How elections reduce Americans to stereotypes

By Dante Chinni

Publicly, at least, Americans try to avoid stereotyping their fellow citizens based on race or ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation, age or religion. Doing so has become unacceptable, offensive to modern sensibilities, anathema to the notion that we’re all individuals, not just members of one or another demographic. This attitude is codified in our laws and enforced in our workplaces, and violating it is frowned upon in polite conversation.

Two arenas are the exceptions. One is reality television, which has found a cash cow in the reductionist treatment of everyone from “little people” to “rednecks.”

The other exception? Election season.

Every two years — and especially every four, when we’re electing a president — individual Americans disappear, and we become subsumed into some larger group. Go to your favorite political blog, cable news channel or daily paper, and you’ll learn that candidates need to do better with African Americans or Catholics or (my favorite) women. Yes, women! They’re half of the population, but obviously they all share common beliefs and values.

So we learn that [Mitt Romney](http://www.washingtonpost.com/mitt-romney-2012-presidential-candidate/gIQANxIecO_topic.html?tid=rr_mod_candidate) is trying to “appeal to women” and improve his support “among evangelicals.” [Rick Santorum](http://www.washingtonpost.com/rick-santorum-2012-presidential-candidate/gIQA61AHdO_topic.html?tid=rr_mod_candidate) is going after “working-class voters” and is not doing especially well with the “Catholic vote.” [President Obama](http://www.washingtonpost.com/barack-obamas-2012-reelection-campaign/gIQAVODn7O_topic.html?tid=rr_mod_candidate) needs the “black vote” and “the youth vote,” but of course he, too, is “wooing women.” And everyone wants do better with Latinos. (I only hope these constituencies never find out about all this two-timing.)

In politics, it’s entirely acceptable to wonder aloud what black people want, how Hispanics think, or whether a new policy proposal would play well with women or people who go to church on Sundays. We feel comfortable reducing people in this way because such conclusions aren’t solely stereotypes, we tell ourselves — they are backed up by polling data.

There are bad pollsters in politics, hucksters who sound off on things they don’t know much about, but there are also some very good ones. I know some of them and trust their work implicitly. The best have spent years honing their craft, and the industry as a whole has gotten very good at what it does since its early days in the 1960s and 1970s. In that primitive time, you might have learned as much by doing hours of man-on-the-street interviews.

But as polling has become more sophisticated, we have come to invest it with powers it often doesn’t have. Those demographic segments morph into cartoon characters that we write and talk about when we want to explain the electorate.

So we have numbers telling us that Santorum is struggling among Catholics; he’s lost the Catholic vote in 10 of 12 states where Edison Research has done exit polls, despite the fact that he is Catholic.

And Latinos, it turns out, don’t like anyone in the Republican field. They favor Obama over Romney by 70 percent to 14 percent, according to a Fox News poll, though roughly a third say they would be more likely to vote for Romney if he chose a Latino running mate.

But what do those numbers really mean? It’s hard to say without cross-referencing a bunch of other indicators including things such as income and geography. Does Santorum have a problem with Catholics or with the electorate as a whole? And of this Latino whom Romney could add to his ticket — might it matter who that person is and what state he or she comes from? [Marco Rubio](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/post/marco-rubio-endorses-mitt-romney/2012/03/28/gIQApm3dhS_blog.html) might appeal to the Cuban American community in South Florida, but would he sway the votes of Latinos in Western states who might have roots in Mexico?

It’s not that polls are inherently suspect. They are crucial for campaigns that use them to better tailor their messages. The media may have initially laughed at the House Republicans’ “Contract With America” back in 1994, but the strategy of making that midterm election a national referendum on the president was an idea that came from polling, as did much of the language in the document itself — and it worked.

The art of polling and micro-targeting has grown markedly since then. In 2008, I created e-mail accounts for 12 composite people (different ages, races, professions, incomes and communities) and registered them to receive messages from the campaigns to see how my faux folks were treated. The Obama team was quite adept at targeting messages that spoke to their imagined circumstances; the campaign of Sen. John McCain was not.

But there is no need for journalists — not to mention the public — to internalize and then parrot these generalizations. I understand the compulsion; I succumb to it myself. As director of the Jefferson Institute’s [Patchwork Nation project](http://www.patchworknation.org/), which uses data to break the country’s 3,100 counties into 12 types of places, I spend plenty of time studying voter demographics and have written about [the challenges that candidates face with different groups.](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2012/03/23/politics-counts-the-demographic-road-ahead-for-romney/)

We don’t need to stop studying and debating voter demographics, but we should be smarter about how we do it. The way we talk about voters matters, not just because it affects campaigns and candidates, but because it shapes how we see our country and our fellow citizens — and the perceptions it fosters are often wrong.

We in the media know there are big pitfalls to talking about demographic groups in the loose way that we often do. We rarely talk about “the white vote,” after all. That’s because we understand that white Americans are hard to define as a unit — depending on where you draw the line, they could be 72 percent of the population. The states with the largest percentages of non-Hispanic whites are Vermont, Maine, West Virginia, New Hampshire, Iowa, Wyoming, North Dakota, Montana, Idaho and Kentucky, according to the 2010 census. They are all more than 86 percent white, and they have very different voting patterns. It makes little sense to speak of them as a “white vote.” Instead, we talk about “working-class whites” or “white evangelicals” or “white women” — still reductionist but a little more useful.

Such differences apply to other groups as well. For instance, surveys show that the Republican Party is facing a gender gap that could hurt its candidates badly in the fall. The latest NBC-Wall Street Journal poll shows Romney trailing Obama by 18 percentage pointsamong women. But that’s certainly not the whole story about female voters.

Consider Santorum. Based on his positions on contraception and abortion, you might assume he is struggling with female voters. And you’d be right — except where you are completely wrong. Among more-conservative women, for instance, he has done well, winning more votes from women in Alabama than Romney did.

The “female vote” is made up of all kinds of individual women from all walks of life; some may favor traditional household roles, some may support abortion rights, some may care about economic policy or the Afghan war more than any social issue. It depends on what filters you apply to a person’s demographic label.

I look at the “female vote” so far in [the GOP primary race](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/campaigns) and see a mirror of a larger fight in the party that is not about women so much as people’s backgrounds, faiths and communities. When you look at the electorate more broadly, that’s a fight the GOP is going to have beyond this election — and it’s about more than gender.

Obama will probably do very well with African American voters again in 2012 — he won 96 percent of them in 2008 — but within that group, opinions are complicated. There are differences in the way African Americans who dropped out of high school and live in small Southern towns see the president, compared with blacks with advanced degrees living in larger cities.

The populist sentiment I have heard from black voters in Wilson, N.C., is very different than the policy-oriented discussions I have had with African American leaders and businesspeople in Philadelphia and Detroit. Down in Wilson, the concern I heard most often was that Obama has not gone far enough in standing up to the establishment and, specifically, Republicans — or that he has been obstructed from doing what he really wanted. In big cities, wealthier African Americans I speak with think Obama faces racism, but in many cases there is no desire for him to move further to the left on policy. Are they concerned enough to vote against the president? No, but the point is that those different black voters are driven by different impulses and, ultimately, want different things.

Of course, we can’t break down the country person by person, so how do we generalize about voters in a way that is useful and realistic? I think it is better to focus on geographic communities rather than gender, race or religion; after all, it is a lot easier to understand the motives and actions of places than of races.

Communities tend to share common economic realities, common consumer and cultural experiences and, often, common faiths. People, scattered to the wind, are much more varied. Even people in the same demographic group who vote for the same person may do so for vastly different reasons.

It makes more sense to explore and compare sentiments in small-town communities with lots of service workers vs. small-town agricultural areas, for instance, than it does to explain what motivates “whites” or even “rural whites.” Both such communities have lower-than-average incomes, but the votes coming out of them usually look different for economic and cultural reasons. Service-worker communities are more sensitive to national economic trends, for example; farming areas never had a housing boom but avoided the bust, too.

You can see similar differences between people who are from the same racial or religious slice of the demographic pie but who live in different places — from the wealthy in the suburbs and the cities to the elderly in college towns and retirement hubs. We should keep these differences in mind when the next poll is released.

The notion that we are far more than our gender or our faith or the color of our skin is not just an American principle or platitude — it’s a reality that should inform our understanding of politics. Simplistic election-year stereotypes don’t just foster misperceptions of what is going on in the campaign and the electorate. They also do a pretty poor job of explaining what most of us want to know once all the ballots are counted. Not who won — but why?