

Hispanics are the second largest group of voting-age Americans and a critical factor in the winning equations for the White House, Congressional balance of power, and numerous state and local races. Yet, mistaken assumptions about this electorate often lead to underinvestment and ineffective outreach.

Given their decisive role, there has been considerable media attention to an observed “shift” in the sentiments of Latino voters, first noted in the 2020 election, through the 2022 election, and after, in some national polling regarding the upcoming 2024 election. Drawing from historical party support patterns, election data, and UnidosUS public opinion research, this memo explores the breadth and depth of this potential shift, its correlates, and whether such a shift would represent a “realignment” of Latino voters.

One thing remains constant: given the Latino community’s youth, every election cycle will see a considerable number of new Hispanic voters. In 2024, it is anticipated that 17.5 million Latinos will cast a ballot, and [1 in 4 will do so for the first time in a presidential election](#). A full 38% of this electorate will be new since the Trump/Clinton match-up of 2016. This stat puts an even greater exclamation point on the need for candidates and parties to engage these voters early and meaningfully if they want to win over their support.

THE LATINO VOTE IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For most of the 1980s and 1990s, party division of the Latino vote was roughly two-thirds Democratic and one-third Republican, with the latter comprised principally of Cuban Americans and those from other national origin groups with a longer generational presence in the US and greater economic diversity. Research in California, for example, demonstrated a secular drift toward the Republican Party from 1980 until the early 1990s (Bowler, Nicholson and Segura 2006). Prop 187’s passage in California and its political aftermath caused a dramatic shift back to Democratic identification.

In the early 2000s, concentrated efforts by the GOP in some portions of the country, and particularly the affinity of President George W. Bush with Latino communities, once again began to attract greater Latino interest and, while the total shift estimated is subject to some debate, approximately 40% of Latinos voters cast a ballot for President Bush in 2004 (for historical statistics on Latino presidential vote choice see [here](#)).

In December of 2005, an extremely punitive immigration bill written by Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner (R-WI) created a massive and previously unmatched mobilization in the Latino community and led to a series of massive demonstrations across the United States in major Latino cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Dallas, NYC, and even smaller places like Seattle. All told, more than 3 million people marched between March and May of 2006 in favor of comprehensive immigration reform, which never happened to date.

Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were the chief inheritors of this mobilization. Presidential and Congressional two-party vote again shifted strongly in the Democratic direction in 2008 and remained there through 2018.

MOVEMENT IN 2020

Stronger-than-expected results for the Republicans in South Florida and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas caught the attention of reporters and raised alarm bells for Democratic partisans. Trump did better than expected in both locations, and in one county, Zapata, Trump won. A narrative emerged of the GOP shift among Latinos and recent polling numbers have reinforced that narrative, some more credible than others, suggesting a shockingly close race among Latino voters for 2024.

The data, however, does not actually support all of this narrative. For starters, a close examination of Zapata County makes clear just how many voters are grabbing our attention. Trump won Zapata by 212 votes, 2,032-1,820. That's all the votes that were cast. By contrast, turnout and vote choice estimates in Dallas County on the same day, using ecological inference, show an increase in Latino Democratic vote share of four percentage points over 2016, an estimated 12,000 vote pickup. Latinos turned out enthusiastically in 2022 and provided margins greater than the total margin of victory in several statewide races in Arizona, Nevada's Senate race, Georgia's Senate race, and others. Returning to Zapata County, data from this year's primary election on March 5 offers an interesting window into the endurance of any shift. In the Texas primary this spring, 89% of votes cast (2,478 Congress, 1,993 President) were in the Democratic primary, compared with 11% cast on the GOP side (249 President, 214 Congress).¹

Cherry-picking election results in one county or another is not an informative method for assessing the size, impact, and endurance of attitude change among Latino voters. Likewise, we should be deeply cautious regarding poll results for which there is no precedent. Horserace numbers among Latinos are too often based on English-only instruments run on exceedingly small samples with large margins of error. Likewise, consumers of these data should be cognizant of polling methods, the geographic embrace of the sample, likely voter screens, and weights based on the pollster's theory of the electorate rather than known population characteristics from the Current Population Survey of the Census.

A DEEPER LOOK BASED ON THE UNIDOSUS 2023 POLL OF THE HISPANIC ELECTORATE

In our effort to find the "shiffters," we look principally at four factors:

- Issue Salience
- Party Reputation
- Presidential Approval
- Categories of Respondents (e.g., new voters, gender, education, etc.)

Let's start by eliminating gender as a consideration. Despite a long-standing gender gap among Latinos (and Whites and Blacks), there does not appear to be much meaningful gender gradient on any of the measures of opinion, preference, or change.

Issues and pro-GOP shifts:

¹ Source: Zapata County <https://www.co.zapata.tx.us/page/zapata.Elections> .

Without a doubt, two issues stand out as pertinent in looking for those whose sentiments appear to be shifting in the GOP direction. First, “Jobs and the Economy” was identified by 51% of those Democrats claiming greater openness to the GOP as one of their top issues. This figure is 10 points higher than Democrats reporting no move and 12 points higher than Democrats shifting further to their own party. However, these voters do not differ appreciably on which aspects of “jobs” most worry them, as they identify low pay and poor conditions at roughly the same rate as other Democrats.

Inflation was important for this group but no more so than for the non-movers and increasingly Democratic. While many Democratic Latinos list inflation as a concern, it was not notably distinct among the GOP-curious and, potentially, less so.

The second issue where Democrats with right-shifting sentiments stand out is “Immigration and Border Security,” identified as a top-3 issue among 30% of the right-drifting Democratic group, about twice the rate of Democrats standing pat (15%) or shifting left (17%). As was borne out in our overall findings, 33% of these folk go on to identify “Increasing Border Security” as among their immigration priorities, compared with 24% of those standing pat and 21% of Democrats shifting left. We should not overstate this effect—those same voters identified a path to citizenship for long-residing undocumented immigrants and Dreamers as a priority by 44% and 42%, respectively. Those numbers are significantly lower than the other two Democratic groups (whose support is in the 60s or greater) but still exceed the 33% highlighting border security. Indeed, it is only among current Republicans and Republican-shifting Independents that border security exceeds a path to citizenship as a priority.

We should note that the Democrats expressing greater openness to Republicans prefer Democrats on immigration by a modest +12 differential (43-31), whereas Democrats standing pat (+56, 62-6) and Democrats shifting left (+70, 75-5) have a far more significant trust advantage for their own party. Among Independents, only for those shifting Democratic do respondents trust Democrats more on immigration (+22, 41-19). Republicans of all types trust their own party more by wide margins, ranging from 45 to 80 points.

Issues and pro-Democratic shifts:

To the extent that some GOP-identified voters might have shifted left in recent years, three issues stand out among those Democratic-curious Republicans: Healthcare, gun violence, and immigration.

Immigration stands out for its *low* intensity. While Republicans reporting no move and those shifting right identify immigration and border security as a priority issue at 41% and 32%, respectively, only 13% of GOP voters shifting left list immigration in their top 3.

By contrast, health care is *important* among those shifting left. A sizable 38% of Republicans reporting greater openness to Democrats identify healthcare as a top issue of concern, with premiums and prescription drug costs most often identified as the root of their concerns. That 38% contrasts with GOP non-movers (21%) and those shifting right (18%) who identify health care significantly less often.

Finally, “Crime and Gun Violence” is identified by 37% of GOP Latinos who report more openness to Democrats, compared with only 19% among GOP non-Movers and 18% of those shifting right. This issue also attracts significantly more attention from Independents moving toward Dems (30%).

The Special Case of Abortion

Our polling has repeatedly found substantial support among Latinos across the board for keeping abortion legal and not taking that decision away from others. Likely, as a consequence, there does not

appear to be a significant abortion effect among those shifting right or left. In every category, keeping abortion legal is the overwhelming preference of voters. There is a partisan effect that is exactly as expected, with Democrats more supportive than Independents who are more supportive than Republicans. However, within each category, there does not appear to be much of an effect in driving changes in partisan sentiments. Among the GOP voters, those shifting left embrace abortion rights a scant 3% greater than those shifting right. Among Democrats, those reporting greater openness to the GOP are 10 points less supportive than those shifting left—but still 72% in favor of keeping abortion legal.

Other Determinants of Shift

- Core views of each party. There is no doubt that brand reputation affects candidates and will shape whether and to what degree voters consider candidates waving that particular banner. We regularly ask whether each political party “cares a lot” about Latinos, “doesn’t care too much,” or is actively “hostile.” Across our polling since we began, the general trend has always been that Democrats were viewed by a plurality as caring about Latinos and seldom as hostile, but with a sizable share of respondents expressing the skeptical opinion that “Democrats don’t care that much.” By contrast, Republicans are viewed as significantly more hostile by a larger share of the electorate, with the “don’t care much” option as a plurality and the “care a lot” descriptor as small. By and large, none of that has changed.

But, there has been a perceptible shift in these views for some respondents. Respondents who see the GOP as less hostile are more likely to report that they have become more open to considering Republican candidates. For example, Democrats reporting greater opening to the GOP are 24% more likely to think Republicans care a lot (34%) than among Democrats whose views have not changed. Likewise, independents shifting right see the GOP as caring a lot (44%), 23 points higher than Independents with no shift (21%). Shifts towards Democrats mirror these results, with 46% of Republicans in this category and 45% of Independents believing Democrats care a lot. Again, it is harder to assess in net whether the total of these shifts will be reflected in voting and long-term party identification. Still, there is substantial churn among the Latino electorate, and it is affecting Democrats, Independents, and Republicans alike.

- Approval of Political Figures. Current officeholders, of course, often bear the weight of party reputation, and that remains true, as President Biden is the face of the Democratic Party in office. At the same time, Congressional Republicans are the face of the GOP in office, notwithstanding the outsized presence of Trump as a political figure. As one would imagine, disapproval of the President is closely associated with a self-reported willingness to consider the other party. Among Democrats indicating greater openness to the GOP, disapproval of Biden is 51%, and among Independents more open to the right, disapproval is 79%. Likewise, disapproval of the GOP’s House majority is similarly impactful on voters’ willingness to move left in their choice of candidate. Among Republicans more open to Democrats, 56% disapprove of the GOP House majority, and among Independents shifting toward Democrat, disapproval of the House majority is 62%.
- Age. The impact of age on a tendency towards independence is unmistakable. Younger cohorts of voters are over-represented in every category of independence, regardless of sentiment shift. And it is younger voters who dominate the categories of Democrats shifting right (55% 39 and under) and Republicans shifting left (61% 39 and under).
- Education. College-educated voters are significantly less likely to be part of the observed drift to the right. In fact, these data appear to suggest that college-educated Republican Latinos are among the most willing to consider Democratic candidates (55% of this group). By contrast, increased openness

to GOP candidates by Democrats is overwhelmingly rooted in respondents with no college degree (75%).

The reason for this is less clear. Possible explanations include the differential effects of inflation and the ongoing recovery across groups, where middle and upper-middle-class voters are doing well in the current economy while blue-collar workers continue to struggle. A second cause may be greater resistance among college-educated voters to populist and divisive political language and appeals.

While the data here cannot answer the underlying dynamics, the effect of education is significant.

FROM WHENCE COMETH THE CHANGE

Are existing voters “moving” to Trump and the GOP? Or are the changes coming from new voters entering the system with different views from those of more established voters?

Separating newer voters (those who joined the electorate since 2016) from more established voters (who voted in 2016 and before) provides insights into these questions. Newer voters are far younger (80% are 39 or younger), which is true by definition, and are overwhelmingly more likely to be US-born (77%).

If newer voters are the source of sentiment shifts, this would then focus our attention on the youngest cohort of voters. While the issue agenda across the two groups seems roughly similar, the issue of healthcare stands out among newer voters.

But could newer (younger) voters be driving the erosion in Democratic support? This phenomenon appears to be the case. Looking at vote intention, established voters +9 Biden compared to newer voters. However, the decline in Biden support does not manifest in an equal increase for Trump, as more of the difference is to be found in ‘don't know’ rather than Trump. Similarly, newer voters demonstrate significantly lower presidential approval (43%) than more established (53%) and 7% greater support for the Republican House majority (37%) than longer-term voters (30%).

Patterns of party sentiment are roughly similar. When we return to the questions regarding whether each party cares a lot, not too much, or is hostile, there are differences that reach statistical significance. Newer voters see Democrats less warmly, -10 in “Care a lot” (42%) and +7 in “Hostile” (15%), when compared with more established voters (52% Care a lot, 8% Hostile). Likewise, views of the GOP are a bit better, with “Care” a +9 (31% total) while “Hostile” is -4% (24%), compared with 22% Care a Lot and 28% Hostile among more established voters. Again, the overall pattern is consistent with years of polling where Democrats are viewed more favorably, but these differences between newer and more established voters are significant.

IN THE END, HOW MUCH CHANGE IS THERE?

Have self-declared “openness” and approval/disapproval of current officeholders resulted in changes in party identification? Looking at the entire sample in our data, newer voters are 14% less likely to identify as Democrats (45%) than more established voters (59%). Importantly, they are ALSO five points less likely to identify as Republicans (18%) than more established voters (23%). Independence is the big winner, with 36% of voters in newer cohorts identifying as independent or non-partisan, compared with just 18% of established voters.

If we examine the voting preferences of those who reported voting in the last national election—including all voters except those registered since 2020, shifts are clearer to estimate. Similar to the partisanship measure, shifting sentiments have not yet landed these newer (younger) voters in the

Trump camp. While support for President Biden among these voters is 57% today—compared with 66% of these voters in the last election—support for Trump in this cohort is **unchanged** at 34%. Voters have moved in each direction, but the net change has been to “undecided,” at least so far.

As for the most recent registrants—since 2020— nearly half (44.6%) are undecided, while just above one-fourth each prefer Trump and Biden. Based on this data, if we observe a significant shift on election day, new voters are the source.

CONCLUSION

- There is a significant difference between long-term registrants and new voters since 2016.
 - They are less Democratic than more established voters and less supportive of the President.
 - However, they remain largely suspicious of the GOP.
- Most of these new voters are young voters:
 - Their issue agenda does not vary appreciably from that of more established voters except on the importance of healthcare.
 - This data suggests their potential drift is not issue-based but rather based on their views of the parties as institutions.
- Trends in partisanship appear confined to a Democratic bleed into independence and non-partisanship, a long-standing if growing feature among younger and Latino voters.
 - Younger voters are SIGNIFICANTLY more independent and less Democratic or Republican than more established voters.
- In NET, Trump is doing not much better than he did in 2020 among Latino registered voters. But President Biden is doing worse, with Democratic erosion moving to ‘Undecided.’”