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Data Journalism

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**Story Memo – Recent immigration had no link to partisan voting behavior in 2022**

Former president Donald Trump has made severe anti-immigration rhetoric a hallmark of his personal political brand since he first announced White House aspirations in 2015.

The topic has remained salient in national politics, as Republicans like Ron DeSantis and Greg Abbott tried to center immigration as a key issue in the 2022 midterms by [bussing migrants](https://www.texastribune.org/2022/09/22/migrant-busing-abbott-desantis/) in Texas to other parts of the country.

Demographic and cultural change is uncomfortable for some Americans, but immigration has always played a crucial role in the social and economic development of the United States. The population of some areas – 14 U.S. House districts, to be exact – would even be decreasing if not for immigrants.

Voters [routinely cite](https://news.gallup.com/poll/404243/economy-top-election-issue-abortion-crime-next.aspx) immigration as a key issue. But do local levels of immigration across the country actually affect voter behavior? In the midterm elections, there was no link between recent immigration levels and elections results, according to a Medill News Service analysis of census data and election returns. The finding suggests that immigration rhetoric has far more influence over elections than actual immigration.

Medill examined immigration data since 2016, Trump’s first year in office, from all 435 U.S. House districts. The analysis compared this year’s election results with recent immigration, approximated using recent changes to the number of foreign-born residents in a district.

**Nationally, there was no link between recent immigration and partisan voting in the 2022 midterms.**

The first map (left) shows election results for the 2022 U.S. House elections. The second map (right) shows the change in foreign-born population of each House district since 2016.

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generatedChart, shape, scatter chart

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*[Note: The footers on these maps could be combined into one if I pursue/eventually publish this article.]*

Visually, there isn’t a clear national connection between recent immigration and voting behavior in favor of one party. If there were a connection, the maps would have similar shading by district.

But all 435 races are a lot to see on a map. Is a clearer connection evident in chart form?

Chart, scatter chart

Description automatically generated

There is still no clear national relationship. Rather, there is tremendous variety in election results up and down the list of districts with the highest and lowest levels of immigration. That begs the question: Is immigration more influential over elections as a talking point than as an actual phenomenon?

***[Analysis Note: The correlation coefficient between foreign-born population change and election margin (continuous variable) is 0.06. Very weak. The correlation coefficient b/w foreign-born population and election outcome (binary, D vs. R) is 0.11. Still quite weak.]***

*Here would be a good place for an expert’s perspective. This should be someone who studies how immigration – rhetoric, policy, and actual immigration trends – impacts American politics. This could be someone like:*

* [*Anna Maria Mayda*](https://sites.google.com/a/georgetown.edu/annamariamayda/?pli=1)*, professor of economics at Georgetown University*
* [*Giovanni Peri*](https://giovanniperi.ucdavis.edu/)*, professor of economics at U.C. Davis. (The two of them collaborated on* [*this 2018 paper*](https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/rb130.pdf)*, which more rigorously tries to establish a link between actual immigration in an area and election outcomes. They do find a stronger link when you split out high-skilled immigrants vs. low-skilled immigrants.)*
* [*William H. Frey*](https://www.brookings.edu/experts/william-h-frey/)*, demographer at Brookings*
* [*Gabriel R. Sanchez*](https://www.brookings.edu/experts/gabriel-r-sanchez/)*, fellow of governance studies at Brookings*
* [*Emily Ekins*](https://www.cato.org/people/emily-ekins)*, director of polling at Cato*

Of the 14 districts that would have declining populations if not for immigration, two border each other in southeastern Pennsylvania. One of the districts, PA-06, elected a Republican in 2022. The other, PA-11, elected a Democrat. Both elections were decided by a wide margin.

***[Note: These districts could be a key source for a lede, main characters, and interesting details to add in the story.]***

**Main reporting target:** The two southeast PA congressional districts.

* Did the topic of immigration play a big role in either PA election?
* What is similar/different about the districts that contributed to divergent election outcomes, despite their shared trait?
* Could try to reach the candidates, volunteers, activists, or PA politics experts. ([Sarah Niebler](https://www.dickinson.edu/site/custom_scripts/dc_faculty_profile_index.php?fac=nieblers), a professor at Dickinson College, helped me with a previous story.)

**Other reporting targets:** The other 12 districts with immigration-dependent growth.

* Did the topic of immigration play a big role in those elections?
* Have local leaders actively tried to bring in immigrants as an economic development engine?
* Do local, state and federal elected officials from the areas feel similarly to one another about this topic?

**Additional visualizations to pair with discussion of the 14 districts:**

Map

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**Chart, scatter chart

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**Analysis explanation for reader/data caveats:**

Because of redistricting ahead of this year’s midterm elections, House district boundaries from 2022 were not comparable to 2016. Medill’s analysis used data from census tracts that make up current districts to look back over time. This was possible thanks to existing geographic correspondence analysis from the [Missouri Census Data Center](https://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/geocorr.html).

The analysis is somewhat limited by the fact that census tracts also can change over time. There are now 85,034 census tracts, and 62,163 (about 75%) remain unchanged since 2016, per [Esri](https://www.esri.com/arcgis-blog/products/arcgis-living-atlas/mapping/acs-2016-2020-updated-boundaries/). This analysis only uses those unchanged tracts.

**Data analysis:**

1. Downloaded 5-year ACS estimates of native and foreign-born populations for all census tracts for 2016 and 2020 from the U.S. Census Bureau
2. Downloaded the Geocorr files matching 118th Congress U.S. House districts to census tracts.
3. Scraped election return data from Bloomberg’s website.
4. Merged all the files based on numerical geo-ID for each tract.
5. Aggregated data at the district level using a pivot table in Excel.
6. Classified districts as having immigration-dependent population growth since 2016 when they had positive total population change but negative U.S. native-born population change.

**Sources:**

* Data.census.gov
* [Missouri Census Data Center (Geocorr)](https://mcdc.missouri.edu/applications/geocorr.html)
* [Bloomberg News Election Results](https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2022-us-election-results/house/)
* Associated Press (to determine how many uncalled races there are)

**Potential analysis to add on this article:**

* Rather than just showing one election, it’d be helpful to show partisan shifts since 2016 or the last midterms in 2018. To do this, I would need to find or build my own geographic correspondence system for House districts at the precinct level.

* Rather than just showing total immigration since 2016, I could add or swap in maps for other pertinent metrics. For example: total population change or immigration as a percentage of total population change (this one gets tricky because I’m often mixing positive and negative numbers).
* While there’s no clear national trend, are there clearer regional or state ones?

**Follow-up reporting ideas:**

* Could do a similar analysis of election results but for different categories measured at the tract level, i.e. “We hear about X a lot in the leadup to elections. But did changes to levels of X in place Y since [important\_event] have any clear relationship to results?”
* How do leaders in areas of the country with shrinking populations but low immigration feel about actively trying to court immigrants? What do their local and national politicians have to say about this?
* What’s going on in areas of the country with growing populations but low immigration? Is that by design?

**Links to all visualizations on Datawrapper:**

* [Hex map, election results.](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/61CT8/)
* [Hex map, recent immigration.](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/AaPRz/)
* [Scatterplot of all 435 races.](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/B3DqM/)
* [Map of 14 “immigration-dependent” districts.](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/AUwXa/)
* [Scatterplot of 14 “immigration-dependent” districts.](https://www.datawrapper.de/_/uUboP/)
* Potential alternatives to the scatterplot of all 435 districts. [This chart](https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/bk9bp/1/) and [this one](https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/5LmUy/1/) could appear side-by-side to (try to) achieve a scrollytelling-like feeling.

**Links to cleaned, simplified datasets on Google Sheets:**

* [Mapping all 435 districts.](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/16MkEwosW9nYQVicArmn9maYTA9SFPzrB1DZjyI3krnE/edit?usp=sharing)
* [Plotting all 435 districts.](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/14yg8E4M_PR6Adca6JtJHii7-0DAwEG-4aUF-84PQl2g/edit?usp=sharing)
* [Mapping and plotting immigration-dependent districts.](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1yaitZNnCQL1VcoiVvWrKbPE8Q60pebjld9iieXOw4MM/edit?usp=sharing)

**Data/graphics editor questions:**

* Big foundational question… Does the fact that I’m only using about 75% of census tracts render my analysis useless?
* Do you think it’s alright to say ***no*** connection b/w recent immigration levels and election results? It would technically be more precise to say “very weak” connection, but I don’t want to muddle the message unless the caveat is very important.
* Do you agree with the use of hex maps for the 435 districts? I stuck with the adage of “land doesn’t vote,” though I know the geography can feel skewed in hex form. Also, readers will have a harder time homing in on their own district.
* Similarly, do you agree with the use of regular maps for the 14 districts with immigration-dependent growth? I figured having a clearer sense of geography mattered there.
* Should the color scheme on the election and immigration maps match?