

A REFLECTION ON THE LATINO VOTE IN TEXAS¹

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The 2018 midterm election sounded creaking noises in Texas suggesting that the long-anticipated demographic wave would turn the state blue. It did not happen in 2018, but surely 2020 would be the year. To add to the intrigue, Latinos accounted for three of every five new Texans eligible to vote and grassroot organizations were making great headway in registering Latino voters.²

Early in the night as polls closed throughout Texas, it became clear that we took some steps back in turning Texas blue. The sounds of the political momentum shift was much more audible in 2018 when Beto O'Rourke nearly beat Ted Cruz and Democrats flipped two U.S. House seats, two Texas senate seats, and seven Texas House seats.³ Two years later, nothing to write home about: Democrats took away a Texas Senate seat and a Texas House seat and ceded a U.S. House seat and a Texas House seat to Republicans.⁴ Furthermore, Trump soundly beat Biden by nearly 6 percentage points and John Cornyn kept his U.S. senate seat blowing past M.J. Hegar by close to 10 percentage points. Furthermore, despite his bashing of Latinos and erecting a border wall along the Texas-Mexico border, Latinos increasingly voted for Trump more so than they did four years earlier.

Political pundits have tried to make sense of the disappointing outcome in Texas for those of us who have wanted to see the state turn blue. In this essay, I provide my analysis of what happened, the challenges that we face, and the opportunities that we have in turning Texas blue.

Lessons learned from the 2020 election.

Post-election analyses draw out the political complexities that are part of the Latino political landscape in Texas. One analysis of 28,000 precincts across more than 20 large cities in the country indicate that while Biden won in these sites, the percentage increase of votes between 2016 and 2020 was much greater for Trump compared to Biden (relative to Hillary Clinton votes in 2016).⁵ For example, although Biden beat Trump by 50 percentage

¹ This essay is a follow up to the virtual MACRI Talk "Mexican American Civic Engagement & the 2020 Election," held on October 20, 2020. The talk can be found on MACRI's Facebook and YouTube pages.

² Rogelio Sáenz and Sharon Navarro, "Dems Must Listen to Latinos to Connect with Them," *San Antonio Express-News*, November 7, 2020, <https://www.expressnews.com/opinion/commentary/article/Commentary-Listen-to-Latino-voters-to-connect-15707983.php>.

³ The Texas Tribune, "See the Results of the Texas 2018 Midterm Election Here," *The Texas Tribune*, November 6, 2018, <https://apps.texastribune.org/elections/2018/texas-midterm-election-results/>.

⁴ Carla Astudillo, "Here Are the Texas 2020 Election Results," *The Texas Tribune*, November 3, 2020 (updated December 1, 2020), <https://apps.texastribune.org/features/2020/general-election-results/>.

⁵ Weiyi Cai and Ford Fessenden, "Immigrant Neighborhoods Shifted Red as the Country Chose Blue," *New York Times*, December 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/20/us/politics/election->

points in Cook County, home to Chicago, in Gage Park, Humboldt Park, Little Village, and Pilsen, neighborhoods where Latinos make up more than half of the population, Trump received 45 percent more votes in 2020 than four years earlier while there was no change in the Democratic vote. Similar trends occurred in Orlando, Philadelphia, New York City, Phoenix, and Los Angeles. In Texas, too, this trend persisted with precincts shifting politically rightward being those with relatively larger Latino populations. Cai and Fessenden note that in Texas the “Democratic margin in 80 percent Latino precincts dropped an average of 17 percentage points.” In McAllen, the number of votes cast for Trump rose 93 percent between 2016 and 2020 while the Democratic vote rose by 7 percent. Other research examining a different set of areas (Phoenix, Milwaukee, Las Vegas, Miami, Paterson, New Jersey, and the Rio Grande Valley) has also shown this trend associated with a large percentage gain in votes for Trump compared to a flat line or declining votes for Biden.⁶

This political shift occurred particularly in the Texas border region. In the 14 border counties that Biden won, Trump gained a considerable portion of the vote ranging from nearly one-third in El Paso County to close to half in Culberson and Starr County.⁷ Trump won six border counties, most prominently Zapata County where he beat Biden by 5 percentage points and where four years earlier Hillary Clinton beat him by 30 points.

Four important lessons emerge from the outcome of the November 2020 election. These illustrate the significant challenges that we face within the Latino community and within the Democrat Party.

First, the 2020 election reminded us that Latinos are a diverse population in many ways but particularly in their politics. For long, we have realized that there is a sizeable portion of the Latino population that is politically conservative and who regularly provide support for Republicans. I think that the Latino left, myself included, has been to a certain degree in denial of this fact, perhaps suggesting that this segment is smaller than it actually is and that eventually these misguided brethren will have an epiphany—the *aha* moment when they realize that Republicans do not have their interests in mind.

Second, political observers have indicated that Latinos along the border may also be voting for their own particular economic interests. Along the border, law enforcement, border patrol, and Homeland Security jobs are plentiful and provide stable income along with benefits not found in many jobs located in the region with the energy sector being another industry associated with job growth and tied to Republican political interests. I put

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⁶ Equis Labs, “2020 Post-Mortem: Part One: Portrait of a Persuadable Latino,” April 1, 2021, https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/20537484-equis_post-mortem_part_one_public_deck.

⁷ Julio Ricardo Varela, “A 63-Page Detailed Analysis of 2020 Latino Voters Is Exactly What Everyone Needs to Read Right Now,” *Latino Rebels*, April 2, 2021, <https://www.latinorebels.com/2021/04/02/a63pagedetailedanalysisof2020latinovoters/?fbclid=IwAR1NvrZsFSs0BpGZA5MhjATGPqYZp9taVe1Vd0prq7KiSveip-9GQWN02FY>.

together data from the 2019 American Community Survey (ACS) 5-year estimates for the 2015-2019 period to identify occupations, industries, and college majors where Latinos 18 and older who are U.S. citizens along the border are disproportionately clustered relative to their counterparts in the interior of the state. The border region includes Public Use Microdata Areas (PUMAs) that are located approximately 100 miles from the Texas-Mexico border and interior regions are all other PUMAs.

There are eight occupations with at least 1,000 Latino workers in the border in which border Latinos are at least 1.75 times more likely to be employed in compared to their counterparts living in the interior (Table 1). These include the following occupations: detectives and criminal investigators (3.10 border Latinos per 1 interior Latino); other extraction workers (2.67); police officers (2.53); underground mining machine operators (2.23); correctional officers and jailers (1.97); probation officers and correctional treatment specialists (1.85); security guards and gaming surveillance officers (1.75); and derrick, rotary drill, and service unit operators, and roustabouts, oil, gas, and mining (1.75). Yet, overall, Latinos on the border who hold law-enforcement, security, and energy jobs represent a small share (3.8%) of the entire Latino workforce in the border region.

Table 1. Eight Selected Occupations Where Border Latinos are Disproportionately Working Compared to Latinos in Interior, 2015-2019

Selected occupations	Border Region		Interior Region		Ratio of Border percent to Interior percent
	Number workers	Pct. of all border workers	Number workers	Pct. of all interior workers	
Detectives and criminal investigators	2,560	0.253	2,584	0.082	3.102
Other extraction workers	4,697	0.465	5,500	0.174	2.674
Police officers	11,660	1.154	14,429	0.456	2.530
Underground mining machine operators	1,294	0.128	1,821	0.058	2.225
Correctional officers and jailers	5,487	0.543	8,717	0.276	1.971
Probation officers and correctional treatment specialists	1,227	0.121	2,079	0.066	1.848
Security guards and surveillance officers	9,569	0.947	17,102	0.541	1.752
Derrick, rotary drill, and service unit operators, and roustabouts, oil, gas, and mining	1,705	0.169	3,050	0.096	1.750
Total U.S. Citizen Latino Workers	1,010,202		3,163,237		

Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

In addition, there are three industries in which border Latinos are more than 1.75 times as likely to work in compared to Latinos in the rest of the state: justice, public order, and safety activities, (1.85); national security and international affairs (1.84), and support activities for mining (1.77). Again, however, Latinos working in these three industries make up a small (6.5%) portion of all Latino workers in the border area.

Table 2. Three Selected Industries Where Border Latinos are Disproportionately Working Compared to Latinos in Interior, 2015-2019

	Border Region		Interior Region		Ratio of Border percent to Interior percent
	Number workers	Pct. of all border workers	Number workers	Pct. of all interior workers	
Justice, public order, and safety	29,356	2.915	49,671	1.574	1.852
National security and international affairs	10,006	0.994	17,067	0.541	1.839
Support activities for mining	25,835	2.565	45,749	1.450	1.769
Total U.S. Citizen Latino Workers	1,007,231		3,156,106		

Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Moreover, Latinos who are U.S. citizens and who have at least a bachelor’s degree living on the border are much more likely to have majored in criminal justice and fire protection than Latinos living in the interior of the state. Criminal justice and fire protection is the third most common major for border Latinos while it ranks eighth among Latinos in the rest of the state. Border Latinos with a bachelor’s degree are approximately 1.75 more likely to have majored in criminal justice and fire protection compared to those in the interior of the state. Once again, however, the share of criminal justice majors among all the majors of Latino college graduates in the border region is small (6.5%).

Table 3. Top Ten Majors of Latinos with a Bachelor’s Degrees or Higher by Geographic Location, 2015-2019

Rank Major	Border Region		Interior Region	
	Number majors	Major	Number majors	Major
1	22,838	General education	47,566	Business management and administration
2	19,066	Business management and administration	35,328	General education
3	12,850	Criminal justice and fire protection	31,570	Psychology
4	10,915	Nursing	30,755	General business
5	10,500	Elementary education	26,791	Accounting
6	9,766	Accounting	26,050	Nursing
7	9,217	Psychology	21,919	Biology
8	8,585	General business	20,751	Criminal justice and fire protection
9	7,655	Biology	17,306	Elementary education
10	4,821	English language and literature	16,124	Marketing and marketing research

Source: 2019 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.

Thus, these data show a greater prevalence of employment in law enforcement and criminal justice and to a certain degree in the energy sector among Latinos living on the border compared to those living in other parts of the state. Yet, persons working in these occupations and industries or who have majored in criminal justice represent a small share of the overall workforce or majors of college graduates in the border region. Still, there are likely to be spillover effects of influence, as family and friends associated with these jobs and diploma holders recognize their economic interests.

Third, the state and national Democratic leadership needs to stop taking Texas Latino voters for granted. It is understandable that with limited resources, the Democratic Party targets particular races that are competitive to maximize their political gains across the state. Yet, in the process, the party stands to face an erosion of Latino support. The national Democratic Party additionally has regularly viewed Texas as a Republican stronghold and has not invested much in cultivating the Latino vote. Only toward the close of the presidential race did the national Democratic Party pay any attention to Texas, sending Kamala Harris at the eleventh-and-a-half hour to the Valley, which proved to be too little, too late.

One of the key takeaways from the results of a large national Equis Lab survey of Latinos, which includes respondents from the Rio Grande Valley, is that “This is a story of turnout **and** persuasion. Some analysis makes the mistake of treating the Latino electorate as static from election to election, when in fact it is incredibly dynamic and fast-changing.”⁶ The message is clear: the Democratic Party needs to consistently engage and pursue the Latino vote. It would be wise for the Texas and national Democratic leadership to court Texas Latinos as they woo white suburban voters. Without such a change, Democrats will continue to see Republicans extend their political dominance. As Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, executive director of NextGen America, asserts “Invest in Latinos everywhere....Spend money on Latinos. Speak to them early and make sure you understand the regional and cultural differences.”⁸ I add that the Texas Democratic Party needs to field more Latino candidates for office throughout the state.

Fourth, summarizing the above three lessons, the Democratic Party needs to recognize the reality of the Latino vote in Texas. A major research project funded by Texas Organizing Project led by Cecilia Ballí aptly paints the diverse portrait of the Latino political landscape in our state. Ballí and her colleagues conducted in-depth interviews with more than 100 Latinos who are eligible to vote in Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, El Paso, and the Rio Grande Valley. In contrast to the cursory survey queries that provide surface information, these are deep conversations tapping at the roots of why Latinos vote, do not vote, and their identification with particular political parties. Their findings clearly reveal the complexity of the Latino voters and potential voters.

From this study, Cecilia Ballí wrote a very important article outlining their findings.⁹ This article will be the playbook for how we go forward. What emerges from these deep conversations does not jive with what we on the left typically project on our Latino community. To a certain extent there are Latino voters who are deeply politically conscious and understand the structural racist and discriminatory aspects of Texas politics. However, there are telling additional findings. First, many Latinos continue to be on the political sidelines. Generations of their family members have never or rarely voted and politics is

⁸ Arelis R. Hernández and Brittney Martin, “Why Texas’s Overwhelming Latino Rio Grande Valley Turned Toward Trump,” *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/texas-latino-republicans/2020/11/09/17a15422-1f92-11eb-ba21-f2f001f0554b_story.html.

⁹ Cecilia Ballí, “Don’t Call Texas’s Latino Voters the ‘Sleeping Giant,’” *Texas Monthly*, November 2020, <https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/dont-call-texas-latino-voters-sleeping-giant/>.

not discussed much. These individuals are largely concerned with making ends meet, they view people in power as not caring about the interests of common people, and they cannot make a link between governmental policy and their lives. Second, many Latino voters consider themselves as independent, even when they vote consistently for one party. Why? Because they do not see either party engaging them, they do not come from families who have voted or voted consistently for a particular party, and many hold ideologically mixed views on political issues—such as abortion, gun rights, and immigration—that cut across political parties. Even more educated Latino voters report that they feel that both parties do not represent their interests. Furthermore, Latino Trump supporters, who Ballí concedes are the most difficult to understand, have specific commonalities: they are conservatives who see that the middle class is being forced to provide for the less well-to-do, people game the system that hurts their own interests, and they compete directly in the job market with immigrants who work for lower wages.

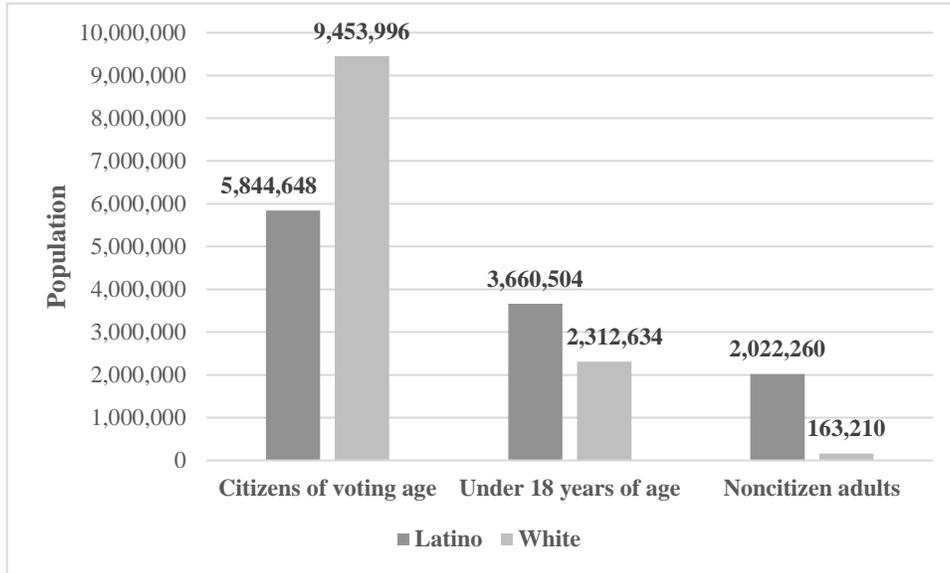
The major takeaways are that Latinos are not an easy political group to profile and demography is not destiny. We see growing numbers of Latinos in the state, but it will not automatically turn to political strength given the internal political diversity among Latinos and a Democratic Party that has taken the Latino vote largely for granted and not taken the time to know them.

The political reality of Latinos as the new numerical majority

Over the last several decades, demographers have been demonstrating that eventually Latinos will replace whites as the state's largest racial or ethnic group. This reality is projected to take place next year. In many ways, Latino political leaders have been savoring this moment. Yet, lesson learned from the previous section: numbers do not translate directly to political strength.

The latest estimates for 2019 show 11.5 million Latinos compared to 11.9 million whites. Whites have an overall population advantage of 402,000 over Latinos, but the reality in the ballot box is that the white advantage is much larger due to half of Latinos being ineligible to vote because they are either less than 18 years of age or are not U.S. citizens. When it comes to citizens of voting age, there are 3.6 million more white than Latino eligible voters (Figure 1). It is difficult to erode that disadvantage in the short run. Yet, political coalitions could help the cause given that there are approximately the same number of eligible voters who are Latino or other persons of color as there are white eligible voters.

Figure 1. Texas Latino and White Population by Voter Eligibility Classification, 2019



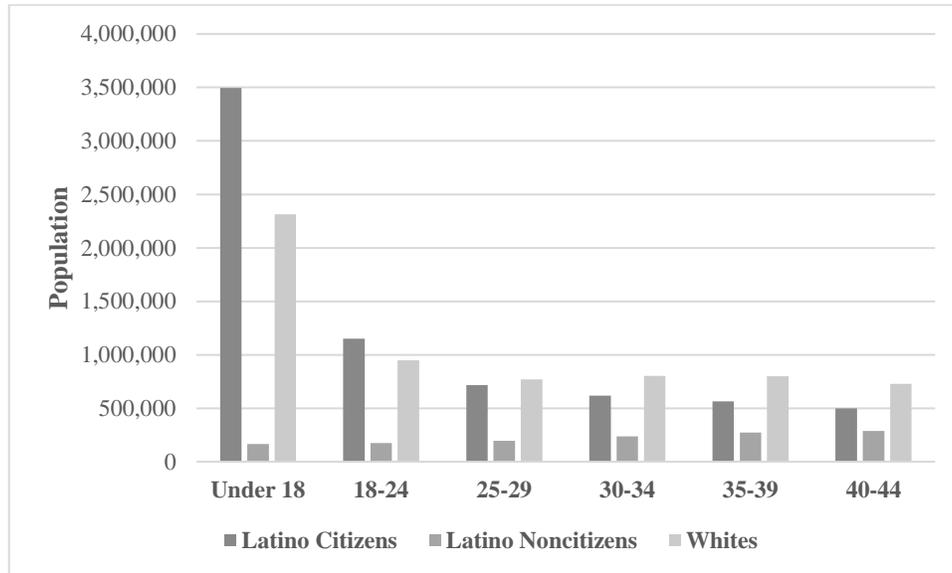
Source: 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

The Latino-white age divide and the future of Texas politics

The age divide between Latinos and whites will be important over the long run. Currently, whites are the numerical majority in age groups at 45 and older with Latinos outnumbering whites in ages younger than 45. Nonetheless, a certain portion of Latinos between the ages of 25 and 44 are not U.S. citizens with whites maintaining an advantage at these ages when we focus exclusively on citizens of voting age.

However, Latino citizens outnumber whites at all ages under 25. This is the sweet spot in the Latino demography. Among citizens who are 20 to 24 years of age, Latinos hold an advantage of 106,000 over whites. Latinos have a much greater numerical advantage over whites among persons who are today less than 18 years of age. There are nearly 1.2 million more Latinos than whites who are less than 18 years of age today and who are U.S. citizens. Add the 165,000 Latino children who currently are not U.S. citizens and provide them a path to citizenship and the Latino advantage becomes even greater. Right now, more than 203,000 Latinos turn age 18 every year and the vast majority—96 percent—are U.S. citizens.

Figure 2. Texas Latino Population by Citizenship Status and Whites in Selected Age Categories, 2019



Source: 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

Again, however, we need to realize that despite these watershed numbers, this still represents potential political power. We need to ensure that today’s Latino youth are politically engaged and with a constant message from family, educators, community leaders, and nonprofit organizations about the importance for them being civically active in their communities. We also need to press high schools to ensure that students who turn age 18 have the opportunity to register to vote. There is so much potential here and from where we will draw our future political leaders.

Results of 2020 Census and Latino role in Texas growth

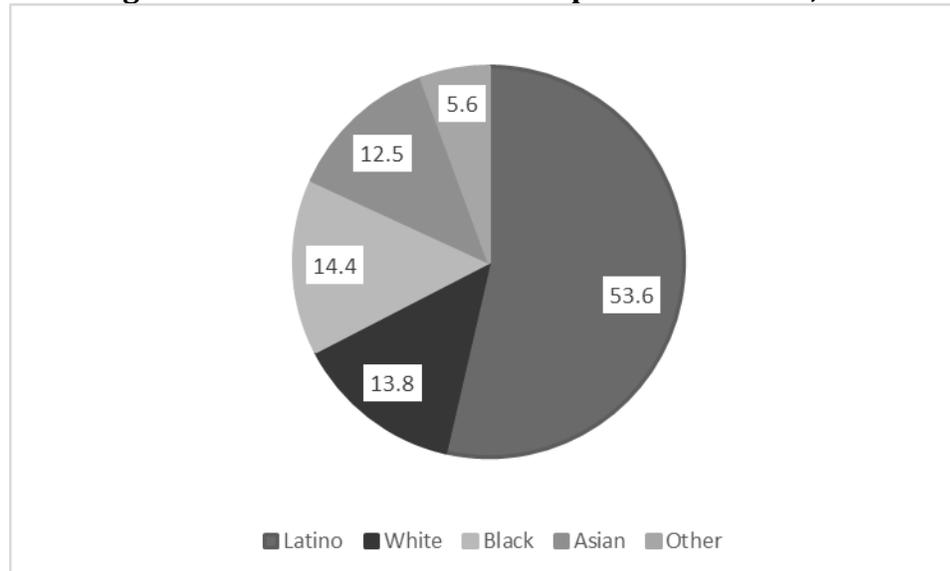
The U.S. Census Bureau just released the national and state tallies of the population counted in the 2020 census. The state totals were used to allocate the 435 congressional seats. Seven states, including California, lost one congressional seat, while six states added one congressional seat with Texas being the big winner gaining two seats. Actually, Texas was projected to gain three congressional seats, but this did not materialize. My colleague Dudley Poston and I recently argue that Texas surrendered the third seat due to Governor Abbott’s failure to invest funds and actively urge Texans to be counted in the census.¹⁰ It is very likely that Latinos, in particular, were undercounted in the census. Trump tried unsuccessfully to insert a citizenship question in the census and sought to omit unauthorized immigrants from the population counts, efforts to discourage Latinos and undocumented immigrants from participating in the census due to fear and uncertainty.

¹⁰ Dudley L. Poston, Jr. and Rogelio Sáenz, “How Abbott Cost Texas a House Seat,” *San Antonio Express-News*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.expressnews.com/opinion/commentary/article/Commentary-How-Abbott-cost-Texas-a-House-seat-16159960.php>.

The growth in the state’s population during the decade has been due primarily to growth in the Latino population and other groups of color. The latest population estimates broken down by race and ethnicity are for 2019. Between 2010 and 2019, the Texas population rose by 15.3 percent. The Latino population grew by 21.8 percent, slightly faster than the Black population (19.3%), while the Asian population increased the most rapidly at 50.8 percent. The white population increased the slowest at 4.7 percent over the decade.

Texas added approximately 3.9 million persons to its population between 2010 and 2019. Latinos accounted for 54 percent of the overall state growth with the other groups of color contributing nearly 33 percent (Figure 3). Overall, of every seven persons added to the Texas population between 2010 and 2019, approximately four were Latino, two other persons of color, and only one was white. Thus, Latinos and, more broadly, all persons of color were largely responsible for the two congressional seats that Texas received. It is anticipated that Republicans will use gerrymandering and related political ploys to dilute the Latino and Black vote this fall when political redistricting begins.

Figure 3. Percentage Distribution of the Texas Population Growth, 2010 to 2019



Sources: 2010 Decennial Census and 2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates.

The Republican pushback

It is this demographic strength of Latinos that Republicans have tried to quash over the last three decades with the passage of laws to make it more difficult to vote and to suppress the Latino vote. The current Texas legislative session has clearly shown the strategy that Republicans will take to keep Latinos from translating their growing numbers into political power. In the political sphere, Republicans have enacted voter suppression laws that serve to intimidate voters, encourage vigilante observers at the ballot box, and criminalize the process of voting—all efforts to quell the state’s demographic shift through voter

suppression.¹¹ In the educational sphere, Republicans have established policies that bar the teaching of critical race theory in public schools with the intent of doing away with instruction of the role of racism in the continual subjugation of people of color.¹² These two pieces of legislation are intended to support the status quo and the Republican political dominance. Come fall, as noted earlier, we will also see the gerrymandering and political ploys that Republicans will use in the drawing of congressional districts to enhance their political power. Never mind that the two new congressional seats that Texas received were due to the disproportionate growth of Latinos alongside African Americans and Asians.

Conclusion

I have provided an overview of where we, as Latinos, stand today several months after the 2020 presidential election that held much possibility after inroads that Democrats made in the 2018 midterm election. The anticipation of turning Texas blue simply did not materialize. We learned important lessons from the November 2020 election with the major realization that our struggle to gain political power will be difficult. Our growing numbers will not simply turn into political power. The current Texas legislative session has resulted in Republican legislative weapons—voter suppression laws and the barring of the teaching of critical race theory in public schools—that are intended to ensure that Latinos do not translate their growing numbers into political power that would erode Republican political dominance in the state.

Republicans have additionally developed policies that hurt people of color and the poor including the opposition to the expansion of Medicaid and improvement of the conditions of workers. The Republican leadership has particularly shown their lack of concern for Latinos, Blacks, and the poor during the pandemic. Throughout the COVID-19 era, Latinos, in particular, have accounted for the greatest numbers of persons statewide who have lost their lives to COVID-19.¹³ I estimated that at the close of 2020 Latinos who had died from this disease had, on average, another 20 years of potential life left were it not for COVID-19.¹⁴ We desperately need to elect political leaders who are going to invest in our future and who will keep us safe during a pandemic or a severe winter storm like the recent one that immobilized the state and killed more than 100 Texans.¹⁵

¹¹ Al Kauffman, “New Dangers in Texas Voting Bills,” *San Antonio Express-News*, May 12, 2021, <https://www.expressnews.com/opinion/commentary/article/Commentary-Texas-voting-bills-are-more-dangerous-16172122.php>.

¹² Patrick Svitek, “Texas Public Schools Couldn’t Require Critical Race Theory Lessons Under Bill Given House Approval,” *The Texas Tribune*, May 11, 2021, <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/05/11/critical-race-theory-texas-schools-legislature/>.

¹³ Rogelio Sáenz, “For Latinos, the COVID-19 Trends Are Getting Worse—and the Worst May Be Yet to Come,” *Poynter*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2020/for-latinos-the-covid-19-trends-are-getting-worse-and-the-worst-may-be-yet-to-come/>.

¹⁴ Anna Kuchment, Holly K. Hacker, and Dianne Solis, “COVID’S Untold Story: Texas Blacks and Latinos Are Dying at the Prime of Their Lives,” December 19, 2020, <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2020/12/19/covids-untold-story-texas-blacks-and-latinos-are-dying-in-the-prime-of-their-lives/>.

¹⁵ Shawn Mulcahy, “At Least 111 People Died in Texas During Winter Storm, Most from Hypothermia,” *The Texas Tribune*, March 25, 2021,

We will all need to up our political game in order to turn the corner on this disastrous political course. The future of our families and our children is at stake.

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<https://www.texastribune.org/2021/03/25/texas-deaths-winter-storm/>.