

Latinx communities to play a central role in the presidential election

In regions where Latinxs are shifting demographics and battling anti-immigrant laws, young people see voting as a form of community defense and a way to demand the dignity their communities deserve



by [María Constanza Costa](#) July 8th, 2024

One of the most pivotal presidential elections is just months away—and the growing Latinx population will play a central role.

According to [Pew Research](#), 36.2 million Latinx people are eligible to vote this year, 3.9 million more than in the 2020 presidential election. More broadly, about 1.4 million U.S. Latinx people become eligible to vote each year.

As a voting bloc, Latinx communities have the potential to change the results of the election—especially in critical swing states [like North Carolina](#), where they have shifted demographics in powerful ways. More broadly, Latinx communities are changing the demographics of the broader South, creating opportunities for Democrats that didn't exist before.

In 2020, Latinx voter turnout hovered [around 54%](#), the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups. Registering Latinx voters also comes with [unique challenges](#). Whether Latinxs will actually show up to voting booths in large numbers remains to be seen, but groups are working to help these communities harness their political power.

“A possibility to make a difference”

In 2022, about [8.5 million](#) of the country's 33.7 million eligible Latinx voters, or 25%, lived in California. This is followed by those living in Texas (6.5

million), Florida (3.5 million), New York (2.2 million), and Arizona (1.3 million). Together, these five states account for about 65% of all eligible Latinx voters, and they have become the center of voter registration drives and other efforts to increase Latinx voter participation.

In [Nevada](#) and [Arizona](#), these efforts paid off during the 2016 presidential election. While there has been a lot of [ink spilled](#) over the Latinxs who are moving right or otherwise voting Republican, the overwhelming majority of Latinxs who do vote cast their ballots [for Democrats](#). But this is not to say that the Latinx vote isn't very much [up for grabs](#)—especially in states where Democrats have taken Latinx communities for granted or otherwise ignored their communities' needs.

In Nevada, for example, Democrats easily won four consecutive [presidential elections](#). In 2020, however, they almost lost the state due to Republicans gaining ground with Latinx voters. Nevada is one of the most competitive battleground states in the country, and “no group could hold more sway over how the state swings than Latinos,” NBC News [reported](#). If Latinx people don't show up to the polls this year, as early estimates seem to suggest, it would be “ominous” for Democrats.

Lagging Latinx registration rates continue to be a major concern nationwide. According to a [2022 report](#) by the [UCLA Latino Policy and Politics Institute \(UCLA LPPI\)](#), Latinx people had the lowest registration rate in California in 2020, with only slightly more than 60% of eligible Latinx voters registered statewide, compared to 78% of white eligible voters.

Many advocacy organizations nationwide focused on Latinx communities have taken up civic engagement organizing work. The goal is to inform Latinx communities of the stakes tied to the presidential election and register new voters.

“Persuasion campaigns so that people understand the political power they have are important and necessary,” said Ben Monterroso, a senior adviser at [Poder Latinx](#), an organization focused on building political power for Latinx communities. “The vast majority of us are new to the political system.

Many of us come from countries where politics has not worked for us, and we do not want to have anything to do with politics because it has been instilled in us that politics was not good. That is one of the reasons why information and education on politics is important. Por eso es importante informar y motivar a la comunidad.”

While immigration is often framed as the most important issue to Latinx communities, Monterroso said Latinx voters consistently cite the economy, education, and health as their biggest concerns. And since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*, prompting states across the U.S. to enact abortion restrictions and bans, abortion is also a top concern for the community. A majority of Latinx voters now support abortion rights, [according to polls](#).

But what stops Latinxs from showing up at the polls on election day? According to Adelina Nicholls, the executive director of the Georgia Latino Alliance for Human Rights (GLAHR), a lot of work needs to be done to help Latinx communities rethink their votes—not just as a drop in the bucket for a particular candidate, but as a strategy for community defense. This is especially true in a state like Georgia, where the state’s Latinx community has grown by [more than 30%](#) in recent years, far outpacing the national growth of Latinx communities.

According to U.S. census data, the Latinx community in Georgia has grown tremendously in the last decade (31.6%), outpacing their demographic growth nationwide (23%). According to advocates, now is the time to harness the power of multicultural and multilingual Latinx communities in Georgia.

“In a state like Georgia there is a possibility to make a difference in favor of our community,” Nicholls said. “The demographic change, children of first-generation immigrants are already coming of age, this increases the possibilities of participation of the Latino community. This entry serves as a community defense strategy. We are not an organization that works exclusively for electoral participation. The vote is collective—it is not just an individual act.”

Nicholls said that within Georgia's mixed-status families, there are those who can exercise the right to vote and those who cannot. Part of the work her organization does is helping community members who can vote understand that they must cast their vote to fight for the interests of those who can't.

Monterroso agreed that voting can be a form of community defense, but it's also a way to nominate candidates who represent the community—people who will fight for the best interests of Latinx communities in ways that will improve their quality of life.

“The vote not only defends us from attacks—from the criminalization of migrants—it also allows us to achieve our goals,” Monterroso said.

The youth vote is also a primary focus of each election season—namely, how to harness the power of younger voters to shape electoral politics. It's worth noting that eligible Latinx voters [tend to be younger](#) than eligible voters overall. The average age of a Latinx person in the U.S. is 29, far lower than the national average of 39. In many ways, capturing the Latinx vote also translates to engaging younger voters.

“Young people and women will play an important role. That is why campaigns in high schools and universities are essential, but also in public places such as supermarkets or in parks and, of course, door to door,” Monterroso said.

“I am the voice of my parents”

While reporting tends to focus on Latinxs who don't make it to the polls, there are plenty who are excited to vote in their first elections this year. New voters who spoke to Prism said they feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their families and communities.

Take, for example, Elida Figueroa, a 47-year-old cashier in Washington state who became a citizen in January. Figueroa told Prism that she arrived in the U.S. with her family 38 years ago and that the 2024 presidential election will be the first one in which she is eligible to vote.

“I am very excited to participate in the election. I think the community has to have more representation in the White House,” Figueroa said, noting that the issues she and other Latinx community members are closely tracking include the economy and housing prices. “We need to make our voices heard, leave apathy aside, and mobilize to vote even though we are tired from our long work days. I have four children who can vote, and all of them are going to do so this year.”

For Rosa Fernández, a Peruvian employee of a New York City software company who has lived in the U.S. for 11 years and is now eligible to vote, the most important issue is the government’s treatment of undocumented immigrants.

“We are very resentful of the current government because it has turned its back on those who do contribute to the country,” Fernández said, referring to the [recent shift right](#) on immigration taken by President Joe Biden and Democrats more broadly.

While Republicans criticize Biden’s supposed “[open border policies](#),” in reality the president [implemented an executive action](#) in June straight out of the Trump administration’s playbook. The order effectively blocks migrants’ ability to request asylum at the Southern border and authorizes immigration officials to immediately deport those who are not asylum-seekers.

Andrés Magana, a 19-year-old student studying for his real estate license in Tulare, California, captures both the elusive Latinx and youth vote. As the son of Mexican immigrants who are ineligible to vote, Magana views his vote as a tool for the larger Latinx community.

“Voting is important because it is a way to express our voice—especially for young people who are entering university or starting to work for the first time,” Magana said, noting that every vote counts because together they make a difference. “My parents do not have the possibility of voting. I am the first in my family who is going to vote. It makes me feel excited. I am the voice of my parents.”

There are myriad reasons why large swathes of communities of color are unable to vote. For Latino communities, it can sometimes be tied to immigration status. This is especially true for Mexican immigrants, many of whom have been in the U.S. for decades but have no pathway to citizenship.

According to Anette Aguilar, a community organizer with GLAHR, it is a privilege for Latinx American citizens like her to vote—and it's also a duty.

While Georgia's immigrant community has grown steadily for decades, so has the state's push for anti-immigrant laws. In May, Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp signed [House Bill 1105](#) that requires, among other things, sheriffs' offices to alert federal immigration officials of people in their custody they suspect are undocumented. This further expands the [crimmigration machine](#) that funnels undocumented immigrants from the criminal legal system into detention and deportation proceedings.

The draconian immigration laws often piloted in the South, combined with [the region's changing demographics](#), presents an opportunity for young Latinxs to vote with community defense in mind.

"We need to vote for people who protect us," Aguilar said. "Voting is a defense and a way to demand the democracy and dignity that we deserve as Latinos."