



Latino Voters and the 2020 Election: Part 2: Issues, Parties, and Candidates

Overview

The Latino* community is suffering a disproportionate impact from COVID-19, and response to the pandemic has become the top issue for Hispanic voters.

Latinos represent one in six people in our country, yet they are one in three among those infected. This unequal impact is a reflection of Latinos being overrepresented among essential workers and those unable to work from home, thus experiencing greater exposure to the virus while having a higher share of families living in multigenerational households, which makes physical distancing challenging. These factors are compounded by existing structural barriers to health care and the social safety net, which have been worsened by relief measures that have actively excluded mixed-immigration households. Not surprisingly, COVID response is dominating the list of Latino voter concerns, with health care costs and unemployment and wages—intrinsically related to the pandemic—rounding out the top three priorities. Given these acute challenges, it is notable that concerns about discrimination against Latinos, and the treatment of Latinos and immigrants, remain among the top five priorities for these voters.

As of August 2020, nearly seven in 10 Latino registered voters said that they were almost certain they would vote, which is up from 62% in May but still below 2016 levels. Lack of outreach to this community of voters, a long-standing shortcoming of political parties and candidates, continues. Latinos blame the mishandling of the pandemic on President Trump and feel that the Republican Party is increasingly hostile to the community. And

* The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race. This document may also refer to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community.

while support for Biden among Latinos is more than 40 points higher than for President Trump, these numbers are still below where Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton was at this time in 2016. Candidates and campaigns are at a critical point for increasing outreach to this electorate.

This brief, the second of a three-part series, takes a closer look at Latino voters' priority issues, their perspectives on parties and candidates and the traits they would like to see in a presidential candidate, and at the levels of outreach they are experiencing. Part one of the series covered the makeup, distribution, and participation trends of the Latino electorate, and part three will cover factors in the election process and administration arena which could impact the Latino electorate—including attitudes toward and vote-by-mail trends among Hispanic voters.

Key points covered in this brief include:

- **Response to COVID-19 is the top Latino voter priority heading into the November election.** Fifty percent of voters* identified this as the top issue that the president and Congress need to address.¹ Nearly half (49%) of Latinos know someone who has been infected with coronavirus, and more than one in four (27%) has a family member who has contracted it.² The pandemic's disproportionate impact has been acutely felt in the health and economic arenas, but it goes well beyond. With the beginning of the school year, families are facing multiple challenges as they weigh what is best for their kids, with more than 80% concerned that their children, teachers, and school staff might be exposed to coronavirus if schools reopen.³
- **Health and economic issues are the second and third priorities for Latino voters.** These issues were the top two in 2019, and currently are highly related to what the community is experiencing as a result of the pandemic. Today, health care and—specifically—lowering costs were identified by 29%, compared to 13% in 2016. A combined 45% identified jobs and the economy among the top priorities that a president should address (24% job creation and unemployment and 21% better wages and income), compared to 33% in 2016.⁴
- **Concerns about discrimination and the treatment of immigrants round out the top five priorities.** Discrimination has become a deepening concern for Latino voters, one in five of whom identified this as a priority, compared to 3% 10 years ago. Similarly, addressing the treatment of immigrants, which also relates to concerns over discrimination, is a priority for 16%.
- **As of August, 69% of Latino registered voters said that they are certain to vote,** up from 62% in May and 57% a year ago—a good indication that Latino enthusiasm is starting to increase. That said, the percent of those expressing certainty to vote around the same time in 2016 was at 88%.
- **In terms of party affiliation,** 25% of Latino registered voters identify as or lean Republican, 54% identify as Democrat or lean Democrat, 13% as Independent, and 7% said no party affiliation.
- **The top trait Latino voters want to see in a presidential candidate is someone who will unify the country.** In a 2019 survey of Latino voters, the top traits were a candidate that (1) values diversity and brings people together; (2) fights for my priorities and is willing to work with both parties to get things done; and (3) has realistic, achievable policy ideas and goals.

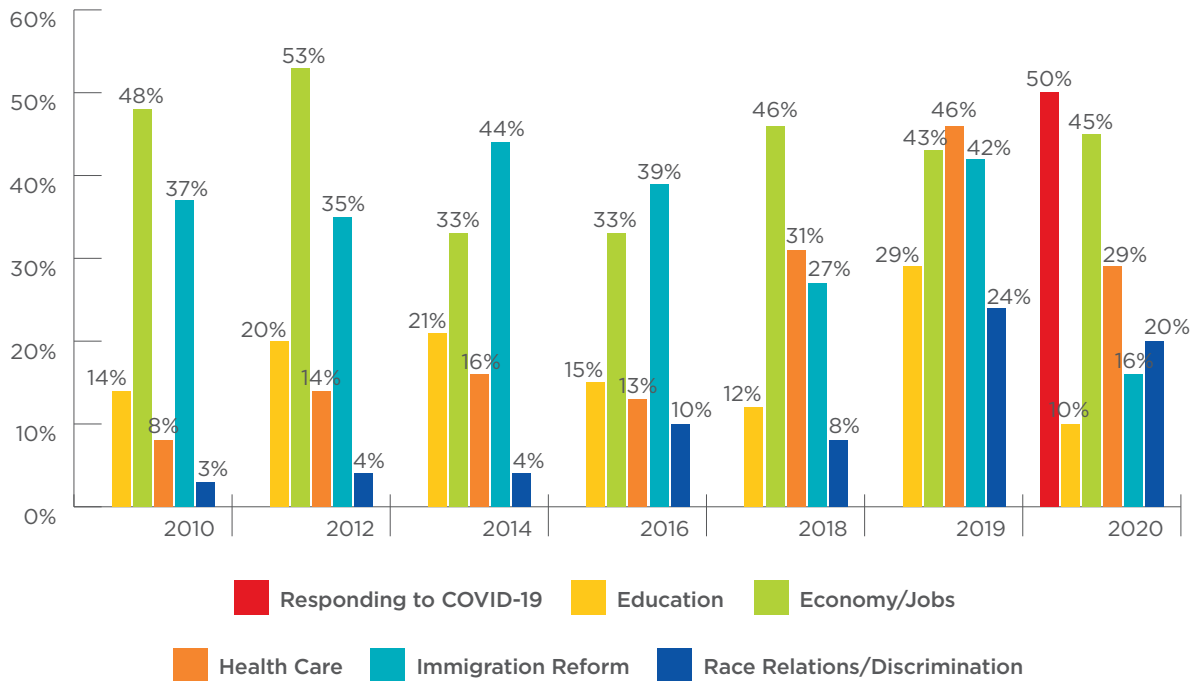
* Percentages for identified priorities add up to more than 100% since respondent could pick up to three issues.

- In terms of presidential candidate support, numbers have remained somewhat stable over the last year,** with slight increases for both candidates as the number of undecided voters decreases. A year ago, those numbers were 22% in support of Trump compared with 24% today, and 62% for the Democratic candidate compared with 66% for Biden today.
- Party and candidate outreach to Latinos continues to be anemic.** In November 2016, only 38% of Latino voters highly likely to vote reported having heard from Democrats, and 29% from Republicans. So far in 2020, 24% of Latino registered voters report having heard from Democrats, and 14% from Republicans. And the numbers are not much better in states considered battlegrounds, though in some of those the gap in Republican outreach is narrower: Latino voters reported outreach from Democrats and Republicans in Arizona at 25% and 23% respectively; 27% and 20% in Florida.⁵

The Issues

Historically, the two issues alternating between number one and number two for Latino voters had consistently been education and jobs and the economy. In 2006, for example, education was the number one issue, followed by jobs and the economy. Since then, as increased toxicity took hold of the immigration debate, immigration climbed the chart of issue priorities, becoming the top issue in 2014 and 2016. By 2019, health care had become the top issue. In 2020, COVID-19 response has become the overwhelming priority, with half of Latino voters identifying response to the pandemic as the top issue that the president and Congress need to address, followed by unemployment, job creation, and wages (45%), health care costs (29%), stopping discrimination against Latinos and immigrants (20%), and protecting immigrant rights (16%) (see Figure 1).⁶

FIGURE 1. Latino Voters: Top Issue Priorities (2010–2020)



Source: Latino Election Eve Polls 2010–2016, and SOMOS/UnidosUS August 2020 poll.

Note: When asked which issues that candidates or elected officials should prioritize, voters can state two to three issues; thus, totals exceed 100%.

While the issues cited most frequently reflect national trends, they also are shaped by community-specific concerns.

COVID-19 response dominates the list of Latino voter priorities. Half of registered Latino voters see this as the priority that Congress and the president need to address. COVID-19 response is closely associated with the health, economic, and educational impacts that the community is experiencing. Latinos have not been fully included in COVID-19 relief and recovery legislation to date. For example, in the first round of Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loans, only 4% went to Latino small business owners and roughly 12% went to Black and Latino small business owners in subsequent rounds,⁷ and 5.5 million people—including Latino citizens, legal residents, mixed-status families, and undocumented taxpayers—were excluded from Economic Impact Payments under the CARES Act. Latinos overwhelmingly support the inclusion of mixed-status families in COVID-19 relief legislation.

In terms of COVID-19 response thus far, 70% of Latino registered voters disapprove of President Trump's handling of the pandemic, and 72% agree that "President Trump ignored early warning signs of—and downplayed the seriousness of—the pandemic, and that due to his delays and incomplete response, thousands of Americans are now sick and dying."⁸ These numbers have grown since April, from 55% to 69% today. The president also has the lowest trust rating for providing accurate information and helpful advice when compared to local elected officials, health care personnel, and community organizations.⁹

The devastating impact of the pandemic reaffirms the heightened need for a national response that truly addresses the health, economic, and educational inequities that the Latino community faces.

As the school year begins, for example, families are facing serious dilemmas. While 77% of Latino households with children are

concerned that their kids are not learning enough from online schooling and will fall behind, more than 80% are worried that their children, teachers, and school staff might be exposed to coronavirus if schools reopen. In light of those concerns, while 34% do not have high-speed broadband internet or Wi-Fi at home and 38% do not have enough computers for everyone to use, 80% support continuing distance learning only (47% strongly, 33% somewhat), and 72% support extending the school year to help kids catch up.

Latino voters will no doubt be going into November looking for a candidate with a plan to combat this crisis.

The economy and jobs remain a top concern for Latino voters. Even before the pandemic, when national unemployment numbers were low, concerns about job security, low wages, and keeping up with the rising cost of living were driving factors among the 46% of Latino voters who identified the economy and jobs as a top concern in 2019.¹⁰ The number stands at 45% today (24% prioritizing unemployment and job creation and 21% improving wages and income).¹¹ Right before the pandemic hit, already 72% of Latino voters agreed that while the economy may have been growing, people like them could not get ahead, and 81% believed that wages were stagnant, and many people needed to work two or three jobs to get by. Nearly one in four (24%) were spending more than 40% of their income on housing; half were living paycheck to paycheck.¹²

While a critical segment of those on the frontlines, Latinos have also suffered a huge economic hit, with 54% of Latino households experiencing lost income due to pay cuts, job loss, and/or having to close a business they own due to the pandemic.¹³ Hispanic workers are twice as likely to have been laid off as a result of the pandemic.¹⁴ The national unemployment rate in August was 8.4%, but for Latinos it was 10.5% (compared to a pre-pandemic rate of 4% Latino unemployment).¹⁵ The consequences have been acute: 28% have had trouble

paying their rent or mortgage;¹⁶ 64% are personally concerned that they won't be able to keep up with basic expenses like rent or mortgage, utilities, or food due to layoffs or pay cuts; and 74% are worried that they will lose their savings, retirement, 401k, or other investments because of the economic downturn.¹⁷

Health care affordability has become a top priority for Latino voters. Health care concerns are intrinsically related to COVID-19 response, the top priority for the Latino electorate today. Even before the pandemic, health care had become a high priority, with specific concerns focusing almost entirely on affordability. In 2018, health care was the second top priority, and the number one priority in 2019. The costs for premiums, prescriptions, and copays have become too expensive for many, and the unpredictable change in those costs (e.g., plans changing) had already made the financial burden difficult to bear. In 2019, 61% of Latino voters said that they sometimes skipped doctor appointments or buying medicine because they could not afford it. With the COVID-19 outbreak, those challenges have become even more acute as many Latinos lost employer-sponsored health coverage as layoffs began. By June 2020, the number of Latinos lacking any form of insurance had reached 22%,¹⁸ and by August, 15% had lost employer-provided health insurance and other benefits.¹⁹

The health impacts extend to a rise in food insecurity. As reported by UnidosUS, "Census data suggest one in five Latino families with children has experienced food insecurity since the COVID-19 outbreak; Latino families have experienced food shortages at a rate roughly 50% higher than the national average throughout the crisis."²⁰

Concerns about discrimination have grown deeper. A decade ago, only 3% of Latino voters cited discrimination as a top priority. Even with the pandemic squeezing out other priorities, 20% of Latino voters today identify stopping discrimination against Latinos as a priority that the president and Congress need to address. Between 2019 and August 2020, the number of Latinos who said discrimination against Latinos and immigrants was a major/somewhat of a problem remained above 80%, with those saying it was a major problem intensifying from 51% to 62% after the El Paso mass shooting, the deadliest attack on Latinos in the country's modern history and motivated by racist beliefs. In the UnidosUS 2019 national survey of registered Latino voters, 66% said that they are very frustrated with how President Trump and his allies treat immigrants and Latinos, and that they worry it will get worse if he is reelected.²¹ In 2020, 50% of Latino voters say that they have felt like an outsider since the start of the pandemic, and 81% continue to feel that discrimination against Latinos and immigrants is a problem.

Related to discrimination, 47% of Latino voters believe that police violence is a big problem; 73% expressed support for protests related to the police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, and support the Black Lives Matter movement. Young Latino voters in particular see recent protests as important.²² More than seven in 10 Latino voters are concerned that police are being too aggressive and arresting protesters (72%); that Homeland Security law enforcement is using tear gas and violence against protesters (75%); and that Trump is sending federal agents to various cities to detain and arrest protesters (74%). That said, 83% are concerned about protesters taking things too far and becoming violent and destructive.

Immigration has shifted from the top issue in 2016 to the fifth today—but still packs a powerful punch.

Over the years, the relationship between this issue and Latinos has been often misunderstood. For a time, the only issue that candidates would talk to Latinos about—if they reached out at all—was immigration, although education and economic concerns were paramount for the community. On the opposite end, when immigration is not at the top of the priority list, some pundits assert that Latinos do not care about it. While eight out of 10 Latinos are U.S. citizens, more than half of Latino voters have family, friends, and/or coworkers who are undocumented immigrants, and policies that impact immigrants reverberate throughout the Latino community, as the exclusion of mixed-status families from COVID-19 relief has shown. The reality is that when the immigration debate becomes toxic—and it has been nothing but toxic for more than a decade—it undermines the civil rights of the entire Latino community, regardless of immigration status, as evidenced by increased harassment and hate crimes against Latinos. Thus, just like immigration has become a dog-whistle that some politicians use to divide Americans and stir up anxiety about the country's changing demographics, particularly antagonism against the country's Latino population, Latinos have similarly seen immigration as a proxy to gauge how parties and candidates regard the community.

In 2019, with immigration as the third-highest priority for Latino voters, in terms of prioritizing specific policies 33% wanted to see an end to the Trump administration policy of separating undocumented children from their parents; 27% wanted the next president to prioritize passing immigration reform with an earned path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants;

and 25% wanted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and DREAM Act protections to be enacted. Only 15% prioritized building a border wall between the United States and Mexico—which also tracks closely with the level of Latino support Trump achieved in 2016.

The Parties

In 2016, a Pew Research Center study showed 63% of Latino voters identified as or leaned Democrat, and 27% identified as or leaned Republican.²³ In an August 2020 SOMOS/UnidosUS poll, those identifying as or leaning Democrat are at 54%, and as or leaning Republican at 25%.²⁴ That said, at the polls, historically Latino party support had generally been 2:1 Democrat/Republican. Today it stands closer to 3:1, even 4:1 in a slew of past races, including the 2016 presidential contest.²⁵ (See Figure 2, Hispanic Presidential Preference.)

In the past, Latinos have demonstrated a willingness to support candidates who build a relationship with the community, conduct meaningful outreach, and have favorable positions on issues that matter to Hispanics. President George W. Bush's presidential and gubernatorial campaigns were good examples of this. Similarly, Hispanic voters have shown a willingness to "split the ticket" rather than voting straight party-line. Previous UnidosUS reports document several examples, including the following: in 2004, Arizona Latinos voted 56% for Democrat John Kerry in the presidential race and 74% for Republican John McCain in the Senate race; in 2006, in California, 39% supported Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger in the race for governor, and 71% supported Democrat Dianne Feinstein in the Senate race.



Images from rallies and press conferences centered around key issue areas, the economy, health, and immigration.

The decline in Latino support for Republicans, while not exclusively tied to immigration, matches up with a period of growing anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric and policies, conditions that propelled the issue of immigration reform to number two on the list of Latino voter priorities in 2010 and 2012, and the top spot in 2014 and 2016. While the sample sizes in these polls are different, they provide a quick comparative glance: between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of Latino voters who think that the Republican Party is doing a good job of reaching out to them has decreased slightly from 29% to 22%. And while the number of those who feel that it does not care much about Latinos has gone down from 36% to 31%, those who feel that the party is hostile to Latinos has grown from 30% to 47%, according to the latest tracking poll of Latino voters by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO).²⁶

Adding more texture to those numbers, in an UnidosUS survey of the Latino electorate in 2019, 37% of Latino voters indicated that they had voted for Republican candidates in past elections. Of those, however, 56%—or 21% of all Latino voters—said that they have a hard time supporting the party today, but if Republicans got focused on issues they care about and treated Latinos with respect, they would seriously consider Republican candidates again.²⁷ The remaining 44%—or 16% of all Latino voters—said that they like the Republican Party of today and it does not need to change to win their vote. Among the 63% who had not supported Republican candidates in the past, 60% of them—or 38% of all Latino voters—said that they would consider voting for a Republican candidate who spoke out against President Trump's harsh policies, treated Latinos with respect, and worked to create more humane immigration laws.

FIGURE 2. Hispanic Presidential Preference (1988–2016)

Year	Source	Rep	Dem	Other
1988		Bush	Dukakis	
	Voter News Service (VNS)	30%	69%	
	Los Angeles Times (LAT)	34%	65%	
	Tomas Rivera Policy Institute (TRPI)	34%	65%	
1992		Bush	Clinton	Perot/Other
	VNS	25%	61%	14%
	LAT	27%	51%	21%
	TRPI*	23%	65%	12%
1996		Dole	Clinton	Perot/Other
	VNS	21%	72%	6%
	LAT	21%	71%	7%
	TRPI*	22%	70%	7%
2000		Bush	Gore	Nader/Other
	VNS	35%	62%	3%
	LAT	38%	61%	1%
	New York (NYT)	31%	67%	2%
2004		Bush	Kerry	Nader/Other
	National Election Pool (NEP) [†]	44%	53%	2%
	LAT	45%	53%	1%
	NYT	43%	56%	
	William C. Velazquez Institute/Southwest Voter Registration Education Project (WCVI/SVREP)	31%	68%	1%
2008		McCain	Obama	Other
	NEPI	31%	67%	2%
	NALEO/ImpreMedia	25%	72%	3%
2012		Romney	Obama	Other
	NEP	27%	71%	2%
	Latino Election Eve Poll****	23%	75%	2%
2016		Trump	Clinton	Other
	NEP	28%	66%	6%
	Latino Election Eve Poll	18%	79%	3%

1988–2004 chart data as documented in NCLR, “How Did Latinos Really Vote in 2004?”, November 15, 2004; revised January 15, 2005. <http://publications.unidosus.org/handle/123456789/554>

Source: for 2008 NALEO/ImpreMedia/Latino Decisions National Post Election Survey, <https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/NALEO.Nov08.pdf>; and for 2012–2016 Reuters, NEP, and Latino Election Eve Poll data from 2012 and 2016. <https://latinoelectionpolls.com/app/ld/latinovote/#all-national-all>

Latino voters have a more positive view of the Democratic Party, but that positivity has decreased somewhat. Between 2016 and 2020, the percent of Latino voters who said that the Democratic Party is doing a good job reaching out to Hispanics decreased from 57% to 53%. Latino voters who thought that Democrats do not care too much about Hispanics grew from 33% to 39%, and those who felt that the party is hostile to Latinos grew from 5% to 8%.²⁸

While Democrats would seem to have a strong platform on which to build Latino support—past levels of Latino support, a party platform that matches many Latino issue priorities, and Latino views of government (71% of the Latino electorate say that government should do more to solve problems, with 82% of Hispanic Democrats and 51% of Hispanic Republicans in support)²⁹—the party does not seem to be making the effort or investments to cultivate these voters. This argument, not new to this election, has resurfaced in a slew of articles and opinion pieces³⁰ particularly after August, when polls showed Latino support for former Vice President Joe Biden behind where Secretary Hillary Rodham Clinton was in 2016 (see Figure 3).

Party and candidate outreach to Latinos continues to be low, conceivably a factor behind the percent of Latino voters who feel that neither party cares too much about them. In the last two presidential

elections, more than 60% of Latino voters highly likely to vote said that they had not heard from Democrats or Republicans. As of August 2020, that number stood at 64%; only 24% of Latino registered voters report having heard from Democrats, and 12% from Republicans.³¹

Notably, and perhaps related to the above, in the last presidential election, when asked about whether they were voting to support Democrats, Republicans, or to support and represent the Latino community, a plurality of Latino voters (42%) said to support the community, 34% to support Democrats, and 11% Republicans.³² In 2012, 36% said for the community, 39% for Democrats, and 15% for Republicans.³³

The Candidates

Presidential candidate preference has remained somewhat stable over the last year.

In June 2019, 21% of Latino registered voters said that they planned to vote for President Trump, and 62% for the Democratic candidate, with 17% still unsure. In August 2020, before the conventions, those numbers grew slightly, to 24% for Trump and 66% for Biden (see Figure 3). Both figures remain below the highest points achieved by previous presidential candidates from each party: President George W. Bush won approximately 40%³⁴ of Latino voters in 2004 and Secretary Clinton approximately 79% in 2016 (See “The Debate Over Election Exit Polls”).

The Debate Over Election Exit Polls

When looking at any poll, it makes sense to examine whether the results are based on representative samples of the groups whose opinions are being reported, since the smaller a sample, the higher the margin of error.³⁵ That accuracy challenge can be magnified by other factors, such as polling only selected locations. That is the case with the National Election Pool (NEP),* the election exit poll we all follow on any given election. The NEP has traditionally had the aggregate outcome correct; but less so when you start breaking it down by smaller groups, whether that is White voters without college degrees, or very often, voters of color.

There has been a long-standing debate over the accuracy of Latino data in election exit polls, which particularly bubbled up in 2004 and in 2016. It is widely acknowledged that President George W. Bush achieved higher levels of Latino voter support in 2004 than in 2000, but the 44% reported by the NEP appeared implausibly high given state results and actual voter data.³⁶ In December 2004, NBC elections manager Ana Maria Arumi issued a statement lowering Bush's share of the Hispanic vote to 40%,³⁷ but to this day NEP data have not officially been edited or modified on the multiple news sites that have the exit poll, and the erroneous number continues to be cited. In 2016, a very similar dynamic repeated, with NEP reporting 28% of Latino voters supporting Donald Trump, a far departure from numerous polls with more extensive Hispanic sampling leading up to election day. Post-election analyses of state results and voter data have called into question the accuracy of the Latino numbers in the exit poll.³⁸ However, the NEP flawed data remain widely and unqualifiedly cited.

The 2004 results led UnidosUS to explore an election eve poll concept in 2006, to at least have a Latino national sample with which to compare results. Since then, the project has grown significantly, with multiple organizations collaborating to make more extensive state sampling possible—and in 2016 expanding to include sampling not just of Hispanic, but Black, Asian American, Native American, and White voters. In 2016 the Latino Election Eve poll, conducted by Latino Decisions, included interviews with 5,600 Latino voters and had a margin of error of +/-1.8 percentage points for its national sample. It estimated Latino presidential support at 79% for Clinton and 18% for Trump.

By its very nature, a poll like the NEP, attempting to measure how, why, and for whom everyone voted, will encounter some challenges. When you hear exit polls numbers on smaller groups of the electorate, including Hispanic voters, remember that the numbers on election night may not tell the whole story, or even the real story, of how those specific voters voted, why, and for whom.

* The NEP is a consortium now made up of ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN, administered by Edison Research (Fox News and The Associated Press pulled out of the consortium in 2017 and the latter has launched its own election polling approach).

Despite the fact that Latinos overwhelmingly disapprove of President Trump’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic—the top issue for Latino voters—and are concerned about the administration’s treatment of Latinos and immigrants, it is notable that only 52% of Latino voters were in the “will vote for Biden” column in early August (an additional 14% were leaning Biden and 10% remained undecided). This reflects, in part, the low levels of contact and engagement that most Latino voters have received from both campaigns and parties. But the stakes are higher for Biden. Trump does not need to win a majority of Latino voters, but merely diminish or keep at bay support for Biden.³⁹ And while Trump is highly visible and more of a known quantity by now, meaningful outreach is needed on the Biden side to increase name recognition and make a connection with these voters, which could also be important, among other things, to address the concerns of some Latino voters over the Obama administration’s deportation record and to counter false narratives about socialism and communism being peddled to other segments of this electorate.

Yet, even in the hotly contested states of Arizona and Florida, where Latino voters will be key to the outcome, outreach remains low. In August, only 22% of Latino voters had heard from Democrats in either state, and 21% from Republicans—although Republican outreach in those states is eight percentage points higher than was reported nationally by Latino voters, and Trump has gained ground in both states (see Figure 3).

FIGURE 3. Latino Presidential Candidate Support, 2016 and 2020

STATE	August 2016		November 2016		June 2019		August 2020	
	TRUMP	CLINTON	TRUMP	CLINTON	TRUMP	D	TRUMP	BIDEN
Arizona	18%	70%	12%	84%	13%	66%	29%	63%
California			16%	80%	18%	67%	21%	70%
Colorado	17%	72%	16%	81%			21%	71%
Florida	27%	62%	31%	67%	29%	54%	41%	55%
Nevada	14%	70%	16%	81%	22%	59%		
North Carolina	14%	73%	15%	82%			24%	61%
Ohio	22%	61%	17%	80%				
Pennsylvania							28%	59%
Texas			16%	80%	20%	62%	21%	66%
Virginia	19%	67%	15%	81%				
Wisconsin			10%	87%				
National	19%	70%	18%	79%	22%	62%	24%	66%

Above levels of support include voters who said definitely/probably would support that candidate.

Source: August 2016 America’s Voice Poll of Latino registered voters https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/AV_Wave_2_Wave_2_Natl_7_State_Svy_Release.pdf; November 2016 Latino Election Eve Poll https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/National_and_State_by_State_Toplines.pdf; June 2019 UnidosUS poll of Latino Electorate <https://latinodecisions.com/polls-and-research/unidosus-2020-national-latino-electorate-survey-june-2019/>; August 2020 SOMOS/UnidosUS poll <https://latinodecisions.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/National-and-State-Results-Somos-Unidos-Aug-Svy.pdf>.

All in all, Latino voters should not be taken for granted. The playbook is simple and documented in many UnidosUS reports: candidates matter, their positions matter, and meaningful outreach is essential. That was the playbook that Senator Harry Reid applied in Nevada in 2010, where he was widely expected to lose yet won thanks to earning 90% of the Latino vote. More recently, that playbook was put into action by Senator Bernie Sanders who, while not winning the nomination, certainly demonstrated that investments in Latino persuasion and outreach won him overwhelming support from Latino voters in Nevada, California, and Texas.



Attendees showing what they vote for at the 2018 UnidosUS Leaders in Action Summit in Washington, DC.

The traits that Latino voters want to see in their next president match their expressed priorities and concerns. Asked to choose the most important trait they would like to see in a presidential candidate, 25% of Latino registered voters said someone who “values diversity and brings people together.” This particularly matches up with increasing Latino voter concerns over discrimination. Another 18% said someone who “has realistic policy ideas,” and an equal percentage said someone who “fights for their priorities and is willing to compromise to get things done.” Moreover, although 33% said that speaking Spanish was important, only 2% chose that as the most important trait. Overall, Latino voters across gender and age had similar views on how they evaluated each of the various traits, as well as on those selected as the most important. There was greater difference in the order of priority traits when looked at by party identification. While the same three were the most cited, for Latino Republicans the order was (1) willing to compromise to get things done, (2) having achievable policy ideas and goals, and (3) valuing diversity and bringing people together (see Figure 4).

Notably, Hispanic voters place a much higher premium on candidates that will fight for their priorities, are willing to compromise to get things done, and have realistic policy ideas and goals, than on someone who “has specific plans addressing issues Latino voters say are important to them.” First, their identified top traits combine issue priorities with getting something done. Additionally, previous research has shown that Latinos overall want to see themselves as part of the whole American community, and their concerns integrated in the agendas of parties, candidates, and elected leaders—rather than as a separate “Latino” platform. For example, in a 2018 poll of 18-24-year-old youth of color, 71% agreed that “we are stronger when we support each other across racial and ethnic groups, whether it is in our communities, in our workplaces, or in the voting booth.”⁴⁰ In UnidosUS focus groups and polling research conducted in 2017, Latinos overwhelmingly agreed that “when people with different backgrounds and from different communities join together, we are more likely to creatively solve problems” (89% agreed, 73% strongly agreed).⁴¹

FIGURE 4. Top Candidate Traits for Latino Voters

Which of the following traits do you think are important in a presidential candidate?

Trait	Overall	Top Trait	Gender		Partisanship			Age		
			Men	Women	Dem	Rep	Ind	18-29	30-49	50+
Values diversity and brings people together	76%	25%	23%	27%	26%	16%	28%	27%	24%	21%
Fights for my priorities, willing to compromise to get things done	74%	18%	17%	20%	18%	23%	16%	17%	18%	23%
Has realistic, achievable policy ideas and goals	73%	18%	17%	20%	16%	22%	20%	18%	20%	17%
Has specific plans addressing issues Latino voters say are important to them	61%	3%	1%	5%	3%	2%	4%	4%	3%	3%
Has bold and ambitious policy ideas, even if they are hard to achieve quickly	56%	9%	10%	8%	9%	9%	9%	9%	10%	7%
Has prior experience in elected office	54%	12%	14%	10%	15%	9%	10%	12%	12%	14%
Fights for my priorities, will not compromise even if nothing gets done	51%	5%	6%	4%	6%	5%	4%	6%	5%	3%
Has business or private sector work experience	41%	7%	10%	4%	6%	11%	6%	7%	6%	7%
Speaks Spanish	33%	2%	2%	2%	1%	3%	2%	1%	1%	4%

Source: UnidosUS polling with Latino Decisions, June 1-14, 2019, “The 2020 Latino Electorate Survey,” http://publications.unidosus.org/bitstream/handle/123456789/1958/UnidosUS_surveycrossstab_June2019.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y (accessed August 25, 2020).



2020 Democratic Presidential Candidate Julián Castro speaking in front of a packed crowd at the 2019 UnidosUS Annual Conference in San Diego, CA.



Attendees at the 2018 UnidosUS Annual Conference in Washington, DC taking photos with signs that highlight the issues and phrases that matter most to them.



Conclusion

The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 is reverberating through the Latino community and shaping the priorities of the Hispanic electorate. That impact has been acutely felt in the health and economic arenas, but it goes well beyond.⁴² Not surprisingly, COVID response dominates the list of Latino voter concerns, with health care costs, unemployment and wages, concerns about discrimination against Latinos, and the treatment of Latinos and immigrants, rounding up the top five priorities. Those priorities are also reflected in the top traits Latino voters, regardless of gender or age, would like to see in a presidential candidate: someone who values diversity and brings people together, will fight for their priorities and is willing to work with both parties to get things done, and has realistic, achievable policy ideas and goals.

Historically, a significant number of Latino voters have shown willingness to support candidates, regardless of party affiliation, who build a relationship with the community and take positions on priority issues. But there is a shift away from the GOP, in part driven by the Republican party's embrace of anti-immigrant and anti-Latino rhetoric and actions.

Democrats have benefited from that erosion in Latino support for Republicans, but have not necessarily deepened their relationship with Latinos in a way that can truly energize and solidly win over these voters. This means that Republicans may be leaving Latinos with less of a choice party-wise when they go to the polls, but Democrats have work to do to get these voters to go to the polls to vote for them in equal if not greater numbers and intensity than in the last election.

In sum, candidates matter, their positions matter, and meaningful outreach is essential. As stated in part one of this series, "polling data show that the size and intensity of Latino turnout will be shaped by the choices voters have, how candidates define themselves on the issues and their outreach, and how unimpeded the path to the voting booth remains."⁴³ It is clear that Hispanic voters will be critical factor in the winning equation for the White House, as well as key Senate, House, and state and local races. Yet, 60% of Latino voters are still not hearing from candidates and parties, and those anemic levels are not much better even in battleground states. While late, candidates and campaigns are at a critical point for increasing outreach to this electorate.

Endnotes

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