

Immigration May Play Bigger Role in Midterms Than Thought

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After Barack Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential election, many political experts expected increasing immigration would hand Democrats consistent electoral victories in the future.

However, in 2020, despite President Donald Trump's harsh rhetoric on immigration, he improved upon the performance of the previous Republican presidential nominee by 10 percentage points among Hispanic-Americans — particularly in Texas and Florida.

Even with Trump off the ballot, the Democratic advantage among Latino voters continues to shrink leading into the 2022 midterms. What's going on?

For one, border chaos resulting from a failure to fix the legal immigration system may have something to do with it.

Going into the 2018 midterms four years ago, Hispanics planned to vote for Democrats by a 36-point margin, 61% to 25%. Now, in 2022, the gap has shrunk nearly 20 points. Only about half (52%) of Hispanics plan to vote for Democrats this November, while 35% plan to vote Republican.

This is evidence of the shrinking Democratic advantage: An NBC News poll found that by a double-digit margin, more Hispanic Democrats considered leaving the party than Hispanic Republicans. Some may dismiss these changes because Democrats continue to have a sizeable lead among Latino voters. However, because the Democratic Party's base depends on heavy Latino support, Republicans don't need to make huge gains to make a difference.

Certainly, part of these shifts is more than about one issue. Across the board, Republicans are doing better in 2022 than they were in 2018, likely because of rising inflation, crime and the economy. In 2018, FiveThirtyEight's Congressional generic ballot average gave Democrats an 8.6-point advantage. Today, that's narrowed to 1 point as Americans trust Republicans more on inflation, jobs, the economy and immigration.

But issues at the U.S.-Mexico border may play an outsized effect among Hispanics. While a September CBS/YouGov poll found immigration was a top five issue among all Americans, it was a top three issue among Hispanics.

A Quinnipiac poll last fall found that 69% of Hispanics disapproved of President Biden's handling of immigration issues. And on top of that, Hispanics reported hearing Republicans talk about the issue more than Democrats by a margin of 73% to 50%. And many Hispanics may like some of what they are hearing. Nearly half (46%) of Hispanics said they approved of Republican governors sending "migrants from the U.S.-Mexico border to Democratic-leaning areas." And the top reason (88%) was that it "draws attention to the issue of immigration."

But what about immigration specifically? It's not that Hispanics want to decrease immigration to the United States. In fact, a July YouGov survey found that 50% of Hispanics want to increase legal immigration while only 12% want to decrease it.

Instead, the issue seems to be the perception of chaos at the border. While a New York Times/Sienna Poll found that Hispanics agree more with Democrats than Republicans by a 29-point margin on the issue of legal immigration, the gap narrows to nine points on illegal immigration

A recent Quinnipiac Survey from Texas may shed more light on national trends. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is running even with Democratic challenger Beto O'Rourke among Hispanics (48% vs. 49%). And immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border was their top issue concern. But that doesn't mean Texas Hispanics support everything Abbott has done on the issue. A slim majority opposed busing migrants to Democratic-led cities and states.

Nonetheless, when asked who would do a better job handling the situation at the border, Hispanics favored Abbott 53% to 44% over O'Rourke.

Hispanics don't agree with all Republican positions on immigration. But Republicans seem to be resonating better on the issue of what's happening at the border. Many Americans perceive the U.S.-Mexican border to be in a state of chaos. And border apprehensions during the Biden administration have surged compared to prior years. As Henry Cueller, D-Texas, told Axios, "The system is being overwhelmed right now. ... No ifs, no buts about it."

But there is a solution to chaos at the border that is politically popular: fixing our legal immigration system.

In a Cato Institute/YouGov survey that I conducted, we asked Americans for their preferred approach to dealing with illegal immigration: making it easier to immigrate to the United States legally or building a border wall and increasing border security. Americans preferred reforming the immigration system to make it easier for people to immigrate to the United States by a margin of 56 percent to 43 percent.

Understanding this could be politically advantageous for either Republicans or Democrats seeking to increase their support among Hispanics concerned with the border. Furthermore, all Americans want to feel that their borders are orderly and secure and that migrants need not risk their lives seeking a better life.

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