

Sioux, and Crow Creek tribes went solidly for Biden. In Oglala Lakota County, which overlaps the Oglala Sioux Tribe's Pine Ridge reservation, Biden won 88 percent of the vote. In Todd County, which overlaps the Rosebud Sioux reservation, Biden won 77 percent.

Additionally, Indigenous candidates did well. Six Native candidates, a historic high, were elected to the U.S. Congress in 2020. New Mexico made history by becoming the second state after Hawaii whose delegation to the U.S. Congress was made up entirely of women of color, two of whom were Native. That success is in addition to dozens of state and local offices to which Native candidates were elected, 11 of whom were elected to state office in Arizona.

As Harvill stated, the 2020 elections illuminated the importance of the Native vote. That vote is only likely to grow as an increasingly young Native population enters the electorate. Harvill maintains that Native American voters will likely become one of the defining groups of the American electorate, much like Latinx and Black voters.

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Latinx Voting Behavior: Key Insights from Recent Presidential Elections

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Since the time of the Chicano civil rights movement, the Latinx community has emerged as an influential and politically active constituency and done so in a resolute, expanding, and multifaceted manner (e.g., see Affigne, Hu-DeHart, and Orr 2014; Bedolla 2014). What scholars refer to as the “Latinx” (or Hispanic) community is a very richly diverse population made up of many generations of people from different countries of origin, cultures, ideologies, and dialects. Media coverage of Latinos often oversimplifies the population as immigrants from

Mexico now living in the United States. However, Latinx immigrants hail from all corners of Latin America and beyond and have assorted political backgrounds, while many other Latinos today are native-born Americans thoroughly acculturated in American principles and politics. And yet despite the many differences, Latinos of all backgrounds experience shared commonalities, often referred to as pan-ethnic connections. As the U.S. Latinx population has grown substantially in size, Latinos of various Latin American origins have grown closer in residential proximity to one another, have experienced a growth in shared interests as they have worked to assimilate into U.S. society, and have become more socially and politically active, often uniting behind key issues (Monforti 2014).

Over the last half century, the Latinx vote was often referred to as a “sleeping giant,” denoting a significantly growing population that had yet to realize its full potential as a powerful voting bloc. More recently, however, that perception has been replaced with the sense that Latinos are a political constituency to be reckoned with. The Latinx vote has increasingly affected and helped determine major election outcomes, including for critical presidential elections. Outreach to Latinos in an election cycle can pay dividends, while any time a candidate takes Latinos for granted, it usually results in a loss of political prospects and electoral support. Just as importantly, the rich diversity of the Latinx community provides ample opportunity for political officials and candidates of all stripes to compete for and earn the Latinx vote. This essay focuses on a few key insights from some of the most recent presidential elections to illustrate just how critical and influential the Latinx vote—and competing for that vote—has become.

In modern U.S. history, particularly since the civil rights movements during the presidencies of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, the Democratic Party has sought to expand its voting base by more actively courting Latinos and other minority constituencies, both symbolically and substantively. Consequently, Democratic candidates have typically

fared much better than Republicans in pursuing the Latinx vote. In recent presidential elections, Democrats have garnered up to as much as two-thirds of the overall Latinx vote, while Republicans have often struggled to keep above a 30 percent threshold to remain competitive overall. However, President George W. Bush's 2004 reelection campaign managed to buck the Latinx voting trend to a significant degree, aided in part by the relatively timid Latinx outreach of his opponent, Senator John Kerry. While Kerry took the Latinx vote for granted vis-à-vis a relatively nominal effort to directly engage the Latinx community, the campaign of President Bush, who had served as governor of Texas prior to his presidency, actively promoted his Spanish "Viva Bush" slogan, ran numerous bilingual television and radio ads, and touted a "compassionate conservative" policy agenda that catered to both traditional religious moral values and social programs (such as Bush's "No Child Left Behind" educational policy), which connected with many segments of the Latinx population.

As election night unfolded in 2004, news outlets took note that Bush had clearly overperformed among Latinos compared to past Republican nominees, earning as much as 44 percent of their vote (although the exact Latinx vote percentage was difficult to confirm due to some limitations with the exit polling data employed; see Leal et al. 2005; Suro, Fry, and Passel 2005). Thanks in part to that achievement, Bush went on to a clear reelection victory. Despite falling short of a majority of Latinx support, Bush's success in courting a much higher than typical percentage of Latinx voters proved a critical factor in aiding his reelection.

The impact of the Latinx vote became even more evident in 2012. The presidential election that year between Democratic incumbent Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney became an historical "watershed moment," when the Latinx vote was most plausibly the decisive factor in the final vote outcome (Segura and Barreto 2012). In terms of the popular vote, Obama won the final vote margin by 2.8 percent,

but it would not have turned out that way without the net 5.4 percent Latinx vote contribution that boosted Obama's overall vote advantage in the popular vote. Still, presidential elections are won by Electoral College votes, not the popular vote, and Obama benefited most critically across key swing state victories that fashioned his 332–206 Electoral College triumph. Across five key swing states—Colorado (9 electoral votes), Nevada (6), New Mexico (5), Florida (29), and Ohio (20)—Obama's net Latinx vote contributions were vital in determining the final results (Segura and Barreto 2012). In Colorado, Obama's +4.7 percent final margin of victory was made possible by the +10.9 percent net vote contribution from Latinx voters, who made up 14.1 percent of the total state vote. Overall, Obama received 87 percent of the Latinx vote in Colorado, compared to Romney's dismal 10 percent. Obama's Nevada and New Mexico Electoral College victories were similarly impressive, with Obama garnering a +10.5 percent net Latinx contribution amid an overall 6.6 percent margin of victory in Nevada, while the New Mexico victory was doubly impressive, with a +22.2 percent net Latinx contribution to his 9.9 percent overall margin of victory. Meanwhile, Florida proved to be a nail-biter as usual, with Obama barely edging out Romney 50 percent to 49.1 percent (a slim +0.9 percent victory margin!) on the strength of a critical +3.1 percent net Latinx vote contribution. Florida Latinos, who made up 17.4 percent of the state's voters, favored Obama 58 percent to 40 percent. Finally, one must also note that in Ohio, which Obama narrowly won by a +1.9 percent margin, the president was victorious because of a +1.4 percent Latinx vote contribution and strong support from other key constituencies, including African Americans. In total, these states represented 69 critical Electoral College votes that helped put Obama over the top. Without the Latinx vote in those key states, it would have been a much tighter race, and Obama's total might have fallen to 263 Electoral College votes—just below the 270 threshold needed to win.

Aside from the vote margins of Obama's victory, what was it that helped the incumbent garner another four years in the White House? To put things in perspective, one can consider a few key survey results among Latinx voters. With respect to Latinx outreach and responsiveness to community needs, 66 percent of Latinos viewed Obama as someone who cared about the Latinx community, whereas only 14 percent of Latinos saw Romney that way (see Segura and Barreto 2012). In fact, 56 percent of Latinos thought Romney did not care that much about the Latinx community, and another 18 percent even viewed Romney as hostile toward Latinos—compared to only 23 percent and 3 percent, respectively, for Obama. Another driving factor underlying Obama's strong Latinx support may have been Obama's deferred action policy on behalf of Latinx immigrant "Dreamers." After Obama undertook this policy the summer before the election, pollsters found an overall +52 percent net increase in enthusiastic feelings across the Latinx community toward Obama. By contrast, Romney's embrace of "self-deportation" for undocumented immigrants in America (as an alternative to outright deportation roundups) was widely criticized as a poorly conceived policy position based on the questionable belief that economic woes in the United States would entice them back to their home countries, presumably Mexico and other parts of Latin America (Madison 2012).

In the aftermath of the 2012 election, the Republican National Committee prepared and released a comprehensive "autopsy" that called for a more inclusive party, with more robust outreach efforts to Latinos (Walshe 2013). Despite its calls for internal reform to make the GOP more minority- and Latinx-friendly, the party went in another direction when Donald Trump entered the fray of presidential politics in the summer of 2015. Trump took the Republican Party by storm with his presidential announcement speech, in which he falsely mischaracterized Mexican immigrants by claiming, "When Mexico sends its people, they're not sending their best. . . . They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists.

And some, I assume, are good people” (Lee 2015). But rather than draw ire and widespread criticism from Republican voters, Trump’s fiery populist and nativist campaign strategy (often fueled by racial resentment) was enthusiastically embraced. Trump subsequently dominated all primary campaign coverage and beat out 16 other, more mainstream, Republican candidates for the GOP presidential nomination. He went on to defeat Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton in stunning fashion with a narrow Electoral College victory in 2016. Trump secured the White House despite losing the popular vote and garnering merely 28 percent of the Latinx vote (Krogstad and Lopez 2016). Thereafter, during his term in office, Trump’s xenophobic and racist rhetoric extended and often blurred the lines between immigrants and native racial/ethnic minorities, while his most controversial policies—including family separation, pushbacks against refugees and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals recipients, various travel bans, defense of racial profiling tactics, and a project to build a massive border wall between Mexico and the United States—garnered widespread criticism. They were blamed by critics for deepening racial tensions and imposing hardships on immigrants, Latinos, and various other minorities (see Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021).

Trump’s subsequent tumultuous term in office was marked by immigration policies that critics called inhumane, divisive politics, and a mismanaged COVID-19 pandemic response leaving hundreds of thousands dead, which set the stage for his own electoral defeat in the 2020 election. Trump once again lost the Latino vote (32 percent) in 2020, but he still managed to slightly improve from his first run in that respect and pulled a few better-than-expected outcomes at the state level, including a margin of 56 percent to 41 percent over Biden among Cuban Americans voters in Florida (Sonneland 2020).

Much like his overall base of support that remained firm throughout his term, Trump’s base of Latinx support also remained loyal despite his many controversial actions,

demonstrating that partisan and ideological loyalty also dwell firmly among Latinos who generally identify as Republican or pro-Trump. On the flipside, Joe Biden ran a successful campaign with extensive, positive outreach to Latinos through an “empathy offensive” that sought to stimulate political unity across racial/ethnic lines. Biden ultimately garnered 66 percent of the Latinx vote amid a record turnout for which he reaped an all-time high 81 million votes and essentially flipped the Electoral College map results of 2016, thereby making him the 46th president of the United States. These election results also made his running mate, Kamala Harris, the country’s first female and first African American and South Asian descendent elected vice president. Biden’s victory was underscored by his explicit and intentional use of empathy as a foundational principle and rhetorical tool to connect with and unify public support, including among Latinos (see Sirin, Valentino, and Villalobos 2021). However, it was complicated by Trump’s relentless efforts to delegitimize the election outcome itself. Trump’s false claims of voter fraud culminated with the horrific January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. This riot delayed but did not derail Congress’s official certification of Biden’s Electoral College victory.

As with the other electoral presidential victories of George W. Bush and Barack Obama highlighted above, Biden’s 2020 election victory lent additional credence to the notion that candidates who make greater efforts to reach out and respond to Latinos are more likely to fare well at the end of their campaigns. Looking forward more broadly, political observers emphasize that American political parties and their flagship candidates will need to put in the work to earn and sustain Latinx votes if they wish to survive politically in the long term.

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