

The background image shows a wide-angle view of a rural landscape. In the foreground, there's a mix of dry, brownish ground and some sparse green vegetation. Beyond that, a dense forest of trees with autumn-colored leaves (yellow and orange) stretches across the middle ground. In the far distance, more hills are visible under a bright, clear blue sky.

TURNING TEXAS BLUE

POST TRUMP OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEMOCRATS IN THE LONE STAR STATE

Josh Yazman

Executive Summary

Demographic change, urbanization, and changes in partisanship have long made Texas appear an attractive target for Democrats. Half decade of election results tells us that favorable trends do not immediately translate to electoral wins, but **Texas is increasingly winnable for Democrats.** This analysis contextualizes recent gains and highlights areas where Democrats can improve our standing.

The analysis in this document is broken into the following sections:

- ★ **How We Got Here:** Texas is experiencing favorable demographic trends for Democrats, but the 2020 election illustrated the limitations of these trends. Democrats must press our growth in the suburbs, maximize our potential with New Texans, and work to win back key base communities that may have shifted right in recent cycles.
- ★ **Where We're Going:** The Republican partisanship of existing reliable Texas voters is a difficult headwind for Democrats, and yet voters have not been terribly impressed by Greg Abbott's handling of the pandemic and opposition to Donald Trump has been a unifying force on the left. Recent polling, combined with further analysis demographic trends, illustrate several additional key openings for Democrats to grow our base.

Two key trends for Texas Democrats

Growing Cities and Suburbs:

Democratic support grew considerably in suburban Texas during the Trump era and was already high in the major Metroplexes. The areas that have been friendly to Democrats have also experienced major population growth recently, imbuing the state with an influx of potential, but by no means certain, Democratic votes. Programs should identify and mobilize these voters.



Changing Demographics:

Texas history and culture is inextricably linked to the histories and cultures of thousands of years of indigenous populations and immigrants calling the region home. The most recent waves of new Texans come from all corners of America and around the world. While Democrats made gains with white suburban voters, we have significant ground to win back diverse communities through persuasion and mobilization work.



How we got here

Texas used to regularly elect New Deal Democrats like LBJ and Sam Rayburn as a part of the “Solid South” but shifted Republican after passage of the Voting Rights Act in the 60s. For a generation now the state has consistently voted to the right of the country - particular when Bushes were in the White House.

Today, demographic and political shifts have nudged Texas bluer. However Trump and Cornyn won in many areas where trends suggest we should have been stronger.

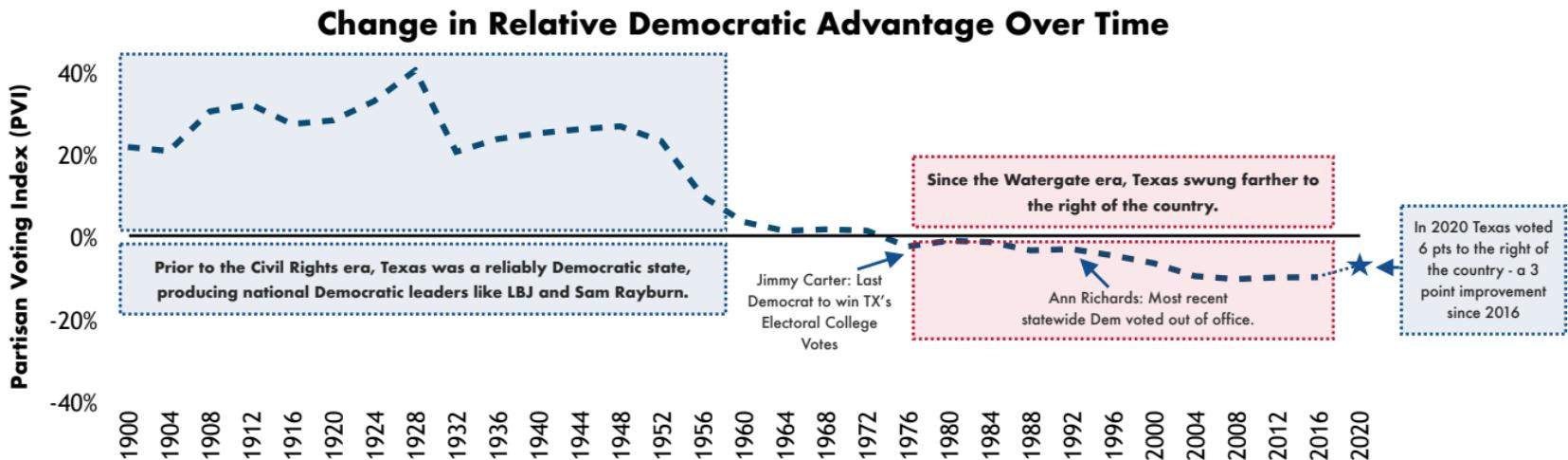
This section examines key trends propelling Democratic growth in Texas, then breaks down the 2020 election results in the context of those trends.

Topline Takeaways:

- Baseline partisanship has favored Republicans overall in recent years, but has trended blue in key large and growing population centers.
- Changes in the demographic composition of the electorate, including more Hispanic voters and more suburban voters, have been favorable for Democrats in recent years.
- Joe Biden and MJ Hegar made Texas increasingly competitive in the run up to the 2020 election but ultimately fell short in Texas’s suburbs and lost ground in the Rio Grande Valley.

Baseline partisanship in Texas

The **Partisan Voting Index (PVI)**, displayed below, measures how well a generic Democrat would perform against a generic Republican in a neutral political environment*. Before the Civil Rights Era, Texas was a reliably Democratic state. Texas first lurched towards Republicans during the Truman and Eisenhower Presidencies. During the Reagan era, culminating with the Bush Presidency and Great Recession, Texas shifted further right. More recently the state has been increasingly competitive in the Trump era and continued to shift left while retaining a rightward lean.



* Note: A value of +5% means that, all things equal, a local Democrat should expect to do 5 points better than the national average.

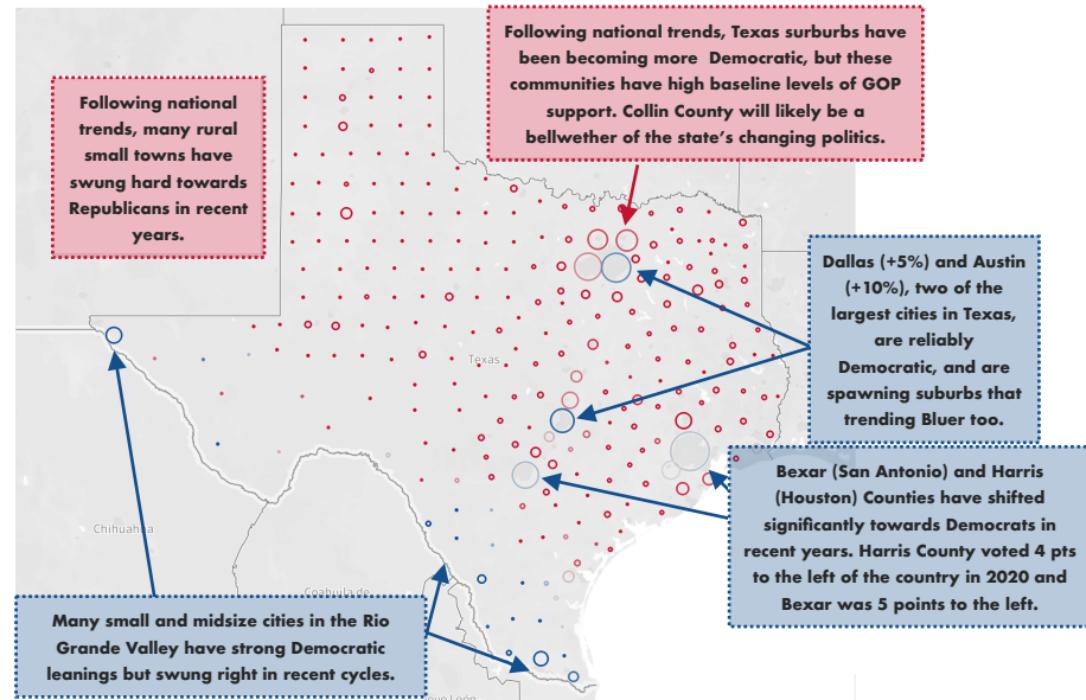
Where are our voters?

Democratic votes are concentrated in large and mid-size cities like Dallas and Austin which have large populations and Democratic leanings. Rural counties, like those in the Panhandle, Hill Country, and East Texas have small populations but tend to be dominated by Republicans. Suburban counties have been trending Democratic nationally in recent years and growing in population, but they remain fairly Republican in Texas.

Overall, the state is still Red, voting 7 points to the right of the country in an average of recent elections. To close this gap Democrats need to press advantages in the rapidly growing and diversifying suburbs, and turn out our base in the cities and Rio Grande Valley.

Statewide PVI

-7%



Cities and suburbs moved left during the Obama years while rurals moved right

2000 - 2016

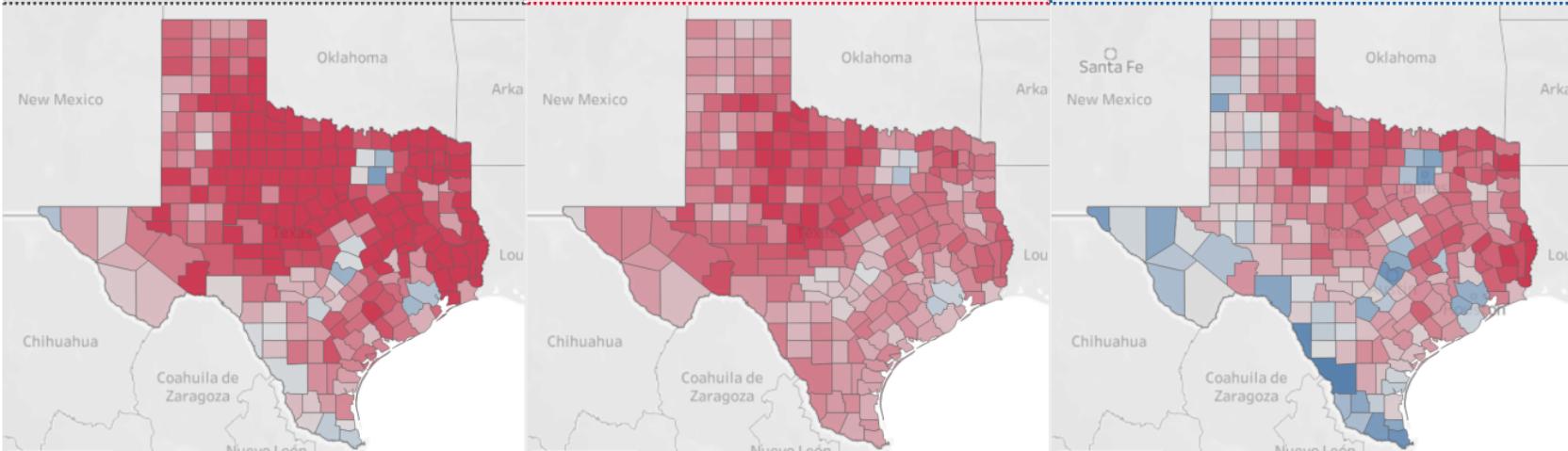
Overall, Texas' major urban areas have trended Blue since 2000, while the rural Hill Country, Panhandle, and Eastern regions swung Republican.

2000 - 2008

During the Bush years, most of the state swung right, most of all West Texas and rural East Texas. Urban counties saw more muted leftward shifts.

2008 - 2020

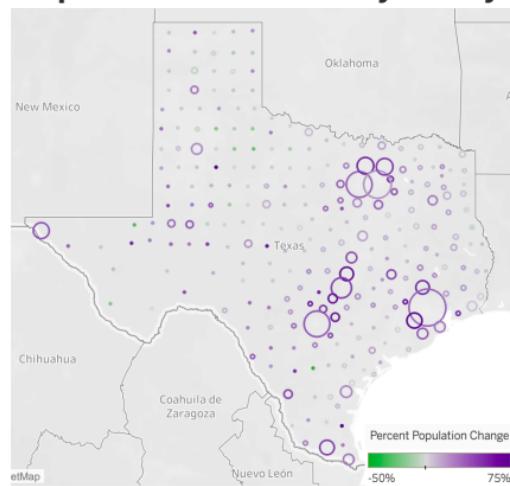
Since the Obama era, and accelerated by increased voter registration and Trump backlash, key regions swung left, though rural counties continued right.



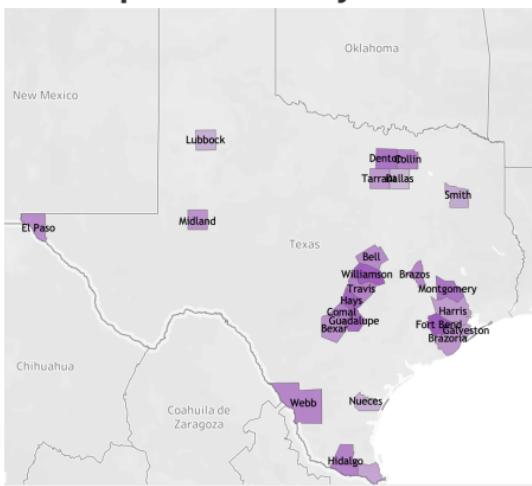
Population growth is changing the electorate

New Texans are joining our communities every day as the population has boomed by 3 million new citizen voting age people in the last decade*. The map below left shows the growth rate (growth in purple, decline in green) by county sized by current citizen voting age population (CVAP). Many of the fastest growing counties, highlighted below right, in Texas are those surrounding major cities, like Denton and Collin Counties in the DFW area, Fort Bend and Montgomery around Houston, and Hayes, Comal, and Guadalupe counties between Austin and San Antonio.

Population Growth Rate by County



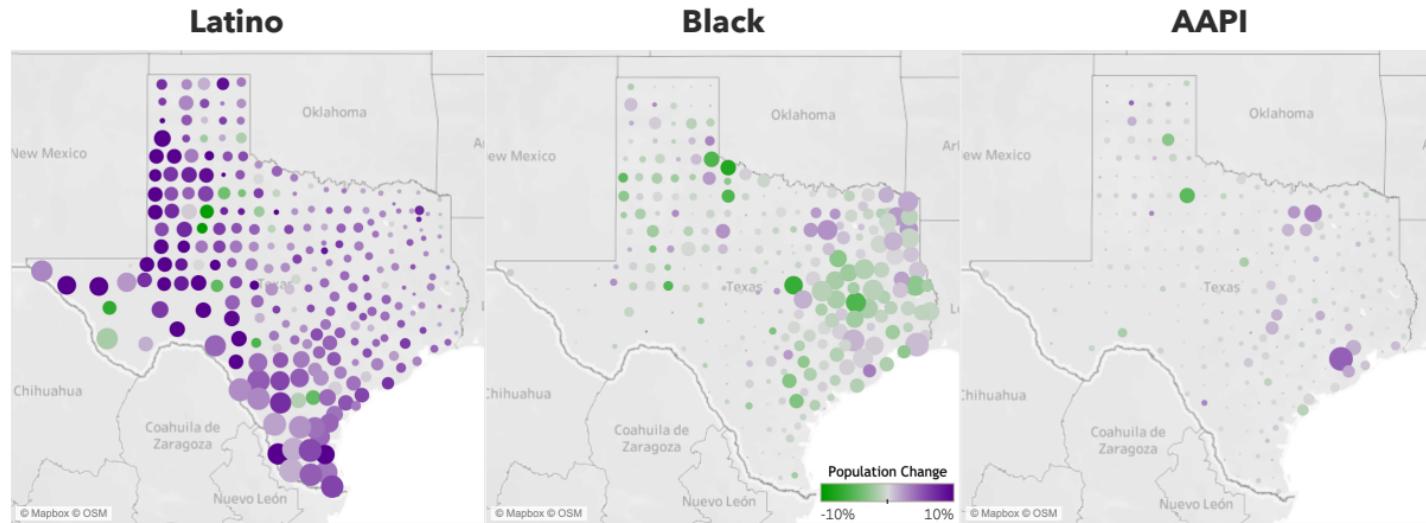
Top 25 Counties by Growth



* Note: Comparison is between Citizen Voting Age Population Estimates the 2004-2009 American Community Survey and 2014 - 2018 ACS.

... and trends Asian and Latino

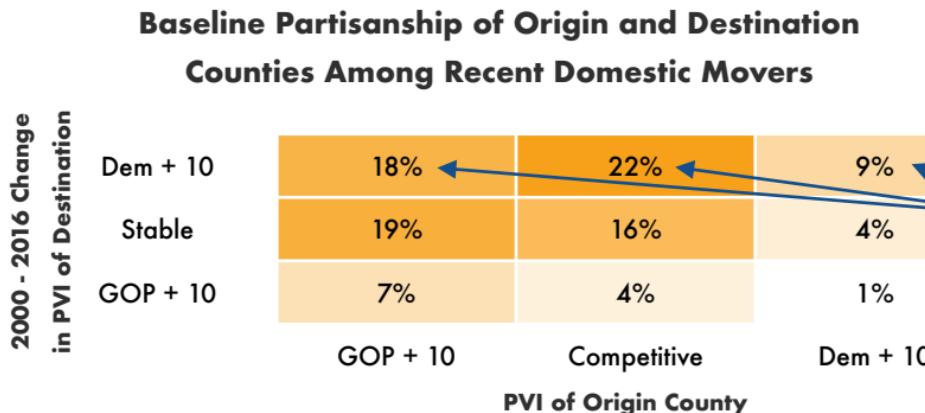
The maps below display population growth sized by each county's initial population of each race. **Latino Texans have made up about half of the population growth in this state**, particularly in rural counties in the Rio Grande Valley and Panhandle regions. **Asian American growth is concentrated in suburbs** like Collin and Fort Bend counties.



* Note: Comparison is between Citizen Voting Age Population Estimates the 2004-2009 American Community Survey and 2014 - 2018 ACS.

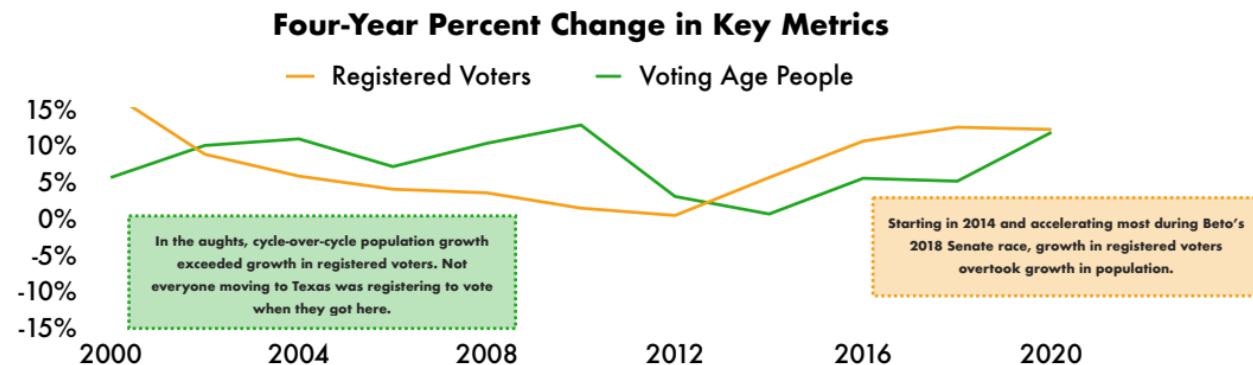
New Texans are moving to bluening areas

Increasingly Democratic-leaning areas have grown due to an influx of immigration from other states. The table below compares the baseline partisanship of counties New Texans are moving from to the change in baseline partisanship of their destination county. **The average New Texan** migrating from another US county is coming from a county that votes about **8 pts to the right** of the nation, but they are moving into a Texas county that has become about **7 pts more Democratic** in recent years.



New arrivals are only recently growing as a source of political power

Illustrated below, four-year growth in voter registrations lagged growth in population during the Bush and early Obama years. In 2014, 2016, and most significantly in 2018 growth in new registrations significantly exceeded population growth as progressive organizations invested in Texas candidates from Wendy Davis to Beto O'Rourke. This cycle, both population and registrations grew by about 12% relative to the last cycle.



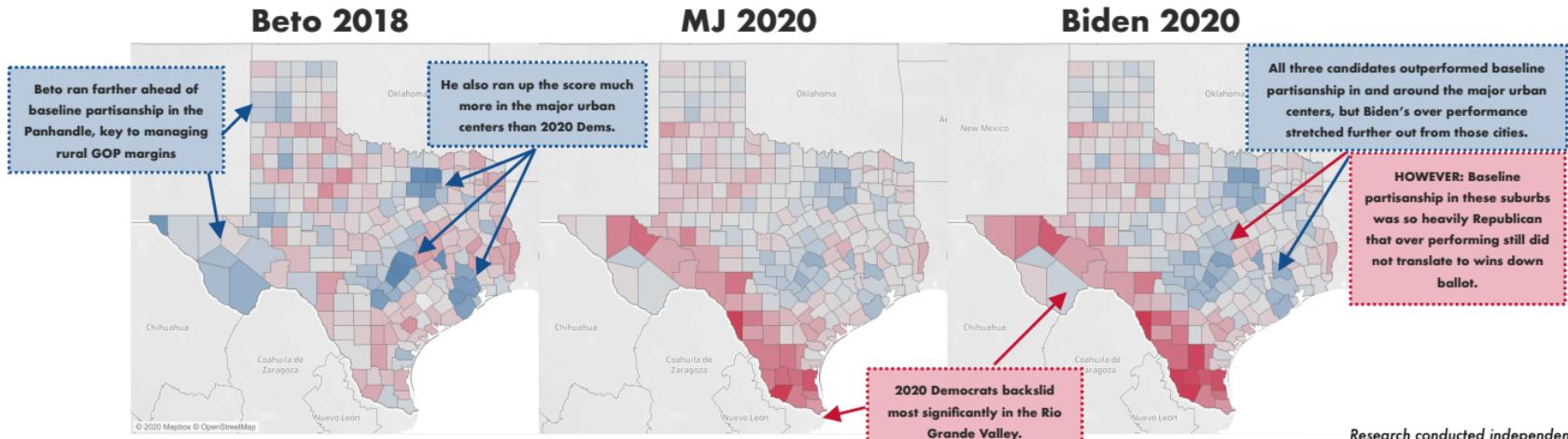
Population growth can only be converted to progressive power if New Texans are registered and mobilized to vote. Since 2000 the Voting Age Population has grown 49.1% but the Registered Voter population has only grown 37.1%

Biden continued gains in the suburbs but backslid significantly in the RGV

Three election results are displayed below: MJ Hegar 2020 (45%), Biden 2020 (47%), and Beto 2018 (48%). Beto was a high water mark for Democrats in recent years, running significantly ahead of baseline partisanship in cities and suburbs - even winning Tarrant County for the first time (but not the last!).

He also managed losses in more difficult rural regions of the Panhandle, though Cruz did well in South Texas. Biden, and to a lesser extent Hegar, improved on Hillary Clinton's performance due to support from growing, diversifying suburbs but underperformed significantly in the Rio Grande Valley.

Democratic Support Relative to Baseline Partisanship



Turnout surged for Biden in the suburbs and Trump in the Rio Grande Valley

The map right displays the number of Presidential votes cast in 2020 relative to the number of votes cast in 2016 adjusted for population growth. Below are a few takeaways from this map:

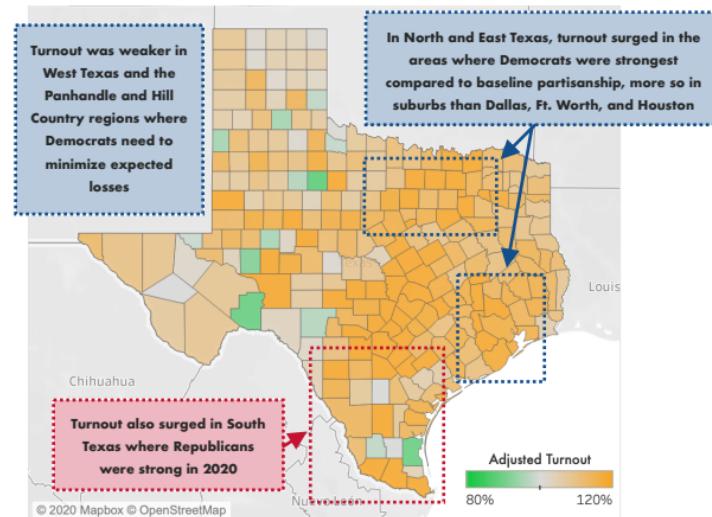
North and East Texas: Turnout in 2020 surged all over relative to 2016, but turnout surged most in the suburbs and exurbs surrounding Dallas, Ft. Worth, and Houston.

South Texas: Latino voters in South Texas voted overwhelmingly for Joe Biden, but also included a surge of typical non-voters who came off the sidelines to support Trump. Higher turnout in this region likely hurt Biden and Hegar and future Democrats have work to do to mobilize supporters in the region.

What if?

Biden's improvement among white suburban voters more than made up for his relative declines among rural Latino voters. If Majority Latino counties had maintained 2016 support while all others supported at 2020 rates Biden would have gained another .5pp

2020 Turnout Relative to Adjusted 2016 Turnout



Where We're Heading

In recent years Republicans have dominated statewide office in Texas, riding the strong Republican lean of the state, but unpopular Republicans doing unpopular things combine with favorable demographic trends to present significant opportunities for progressives to build power in the state.

This section draws on publicly available polling from the University of Texas' Texas Politics Project* and other researchers to contextualize key segments of voters identified in the previous section.

Topline Takeaways:

- Trump is polarizing, coronavirus has made Texans increasingly critical of Republicans in power, but partisanship is a hell of a drug.
- There is still room to grow our support in the suburbs - particularly those which have been trending Democratic nationally
- Democrats lost ground among Latino voters in many parts of Texas. Winning these voters back, through persuasion and mobilization, is key to maximizing the power of a diversifying electorate.
- While difficult to measure precisely, there are clear opportunities for Democrats to gain votes through registration.

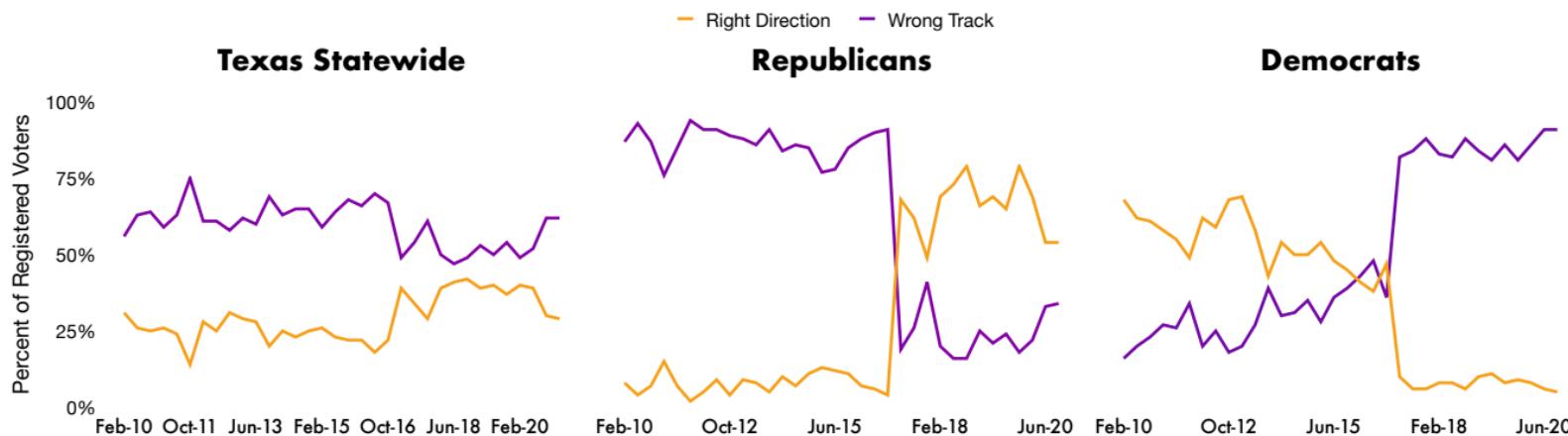
* Note: This poll was spot on in the Presidential horse race (50-45 for a 53% two-way Trump topline) and Senate (50-42 for a 54% two-way Cornyn topline).

Texas Democrats hated Trump as intensely as Texas Republicans hated Obama

Following national trends there are stark differences in how partisans view the direction of the country* based on who holds the most high profile political office in the country. In the Obama years Republicans nearly unanimously rated the country as being on the wrong track while Democrats offered better, but not amazing ratings. Since the 2016 election Democratic wrong track ratings are consistently in the 80s and right track rarely break 10%.

Dissatisfaction has become more severe across parties since the failed early response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Right Direction - Wrong Track (National) by Party



* Respondents were asked, "Thinking about the country, do you think that things are headed in the right direction, or do you think that things are headed off on the wrong track?"

Source: University of Texas/Texas Tribune Polling

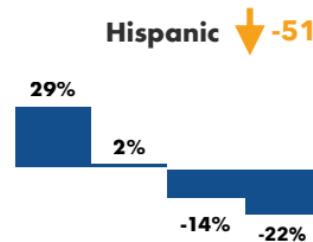
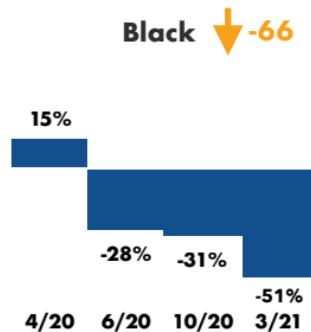
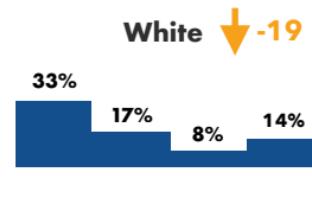
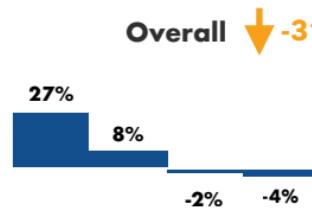
Research conducted independently by Josh Yazman. Please email me at joshyazman@gmail.com with any questions or comments

Voters have soured on the Republican response to COVID-19

Voters have been continually dissatisfied with Abbott's Trumpian response to the coronavirus crisis and are much more favorable of Biden's response to COVID. Since April his net approval* on the topic has dropped **-31 pts** and is now negative overall. This drop was led by Black (**-66 pts**) and Latino (**-51 pts**) voters, but this issue may also be a significant opportunity to message to white voters (**-19 pts**) though net approval has ticked up among this population in the last poll.



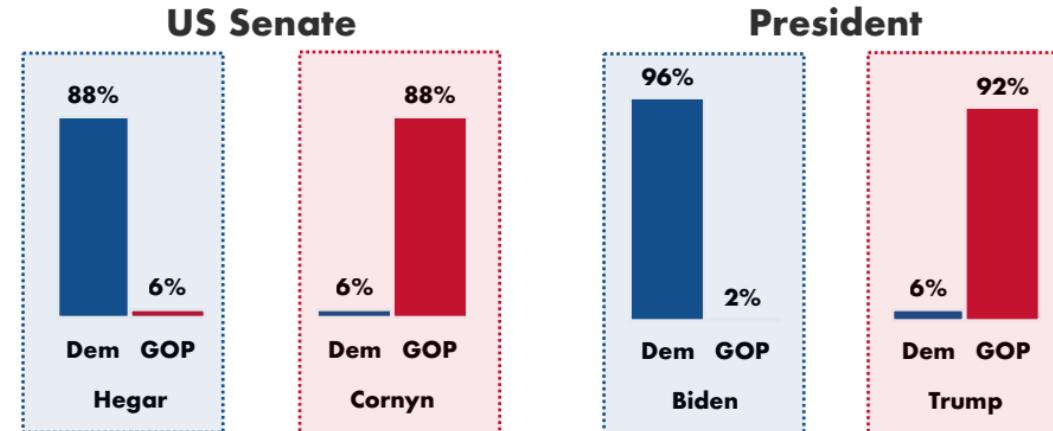
Do you approve or disapprove of how Greg Abbott has handled the response to the coronavirus/COVID-19?



...and yet partisanship still rules vote choice

Despite heavy disapproval of Republican's handling of the Coronavirus and consistently low job approval numbers for John Cornyn, partisans largely stuck with their teams in 2020. These poll results underscore the difficulty of flipping Republican votes to Democratic ones, and the importance of maximizing the electoral potential of new voters moving into Texas as well as existing racially diverse base communities.

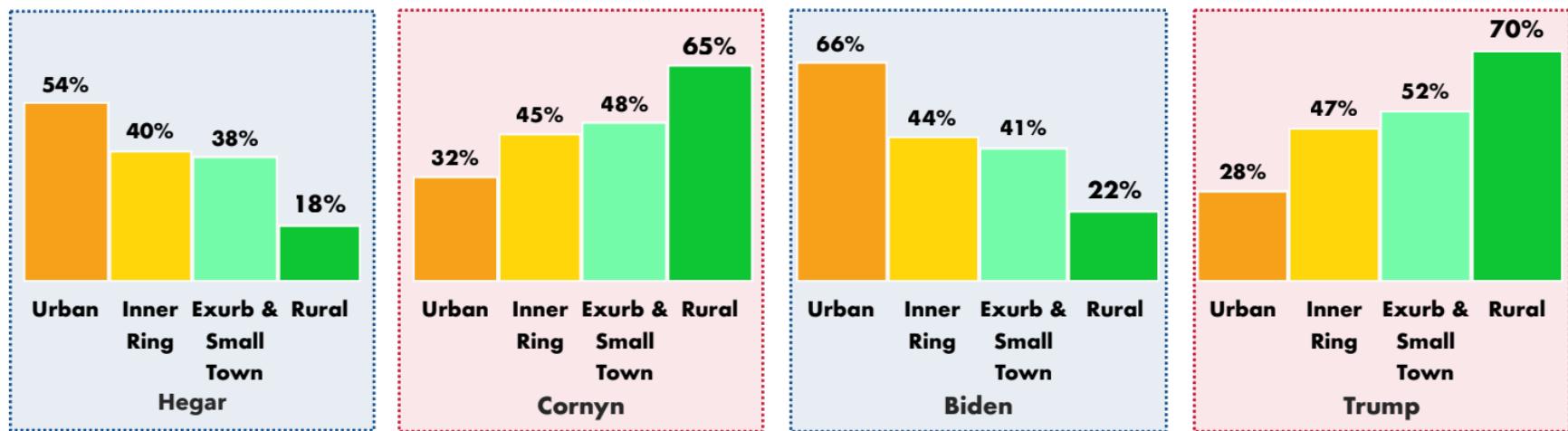
Pre-Election Trial Heats by Self-Reported Party ID



We have work to do in the burbs

National trends suggest that denser, "Inner Ring" suburbs (think Plano) have been moving left while more spread out "Exurbs" and "Small Towns" (like Midlothian) have been trending Republican. Pre-election surveys showed **Cornyn and Trump leading among all types of suburban Texas voters and they both won many of the most suburban counties in Texas**, like Montgomery and Collin counties. One area for Democrats to improve in Texas is to persuade suburban voters who have been trending Democratic nationally.

Pre-Election Horserace by Neighborhood Level Urbanicity Senate President



* Source: Texas Politics Project/Texas Tribune poll from October 2020

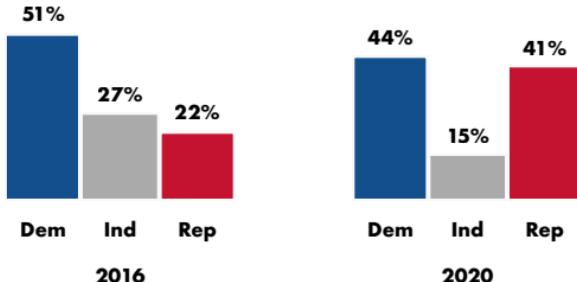
Note: Urbanicity is classified using a model developed by the New York Times that has historically done a good job of separating out dense, more progressive suburbs from sprawling, conservative exurbs

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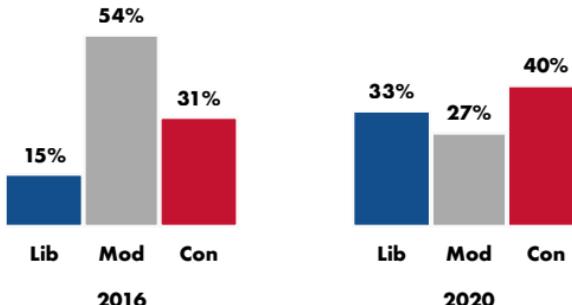
Republicans have gained among Latino voters as ideologies have polarized

Republican Party identification among Latino voters doubled during the Trump years as Democratic and Independent identification has declined. **At the same time, ideologies have polarized.** The share of moderates has cut in half since 2016 while the share of Liberals has doubled and Conservatives have made gains as well. Equis Research's 2020 Post-Mortem Report notes a surge in Republican Latino turnout in the Rio Grande Valley, primarily from new voters with weak previous partisan identities and argues that **Latino voters are key persuasion targets for Democrats moving forward.**

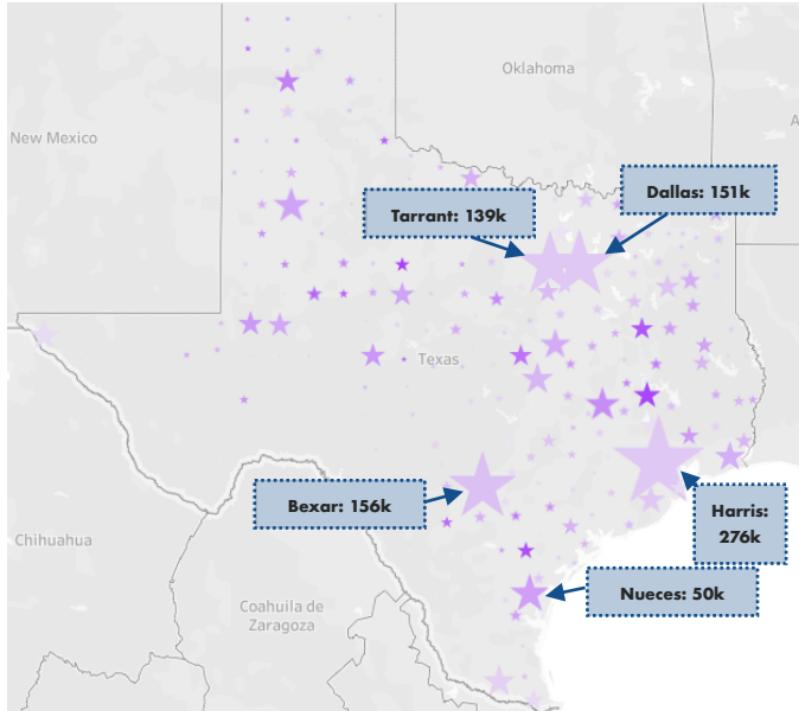
Hispanic Party ID by Year



Hispanic Ideology by Year



Voter registration is an opportunity in Texas



Notes: Estimates above compare the Citizen Voting Age Population published by the US Census Bureau with counts of registered voters reported by the Secretary of State, which are much more recently updated. This analysis likely under-counts the number of unregistered voters in growing urban and suburban areas and over-counts registration potential in areas with slower population growth.

* Source: TX Tribune ([here](#))

Proactive voter registration has a number of benefits for Texas Democrats. Two major factors in the state's increasing competitiveness are increasing diversification of the citizenry and population growth. **Registering voters accelerates the electoral impact of both of these trends.** Texas added 1.8MM new registered voters to the rolls between 2016 and 2020*.

The map left takes a very rough look at where potential registrants likely live throughout Texas by comparing the size of the Citizen Voting Age Population at the county level with the number of people reported as registered to vote by the state. The plurality of likely unregistered voters are located in the DFW and Houston Metros.

Targeting unregistered voters is difficult as population estimates are sensitive to measurement decisions. Credible estimates of the unregistered voter population range from 1MM to close to 6MM depending on how you measure populations of citizens and voters. In all estimates I've seen, the distribution of likely unregistered voters suggests potential voters live in more Democratic areas, and that registration work needs to be carefully targeted.

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CONCLUSIONS

Texas has been undergoing demographic and political changes since long before Stephen F Austin first set foot in the then-Mexican territory. As a result the state is an ever-changing amalgam of political cultures ranging from the Deep South to Mexico to indigenous peoples and daily new arrivals.

Recent trends are favorable for Democrats, who have been making up ground here for several cycles but fell far short of hopes in 2020. Analysis of public data indicates two areas of growth potential for Democrats in Texas:

- ★ **Growing Cities and Suburbs:** Voters in urban and suburban regions of Texas have been increasingly likely to support Democrats in recent cycles. However, we still have work to do to maximize our vote in more diverse inner ring suburbs and register and turn out as many of the new Democratic-leaning voters packing into the metro areas as possible..
- ★ **Changing Demographics:** Texas has become more diverse over time as new immigrants have moved to our state from abroad and from every corner of America. But many diverse communities in Texas shifted right in the Trump era as conservative non-voters turned out in unexpectedly high numbers. There is considerable persuasion and mobilization work to be done in reaching out to base communities in Texas.

