

The Politics of Immigration

Tony Farrell December 9, 2023

For me, a Texan, the revelation came when I was pondering the border situation. Many on the right call it a crisis; honestly, I'm not convinced, but then I don't live in a border area – so for me it's broadcast news like any other. I found myself wondering why Texas Governor Greg Abbott is so invested in it, as are Republican Congresspeople of the state. That's when it occurred to me that the issue could, at least in part, be about politics: I posited that, if people cross the border – legally or otherwise – become naturalized citizens, then exercise their rights to vote, they'd tend to vote Democrat, which could pose a threat to the Republican Party. Texas hasn't had a Democrat as Governor for almost 30 years. ⁱ

A study of voting behaviors between 1996 and 2010 published by The U.S. Census Bureau found that naturalized citizens were less likely to register and vote than U.S.-born citizens (due in part to social and cultural factors) but were registering and voting at an increasing rate. ⁱⁱ

A 2020 study conducted by the Pew Research Center reported a 93% increase in immigrant eligible voters, compared to an 18% increase in native eligible voters, over the previous 20 years, with Mexican-born immigrants being the largest group, accounting for over one-third of the immigrant eligible voting population. The Pew study did confirm the U.S. Census Bureau findings that immigrant eligible voter rates lagged those of U.S.-born eligible voters, but noted that the pattern had reversed among Hispanic and Asian eligible voters – with Hispanic voter turnout eclipsing that of U.S.-born voters 53% to 46% since 2000. Texas is in the top five states with the most immigrant voters. ⁱⁱⁱ

So immigrants make up an increasing percentage of eligible voters in the U.S., with Hispanics and Asians in particular exercising their voting rights. How does this translate into a threat to the Republican Party?

A Pew study examining political party affiliation among immigrants by showed a significant majority of immigrants surveyed identified as Democrat or left-leaning: ^{iv}

Table 1: Party affiliation among immigrants, by state

STATE	REPUBLICAN/ LEAN REP.	NO LEAN	DEMOCRAT/ LEAN DEM	SAMPLE SIZE
California	21%	31%	48%	821
Florida	26%	28%	46%	386
Illinois	26%	35%	39%	120
Massachusetts	17%	16%	67%	101
New Jersey	14%	24%	62%	166
New York	15%	26%	60%	369
Texas	18%	38%	44%	448

Author James Gimpel, a Professor of Government at the University of Maryland, College Park, writing for the Center for Immigration Studies in 2014, performed an analysis of the impact of immigration on the performance of the Republican party over a 32 year period from 1980. He concluded that the flow of legal immigrants “has remade and continues to remake the nation’s electorate in favor of the Democratic Party.” ^v Figure 1 depicts the significance of the decline of Republican votes among the largest counties in the United States between 1980 and 2012.

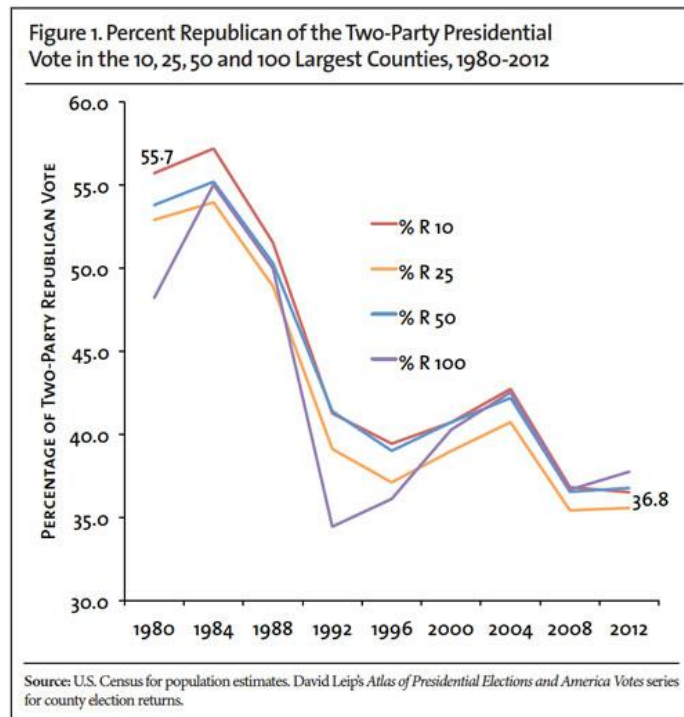


Figure 1. Source: Gimpel (2014).

With respect to Texas, Gimpel noted (emphasis mine):

[As] the immigrant population has grown across its 254 counties, the Republican vote share has declined from where it stood 30 years ago.... these figures show that for every 1 percent increase in the immigrant presence in a county, the Republican vote share dropped by 0.51 points, which is somewhat higher than the impact nationally. A one standard deviation ($\sigma=6.2$) increase in the percentage of immigrants taking up residence in Texas counties translates into a three-point drop in Republican Party prospects.... Contrary to conventional wisdom, immigration is precisely why the GOP has lost so much ground in the most heavily Latino areas of South Texas, as well as in the larger urban counties.

Returning to the scope of politics nationally, Gimpel concluded:

As the immigrant population has grown, Republican electoral prospects have dimmed, even after controlling for alternative explanations of GOP performance.

A typical drop in Republican support in a large metro area county is about six percentage points. In practical terms, an urban county that cast 49 percent of its vote for the Republican candidate in 1980 could be expected to drop to 43 percent by 2012, just as a consequence of a rising immigrant population.

In January 2016, the National Bureau of Economic Research summarized that “On average across election types, immigration to the U.S. has a significant and negative impact on the Republican vote share.”^{vi} A 2018 report by the Public Policy Institute of California showed that “among naturalized citizens in our surveys who are registered to vote, 56% are registered Democrats, [and] 14% are Republicans.” U.S.-born voters surveyed were 44% Democrat and 28% Republican.^{vii}

In at least ten states there were more foreign-born residents contributing to their economies and tax bases than were U.S.-born residents – as of ten years ago.

Data from New American Economy (NAE), a bipartisan research and advocacy organization, shows the number of foreign-born residents in the United States has risen from 19.8 million in 1980 to 44.4 million in 2017. The overwhelming majority of foreign-born residents are of working age (between 25 and 64 years old). In Texas and at least nine other states, including California, Illinois and New Jersey (each mentioned in the Table 1, above), three-quarters of foreign-born residents were of working age in 2014, compared to fewer than half of U.S.-born residents. In other words, **in at least these ten states there were more foreign-born residents contributing to their economies and tax bases than were U.S.-born residents – as of almost ten years ago.** In 2017, The United States has over 6.6 million immigrants eligible to naturalize – of that number, California had 1.8

million, Texas had over 700,000, and Florida had over 556,000.^{viii} NAE further expected that “between 2015 and 2024, the share of the electorate that is white is projected to decline by 4.4 percent. The share that will be both white and working class will see even steeper declines, falling by 5.5 percent.”^{ix}

We now understand that immigrants make up an increasing percentage of eligible voters in the U.S., with many states’ economies now powered by immigrants more than their U.S.-born contemporaries; that the increase in immigrant populations is shrinking the relative share of the electorate held by whites; and that the political tastes of naturalized citizens overwhelmingly oppose the Republican Party.

The data seems to demonstrate the plausibility of the notion that border security is a priority for especially state and federal Republican administrations at least in part because naturalized immigrants will translate into Democrat voters – threatening the station of the Republican Party.

ⁱ Legislative Reference Library | Legislators and Leaders | Governors of Texas, 1846 - Present. lrl.texas.gov/legeleaders/governors/govBrowse.cfm.

ⁱⁱ Crissy, Sarah, and Thom File. “Voting Behavior of Naturalized Citizens: 1996-2010.” *U.S. Census Bureau*, USA, U.S. Census Bureau Social, Economic and Housing Statistics Division, www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/2012/demo/crissey-01.pdf. Accessed 9 Dec. 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ Atske, Sara. “Naturalized Citizens Make up Record One-in-Ten U.S. Eligible Voters in 2020 | Pew Research Center.” *Pew Research Center’s Hispanic Trends Project*, 24 Sept. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/02/26/naturalized-citizens-make-up-record-one-in-ten-u-s-eligible-voters-in-2020.

^{iv} “Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics | Pew Research Center.” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, 13 June 2022, www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/compare/party-affiliation/by/state#party-affiliation.

^v Gimpel, James G., “Immigration’s Impact on Republican Political Prospects, 1980 to 2012.” *CIS.org*, 15 Apr. 2014, cis.org/Report/Immigrations-Impact-Republican-Political-Prospects-1980-2012.

^{vi} Mayda, Anna Maria, et al. *Immigration to the U.S.: A Problem for the Republicans or the Democrats?* 1 Jan. 2016, <https://doi.org/10.3386/w21941>.

^{vii} Baldassare, Mark, et al. "Just the Facts: Immigrants and Political Engagement." *Public Policy Institute of California*, Mar. 2018, www.ppic.org.

^{viii} "Voting and Demographics: How Immigration Plays a Critical Role." *New American Economy*, www.newamericaneconomy.org/issues/voting-demographics.

^{ix} *ibid.*