

BY MARK P. JONES, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR | 11/24/21

# Hispanic support for Republicans' hardline immigration policies may keep Texas red



Democratic hopes for turning Texas blue hinge heavily on winning the vote of a large majority of the state's growing Hispanic population. Democrats often contrast their progressive policies on immigration and border security with the more conservative policies advocated by Republicans as a reason why their share of the Hispanic vote will increase.

And yet, when Texas Hispanics are asked about their opinions on immigration and border policies, their preferences tend to align more with those of Republicans than Democrats.

Many Democrats were convinced that Donald Trump's conservative, and at times offensive, policies on immigration and border security would alienate Hispanics to such an extent that they would flock in droves to the Democratic Party in 2020. Instead, according to exit polls, Trump won 32 percent of the Latino vote nationally (up from 28 percent in 2016) and 41 percent of the Latino vote in Texas (up from 34 percent in 2016). In the Rio Grande Valley's two most populous counties (Hidalgo and Cameron; directly across the border from Mexico), where Hispanics account for more than 90 percent of the population, Trump won 41 percent and 43 percent of the vote in 2020 (up from 28 percent and 32 percent, respectively, in 2016).

In late October the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation conducted a representative public opinion survey of 1,402 Texas registered voters, including 616 Texas Hispanics, who are the focus here.

The survey results reveal that more Texas Hispanics support than oppose four out of five of the border security policies that have been implemented by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott on his own via executive actions or through legislation passed by the Texas Legislature

under the leadership of Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan.

Twice as many Texas Hispanics support (51 percent) than oppose (25 percent) the Texas policy of having Department of Public Safety (DPS) officers and local law enforcement arrest immigrants who cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally. (The remaining 24 percent neither support nor oppose the policy.)

Far more Hispanics support dispatching DPS officers (48 percent) and Texas National Guard soldiers (46 percent) to patrol along the border than oppose these policies (30 percent and 32 percent).

A narrow plurality of Texas Hispanics even supports spending \$1.5 billion of state funds annually on border security, funds that could be used instead to help address documented needs in Texas public schools, where more than half of the students are Hispanic.

The only Texas policy opposed by a plurality of Texas Hispanics is the state building a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, which is opposed by 45 percent, but is nonetheless still supported by 38 percent.

The closer one gets to the South Texas-Mexico border, the greater the level of support among Texas Hispanics for Republicans' border security policies. This is a problem for congressional Democrats, since under the new Republican-drawn Texas congressional map, only three congressional districts (the 15th, 23rd and 28th) are considered to be competitive, and all three are located either in whole or part in South Texas, with two presently held by Democrats and one by a Republican.

Turning to federal immigration policies, if national Democrats believe creating more open borders and

making it easier for immigrants to seek asylum will significantly boost their support among Hispanics, they are likely mistaken, at least in regard to the Lone Star State.

When it comes to increasing the number of immigrants allowed into the United States from Mexico and Central America, Texas Hispanics are evenly split, with 39 percent in opposition and 37 percent in support. This is a policy that has an adverse impact on the Democratic Party's ability to generate support within the Anglo (non-Hispanic white) community. In Texas, 59 percent of whites oppose this policy, compared to 25 percent who support it.

On the related policy of increasing the number of refugees and asylum seekers allowed into the United States, 42 percent of Texas Hispanics oppose this policy compared to 35 percent who support it. And while this policy is at best a breakeven proposition among Texas Hispanics, it is quite unpopular among Anglo Texans, 59 percent of whom oppose it compared to 27 percent who support it.

Both Gov. Abbott and President Biden are underwater in regard to Texas Hispanic approval of their handling of the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border. But Abbott (42 percent approve/48 percent disapprove) is far closer to the surface than Biden (35 percent/55 percent).

Texas Hispanics will in large part determine whether Texas remains red or turns purple or even blue this decade. For years commentators have predicted Texas would turn blue as the Hispanic share of the state population increased, to the point where in 2022 it will eclipse the Anglo population.

But that prediction depended on Hispanics voting overwhelmingly for Democrats, something not seen in the Lone Star State, where statewide GOP candidates continue to win between 35 percent and 45 percent of the Hispanic vote.

If current Hispanic support for Republican immigration policies is any signal, we can expect Texas Republicans to maintain the backing of roughly two-fifths of Texas Hispanic voters in the 2022 midterms. This would mean the continuation of the Republican statewide winning streak that dates back to 1996 and a GOP net gain of between one and three U.S. House seats. This advantage could prove pivotal to the Republican effort to retake control of the U.S. House.

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