



Latinos and the 2024 Elections: Demographics, the Economy and Religion as Signals to Electoral Shifts

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Abstract

The 2024 US election saw large numbers of American Latinos supporting the Republican Party and voting for Donald Trump. This work considers a few explanations for this phenomenon: The relative youth of the Latino electorate, the importance of immigration and the economy for Latino voters, and the increasing appeal of Pentecostalism to Latino voters. I argue first that reliance on social media for political information and news, along with deep cultural vulnerabilities makes Latino youth specifically vulnerable to mis and disinformation. Second, issues of immigration and the economy are of central importance to Latinos, and particularly to Latino men under 40 who experience heightened fear of job loss due to undocumented migration. Finally, the growing appeal of Pentecostalism, and specifically Prosperity Gospel theology, has resonated with many Latino voters. This movement has often framed Trump's financial success as God's blessing, encouraging the belief that his leadership will in turn bring material prosperity to the Latino community as well. As their demographic presence in the US continues to grow, it is uncertain how these cultural, economic, and religious dynamics will reshape the US political landscape in the long term.

Keywords: Latinos, Electoral Shift, Immigration, Donald Trump, Pentecostalism

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Postmortem analyses of the 2024 elections have highlighted a large shift among Latinos in favor of Donald Trump. According to exit polls, about 10 to 15 percent of the Latino electorate switched their vote from Joe Biden in 2020 to Trump in 2024.¹ The shift was especially pronounced among young Latino men, among whom some measures have recorded a Trump gain of about 33 percentage points.² Exit polls also showed Republicans overall making inroads with the Latino electorate, particularly in border districts.³ Caution should be taken in interpreting exit polls, as they were not designed to capture voting turnout or intentions of subpopulations. In fact, exit polls tend to get Latino voting margins wrong because they fail to properly sample, cluster, or consider the language of the interviewee.⁴ Despite these flaws, there is little doubt that Latinos are less of a reliable electorate for Democrats than in the past, while by some accounts, they are in the middle of a sustainable shift toward Republicans, at least among some segments of this group.⁵ This has important implications for politics in the United States, including the rise of illiberalism, eroding the democracy that has touted itself as “the shining city on a hill.”

Latinos: A Changing Demographic

The Latino electorate is the second largest voting group in the U.S., behind only whites. Latinos are also the youngest demographic group in the country. Twenty-one percent of Millennials and a quarter of Generation Z (24%) are Latinos.⁶ As a result of their disproportional youth, more than a third of the Latino electorate became eligible to vote in national elections in the past five years. One in five Latinos were voting in a presidential election for the first time in 2024, and 36% were new to the electorate since 2016.⁷ While perhaps difficult to envision, a large proportion of the current Latino electorate was not eligible to vote when Barack Obama ran for president in 2012.

The relative youth of Latinos bring about certain realities that are likely to inform their political choices and preferences. For example, young Latinos, like members of Generation Z and the Millennial Generation in general, have not known a political environment that is not defined by polarization. They have also not known a time when the U.S. Congress was not completely gridlocked and able to pass much significant legislation. Young generations, Latinos included, are also digital natives—having been raised in the age of technology—who communicate and receive (political) information almost exclusively through social media and digital platforms. This reliance, in addition to deep cultural vulnerabilities, makes Latinos susceptible

1 Gamboa, Suzanne, Nicole Acevedo, Daniella Silva, Carmen Sesin, and Deon J. Hampton. “Record voter gains among Latinos for Trump mainly boiled down to their top issue—the economy.” *NBC News*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/trump-economy-latino-vote-2024-election-rcna178951>

2 “Latino Male Voters Shift Toward Trump in 2024 Election.” *Edison Research*, November 6, 2024, <https://www.edisonresearch.com/latino-male-voters-shift-toward-trump-in-2024-election/>

3 Nadia Lathan. “Republicans again make gains on Texas-Mexico border and hang onto a U.S. House seat.” *AP News*, November 6, 2024. <https://apnews.com/article/texas-election-border-house-cuellar-furman-6735e5d0b579f66046ff97495451cb38>

4 “Lies, Damn Lies, and Exit Polls,” *Latino Decisions*, November 10, 2016. <https://latinodecisions.com/blog/lies-damn-lies-and-exit-polls/>; Kaleigh Rogers, “Why Exit Polls Are Misleading,” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/05/us/politics/exit-polls-election.html>

5 Bernard L. Fraga, Yamil R. Velez, and Emily A. West. “Reversion to the Mean, or Their Version of the Dream? Latino Voting in an Age of Populism,” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 119, no 1 (2024): 1-9, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000406>.

6 “Population by Birth Cohort Generation and Race and Ethnicity.” The Annie E. Casey Foundation, July 2024. <https://datacenter.aecf.org/data/tables/11504-population-by-birth-cohort-generation-and-race-and-ethnicity>.

7 “Hispanic Voters Back Harris over Trump by a 62%-37% Margin; Cite Economic Concerns as Top Priorities,” *Unidos US*, November 12, 2024. <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/hispanic-voters-back-harris-over-trump-by-a-62-37-margin-cite-economic-concerns-as-top-priorities/>

to mis- and disinformation, from guidance about the COVID-19 pandemic to news about politics, especially when this news is consumed in Spanish.⁸

A common refrain in the study of and discussion about Latinos is that they are not monolithic. A group is an amalgamation of individuals who have different experiences and characteristics, but this is particularly true for Latinos, who are not bound by a single defining experience. Their traditionally defining commonalities have been twofold: 1) places of origin, i.e., Latin American countries, and 2) the Spanish language. These traditional group characteristics are no longer as well defined as in the past. Many Latinos are now native-born rather than foreign-born, and most now are either English-dominant or bilingual.⁹ This means that third- and fourth-generation Latinos are far removed from an immigrant experience that defined their parents' and grandparents' lives, and they may not associate with a country of origin other than the United States.

Latinos are in a unique and precarious position relative to their susceptibility to the messaging and promises of a "cult of personality" and a strongman like Trump. This is due to their disproportionate youth, their use of digital technology, the shift in their nativity, and being predominantly English (or bilingual) speaking, on top of living in a hyper-polarized political environment. The Latino identity is complicated; it includes attitudes about race, gender, and religion. Many Latinos carry "racial baggage." This baggage refers to a sense of wanting to belong and be accepted into the predominant societal group—non-Latino whites. To some extent, this baggage has manifested itself in acceptance of Trump and his rhetoric around racial grievance and nativism.¹⁰ Both economic and social factors are important explanatory forces for this grievance and for the shifts in the Latino electorate over the past several election cycles.

The Role of the Economy (and Immigration) in Latino Electoral Shifts

In the run-up to the 2024 elections, 85% of Latinos named the economy as their most important issue. Not far down the list, almost six in ten Latinos (59%) said immigration was very important to their vote.¹¹ The economy and immigration are very much linked, with immigration serving as a proxy for economic anxieties and fears. Trump and the GOP have played on these fears by connecting the loss of American jobs to undocumented migrants. Among Latinos, support for Trump in 2024 was highest among men under the age of 40, who are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns.¹² The strategy of blaming migrants for the economic challenges Latinos are facing has been at least somewhat successful, as research shows a shift

8 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024); Marisa Abrajano, Marianna Garcia, Aaron Pope, Robert Vidigal, Joshua A Tucker, and Jonathan Nagler. "How Reliance on Spanish-Language Social Media Predicts Beliefs in False Political Narratives amongst Latinos." *PNAS Nexus* 3, no. 11 (2024): 442. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pnasnexus/pgae442>; Stella M. Rouse, Ashely Ross, and Rhonda Struminger. "In Science We Trust? Depends on Who 'We' Are: How Social Identities Inform Attitudes about COVID-19 and Trust in Science." Paper presented at the Southern Political Science Association Annual Meeting, January 10-13, 2024.

9 Jens Manuel Krogstad, Renee Stepler, and Mark Hugo Lopez. "English Proficiency on the Rise Among Latinos." *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015. <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2015/05/12/english-proficiency-on-the-rise-among-latinos/>

10 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024).

11 Lopez, Mark Hugo and Luis Noe-Bustamante. "In Tight U.S. Presidential Race, Latino Voters' Preferences Mirror 2020." *Pew Research Center*, September 24, 2024. <https://www.pewresearch.org/race-and-ethnicity/2024/09/24/in-tight-u-s-presidential-race-latino-voters-preferences-mirror-2020/>

12 Gabriel R. Sanchez, "A deep dive into the 2024 Latino male electorate." *Brookings*, November 22, 2024. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/a-deep-dive-into-the-2024-latino-male-electorate/>

in support among lower socioeconomic status Latinos toward Trump over the past few election cycles.¹³

On the very first day of his second term, Trump issued a slew of executive orders on immigration. These policy directives included: ending birthright citizenship for future children born to mothers who are undocumented, ending the CBP One program that used a lottery system to award asylum claim appointments, reinstating the “remain in Mexico” policy that requires migrants who present themselves at the border to stay in Mexico while their case is processed, and requiring immigrants unlawfully in the U.S. to register and be fingerprinted.¹⁴ In addition, Trump immediately began making good on his campaign promise of mass deportations by initiating immigration raids in several cities. He threatened to withhold funds from cities that protect undocumented immigrants (known as “sanctuary cities”) and to prosecute local officials who do not cooperate with immigration raids. He also threatened new tariffs against countries like Colombia for initially refusing to accept U.S. deportation flights.¹⁵

Trump and the Republican Party have boldly campaigned on restrictive immigration policies over the last several election cycles—a stark change from former Republican presidents like George W. Bush who promoted “compassionate conservatism” to connect government, charities, and faith-based organizations to develop policies to help disadvantaged persons.¹⁶ Compassionate conservatism gave way to movements like the Tea Party and Make America Great Again (MAGA), which have put white identity and white grievance front and center. Both movements represented a reaction to and hostility toward the first African American president.¹⁷ Some Latinos who voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 have shifted their support to Trump, signaling some level of implicit or explicit agreement with the politics of grievance that defines his policy positions.¹⁸

The Role of Religion in Latino Electoral Shifts

Changes in religious identity among Latinos is an important cultural factor that is also likely contributing to shifts in the electorate. While Catholics remain the largest religious group among U.S. Latinos, their share has been on a steady decline. In 2023, 43% of Latino adults identified as Catholic, down from 67% in 2010.¹⁹ At the same time, Latinos are “increasingly driving America’s evangelical movement.”²⁰ New Latino Protestants are largely Millennial females, foreign-born, and of

13 Bernard L. Fraga, Yamil R. Velez, and Emily A. West. “Reversion to the Mean, or Their Version of the Dream? Latino Voting in an Age of Populism.” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 119, no. 1 (2024): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0093955424000406>.

14 Julia Ainsley, Did Martinez, and Laura Strickler. “Trump issues a slew of immigration-related executive orders on first day of new term.” *NBC News*, January 20, 2025. Available at: <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/trump-issues-10-executive-orders-immigration-taking-office-rcna188385>

15 Sara Dorn. “Trump Hits Colombia With Tariffs For Rejecting Deportation Flights—In First Clash Over Crackdown.” *Forbes*, January 26, 2025. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2025/01/26/trump-hits-colombia-with-tariffs-for-rejecting-deportation-flights-in-first-clash-over-crackdown/>

16 Marvin Olasky. *Compassionate Conservatism: What It Is, What It Does, and How It Can Transform America*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

17 Ron Elving. “Trump’s MAGA is marching down a trail blazed by the Tea Party.” *NPR*, May 21, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/21/1100386445/trumps-maga-is-marching-down-a-trail-blazed-by-the-tea-party>

18 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024).

19 “Among U.S. Latinos, Catholicism Continues to Decline but Is Still the Largest Faith.” *Pew Research Center*, April 13, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2023/04/13/among-u-s-latinos-catholicism-continues-to-decline-but-is-still-the-largest-faith/>

20 Marie Arana. “Latinos Are Flocking to Evangelical Christianity.” *The Free Press*, March 13, 2024. <https://www.thefp.com/p/latinos-are-flocking-to-evangelical>

lower educational attainment.²¹ By some estimates, half of Latinos will identify as evangelical Protestants by 2030.²² At the same time, white evangelical Protestants are on the decline (from 23% of the American population in 2006 to 14% in 2020).²³ This means that the growth potential for evangelical Protestantism is driven largely by Latinos, which could have long-term consequences for the U.S. political landscape.²⁴

Pentecostalism, a Protestant movement, is also increasingly popular with Latinos.²⁵ Pentecostalism promotes “prosperity theology,” or the Prosperity Gospel (PG), which advances the tenet that the ability to acquire wealth is constrained only by the limitations in a person’s faith in God. It promotes a provocative rhetoric that salvation and riches can be obtained on earth by simply believing and by monetarily contributing to the church.

Unlike most of the Christian Right (mostly made up of white evangelicals), PG teachings appeal to a substantial number of minority groups, including Latinos.²⁶ The tendency of PG ministries to discuss prophecy in connection with obtaining wealth as God’s blessing means that Trump’s projected financial success serves PG believers’ need for a prophetic figure who is God’s emissary.²⁷

Trump is not the only figure whom Latinos look up to; they are also more likely to follow the messages of “charismatic” Latino religious leaders who evoke memories of past colonization and preach support for a strongman who can avoid replicating the failures of their home countries (often attributed to socialism). Latinos are particularly susceptible to messages, whether true or not, that align with their worldview, especially if this (mis)information promises to protect them from economic hardship and oppression.²⁸

Consequences of Economic and Cultural Anxieties among Latinos

Both immigration and religion feed into Latino economic and cultural anxieties. Religious messages that Latinos receive—because of their increasing adherence to evangelical Protestantism and the Pentecostal tenets of prosperity theology—are based on a desire for prosperity on earth that may need to come at the expense of “others” whom they perceive as a threat to that prosperity. Similarly, messages from charismatic religious leaders often challenge Latinos to ignore undemocratic experiences with strongmen in their home country and accept a strongman in the U.S. who makes them feel “safe” and “in charge.” This strongman can “creep into and grab hold of people’s psyches when democracy feels slightly messy, uneasy, or on the verge of unpredictable change. And for many Latinos who come to the U.S. fleeing different forms of political trauma, that pursuit for a stable democracy can paradoxically lead some to embrace undemocratic leaders...”²⁹

21 Marie Arana. “Latinos Are Flocking to Evangelical Christianity.” *The Free Press*, March 13, 2024. <https://www.thefp.com/p/latinos-are-flocking-to-evangelical>

22 Mark T. Mulder, Aida I. Ramos, and Gerardo Mart. *Latino Protestants in America: Growing and Diverse*. (New York: Rowan and Littlefield, 2017).

23 Marie Arana. “Latinos Are Flocking to Evangelical Christianity.” *The Free Press*, March 13, 2024. <https://www.thefp.com/p/latinos-are-flocking-to-evangelical>

24 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024).

25 Brian Calfano, Tony Carey, Paul Djupe, and Valerie Martinez-Ebers. *Race, Politics, and America’s Prosperity Gospel*. (New York: Columbia University Press, Forthcoming).

26 Brian Calfano, Tony Carey, Paul Djupe, and Valerie Martinez-Ebers. *Race, Politics, and America’s Prosperity Gospel*. (New York: Columbia University Press, Forthcoming).

27 Brian Calfano, Tony Carey, Paul Djupe, and Valerie Martinez-Ebers. *Race, Politics, and America’s Prosperity Gospel*. (New York: Columbia University Press, Forthcoming).

28 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024).

29 Ramos, Paola. *Defectors: The Rise of the Latino Far Right and What it Means for America*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2024), 151.

It is unclear whether Latinos support, from an economic or cultural perspective, the aggressive immigration directives that Trump is pushing. However, many Latinos voted directly or indirectly on this issue. Some Latinos who migrated to the U.S. have taken a “shut the door behind you” approach to immigration. Others who are native-born may have enough distance from the immigrant experience that they do not associate a threat to their identity where “increasing restriction on immigration by the Republican Party would lead to support for the Democratic Party.”³⁰ It is also unclear how countervailing religious forces—a sense of obligation to support the downtrodden versus a need to belong to the dominant American group—will ultimately shape durable political preferences of the Latino electorate moving forward. On the one hand, they hear voices like Bishop Mariann Budde, who asked President Trump “to have mercy on the people of our country who are scared” and said, “The vast majority of immigrants are not criminals.”³¹ On the other hand, they see Vice President J.D. Vance criticize the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for bishops’ criticism of President Trump’s immigration policies, which were called “deeply troubling.” Vance suggested that the criticism was rooted not in “pastoral concerns” but in fear of losing the substantial federal funding that diocese receive to help resettle immigrants.³² It remains to be seen how Latinos will reconcile their economic and cultural anxieties with Trump policies over the next four years. These policies may turn out incongruous with Latinos’ demands, failing to provide solutions to their most pressing concerns.

Latino Susceptibility to Illiberalism

The ongoing U.S. experience with illiberalism—an ideology that rejects liberal democratic norms—helps us to comprehend how the rise of illiberal parties and candidates can take place within a legitimate democratic electoral system.³³ Research on illiberalism is useful also for a better understanding of how political elites work to legitimize their efforts to weaken institutions and accelerate democratic backsliding. That can be justified by playing on the fears and anxieties of specific segments of the population. Furthermore, the illiberalism literature tells us that “The deprivation of religion and its return to public life contribute to an instrumental use of religion to promote illiberal politics.”³⁴ For the reasons discussed in this paper, Latinos are on the front lines because of their susceptibility to illiberal effects. This is an evolving phenomenon, and its ultimate consequences in the U.S. remain to be seen. Latinos are the largest minority group in the country and will spearhead the United States’ becoming a majority-minority nation in the next 20-25 years.³⁵ However, there is no turning back the demographic shift the U.S. is experiencing, and the reaction to that shift is manifested in the illiberal tactics being employed by Trump and the MAGA movement. A growing number of Latinos have embraced this ideology. In the short term, it appears that Latinos have become more candidate- and issue-driven voters, rather than reliable straight party-line voters. In the longer term, demographic

30 Bernard L. Fraga, Yamil R. Velez, and Emily A. West. “Reversion to the Mean, or Their Version of the Dream? Latino Voting in an Age of Populism,” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 119, no. 1 (2024): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055424000406>.

31 Zolan Kanno-Youngs, Tim Balk, and Erica L. Green. “Bishop Asks Trump to ‘Have Mercy’ on Immigrants and Gay Children.” *The New York Times*, January 21, 2025. <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/21/us/politics/trump-bishop.html>

32 Camillo Barone. “Vice President Vance criticizes US bishops over immigration.” *National Catholic Reporter*, January 26, 2025. <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vice-president-vance-criticizes-us-bishops-over-immigration>

33 Laruelle, Marlene. “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction.” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 303–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

34 Hennig, Anja, and Oliver Fernando Hidalgo. “Illiberal Cultural Christianity? European Identity Constructions and Anti-Muslim Politics.” *Religions* 12, no. 9 (2021): 774. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12090774>; Laruelle, Marlene. “Illiberalism: A Conceptual Introduction.” *East European Politics* 38, no. 2 (2022): 303–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21599165.2022.2037079>.

35 Justin Gest. “What Happens When White People Become a Minority in America?” *Foreign Policy*, March 22, 2022. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/22/us-white-majority-minority-nation-demographic-change/>

change, especially the evolving “Latino” identity, along with Latinos’ susceptibility to illiberal ideology, may bring about a more durable realignment in the partisan identity of this group.

