

Reversion to the Mean, or their Version of the Dream? An Analysis of Latino Voting in 2020*

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Abstract

In 2020, support for Joe Biden among Latina/o/x voters was 8 percentage points lower than support for Hillary Clinton in 2016, the largest drop of any racial/ethnic group. While much media and academic attention has focused on understanding the impact of misinformation, COVID concerns, and racial animus on Latino voters in 2020, we take a step back and clarify the demographic and core ideological characteristics of Latino voters who voted for Donald Trump in 2020. Using a mix of national survey data, precinct returns, and voter file records, and disaggregating components of electoral change, we find evidence of an increasing alignment between Latinos' ideology, issue positions and vote choice. Correspondingly, we observe significant pro-Trump shifts among working-class Latinos and modest evidence of a pro-Trump shift among newly-engaged U.S.-born Latino children of immigrants and Catholic Latinos. The results point to a more durable Republican shift than currently assumed.

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1 Introduction

Latina/o/x support for Biden in 2020 was 8 percentage points lower than support for Clinton in 2016, the largest drop of any racial/ethnic group.¹ Given the increasing competitiveness of presidential elections, these shifts led pundits and academics to speculate about the causes and consequences of Latinos drifting from the Democratic Party. Though these electoral shifts re-ignited interest in Latino politics, the specter of GOP gains among Latinos has always been present (de la Garza and Cortina 2007).

While many Latinos identify as conservative and vote Republican, Latino Democratic support has increased over time. Recent research shows evidence of a threat-mobilization relationship (Bowler, Nicholson and Segura 2006; Barreto and Collingwood 2015; Gutierrez et al. 2019). Scholars document a growing aversion to the Republican Party, owing to the GOP's championing of restrictionist policies and embrace of xenophobic rhetoric. This is broadly consistent with social identity research, which considers threat to be a potent activator of identity strength (Mackie, Devos and Smith 2000). Trump support among Latinos ought to have reached a nadir after four years of immigration restrictionism. Yet, Trump made gains in majority Latino areas across the nation.²

Are these changes durable? On one hand, some suggest working-class and ideologically conservative Latinos supported Trump more in 2020, mirroring mass-level increases in educational and ideological polarization (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano and Piketty 2022), pointing to lasting shifts in partisan loyalties. On the other hand, historical voting patterns among Latinos reveal significant ebbs and flows in Republican support.³ 2020 could be a “reversion to the mean,” with 2016 serving as a high Democratic watermark.

¹According to Catalist, Biden's 2020 two-way voteshare estimate among Latinos was 63%, whereas Clinton's estimated 2016 two-way voteshare was 71% (<https://catalist.us/wh-national/>).

²<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/12/20/us/politics/election-hispanics-asians-voting.html>

³<https://centerforpolitics.org/crystalball/articles/are-latinos-deserting-the-democratic-party-evidence-from-the-exit-polls/>

We unpack the 2020 “Latino shift,” which has mostly been described in aggregate terms, by examining the electoral behavior of Latino subgroups. We leverage surveys to show which Latino subgroups contributed *net* votes for Trump in 2020. We also decompose components of change into shifts in turnout, vote choice, and group size using the approach outlined by Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau (2022). We find that Trump improved within subgroups already disposed to favor Republicans, indicating a more durable change in Latino voting. Specifically, we find a stronger alignment between issue positions/ideology and 2020 votechoice, as Trump gained net votes among blocs defined by criminal justice and immigration attitudes, as well as Latinos who describe themselves as very conservative, Catholic, and lower socio-economic status (SES). These gains are attributable to rightward swings as opposed to (de)mobilization, with the notable exceptions of college-educated Latinos and partisans whose attachments remained stable. Analyzing precinct returns and voterfile data, we see that places with more immigrants and lower SES shifted rightward.

2 Our Contribution

The Appendix provides an extended literature review; however, evidence exists for both stability and instability in Latino voting. The potential for Republican gains among Latinos has long been recognized (de la Garza and Cortina 2007), but unrealized (Barreto and Collingwood 2015). The 2020 election is theoretically important since a shift toward Trump occurred despite the presence of several conditions that could generate Latino bloc voting (e.g., threat). Latinos are still heavily Democratic-leaning, in both party identification and vote choice (Barreto and Segura 2014; Corral and Leal 2020). However, a deeper understanding of who shifted toward Trump may resolve the disconnect between recent political shifts among Latinos and the extant literature.

We seek to answer two questions related to 2020 Latino voter behavior: First, *which Latinos increased their support for Trump in 2020?* Here we draw on national surveys, precinct-level returns, and voter file data. Second, *will this increase in support transfer to other Republican candidates in*

the future? While speculative given that our analyses do not extend beyond the 2020 election, we study the characteristics of Latinos who contributed to Trump’s gains and/or shifted their support to Trump in order to get traction here.

We divide our analyses into two parts. First, we conduct a decomposition of the net votes Trump gained from Latinos in 2020 relative to 2016. Second, we use a combination of precinct returns and national voter file data to conduct an ecological analysis of areas with a disproportionate “Latino shift.” Though both approaches have limitations, we consider the use of both individual-level and ecological data as necessary, given wide variation in estimates of Latino opinion across different polls.⁴ To the extent that we find similar patterns across data sources, we can be more confident in our conclusions.

3 Results

3.1 Trump gained among low-SES and conservative Latinos

Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau (2022) contend that while models focused on changes in votechoice across elections can identify shifts in support for political parties/candidates, assessing how these shifts are translated into *vote totals* requires a different approach. A bloc’s contribution to election outcomes depends on three components – turnout, vote choice, and composition. Simply knowing if a voting bloc became more likely to vote for a candidate between elections is insufficient for knowing if that bloc produced a net increase in that candidate’s vote total. As Grimmer, Marble and Tanigawa-Lau (2022) show, one can estimate this “net votes” quantity within a given voting bloc x using the following equation:

⁴<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/have-latinos-really-moved-toward-the-republican-party/>

$$\begin{aligned}
\text{Diff Net}(x) = \text{Net Trump}_{2020}(x) - \text{Net Trump}_{2016}(x) = \\
\underbrace{(p(\text{Trump} \mid \text{turnout} = 1, x)_{2020} - p(\text{Biden} \mid \text{turnout} = 1, x)_{2020})}_{\text{Vote choice difference (2020)}} \overbrace{p(\text{turnout} = 1 \mid x)_{2020}}^{\text{Turnout rate (2020)}} \underbrace{p(x)_{2020}}_{\text{Composition (2020)}} - \\
\underbrace{(p(\text{Trump} \mid \text{turnout} = 1, x)_{2016} - p(\text{Clinton} \mid \text{turnout} = 1, x)_{2016})}_{\text{Vote choice difference (2016)}} \overbrace{p(\text{turnout} = 1 \mid x)_{2016}}^{\text{Turnout rate (2016)}} \underbrace{p(x)_{2016}}_{\text{Composition (2016)}}
\end{aligned}
\tag{1}$$

This equation clarifies the necessary components for calculating if a candidate gained votes from a bloc over time. The first component captures the percentage point difference in vote choice between Trump and his Democratic competitor within voting bloc x , the second component is x 's turnout rate, and finally, the third component is the share of the Latino electorate in voting bloc x . (See Appendix for further explanation.)

To better understand the role of different Latino voting blocs in 2020, we estimate Latino-specific survey weights using entropy balancing (Hainmueller 2012) and apply the Grimmer-Marble-Tanigawa-Lau (GMTL) decomposition to key political and demographic subgroups using data from the 2016 and 2020 CES. The principal advantages of the CES are the size of its Latino sample ($N_{2016} = 7,495$; $N_{2020} = 6,978$) and the inclusion of turnout and voter validation data. Given that we aim to make inferences about Latinos, we use entropy balancing to estimate Latino-specific weights using data from the 2016 and 2019 ACS.⁵ We assess if Trump observed increases in net votes from 2016 to 2020 among Latino subgroups based on age, sex, income, education, ancestry, generational status, partisanship, ideology, religion, crime policy attitudes, immigration attitudes, and social media usage. Given inconsistent survey items across CES surveys, item response theory (IRT) was used to place respondents on the same latent scale through the use of common items

⁵We generate Latino-specific weights with targets based on key demographics such as age, sex, education, national origin, foreign-born status, and state.

present in both 2016 and 2020 (see Appendix A7 for question wording and scale construction details).

Figure 1 presents estimates of net vote Trump increases from 2016 to 2020 with bootstrapped 95% confidence intervals (see Table A1 in the Appendix for estimates). Positive estimates indicate shifts in relative Trump support from 2016 to 2020, whereas negative estimates indicate shifts towards Biden. Observable shifts in votes for Trump from 2016 to 2020 were mostly contained within partisan, religious, ideological, and attitudinal voting blocs, such as Catholic, restrictionist, pro-police, partisan, and ideologically conservative Latinos. The picture beginning to be painted is that indicators for alignment with the Republican party most strongly predict Latino vote shifts, suggesting that shifts are sustainable and not necessarily specific to Trump or 2020 (i.e. COVID-19).

Patterns for demographic voting blocs were smaller, with considerable uncertainty in the estimates. Net vote increases of 2pp were observed among the least educated and lowest income quartile. Those with a college degree provided Biden with a net vote increase of approximately 1pp. This is consistent with a shift in the electorate in general, and thus again indicates the rightward shift among Latinos may be sticky. We observe suggestive evidence of a shift towards Trump among first-generation Latinos (i.e., American-born children of immigrants) ($p = .10$). Shifts towards Trump due to age, sex, social media use, ancestry, or geographic region are less discernible.

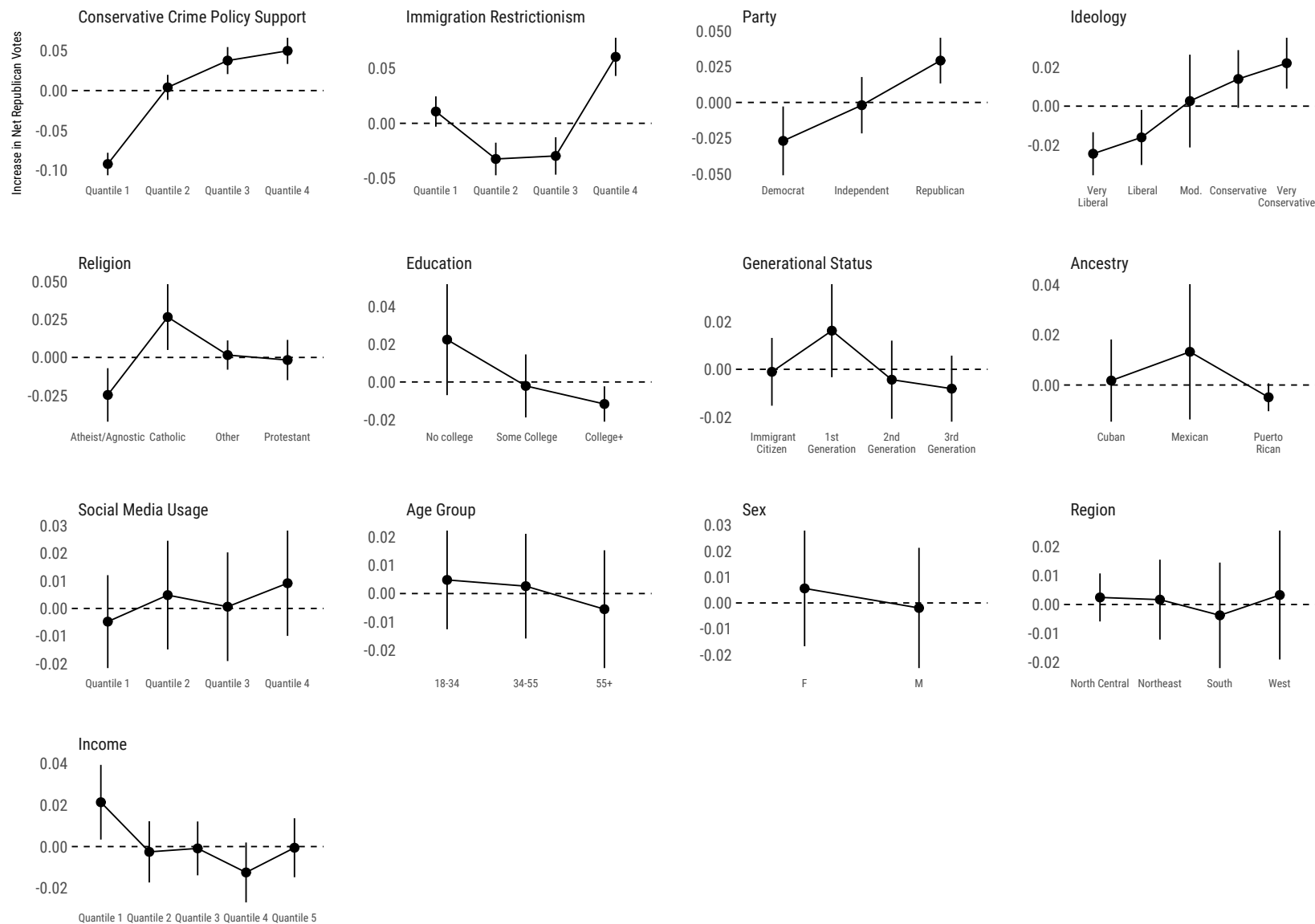


Figure 1: **Increase in net Republican votes from 2016 to 2020 among different Latino subgroups.** Positive scores indicate that Trump gained votes within a subgroup across elections. Negative scores indicate that Biden gained votes (relative to Clinton) across elections. Estimates are calculated for Latinos only.

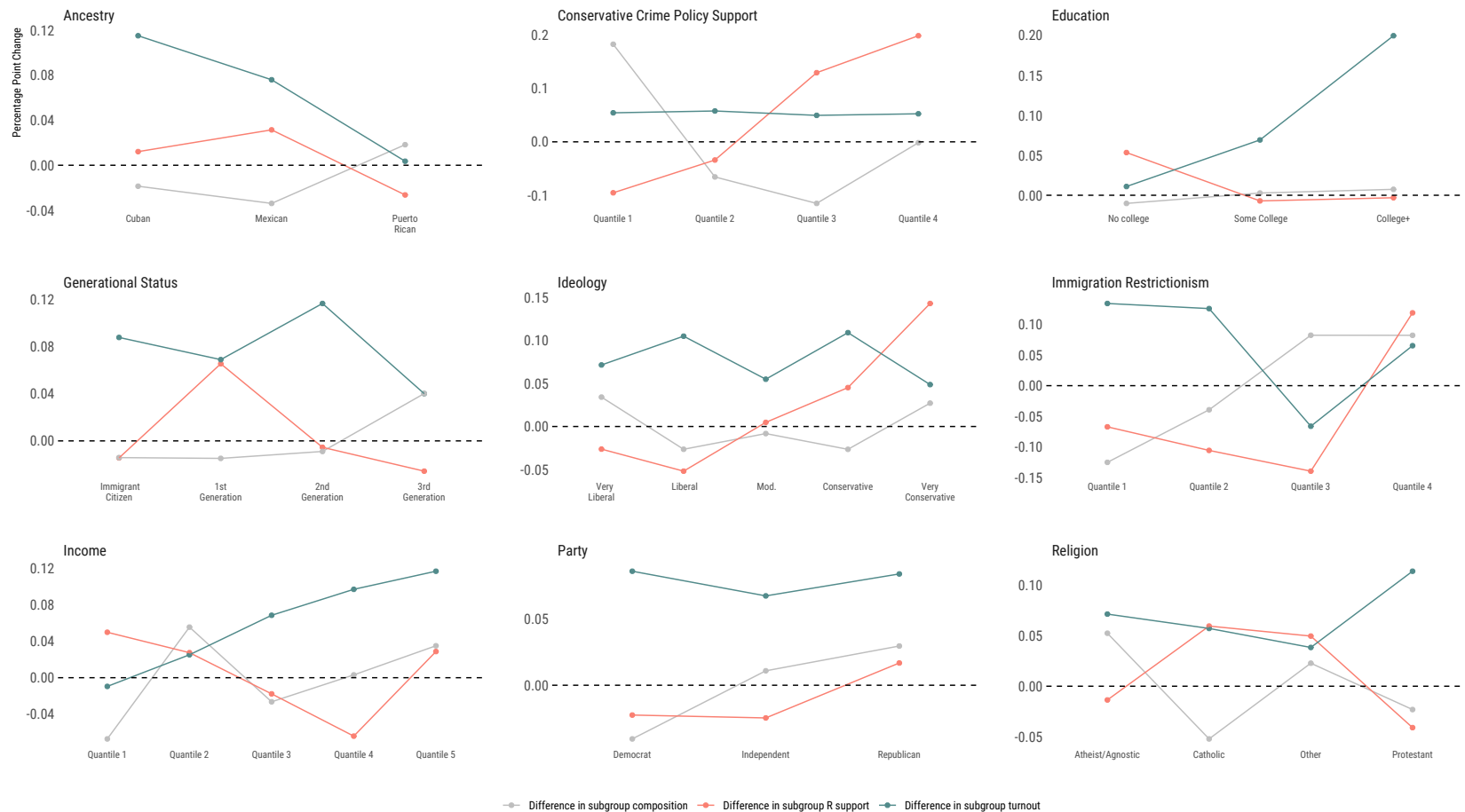


Figure 2: **Decomposition of net votes into changes in turnout rate, composition, and vote choice from 2016 to 2020 for voting blocs demonstrating discernible shifts towards Trump. Estimates are calculated for Latinos only.**

In Figure 2, we display the different components of the “net votes” estimand for the voting blocs that had statistically discernible shifts (see Table A2 in the Appendix for estimates). The figure displays percentage point changes from 2016-2020 with respect to the different components: turnout rate; Trump support; and group size. The closer the estimate of a component is to zero, the less likely it is to be an explanation for increases in net votes. Positive (negative) estimates for the turnout rate indicate that the voting bloc increased (decreased) its turnout from 2016 to 2020, positive (negative) estimates for the subgroup Republican support measure indicate that the subgroup increased (decreased) its probability of Trump vote from 2016 to 2020, and positive (negative) estimates for the composition measure indicate that a group grew (shrank) as a proportion of the electorate.

Shifts in Trump votechoice from 2016 to 2020 help explain net vote increases among voting blocs defined by conservative crime policy attitudes, generational status, and ideology. Turnout increases from 2016 to 2020 appear to be responsible for the net vote increases for Biden among those with a college degree. In other cases, a combination of changes in turnout, Trump vote, and/or composition is responsible for the observable shifts within voting blocs. For example, those scoring at the lower end of immigration restrictionism had a higher turnout rate in 2020 than 2016 *and* increased their support for Biden, but became a smaller proportion of the electorate. Those scoring at the upper end of the scale became more numerous, increased turnout, and increased Trump support in 2020 over 2016. Relative increases in Trump support among first-generation Latinos can be explained by a mixture of increased turnout and increased Trump vote choice, whereas shifts among low-income voters can mostly be attributed to votechoice. Gains among Catholics can be explained by changes in turnout and vote share, whereas gains among atheists/agnostics can mostly be explained by increases in turnout.

We find changes in vote choice among low SES and conservative Latino voting blocs generated increases in net votes for Trump. This is consistent with trends among White voters starting in 2016, and suggests that this rightward 2020 shift among Latinos may stick. In contrast, mobilization among voters with stable voting patterns who were already opposed to Trump (e.g., self-identified

Democrats, liberals, and college-educated voters) contributed to decreases in his vote totals. Our estimates are consistent with ideological sorting, rather than an increase in the share of conservative Latinos. As shown in Figure 2, the proportion of Latino conservatives stayed relatively consistent across surveys, there was just an increase in Trump support among this group.

3.2 Shift to Trump was geographically broad/concentrated in areas with low-SES, newly-activated Latinos

To further examine Latino voter shifts, we rely on official records of turnout and election results at the sub-county level. We identify the population of 2020 voters using individual-level voter file records from TargetSmart, a vendor that compiles voter registration and vote history data in each state, geocoding registrants' addresses and using a combination of given name, surname, and geographic context to model individual race/ethnicity. We aggregate the number of voters in 2020 by voting behavior in the 2018, 2016, and 2014 elections, along with sums of the modeled probabilities of voter race/ethnicity, to the Census tract level. We aggregate Census block-level 2016 and 2020 election results produced by the Voting and Election Science Team (VEST) to the 2020 Census tract level, merging the resultant election results with the voterfile-derived turnout totals.

To replicate the GMTL decomposition's focus on shifts, Figure 3 indicates the increase or decrease in Trump's two-party 2020 voteshare as compared to the 2016 election at the Census-tract level. There are broad *gains* in Trump voteshare in neighborhoods with substantial numbers of Latino voters.⁶ Here the trend is monotonically rising from 25% Latino onward, with an 80% Latino tract seeing a roughly 15pp increase in Trump two-party voteshare between 2016-2020. In the Appendix we show that these gains can be observed even outside Florida and Texas. Figure 3 indicates that Catalist's estimate of an 8pp increase in Latino Trump support may be conservative.

⁶Appendix Figures ??-?? isolate trends in Florida and Texas.

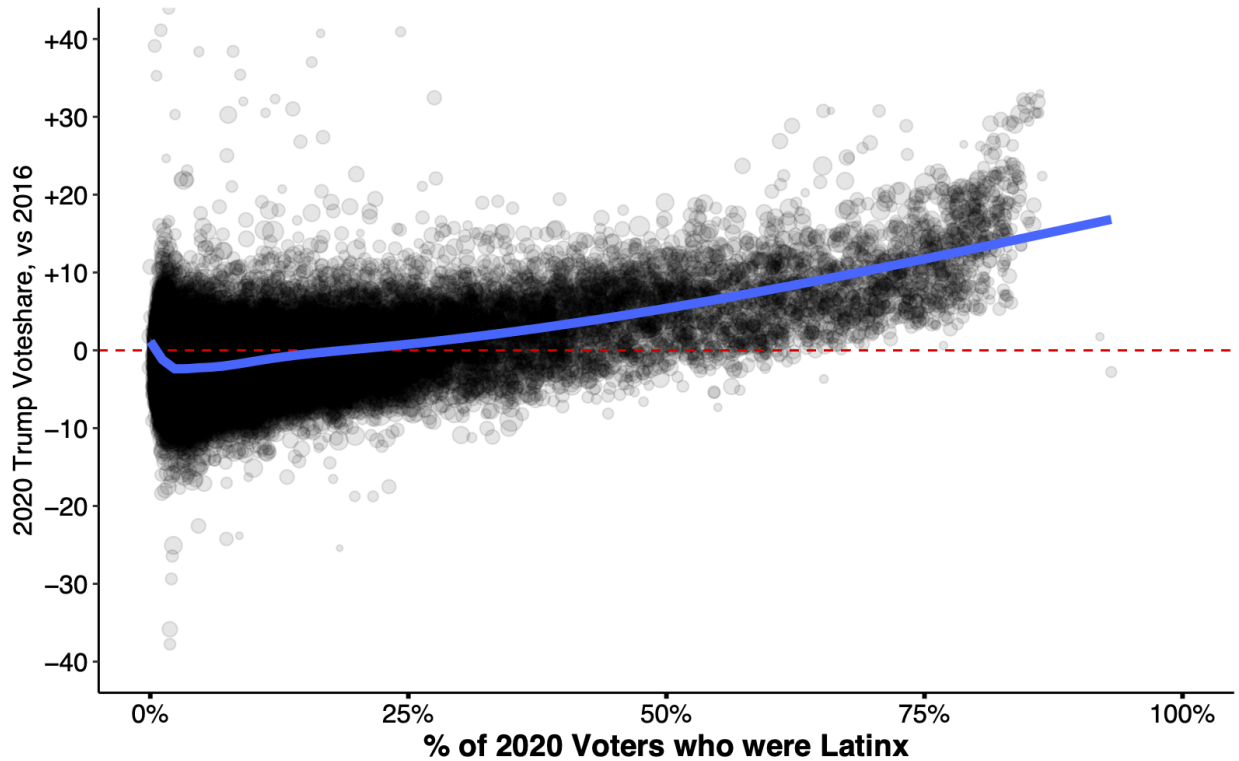


Figure 3: **Census Tract-level Trump 2020 Voteshare - Trump 2016 Voteshare as a function of % Latino Voters.** Blue line represents a loess smoother. Red dashed line indicates 0 change in Trump two-party vote between 2016 and 2020.

Which factors predict increased Trump voteshare in the voterfile data? Table 1 presents estimates from a weighted linear regression on the Census-tract level election and turnout data.⁷ The dependent variable is the 2020 Trump share of the two-party vote, and % Latino is the modeled share of tract voters in 2020 who were Latino. Model 1 indicates a linear *decrease* in Trump support as the share of Latino voters increases. That is, at baseline, Democrats perform better than Republicans in heavily-Latino areas. However, once we control for Trump’s voteshare in 2016 at the tract level (Model 2), the relationship reverses and the percent of voters who are Latino in a Census tract positively predicts Trump *gains* in 2020. Model 3 adds a voterfile-derived variable related to previous voting history: the percent of Latino voters in the tract who could have voted prior to

⁷The regression analyses only include tracts where Latinos constitute at least 5% of 2020 voters. Observations are weighted by the number of 2016 voters in the tract.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
% Latino Voters (2020)	-0.247*** (0.007)	0.129*** (0.001)	0.130*** (0.001)	0.123*** (0.002)	0.120*** (0.001)	0.117*** (0.002)
Trump Voteshare (2016)		0.908*** (0.001)	0.908*** (0.001)	0.907*** (0.001)	0.912*** (0.001)	0.914*** (0.001)
% New Voters (Among Latinos)			0.031*** (0.003)			0.046*** (0.003)
log(Latino HH Income)				-0.005*** (0.001)		-0.006*** (0.001)
% Non-College (Among Latinos)				0.012*** (0.002)		0.012*** (0.002)
% Immigrant (Among Latinos)					0.007* (0.003)	0.007* (0.003)
% Latino Immigrants Naturalized					-0.007*** (0.002)	-0.006** (0.002)
% Native-Born Latinos LEP					-0.018*** (0.001)	-0.007*** (0.002)
% Immigrant × % Naturalized					0.056*** (0.005)	0.065*** (0.006)
(Intercept)	0.434*** (0.002)	0.011*** (0.001)	-0.012*** (0.002)	0.065*** (0.007)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.031*** (0.008)
<i>N</i>	23,288	23,288	23,288	19,124	22,986	18,996
<i>R</i> ²	0.057	0.962	0.962	0.959	0.963	0.961

Table 1: **Census Tract-level regressions predicting Trump 2020 two-party voteshare.** Unit of observation is the 2020 Census tract. Estimates derived using a weighted least-squares model. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

the 2020 election,⁸ but have no recorded vote history before Trump’s re-election campaign. After controlling for 2016 Trump voteshare, and the overall percent Latino voter in the tract, the percent of Latinos who were first-time voters in 2020 significantly predicts an increase in Trump voteshare. In conjunction with Figure ??, this implies a *newly activated* group of Latino voters produced some of Trump’s raw gains.

Leveraging the Census tract-level aggregated data, Table 1 Models 4-6 add estimates from the Census American Community Survey 2016-2020 5-Year data. These additional variables proxy for

⁸This percentage does not count individuals who aged into the electorate between 2016-2020 as “new voters.” These voters who then turned out for the first time in 2020 predicts a slight decrease in 2020 Trump support, after controlling for 2016 Trump voteshare.

individual-level attributes discussed in the net-votes analysis. In line with the GMTL decomposition, median household income for Latino-led households in the tract is associated with a significant decrease in Trump support. Similarly, as percent Latino non-college increases, Trump's voteshare also increases. Both of these corroborate the story that lower-SES Latinos were a source of increased 2020 Trump support, even after accounting for his performance in the same Census tracts in 2016.

Table 1 Model 5 attempts to capture generational dynamics. Recall that in the GMTL decomposition there was a large, though just shy of significant, boost in Trump support among individuals who indicated that they were the children of immigrants. The Census Bureau does not ask about generational status directly. Instead, we use three variables in an attempt to establish how personal proximity to the immigration experience predicts an increase in Trump support: percent immigrant, which uses the total Latino population in the tract as the denominator; percent of Latino immigrants who are naturalized, an interaction between these variables that should expose the independent effect of the Latino immigrant voting-eligible population; and the percent of native-born Latinos who report that they speak English less than "very well." This final measure is designed to probe the size of the less acculturated native-born Latino population within a Census Tract, which after accounting for size of the immigrant population could proxy for the presence of a longstanding, multi-generational Latino community.

The results again provide evidence of shifting loyalties among Latinos proximate to the immigrant experience. In places with more immigrants, and a larger share of potential immigrant voters (the interaction term), Trump support 2016-2020 increased, implying that immigrants were a source of Trump gains. Yet, the independent effects of the Latino immigrant naturalization rate and the percent of the native-born population that is limited English proficient tell a different story. Places with a high naturalization rate, but few Latino immigrants overall, saw relatively lower levels of Trump support in 2020 compared to 2016. An increase in the share of native-born Latinos who exhibit limited English proficiency, again in places with a relatively small Latino immigrant population, also predicts a decrease in Trump support. Model 6 demonstrates that these heterogeneous estimates persist after controlling for education and income. These results offer

tentative evidence that, all else equal, places with a more longstanding Latino population were not disproportionately likely to shift toward Trump in 2020. Instead, Trump made gains in places with large Latino immigrant populations. We thus confirm some of the demographic correlates of increased Latino support found in the GMTL decomposition.

4 Conclusion

In early 2022, a National Republican Campaign Committee press release highlighted a recent poll showing “Republicans are making substantial gains with Hispanic voters because of our focus on economic issues such as the cost of gas and groceries. Republicans are fighting to protect the American Dream while Democrats are pushing a socialist agenda that threatens it.”⁹ On the one hand, our evidence appears to validate the NRCC statement: Republican gains in recent elections were concentrated among Latinos already aligned with Republican ideological and issue positioning.¹⁰ These gains included activating new Latino voters and shifting previously-Democratic voting Latinos who felt less cross pressured in 2020 than in 2016, not just those already holding Republican partisan attachments.

On the other hand, these gains also indicate a more durable shift toward the Republican party that has less to do with the specific campaign messaging. Gains were not found solely among national origin groups or in states where immigration messaging would be expected to have a large impact. In the Appendix, we examine election-specific factors such as Covid-19 and BLM protests, and fail to find evidence that these events induced distinctive 2020 GOP shifts, suggesting that these transient factors are not distinctively influential for Latino voters. Instead, a segment of the Latino electorate that is in line with Republicans’ decade-long immigration restrictionist policy

⁹<https://www.nrcc.org/2022/02/18/new-nrcc-poll-republicans-make-large-gains-with-hispanic-voters/>. Dated Feb 18, 2022.

¹⁰At the time of writing, exit poll results from the 2022 Midterm elections seem to support a consistent Latino voter base for the Republican party.

agenda supported Trump in 2020 and are unlikely to transfer support to Democrats going forward. Moreover, we observe some dramatic shifts among Catholic Latinos that are worthy of further exploration, especially in light of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. These results suggest that those Latinos who are most ideologically and policy aligned with the Republican party on core issues are the ones who are shifting support towards the GOP, which, again, is reason to believe that this shift is durable.

Beyond implications for future trends, our results advance understanding of Latino political behavior in two ways. First, by using the GMTL decomposition technique and large-*N* survey data calibrated to the Latino population, we are able to isolate the specific impact of changes in Latino: turnout; subgroup composition; and vote choice. Previous work has focused on these components in isolation, whereas our project explicitly considers how they interact. Our second contribution is documenting an influential set of Latino voters who will vote for restrictionist candidates despite being the population of eligible voters most impacted by increased immigration enforcement: immigrants and their children. We find evidence that less acculturated and first-generation Latinos may have increased their support for Trump. Given the polarized nature of immigration, future research in Latino politics could examine how and when immigrant identities are politically consequential. While our approach provides some clarity regarding who has shifted, we still know little about the *why*. Future research could examine how changes in material interests, messaging, and information environments are contributing to shifting loyalties across different Latino subgroups.

Though the future of Latino politics is uncertain, the 2020 election is an opportunity to reflect on the complicated nature of identity-based political behavior. Throughout different eras of US immigration, ethnic voting blocs have formed and dissolved, owing to both changes in the material conditions of group members and shifts in elite behavior (Wolfinger 1965). Assuming a trajectory that favors one political party runs the risk of embracing a “demographic determinism” that does not neatly align with minority voting patterns. This hinders political responsiveness insofar as groups’ political attachments are seen as fixed.

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