

# The Dream Team, Texas Democrats, and Turnout: A County-level Analysis of the 2002 Elections in Texas

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**ABSTRACT:** *In the 2002 statewide election Texas Democrats assembled the Dream Team, a racially diverse set of candidates consisting of Tony Sanchez, the first Hispanic candidate for governor; Ron Kirk, the first African-American candidate for U.S. Senator; and John Sharp, an experienced White candidate for Lieutenant Governor. Democrats hoped that the Dream Team would increase voter turnout among minorities in a state with a rapidly growing Hispanic population. Yet the hoped for turnout did not materialize and the Democrats were shut out of statewide races for the second consecutive gubernatorial election. Using county-level data, this article examines the effect the Dream Team had on voter turnout, especially among Hispanics, and how it affected the election results.*

The 1990s began with great promise for Texas Democrats. After the 1990 election, Democrats controlled all but six of the 27 statewide elected offices, including the most visible ones, and had comfortable majorities in both houses of the state legislature. Party fortunes quickly changed, though. By the end of the decade Republicans won all 29 statewide offices handily, were the majority party in the state Senate, and were closing in on capturing the House of Representatives.

The Democrats hoped that the 2002 election would be different. Their plan to reverse the Republican winning streak was to change the electoral dynamics by running a racially diverse set of candidates that came to be known as the Dream Team. The Dream Team featured Tony Sanchez, the first Mexican-American to run for governor; Ron Kirk, the first African-American candidate for U.S. Senate; and John Sharp, a Caucasian who was a well-known fixture in Texas politics, to run for lieutenant governor. Democrats hoped that a Black and a Hispanic candidate at the top of the state Democratic ticket would excite the party faithful and mobilize the state's large minority population, particularly the burgeoning Hispanic population, which votes primarily for the Democratic Party. Their hopes were buoyed by Sanchez's promise to spend whatever money of his personal fortune was necessary to secure the gubernatorial election, thus alleviating Democrats' fears of not being able to compete financially with Republicans. The 2002 election also seemed more winnable for Democrats because, unlike 1994 and 1998, George W. Bush was not heading the Republican ticket as governor, and the Republican

candidates appeared less formidable than the candidates who ran four years earlier.

The Democrats' dreams and well-laid plans were all for naught, however. The 2002 election was a Republican rout. The troika of Sanchez, Kirk, and Sharp failed miserably, and Republicans won every statewide race easily. In the races featuring the Dream Team members, incumbent governor Rick Perry handily defeated Sanchez with 58% of the vote to Sanchez's 40%, Cornyn won 55% to Kirk's 43%, and in the closest statewide election of the year, Dewhurst defeated Sharp 52% to 46%.

Because the Dream Team was an experiment that had never before been tried in Texas, this article examines the effect of the Dream Team on the 2002 election. It briefly highlights how Texas had become a Republican state by the 2002 election, discusses the efforts the parties made that year to increase voter turnout, and explains the importance of race in elections and the role it played in the 2002 election. The article specifically looks at how successful the Dream Team was in accomplishing the goal of mobilizing the Democratic base and the traditionally dormant Hispanic population, and also examines the effect of the Dream Team on how Hispanics and Whites voted.

## From Democratic to Republican State

The fortunes of the Republican Party in Texas changed dramatically in a relatively short time. For most of the 20th century the Democratic Party dominated Texas

politics and the Republican Party struggled to survive. Indeed, the political battles in Texas for most of its history were not between Republicans and Democrats but rather between Democrats and other Democrats.

Despite the difficulty the Republican Party has traditionally had in Texas, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, the political landscape began changing and the Republican Party in Texas began to grow. One source of Republican growth in Texas was from the flood of people moving to Texas with Republican predilections. Republicans also benefited from the changes in the Democratic Party that made the Democrats less appealing to conservative Whites—the backbone of the Democratic Party in Texas. With the growth of the civil rights movement and the increase in minority suffrage, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party gained more power and the conservative White Democrats in Texas felt increasingly displaced and their positions in the party threatened. They began looking to the Republican Party as an alternative (Cunningham, 2010; Gibson & Robison, 2013; Maxwell, Crain, & Santos 2014).

Although the Republican Party enjoyed modest but noticeable gains in the 1970s and 1980s, few expected the dramatic transformation that took place in state politics in the 1990s. In 1993, after a special election to replace Democrat Lloyd Bentsen as United States Senator, both Texas Senators were Republican. In 1994 George W. Bush defeated a popular Democratic incumbent, Ann Richards, and Republicans captured four other statewide offices, marking the most statewide gains by Republicans in any single election since Reconstruction. In 1996 Republicans captured all 10 offices of the statewide general election ballot and became the majority party in the state Senate for the first time since Reconstruction. Two years later Bush trounced his Democratic challenger with 68% of the vote and, more demoralizing for the Democrats, Republicans gained control of all 29 statewide elected offices. In 2000 Texas voted for the Republican candidate for the sixth straight presidential election, and in 2002 Republicans easily won all statewide elections and became the majority party in the Texas House of Representatives for the first time since Reconstruction (Maxwell, Crain, & Santos, 2014).

## **Voter Turnout**

Despite the success of the Republican Party in Texas in the 1990s, the tremendous growth of the Hispanic population in Texas posed an apparent threat to Re-

publican dominance and provided an opportunity for a Democratic resurgence in 2002. In 1990 Anglos composed 60.7% of the Texas population and the Hispanic population 25.6%. However, by 2002 51.5% of the Texas population was Anglo and 33.4% of the population was Hispanic, with Blacks staying about the same throughout this period with just under 12% of the population (Texas Department of State Health Services, 2011). These demographic changes were politically significant because White and minority voters exhibit different voting patterns. Blacks and Hispanics now largely identify with the Democratic Party and vote overwhelmingly for Democratic candidates. Whites, on the other hand, vote Republican and identify more with the Republican Party than the Democratic Party (DeSipio, 1996; Bardes & Oldendick, 2000; Wayne, 2012; Erikson & Tedin, 2011).

Although the Democratic Party enjoys widespread support from Blacks and Hispanics, the problem for Democrats is that these groups, especially Hispanics, have a lower voter turnout than whites (Cassel, 2002; Citrin & Highton, 2002). By running Hispanic and Black candidates at the top of the ticket, Democrats hoped that minority voters would take more interest in the election and be more motivated to vote. To make this happen the Democratic Party went to unprecedented lengths to register new voters and mobilize them to vote. The Every Texan Foundation planned to register 500,000 new voters with Spanish surnames, and the Democrats, particularly Sanchez, spent considerable resources registering and encouraging minorities to vote (Ratcliffe & Williams, 2002b; Sylvester, 2002). Not to be outdone, Republicans also aggressively sought out new voters, promising that 400,000 new Republican voters would be registered for the election (Richter, 2002).

Both parties also worked to get their people out to the polls. The Republicans had people going door to door in 40 counties and had hundreds of phone lines dedicated to getting people out to vote. John Sharp said Democrats spent \$10 million on getting out the vote statewide, and Sanchez's campaign manager said Democrats spent three or four times more than ever before and organized in every part of the state (McNeely, 2000c). Sanchez said that on one weekend his workers canvassed 1.1 million doors across the state. In Houston a force of 1,200 people, most of whom were paid, went to 600,000 households in the three weekends leading up to the election. Sanchez said, "What we are doing has never been done in any state in the nation" (Gwynne, 2002).

The Democrats were hopeful that the Dream Team would appeal to minorities so they would register and

vote. They saw their path to victory was to take advantage of the state's growing minority population and to try to change the makeup of voting public. However, efforts to appeal to minority voters created a conundrum for the Democratic Party. If candidates or parties actively court and design a campaign around appealing to minority voters, candidates and parties risk alienating the White population (see Sonenshein, 1990; Petrow, 2010). Despite the growing Hispanic population, Whites were still the majority in Texas in 2002 and made up an even greater percentage of voters; Democrats could not afford to disregard the White vote. Democrats estimated they needed to win about 35% of the White vote and thus needed to appeal to independent and moderate White voters. Yet if they focused their message to appeal to White voters, they feared they would not be able to mobilize minority voters, and the purpose of the Dream Team would be negated. Indeed, many Democrats worried that the Dream Team, especially Kirk, sounded too Republican and would not energize the Democratic and minority bases (Williams, 2002).

### Race in the Campaign

Despite Sanchez claiming "I'm not running as a Hispanic," or Kirk contending that "the fact that I'm African-American is irrelevant" (Kiely, 2002), race was, of course, a factor in the campaign (Casey 2002; Fikac, 2002; Robison, 2002; Russell, 2002). Columnist Dave McNeely (2002a) contends that "Race has always been at least a background factor in Texas politics." In 2002 the Democratic party guaranteed that race would be more than a "background factor," however, by designing a ticket whose main appeal to the party was that it was racially diverse. Indeed, one of the reasons Democrats were excited about Sanchez and Kirk was their race and their hoped for appeal to the minority population in the state. Republicans reacted by attempting to keep that appeal to a minimum and both parties battled to define the Dream Team on their terms—the Democrats portraying the Dream Team as racially inclusive and the Republicans portraying it as racially divisive (McNeely, 2002a). Moreover, both Republicans and Democrats talked of race in calculating turnout and the percentage of votes each side needed to win among Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks. As Paul Burka (2002) wrote in the *Washington Post*, "This election is all about fundamental politics: race, party, turnout."

Race was a factor early in the campaign season, beginning in the Democratic primary. In the senatorial race

Ron Kirk ran against two other challengers that were considered to have a chance of winning. One was White (Ken Bentsen) and the other was Hispanic (Victor Morales). Although it was a tight, three-way race and race was likely a factor in the vote, the candidates themselves did not make race an issue.

The same could not be said about the Democratic primary for governor. This race pitted Tony Sanchez against Dan Morales, a two-term, former attorney general of Texas, who at the last minute surprised the party hierarchy and political pundits by seeking the nomination for governor. With an unexpected challenge from a well-known Hispanic candidate, Sanchez felt compelled to distinguish himself from Morales by focusing on Sanchez's Hispanic heritage. Morales reacted bitterly and accused Sanchez of running a "race-based" campaign (Ratcliffe, 2002a), and charged that Sanchez was running for "governor of Mexico" (Balz, 2002).

Both candidates agreed to a debate in Spanish, the first debate for a major statewide office in which the questions and answers were to be solely in Spanish. Sanchez saw this as an opportunity to show that he was the true Hispanic by contrasting his fluid Spanish with Morales's more pedestrian Spanish language skills. In the debate Morales decided to appeal to White Democratic voters by translating his answers into English, arguing "that the vast majority of the citizens of our state speak English" (Ratcliffe, 2002a). Sanchez responded by speaking Spanish throughout the debate and accused Morales of being ashamed of his Hispanic heritage (Fikac & Castillo, 2002).

Sanchez's efforts to stress his Hispanic roots led to a high turnout in the primary among Hispanics, and he easily outperformed Morales to win the nomination. Yet Sanchez's strategy may have been damaging to his chances in the general election. The Spanish-only debate, Sanchez's brandishing of his Hispanic heritage, and his ardent support of affirmative action made race more of an issue than it might have otherwise been. Although such an approach may have appealed to Hispanics, it also might have turned off many Whites (Ratcliffe, 2002b). Republicans wanted to make sure that it did.

Once the Democrats had settled on the Dream Team, the Republicans quickly moved to infuse race into the campaign and to define the Dream Team on Republican terms. The day after Kirk won the Democratic senatorial nomination in a runoff and all three members of the Dream Team were set, Dave Beckwith, spokesperson for Kirk's Republican opponent John Cornyn, said, "This dream ticket is cynical. It is based on a racial quota system. In the end, it will not work because most people

vote on issues and philosophy, not on race” (Falkenberg, 2002). Cornyn reprimanded Beckwith for his comments and promised the campaign would be “run solely on the issues and not based on any inappropriate considerations like race” (Copelin & Susswein, 2002). Despite Cornyn’s assurances, though, Republicans continued to press the race button. Phil Gramm, the retiring senator whose seat Cornyn and Kirk were vying to fill, portrayed the Dream Team as a racially divisive tactic by the Democrats. At the state Republican Party convention he said “the Democrats believe that they can divide Texas based on race. That is their dream, and that is their vision. This election is about rejecting that dream and vision once and for all.” He also characterized the Spanish-language debate between Sanchez and Morales as racist, an attempt “to sever the bonds that bind us together.” Gramm said “we are first, last, always and forever Texans and Americans – and we’re damn proud of it. Let me give the Democrats a message. We look different. Some of us talk different. Our skins are not the same color. Our ethnic origins are not the same. But what’s important as a Texan and American is not the color of your skin and not where your grandfather came from but what is in your heart” (Rushing, 2002).

The Democrats reacted strongly to Gramm’s words. Mark Sanders, Sanchez’s press aide said “this is outrageously insulting. If this is an effort by Rick Perry and Phil Gramm to play the race card, they should be ashamed of themselves. This is a shameful political tactic to divide this state.” Molly Beth Malcolm, the state Democratic chair, said the Republicans “chose to play the race card” because “they didn’t want to talk about their right-wing platform. By misrepresenting the Democratic ticket as a quota-driven appeal to race, the Republicans have launched a very cynical attack of division that essentially tells Texans that a qualified African-American is not fit to run for the Senate, that a qualified Hispanic is not fit to run for governor” (Ratcliffe and Williams, 2002a).

Both parties and the candidates tried to shape how the public viewed the Dream Team and reacted to Black and Hispanic candidates at the top of the ticket. It was with good reason: race matters in American politics. Many studies show that a candidate’s race affects voters’ attitudes towards a candidate. People view Black candidates differently from White candidates (Williams, 1990; Sigelman, Sigelman, Walkosz, & Nitz, 1995; Sears, Van Laar, Carillo, & Kosterman, 1997). Voters stereotype Black and Hispanic candidates as “highly attuned to black and Hispanic interests” (Sigelman et al., 1995, 261; Williams, 1990; McDermott, 1998) and voters’ perceptions of minority candidates align with ethnic stereotypes (Si-

gelman et al., 1995, 261). Indeed, Sigelman et al. argue that “a candidate’s race-ethnicity . . . in interaction with his stands on issues influences how voters perceive him and whether they will likely vote for him” (1995, 258). As examples research has found that racial attitudes have played a significant role in mayoral elections and city politics (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Kleppner, 1985; Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 1990; Perry, 1996; Jennings, 1997), statewide elections (Sonenshein, 1990; Perry, 1996), Jesse Jackson’s presidential candidacy (Reed, 1986; Sears, Citrin, & Kosterman, 1987; Barker & Walters, 1989; Abramowitz, 1994), Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy (Fraser 2009, Mas, & Moretti, 2009; Schaffer, 2011; Redlawsk, Tolbert, & Franko, 2014) and in campaigns where White candidates have been accused of playing the “race card” (Kuzenski, Bullock, & Gaddie, 1995; Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Mendelberg, 1997).

## Method

The effect of the Dream Team on voter turnout and the level of support that the Dream Team received from different groups is examined using aggregate data collected at the county level. The official canvassed election returns were obtained from the Texas Secretary of State’s webpage (<http://www.sos.state.tx.us>). Demographic data were collected from the Texas State Data Center and the Office of the State Demographer (<http://txsdc.tamu.edu>).<sup>1</sup>

Support for the Dream Team is measured using the percentage of voters in each of Texas’ counties who cast a ballot for Tony Sanchez. This was chosen because of the strong correlation of support for Sanchez with that of Kirk and Sharp. The correlation coefficient between the Sanchez vote and the Kirk vote is .968 ( $p=.0001$ ), between the Sanchez vote and the Sharp vote is .893 ( $p=.0001$ ), and between the Kirk vote and the Sharp vote is .928 ( $p=.0001$ ). A factor analysis conducted on the three votes revealed one factor with a reliability of .9732. For the sake of parsimony, we can examine just the vote for Sanchez and reach similar conclusions about the votes of the other members of the Democratic Party’s Dream Team.<sup>2</sup> Turnout is measured as the percentage of each county’s registered voters who actually voted.

We also include other variables that have been shown to affect whether people vote and how they vote: socioeconomic status, race, partisanship, and fluidity of county population (Verba & Nie, 1972; Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980; Squire, Wolfinger, & Glass, 1987; Teixeira, 1987; Leighley & Nagler, 1992a; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady,



1995; Leighley, 2001). Socioeconomic status is measured by calculating the percentage of college graduates and per capita income, and race is measured using the percentage of Anglo and Hispanic population. Because Texas voter registration does not record the party identification of voters, partisanship is measured by using the percent of the vote received by Democrat John Sharp in the 1998 Lieutenant Governor's election. This was the most recent statewide election of significance with two quality candidates and a narrow vote margin separating the Democratic and Republican candidates. The supposition is that Democrats turned out for Sharp and Republicans backed the Republican candidate Rick Perry. Each county's population change from 1990 to 2000 is also included as a variable because it is expected that rapidly growing counties with many new residents will lack a sense of community and tend to have lower voter turnout.

## Analysis

To win elections candidates and parties not only have to get people to support them but they must also get their supporters to vote. In the 2002 Texas election turnout was less predictable than usual because of the Democratic Party's aggressive attempt to mobilize minorities to register and vote Democratic. However, Table 1 indicates that these efforts did not pay off in the way the Democrats had hoped. Although by historical standards the 81% of the voting age population that registered to vote in 2002 was very high, it was less than it was in the previous gubernatorial election in 1998.

More importantly, however, was the turnout, which was lower than both parties expected. The 4,553,979 votes was 10% lower than the five million the secretary of state had predicted before the election and 25% less than the Democrats had hoped for (McNeely, 2002b). Although the turnout was higher than the one in 1998, it is considerably lower than what was expected and lower than many previous gubernatorial elections. It is also more understandable that the 1998 election had a low turnout. It offered a popular governor who did not face a serious challenge from the Democratic nominee and did not have a U.S. Senate seat up for election. The 2002 election, on the other hand, featured an open U.S. Senate seat, a more competitive gubernatorial race, and the most expensive election in state history with millions of dollars funneled toward increasing turnout. It seemed that the setting was ripe for a good turnout.

Compounding the problem of low voter turnout for Democrats is that the hoped for Hispanic turnout did not materialize. Table 2 shows a negative correlation between the Hispanic population and voting, while the Anglo population was positively correlated with turnout. While Table 2 shows that Hispanics strongly supported Sanchez, it also shows that Sanchez had the least support in counties with large Anglo populations, verifying that Democratic fears of the Dream Team's inability to tap into the Anglo vote were legitimate. In other words, the group that had a low turnout was also the group on which the Democrats had rested their election hopes. Although Hispanics voted for Sanchez, their low turnout made the effect minimal. Moreover, as Table 3 indicates, Democrats did not get any more of a boost from the Dream Team than they would have had anyway. Table 3 shows that the Democratic support explains most of the vote for Sanchez. In short, the Dream Team was able to keep Democratic voters in the fold but added nothing to their vote tally by running the Dream Team and trying to attract Hispanic voters.

## Conclusion

The Dream Team was a big story because of the candidates' race. Although the candidates lost, it is unlikely they lost because of their race. By the end of the 1990s Texas had become a solidly Republican state and continues to be; the 2002 election was just another manifestation of Republican dominance.

Part of the reason for Republican success in the 2002 election was that they did not sit idly, willing to concede minority voters to the Democrats (Balz, 2002; Jacoby, 2002; Schneider, 2002; Williams, 2002). Republican leaders in Texas were just as aware of the demographic changes in Texas as Democratic leaders were, and Republicans in the 1990s courted the Hispanic population. Although they did not win a large percentage of the minority vote in 2002, it was more than offset by the poor Democratic showing among White voters. Indeed, the Democratic strategy of selecting the Dream Team was ineffective and perhaps even counterproductive. The voters who voted for Sanchez and Kirk (liberals and minorities) likely would have voted for any Democrat. By having Sanchez and Kirk at the top of the ticket and making race an issue, Democrats had a tougher time appealing to independent and moderate white voters (see Petrow 2010). Despite the demographic changes in Texas that have resulted in Whites becoming today less than half of the

**Table 1.** Voter Registration and Turnout in Texas Gubernatorial Elections (1974–2002)

	2002	1998	1994	1990	1986	1982	1978	1974
Percentage of VAP Registered	80.9	81.9	66.09	61.48	61.51	59.95	60.63	64.61
Percent of Turnout to RVs	36.2	32.4	50.87	50.55	47.23	49.74	41.71	30.94
Percent of Turnout to VAP	29.3	26.53	33.62	31.08	29.05	29.82	25.29	19.99

**Table 2.** Correlations

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)
(a) Sanchez Vote (%)	1							
(b) Turnout (%)	-.460**	1						
(c) Population Change 1990–2000 (%)	-.058	-.073	1					
(d) Anglo Population (%)	-.724**	.412**	.076	1				
(e) Hispanic Population (%)	.639**	-.309**	-.125*	-.943**	1			
(f) Sharp in '98 (%)	.849**	-.353**	-.149*	-.503**	.414**	1		
(g) College Grads (%)	-.327**	.169**	.419**	.229**	-.222**	-.470**	1	
(h) Per Capita Income (\$)	-.486**	.169**	.429**	.530**	-.527**	-.484**	.722**	1
(i) Population over 18 (%)	-.350**	.289**	.073	.581**	-.618**	-.103	.085	.290**

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed) \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

**Table 3.** OLS Regression of County Vote for Sanchez (N=254)

	Sanchez Vote	
	Beta	p
Turnout	-.075	.009
Population Change 1990–2000	.047	.091
Anglo Population	-.291	.001
Hispanic Population	.005	.954
Sharp in 1998	.697	.000
College Graduates	.104	.008
Per Capita Income	-.051	.245
Population over 18	-.082	.011

$R^2=.925$  Adj.  $R^2=.856$   $p=.0001$

Source: Computed by authors using data from the Texas State Data Center and the Texas Secretary of State.

population, the majority of voters in the state still remain White. Democrats won the minority vote, but there are many more White voters than minority voters.

The main problem the Democrats faced in 2002 with courting and relying on minority turnout is that minorities have a long history of not participating in Texas electoral politics. The 2002 election shows that having minority candidates run for office is not enough to increase minority turnout in Texas. Indeed, a statewide poll commissioned by the *Houston Chronicle* and KHOU-TV in September 2002 showed a decided lack of interest in the campaign among minorities. Even with two minorities at the top of the Democratic ticket, the poll showed that 54% of Hispanics and 59% of Blacks were interested in the election compared to 76% of Whites (Rodriguez, 2002). Perhaps what was needed were issues that were salient or antagonized the minority population. In California, for example, Proposition 187, the initiative to reduce services for undocumented immigrants, was voted on in 1994. This issue was salient to Hispanics and other minorities and led to a 9% increase in turnout among Hispanics from the 1990 election (Citrin & Highton, 2002). But there have been no such issues in Texas that have grabbed the attention of minority voters and spurred minority turnout.

Unlike some election years, Democrats could not blame the lack of funding for their poor showing in 2002. Sanchez in particular had enough money to get his message across and in fact set records for campaign spending

in Texas. Sanchez spent millions of dollars on advertisements and began running commercials, including negative advertisements against Governor Perry, in the spring for the general election that took place in the fall. By early summer, Governor Perry responded in kind. In a campaign that was banking on increased turnout among minorities, this was perhaps the wrong strategy to follow. There is the possibility that the early negative campaigning turned off potential voters, particularly those who usually do not participate. As it was, Sanchez spent millions of dollars attacking Perry but perhaps never gave voters a reason to vote for Sanchez.

Although the Dream Team was a first in Texas, it was likely a precursor to a time that is approaching in Texas when having a Hispanic gubernatorial candidate will no longer be the exception. With the changing demographics, more and more Hispanics will run for high elected office in Texas. Given the dominance of the Republican Party and the dormant Hispanic population, however, in the near future a Hispanic candidate has a better chance of winning by running as a Republican than by running as a Democrat and hoping to mobilize the Hispanic population.

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## Endnotes

1. Demographic data could have been obtained from the United States Bureau of the Census, but the data at the Texas State Data Center were presented in a manner that made importing it into an SPSS data file much easier. Please recall that Texas has 254 counties.
2. These coefficients also indicate that analysis before the election suggesting that Hispanic voters would vote for the Hispanic candidate but not for the black candidate was unfounded (Jacoby 2002; Meyerson 2002; Rodriguez 2002).

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