voted Democratic, 35 points more than the

number who voted Republican. As for Latinos, nearly two-thirds of that population consistently vote Democratic.

The implications of these developments are most significant in the specific states where the election will be most fiercely fought. In Michigan and Wisconsin, which were decided in 2016 by roughly 11,000 and 22,700 votes respectively, close to a million young people have since turned 18. Beyond the Midwestern trio of states, the demographic revolution has even more transformative potential. Mr. Trump won Arizona, for example, by 91,000 votes, and 160,000 Latinos have turned 18 in that state since then.

To fully harness the energy from the demographic revolution, Mr. Sanders will need to strengthen his support among African-American voters who were more resistant to his candidacy when he faced Mrs. Clinton. His strong support among younger African-Americans could help, but he would be best served by choosing as his running mate an African-American with strong electoral appeal, such as Stacey Abrams, the former minority leader of the Georgia House of Representatives who received more African-American votes in a statewide election than anyone not named Barack Obama.

In addition to those particular parts of Mr. Sanders's strength, he is also well-positioned to win back those voters who defected in 2016 because Mrs. Clinton was too moderate for their tastes. For all the focus on Obama-Trump voters, it was Obama-Stein voters who created the critical cracks in the Democratic firewall (the *increase* in votes for Jill Stein from 2012 to 2016 was greater than Mr. Trump's margin of victory in Michigan and Wisconsin). Of all the remaining candidates, Mr. Sanders is the most likely to reclaim those Democratic voters who defected to the Green Party in search of a more progressive standard-bearer.

Much of the angst about Mr. Sanders topping the ticket stems from fear about negative fallout in down-ballot congressional races. Here, too, the concerns are overblown. In the vast majority of congressional districts where Democrats ousted Republican incumbents in 2018, it was enthusiasm and the high turnout of Democratic voters that made the difference, much more than alienated moderate Republicans switching their party allegiance. In all but five of the 41 seats picked up by Democrats, increased Democratic turnout alone would have been enough to flip the seats without any Republican crossovers.

While some small number of down-ballot House races could become more competitive, that risk is offset by the opportunity for Democrats to flip even more seats by mobilizing younger and more diverse voters. In 2018, Democrats fell just 1,000 votes short in both the Seventh District of Georgia, for example, where there is a sizable African-American population, and San Antonio's 23rd District, which is more than half Latino. There are several other seats where Democrats could make additional gains with Mr. Sanders atop the ticket.

The empirical evidence shows that there is no need for alarm about Mr. Sanders being the Democratic nominee, and even some cause for confidence. If you want to engage in theoretical thought experiments, a useful exercise would be to ask how many people who voted for Hillary Clinton in 2016 would switch their votes to back Mr. Trump just because Mr. Sanders was the nominee? Common sense suggests that the answer is infinitesimally small.

If that is the case, then Mr. Sanders would win the popular vote. As for the roughly 78,000 votes in three states that flipped the Electoral College, the particular strengths that Mr. Sanders brings to the contest strongly suggest that he could close that gap and make the leap into the Oval Office.

Steve Phillips is a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress.