



# **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, but a half decade of election results tells us that favorable trends do not immediately translate to electoral gains. **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 has the following sections:

**Context:** Texas is experiencing favorable demographic trends for Democrats, but the 2020 election illustrated the limitations of these trends. Democrats must improve our position in the suburbs to leverage demographic trends for political power.

**Polling:** There were some early indications in public polling of weakness in the parts of Texas we most needed to win. Polling also indicates some opportunities for growing the Democratic base.

**2022 and Beyond:** Democrats should vigorously contest the 2022 midterms in Texas, despite likely political headwinds at the national level (if past midterms serve as prologue, Republicans will mobilize support in 2022. Abbott's handling of COVID has been a disaster and he deserves to be replaced. Patrick and Paxton don't add a whole lot on their own.

# Context

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. Since Nixon the state has consistently voted to the right of the country in national and state elections - 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.** We have more work to do to convert favorable trends to political gains.

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

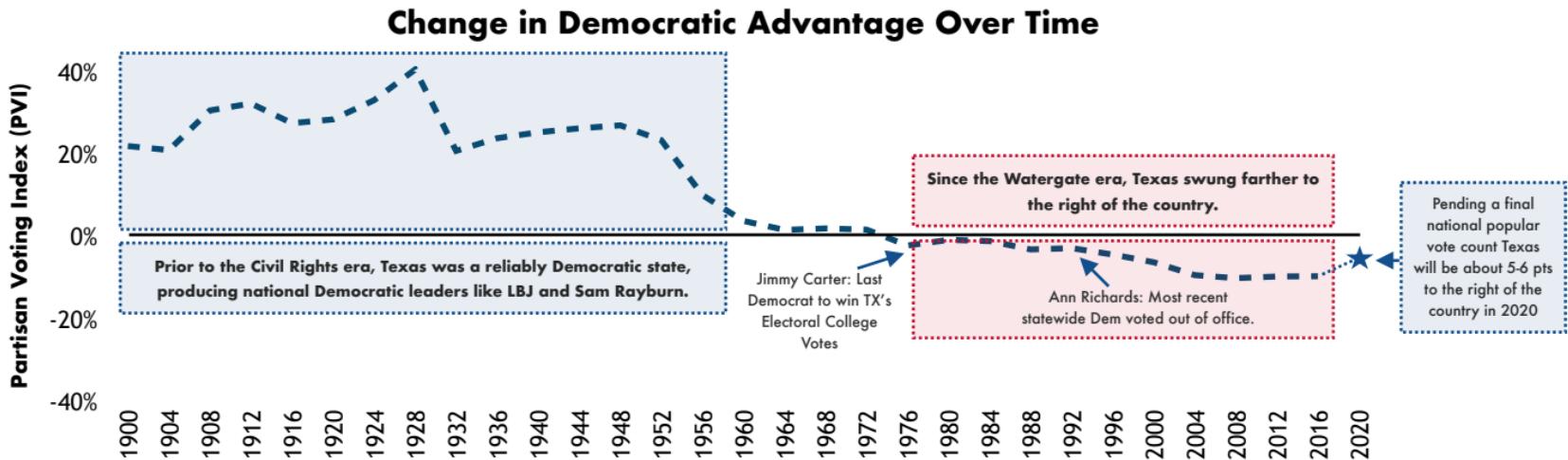
## Topline Takeaways:

- 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. However, these trends and their impacts are not uniform across the state.
- Joe Biden and MJ Hegar looked competitive in the run up to the 2020 election, but ultimately fell short in Texas’s suburbs and 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, but the 2020 election largely followed partisan trends.

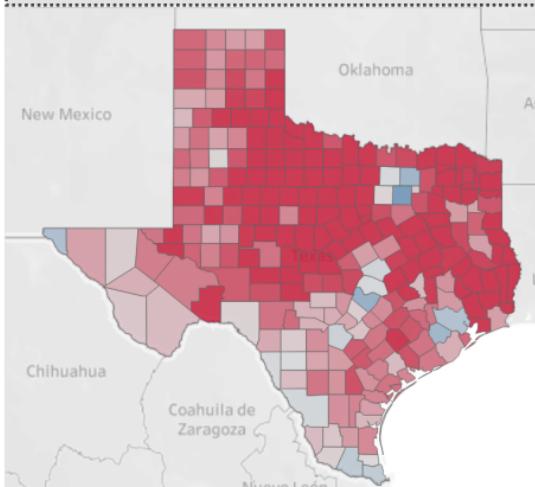


\* Note: A value of +5% means that, all things equal, a local Democrat should expect to do 5 points better than the national average.

# Key Regions Have Been Trending Democratic Since the Obama Years

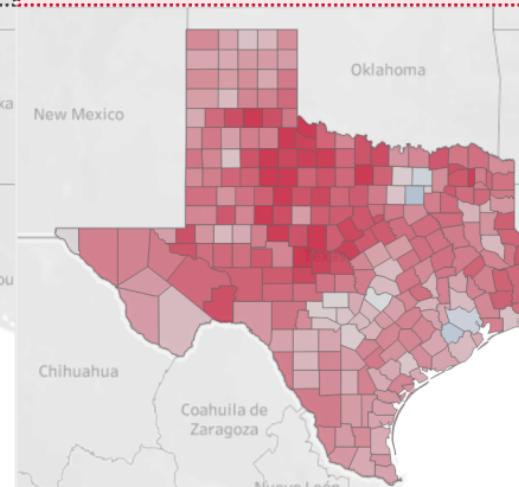
## 2000 - 2016

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



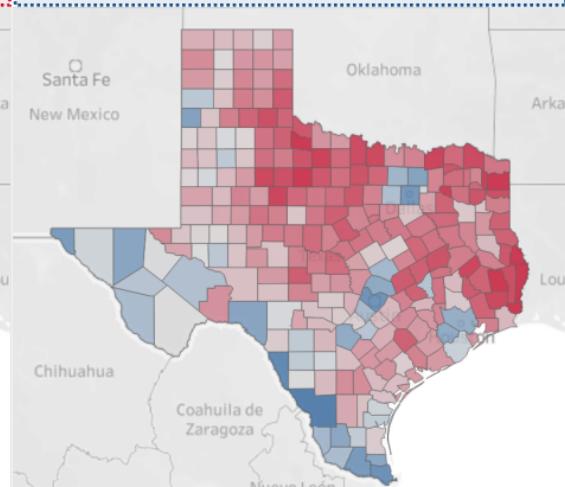
## 2000 - 2008

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, border counties and more urban counties swung hard towards Democrats, while many rural counties continue to move right.



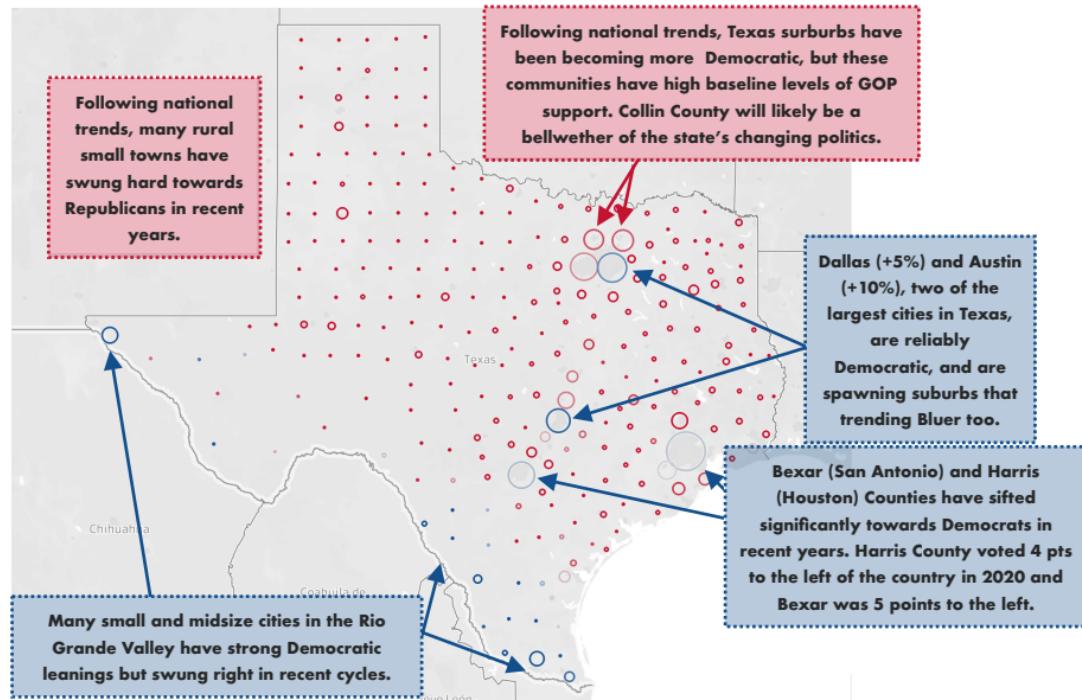
# Where Are Our Voters?

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, typically voting 7 points to the right of the country. Democrats need to make inroads with rural voters and win over the rapidly growing and diversifying suburbs voters while turning out our diverse base in the cities and Rio Grande Valley.**

**Statewide PVI**

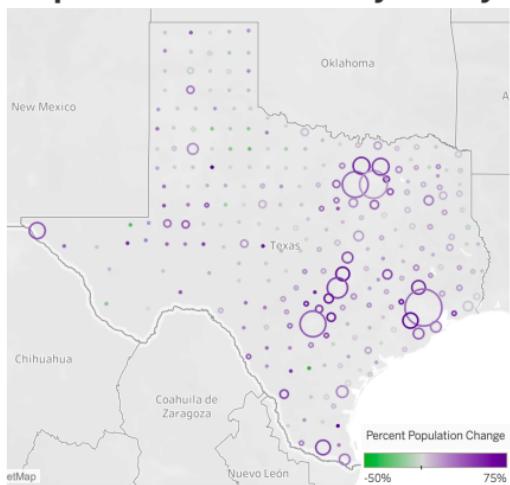
**-7%**



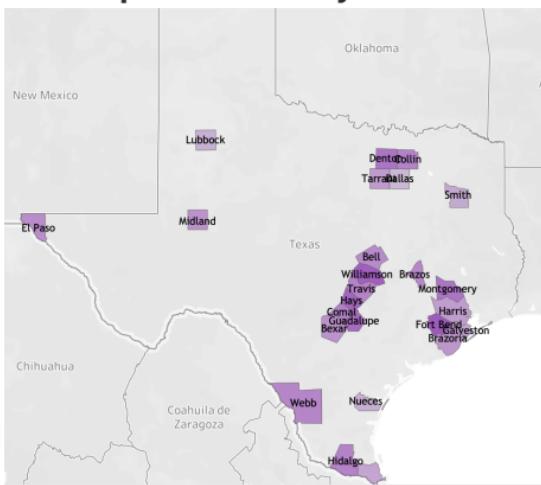
# Populations in Cities and Suburbs are Exploding

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, mapped 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 and Comal between Austin and San Antonio.

**Population Growth Rate by County**



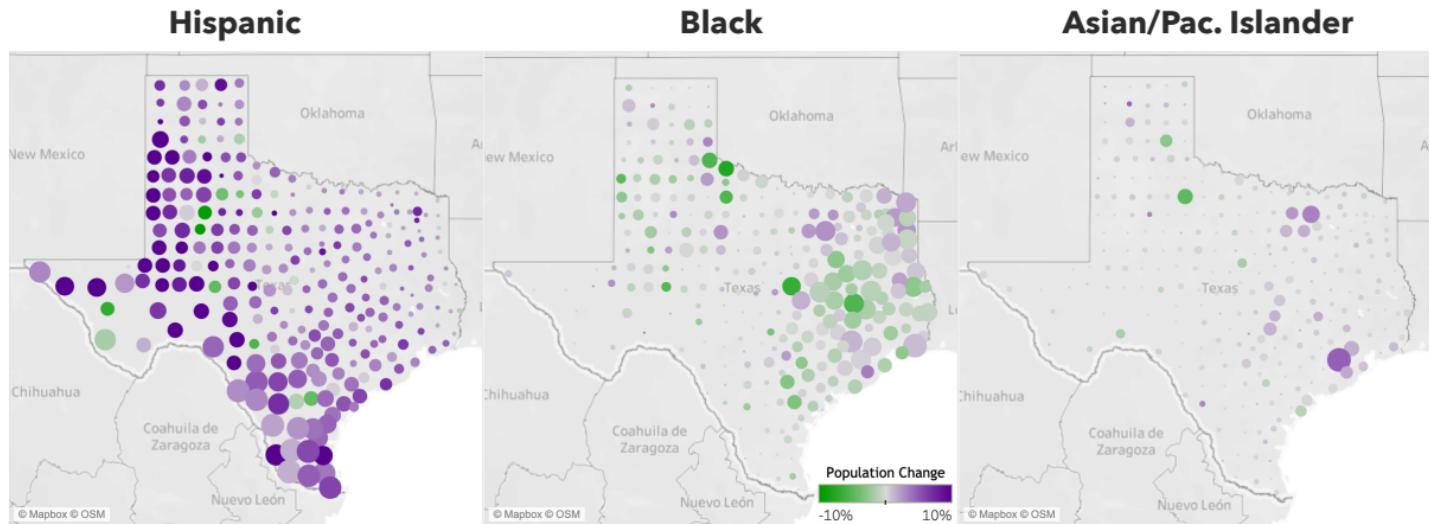
**Top 25 Counties by Growth**



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

# Pop. Growth Trends Asian and Hispanic

The maps below display population growth sized by each county's initial population of each race. **Hispanics 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.



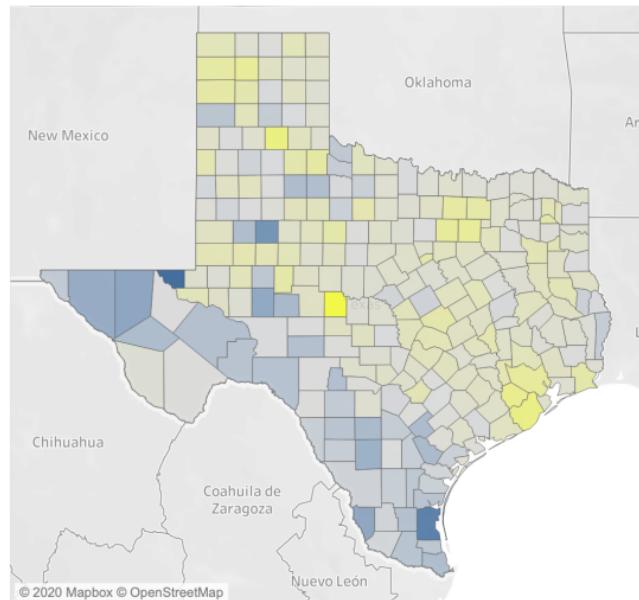
\* Note: Comparison is between Citizen Voting Age Population Estimates the 2004-2009 American Community Survey and 2014 - 2018 ACS.

# Everywhere Else Is Diversifying While The Rio Grande Valley is Homogeneously Hispanic

The new influx of Hispanic voters has meant different things in different parts of the state. The **Simpson Diversity Index\*** illustrates re. The map right displays the change in this index observed in the last decade. Blue counties got less diverse while yellow counties got more diverse.

**The parts of Texas which previously had the fewest Hispanic citizens have become significantly more diverse.**

In the Rio Grande Valley, counties have gotten less diverse as they've become more homogeneously Hispanic. These areas have been trending Democratic, but not as fast as other regions with large Hispanic populations. **Academic research suggests that counties with large, homogeneous populations of non-white citizens require different organizing and messaging strategies than the more diverse populations we see in cities.**



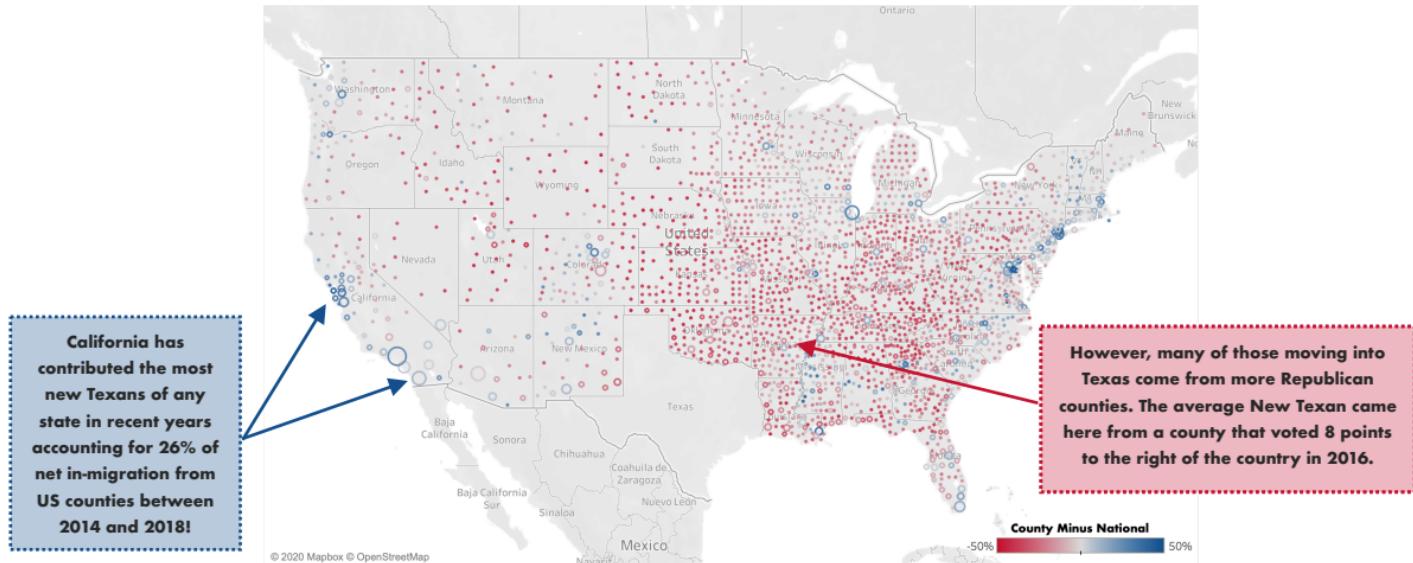
\* Note: This index estimates how likely you are to pick two people of different races if you randomly selected two citizens from a county.

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

# Y'all Come In... From Everywhere

The map below shows US Census Bureau estimates of the number of New Texans coming from each other US county (corresponds to marker size) and how that county voted in 2016 relative to the national popular vote (corresponds to color). For example, Los Angeles County is a large blue dot because lots of people moved to Texas from there and the county supported Clinton more than the country as a whole. The converse is true for Lonoke County, AR.

**2016 County Democratic Vote Share Relative to National**



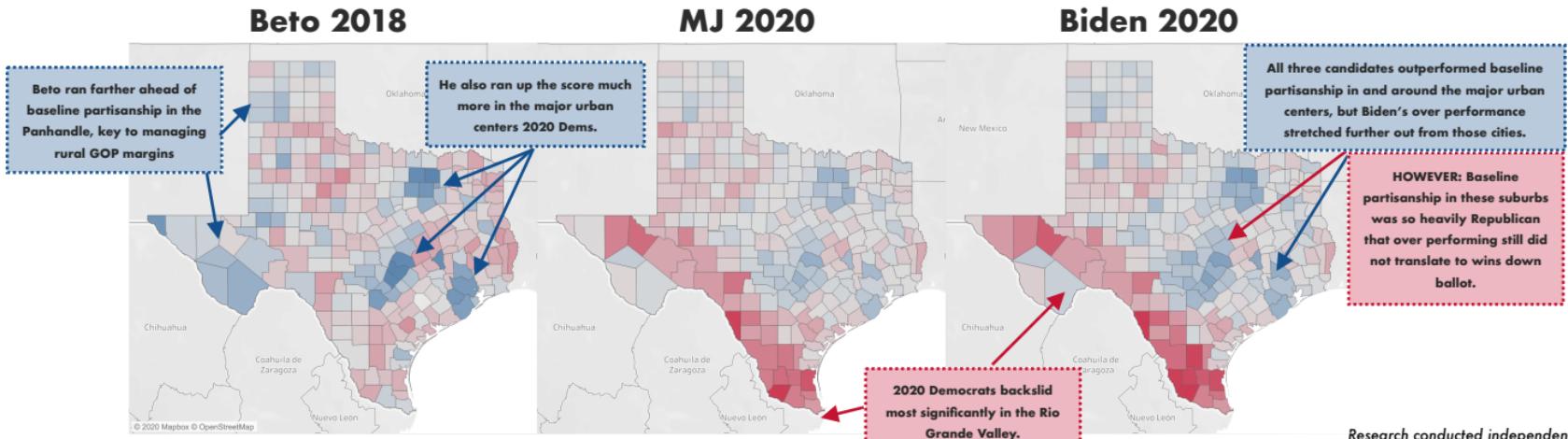
\* Source: US Census Bureau and Harvard Dataverse

Research conducted independently by Josh Yazman. Please email me at [joshyazman@gmail.com](mailto:joshyazman@gmail.com) with any questions or comments

# 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 more difficult rural regions of the Panhandle, though Cruz did well in South Texas. Biden, and to a lesser extent Hegar, continued to press Democratic growth in the growing, diversifying suburbs but underperformed significantly in the heavily Hispanic Rio Grande Valley.

## Democratic Support Relative to Baseline Partisanship



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# Turnout Surged for Biden in The Suburbs and Trump in the Rio Grande Valley

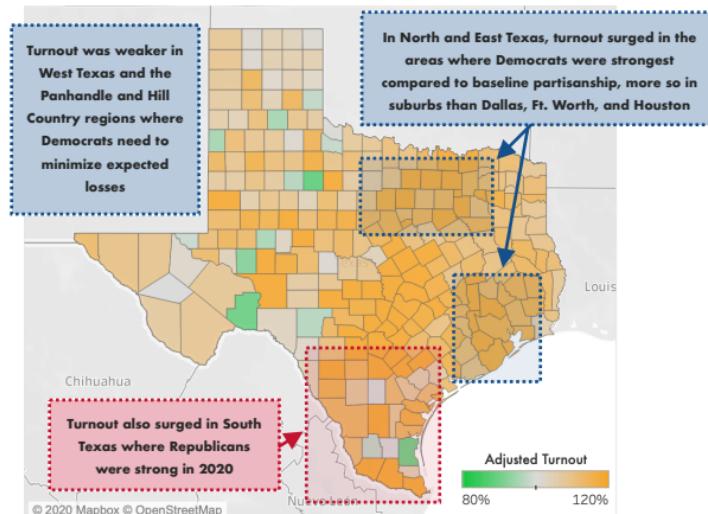
The map right displays the number of Presidential votes cast in 2020 relative to the number of votes cast in 2016 adjusted for population growth. Below are a few takeaways from this map:

**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:** Hispanic voters in South Texas voted overwhelmingly for Joe Biden, but were further to the right than they have been in recent elections. Higher turnout in this region likely hurt Biden and Hegar and future Democrats have work to do to win over these voters.

**Points West:** Turnout surged much less in the rural Panhandle, Hill Country, and West Texas regions than the rest of the state. These are also very conservative regions where recent Democrats have been increasingly successful in managing our margins.

## 2020 Turnout Relative to Adjusted 2016 Turnout





<https://www.luckenbachtexas.com/>

# Polling

Polling in 2020 may have had serious problems measuring the down-ballot horse race - particularly showing Senate races being more competitive than they ultimately were. A couple of high profile polls in the run-up to the election showed Biden winning the state, but the polling average maintained by *The Economist* was **51.1% - 48.9%** for Trump which was in line with the result.

This section draws on publicly available polling from the University of Texas to contextualize key segments of voters identified in the previous section. To better understand the Hispanic vote this analysis relies on extensive research published by Equis on Hispanic voters in Texas ([equisresearch.us](http://equisresearch.us)).

## Topline Takeaways:

- Trump is polarizing and 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
- Hispanic voters have polarized as part of these trends but more research is needed to understand this important voting bloc

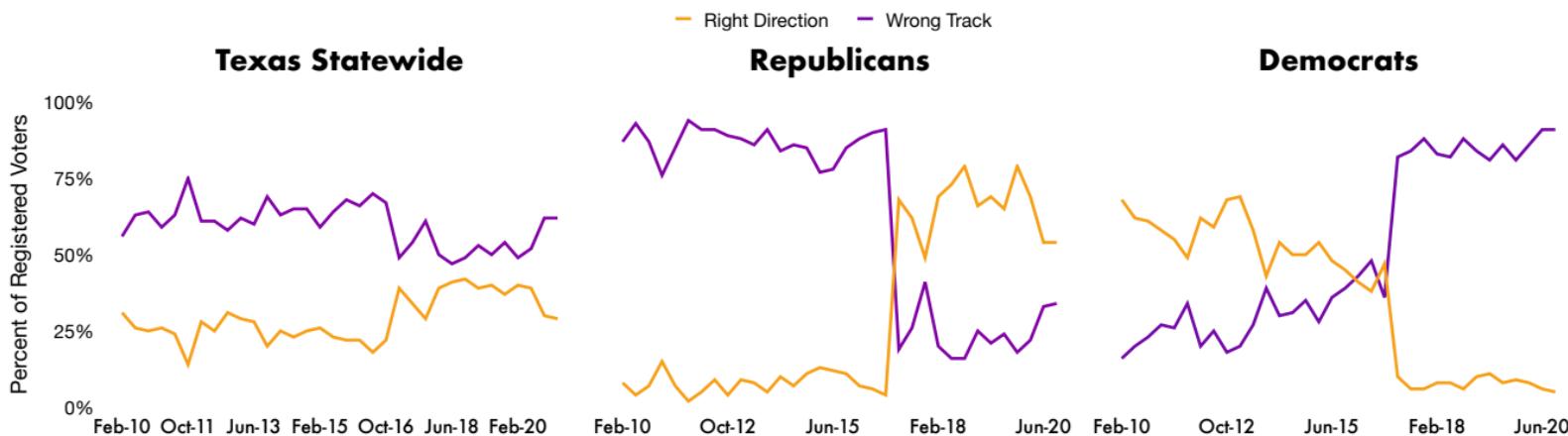
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# Texas Democrats Hate Trump As Intensely As Texas Republicans Hated Obama

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?"

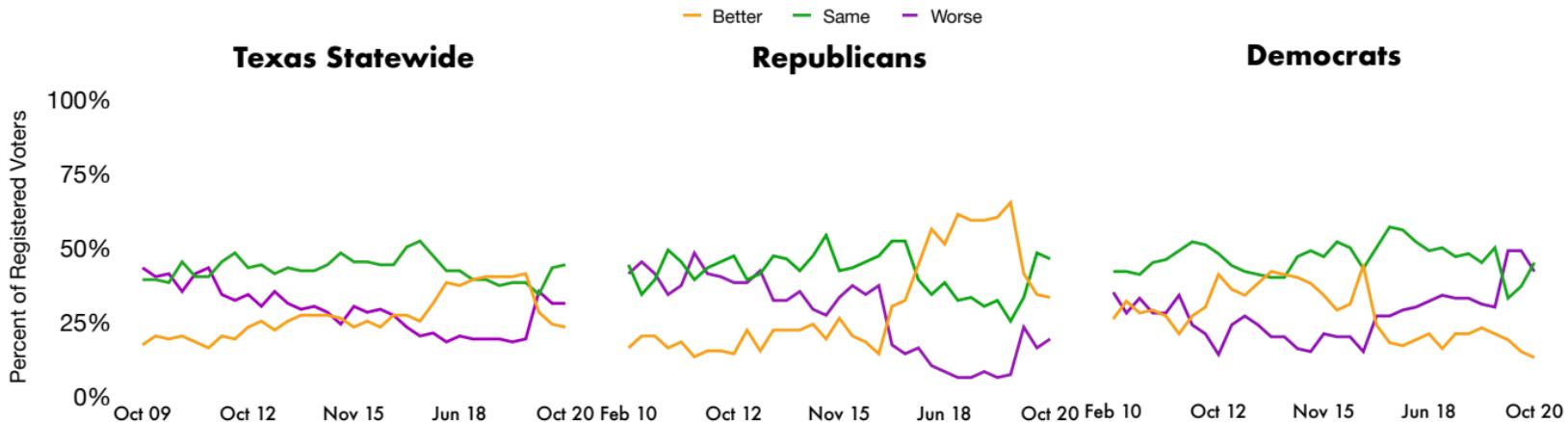
Source: University of Texas/Texas Tribune Polling

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# Personal Economies Bring Partisanship Home

Voter evaluations of their personal economic positions blend lived experience with partisanship. During the Obama years, Texas Republicans rarely reported that their economic positions were better than the year prior while Democrats were much more likely to say they were better off than the year prior. During most of the Trump years this relationship entirely inverted. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed both Democrats and Republicans in the same negative direction, though prior research on partisanship suggests this trend may be ephemeral.

## State of Personal Economy by Party

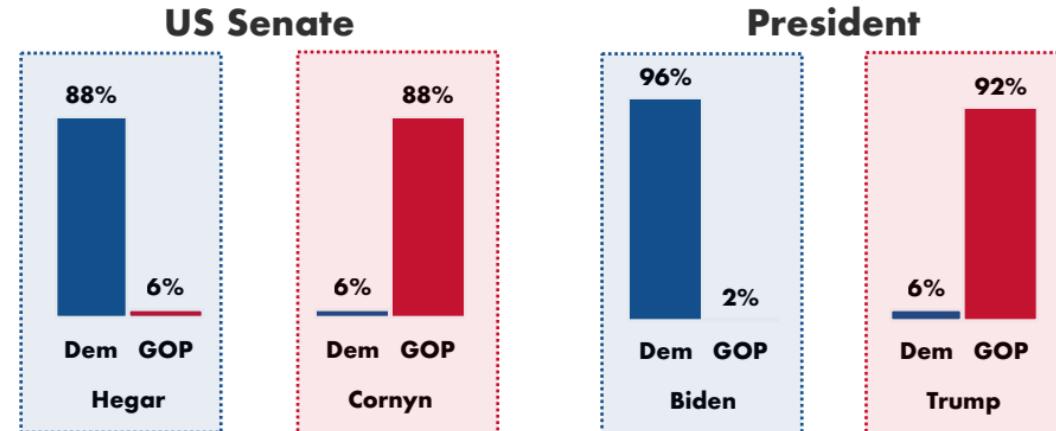


\* Respondents were asked, "Compared to a year ago, would you say that you and your family are economically a lot better off, somewhat better off, about the same, somewhat worse off, or a lot worse off?"

# But 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. Biden consolidated 96% of Democrats while Trump secured 92% of the Republican vote. Mj Hegar and John Cornyn secured an identical 88% of their respective party's votes.

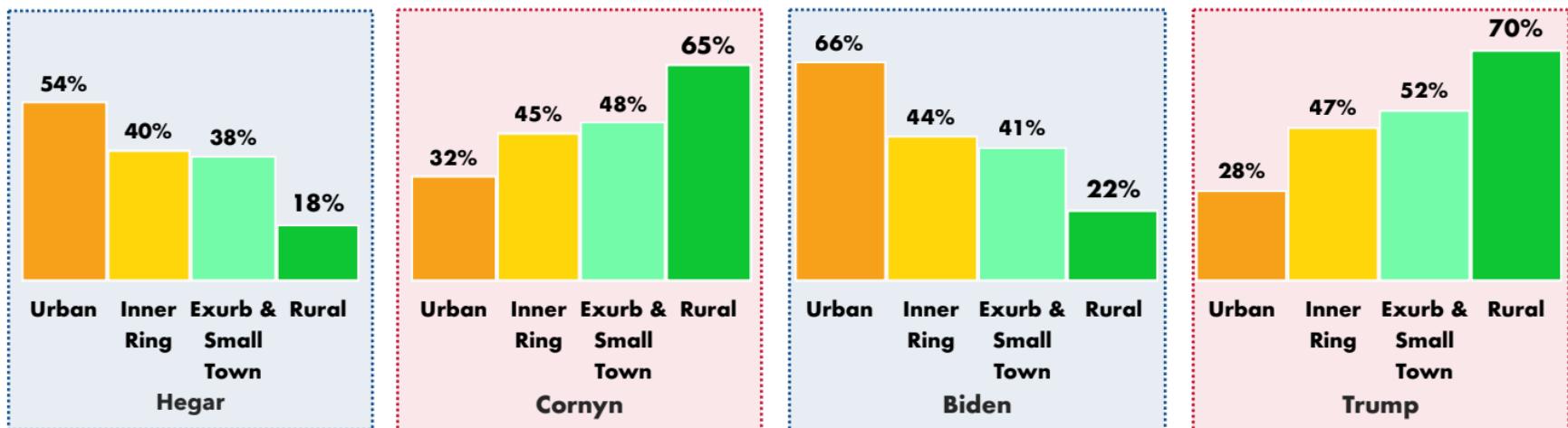
## Pre-Election Trial Heats by Self-Reported Party ID



# We Have Work To Do In The Burbs

National trends suggest that denser, "Inner Ring" suburbs (think Frisco) have been moving left while more spread out "Exurbs" and "Small Towns" (like Canton) have been trending Republican. Pre-election surveys showed **Cornyn** and **Trump** leading among suburban Texas voters and they both won many of the most suburban counties in Texas, like Montgomery and Collin counties.

## US Senate and Presidential Vote Choice by Neighborhood Level Urbanicity



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

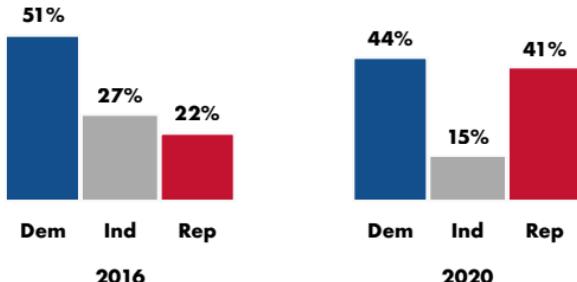
Note: Urbanicity is classified using a model developed by the New York Times that has historically done a good job of separating out dense, more progressive suburbs from more sprawling, conservative exurbs

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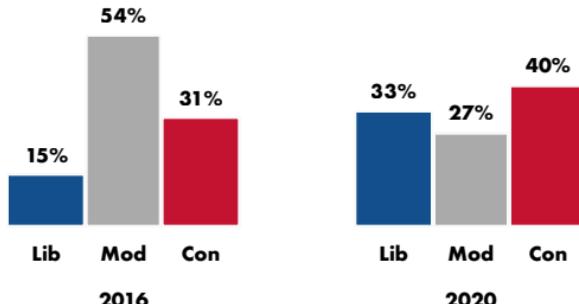
# Republicans Have Gained Among Hispanic Voters as Ideologies Have Polarized

Republican Party identification among Hispanics has doubled during the Trump years as Democratic and Independent registration 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. Finding messages and messengers who can communicate effectively with Hispanic voters is critical to maximizing the potential posed by favorable demographic trends described in the previous section.

**Hispanic Party ID by Year**



**Hispanic Ideology by Year**



Source: University of Texas/  
Texas Tribune Polls of Registered  
Voters

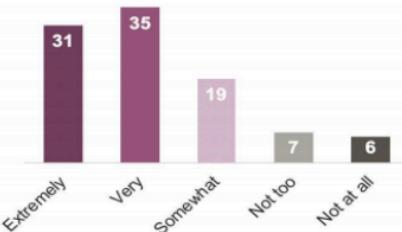
Note: Equis Research has done extensive public research on Hispanic voters in key states including Texas. The electorate is not monolithic and we will need cycle-specific research to best understand Texas Hispanic voters.

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# Equis Highlight: Strength of Latino Identity is Correlated with Progressive Views

## Strong Correlation with Importance of Latino Identity and More Progressive Tendencies

How **important** to you is your identity as (Hispanic, Latino, Latina, Latinx)?



### Those whose Latinx identity is extremely or very important:

- Overwhelmingly support Democratic presidential candidate
- Believe their personal financial situation and the US economy have gotten worse during Trump's presidency
- Disapprove of Trump's job performance
- Younger, female
- Less educated
- More Catholic

**Key Takeaway:** Given the importance of personal Latino Identity, communications to these voters should speak to individual identity.



# 2022 Statewide Opportunities

In recent years Republicans have dominated statewide office in Texas, riding the strong Republican lean of the state. As this partisan advantage shrinks it's entirely unclear that many current Republican statewide office holders can build winning coalitions of Texas voters.

This section examines several incumbent statewide officers and their recent strengths and weaknesses.

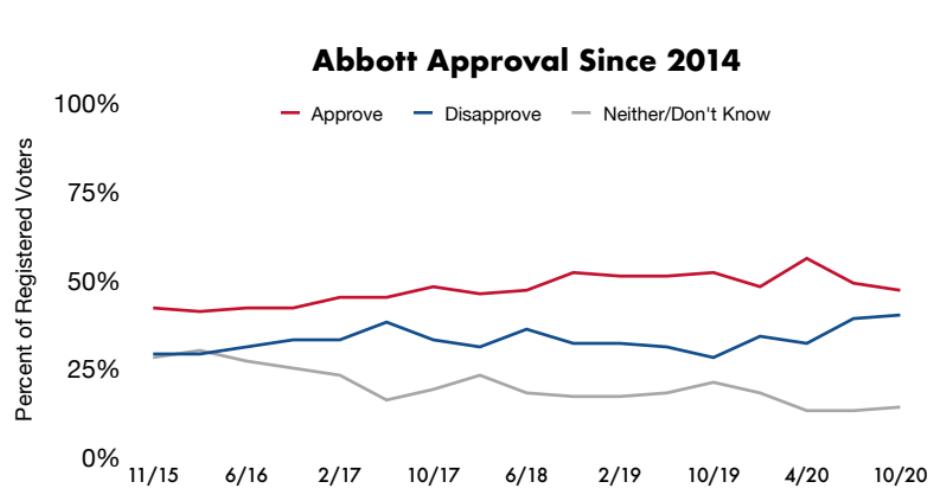
## Topline Takeaways:

- Greg Abbott has historically proven difficult to beat, but his handling of the coronavirus pandemic is increasingly unpopular. That said, Cornyn and Trump faced similar headwinds here in 2020 and it was not decisive.
- Dan Patrick and Ken Paxton are weak statewide incumbents. Democrats should continuously challenge each of these men on the merits of their awful policy positions and in their re-election efforts in 2022.
- Voter Registration in the context of the 2022 election will be critical to converting favorable trends outlined in previous sections into real political gains for Texas voters.

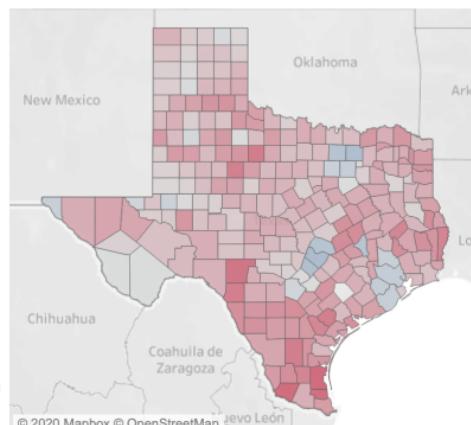
# Abbott Faced Weak Opposition in 2018 and Won Handily



In 2018 Greg Abbott defeated former Dallas County Sheriff Lupe Valdez by 13 pts in the same year Beto O'Rourke almost defeated Ted Cruz. Abbott won broad support, over performing baseline partisanship significantly in the rural parts of the state, most of all the Southern Border, while holding Valdez' advantage in the cities to manageable levels.



**Abbott 2018 Relative to Baseline Partisanship**



**Next Chance to Beat Him: 2022**

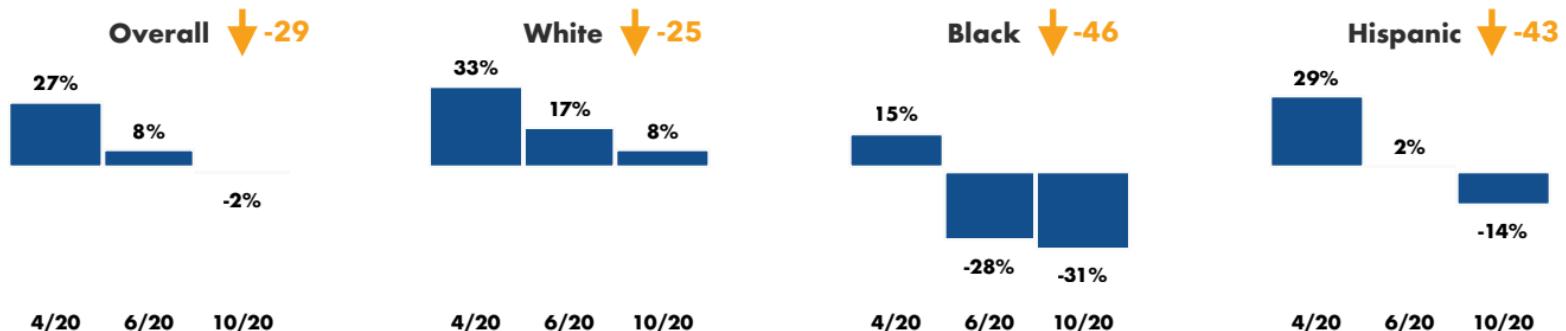
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# Voters Have Since Soured On Abbott's Failed Response to COVID-19



Voters have become increasingly dissatisfied with Abbott's Trumpian response to the coronavirus crisis. Since April his net approval\* on the topic has dropped **-29 pts** and is now negative overall. This drop was led by Black (**-46 pts**) and Hispanic (**-43 pts**) voter cohorts, but this issue may also be a significant opportunity to message to white voters (**-25 pts**) who understand the importance of a steady competent response to the virus as well.

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



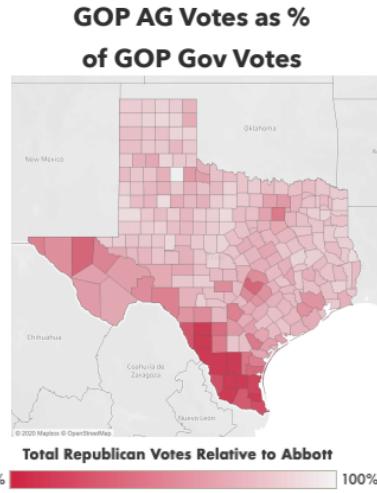
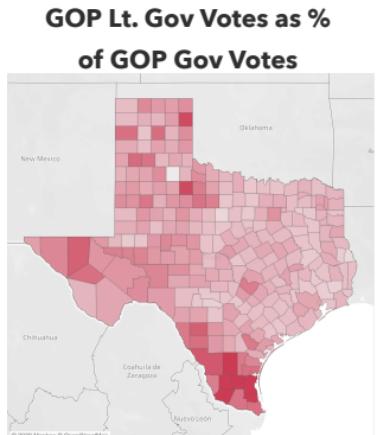
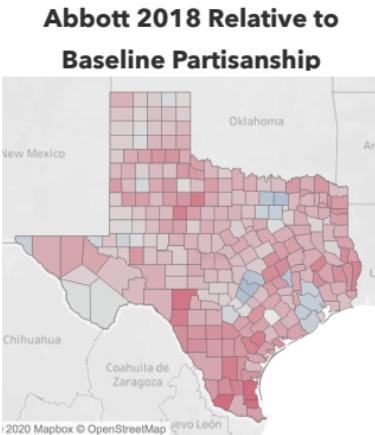
**Next Chance to Beat Him: 2022**

Source: University of Texas/Texas Tribune Polling  
 \* Net approval is calculated as Strong Approve + Weak Approve minus Strong Disapprove + Weak Disapprove

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# Lots of Abbott Voters Declined to Support Paxton and Patrick Last Time

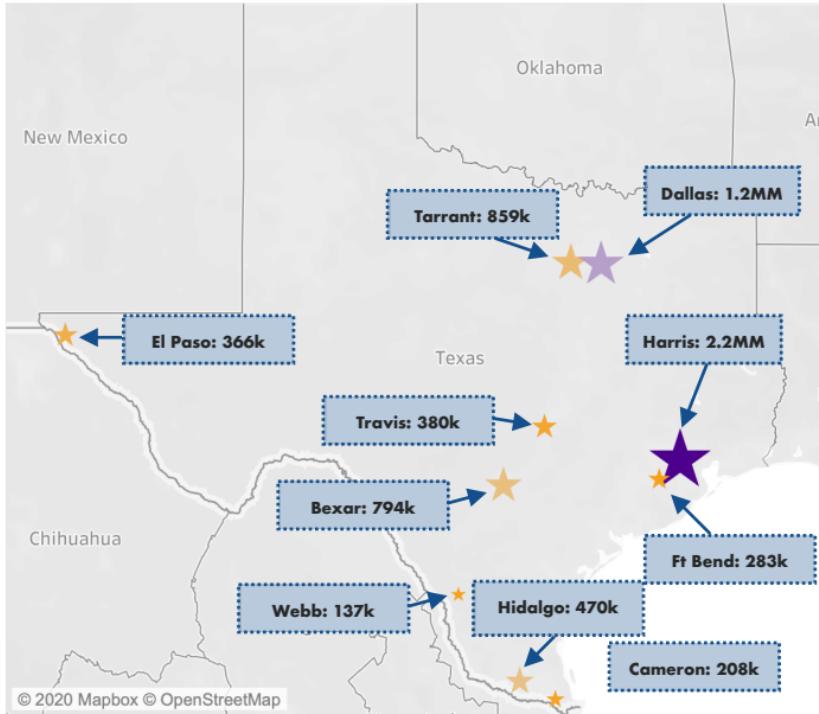
Abbott won the most convincing margin of any of the major Republican statewide elected officials in 2018 - including Dan Patrick and Ken Paxton. In the border regions, where Abbott over-performed baseline partisanship the most, **Patrick and Paxton underperformed because Abbott voters went home before completing their ballots**. In future elections these men may have difficulty mobilizing their own bases of support if the top of the ticket falters.



**Next Chance to Beat Em: 2022**

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# Voter Registration Opportunities in Texas



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.**

The map left shows the top 10 most efficient counties for voter registration and the number of likely unregistered voters. **Over half of unregistered voters live in one of these counties, with the majority living in the DFW and Houston areas.**

Growing cities along the border with Mexico also represent significant registration opportunities and **will likely require different organizing strategies** than registration projects in the less Hispanic-concentrated cities.

**Statewide Unregistered Voters:**  
**11.6 Million**



Further Reading and Photo Credit: Don't Call Texas's Latino Voters the "Sleeping Giant" - Texas Monthly

# CONCLUSIONS

Texas has been undergoing demographic and political changes ever since Stephen F Austin first set foot in the then-Mexican territory. As a result the state is an ever-changing amalgam of political cultures from the Deep South, West, Midwest, and Sunbelt regions of America.

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, turn out as many urban voters as possible, and narrow our losses in rural areas.

**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. Democrats and progressive organizations should invest in voter registration and mobilization outreach in these communities, but should also be mindful that there is considerable persuasion work to be done as well, as illustrated by the rightward shift of the Rio Grande Valley in recent elections.