

The Conditional Effects of Latino Candidates and Partisanship on Latino Turnout

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Abstract

Does the presence of a Latino congressional candidate increase Latino turnout? An ongoing debate exists regarding the mobilizing effect of Latino candidates on Latino turnout. However, scholars on both sides of this divide have, as of yet, failed to detect the critical role that a Latino candidate's *partisanship* may have on Latino turnout. Using national turnout data and leveraging the exogenous shock of redistricting between 2010 and 2012, we find evidence that while the presence of a Latino congressional candidate increases turnout among Latino co-partisans, the presence of Latino congressional candidates who do not share the partisan identity of Latino voters depresses turnout. We conclude by emphasizing the importance of the reinforcing power of shared partisan and pan-ethnic identities in empowering Latinos to vote.

Keywords

turnout, partisanship, Latino candidates

Understanding Latino political behavior¹, especially voting behavior, has become increasingly important to understanding the future of American elections. As a result of the growth of the Latino population, Pew Research Center estimated that Latinos comprised 13.3% of all eligible voters in 2020, an increase of over seven percentage points since 2000.² However, Latino turnout still lags behind that of other major racial groups. For instance, in the 2020 election 53.7% of eligible Latino voters went to the polls while turnout among African Americans and white adults was 62.8% and 70.9% respectively.³

Given the importance attributed to Latino voters and the growing concerns regarding their relatively low levels of participation, a number of scholars have explored the central determinants of Latino voter turnout (Barreto et al., 2004; Barreto, 2007; 2010; Barreto et al., 2005; Barreto et al., 2004; DeSipio, 1998; Fraga, 2013; 2016a; 2016b; Stout & Martin, 2016). One influential strand of this literature has explored the utility of the theory of minority empowerment for Latino communities (Barreto, 2007; 2010; Henderson et al., 2016). In its simplest form, this theory predicts that the mere presence of a co-racial candidate on the ballot will increase interest and general participation among voters from the racial group in question (Bobo & Gilliam, 1990). Studies of Latino turnout using a range of methods and data have found evidence in favor of this theory, concluding that Latino turnout increases when a Latino candidate, regardless of the candidate's partisanship, appears on the

ballot (Barreto, 2007; 2010; Barreto et al., 2005; Barreto et al., 2004).

However, the link between co-ethnic candidates and increased Latino turnout has not gone unchallenged. Eschewing the use of precinct-level data for individual-level turnout data at the national level, a number of recent studies have found little empirical evidence that the presence of Latino candidates on the ballot increases Latino turnout, with some uncovering evidence that Latino candidates depress the level of Latino turnout (Fraga, 2013; 2016a; 2016b; 2018; Henderson et al., 2016).

Do Latino candidates, irrespective of their partisanship, increase Latino turnout? As outlined above, there remains little consensus regarding the impact of Latino candidates on Latino turnout, but in this research note we attempt to adjudicate between these two equally compelling perspectives. In so doing, we argue that a missing link in the extant scholarship is a lack of deeper exploration of the role that a Latino

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candidate's partisanship may have on Latino turnout. In this paper, we propose a theory of conditional effects that predicts that when a Latino candidate runs for office it will produce either reinforcing or conflicting identities for Latinos in the electorate, depending on the party of the Latino candidate and the partisanship of the Latino voter in question (Fairdosi & Rogowski, 2015). This notion of reinforcing versus conflicting identities is based on three persistent findings in the literature.

First, partisanship has been found to operate as a social group identity that subsequently shapes not only perceptions of politics, but the manner in which individuals interact with the political world (Egan, 2020; Green et al., 2002). Second, while much has been made of the electoral support that former President Donald Trump received from the Latino community, most notably from Latinos in Texas and Florida, we note that the majority of Latinos self-identify as Democrats and vote for Democratic candidates in local, state, and federal elections (Affigne, 2000; Alvarez & Bedolla 2003; Casellas, 2010; De la Garza et al. 1992; De la Garza, 2004; Hero et al., 2000).⁴ Finally, we highlight that Latinos generally have a relatively weak sense of pan-ethnic identification as Latino (Gonzalez-Barrera 2020; Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera 2013; Lopez et al., 2017; and, relative to African Americans, have a diminished perceptions of linked fate (Hochschild et al., 2016). Taken together, we hypothesize that shared pan-ethnic identification alone may be insufficient to empower Latino to go to the polls, especially since previous research shows that the effects of efforts to mobilize Latinos are conditional on the strength of pan-ethnic identification (Pérez 2015; Valenzuela & Michelson, 2016). Rather, we argue that shared pan-ethnic identification may only work to mobilize Latinos when it is *reinforced* by shared partisanship; and when partisanship is not shared between a Latino voter and candidate, it may actually serve to demobilize Latinos since Latino voters will face conflicting signals from two of their most politically relevant identities (Cavanagh, 2021).

Our hypothesis, that the mobilization effects of Latino candidates may be conditional on partisanship, mimics the conclusion reached by Fairdosi and Rogowski (2015) who find evidence that African American turnout in congressional elections is uniquely influenced by the partisanship of African American candidates. Employing survey data from the Cooperative Congressional Election Study, they find that African American turnout is significantly higher in elections featuring African American Democratic candidates relative to elections in which an African American Republican candidate is on the ballot. While this finding serves as the theoretical foundation of our current work, we note that Fairdosi and Rogowski rely solely on cross-sectional survey data which leads to questions concerning the causal relationship between a candidate's race, their partisanship, and turnout. We also note that our hypothesis is particularly relevant for the Latino population which, unlike African Americans, frequently encounters Republican Latino candidates in general election

contests (Ocampo & Ray, 2019; Michelson 2005; Sathwani & Mendez, 2018). For instance, in 2010, while 40% of all Latino candidates were Republican, 62% of Latinos in the mass electorate identified as Democrats (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). If the presence of a co-ethnic candidate does operate in tandem with partisanship, then the relative frequency of Republican Latino candidates when compared to the proportion of Latino Democrats may help to explain null findings in previous studies that do not model such conditionality.

Design

In this research note, we take advantage of the redistricting process coupled with large-scale individual-level turnout data from the voter file firm Catalist. Redistricting is useful for our purposes because it creates an exogenous shock to the composition of congressional districts that in many cases influences the types of candidates that citizens might be exposed to in a congressional campaign. Thus, by examining the turnout behavior of individuals across the election cycles before and after redistricting, it is possible to estimate the casual effect of Hispanic candidates on turnout among Hispanic individuals.

We track the participation (or non-participation) of individuals in the 2010 and 2012 election cycles. To do this, we rely on data from the voter file firm Catalist. Catalist maintains a vast database of individuals in the United States based on voter files appended with commercial and other political data. While Catalist largely markets their services to progressive candidates and organizations, they also provide an academic subscription to their services, which includes access to a full 1% sample of their entire database. We use a 1% sample file generated in August, 2013 for the purpose of this study. The 2013 file includes validated vote information for individuals from 2012, as well as for previous elections cycles.

We use a difference-in-difference approach exploiting the panel nature of the data available from Catalist. Specifically, for each individual in the database, we create two records—one that captures values of the dependent and independent variables in 2010 and another that includes the same information for 2012. Our dependent variable for each record is whether or not the individual turned out to vote. This information is taken directly from voter files compiled by Catalist. An individual's identification as a Latino is determined from one of two sources. First, for those individuals living in states that collect an individual's race or ethnicity as part of the registration process, status as a Latino comes directly from the voter file. Of the 58,346 individuals who we classify as Latinos in this analysis, 26.5% receive that classification as a result of information taken directly from the voter file. The remaining Latinos in the database are classified as such by virtue of models used by Catalist to predict the race/ethnicity of individuals. These models are based largely on a model that uses first, middle, and last name, census block contextual

Table 1. Exposure to Latino House Candidate Among Redistricted An Non-Redistricted Individuals From the Catalist 1% Sample.

Latino Candidate in House Election?	Hispanics (%)		Non-Hispanics (%)	
	Redistricted	Not Redistricted	Redistricted	Not Redistricted
Neither election	61.5 (27,263)	58.1 (48,771)	91.7 (382,777)	92.5 (968,323)
In 2010 but not 2012	11.1 (4903)	5.1 (4299)	3.5 (14,797)	2.7 (28,510)
In 2012 but not 2010	14.2 (6315)	6.8 (5725)	3.6 (14,909)	1.9 (20,307)
Both elections	13.2 (5870)	30.0 (25,183)	1.2 (4,9310)	2.8 (29,618)

Note. Entries are percent and number of individuals on Catalist 1% sample voter file who experience each scenario.

data, and commercial data in order to predict an individual's race/ethnicity and indicate how likely it is that the prediction is correct. Fraga (2016a) notes that these models are generally quite accurate when validated against self-reports from survey data. We provide additional evidence regarding the accuracy in the Supplemental Index. We also replicate our analysis only using individuals where Catalist judges the race prediction to have the highest level of accuracy.

The key independent variable of interest for our analysis is whether there is a candidate running in the House election who is Latino. The indicators for the presence of Latino candidate in each election year come from coding candidates identified by the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO). NALEO listed 43 Latino congressional candidates in 2010 and 44 in 2012, with two Latino Democrats running against each other in California's 35th district in 2012.⁵

To get a sense of how the external shock of redistricting creates inter-election change in exposure to Latino candidates, Table 1 shows the percentage of Hispanic and non-Hispanic individuals exposed to Latino House candidates in each election cycle based on whether that individual was drawn into a new congressional district between 2010 and 2012. The first column shows that one-fourth of Hispanic individuals who were redistricted experienced a change in exposure to Latino House candidates between 2010 and 2012. Specifically, 11% went from voting in a house race with a Latino candidate in 2010 but not in 2012, while 14% went from not having a Latino candidate on their House ballot in 2010 to having one in the race in 2012. By comparison, among the Hispanics who were not redistricted, just 12% experienced a change in exposure to Latino House candidates. Thus, being redistricted doubled the chances that Hispanics individuals would experience a change in the presence of a Latino House candidate between these two elections. A similar pattern exists for non-Hispanics (in the two columns), though exposure to Latino candidates is much more rare for this group overall.

In this paper, we are interested in using this decennial shock of the redistricting process to calculate the marginal effect of being in a congressional district in which a Latino is running for office compared to a district where a Latino is not running. Thus, we use panel regression with individual fixed effects to estimate the effect of moving from an election

without a Latino candidate to one with a Latino candidate (or vice versa). The individual fixed effects model is a useful approach because it accounts for any time invariant differences across individuals. This means that the treatment effects uncovered by the model are calculated from changes within individuals, not comparisons across different individuals.

However, it is still important to control for other factors that may differ over time and would also be correlated with our variable of interest (the presence of a Latino candidate) and turnout. The two contextual controls we include in our model are the competitiveness of the House campaign in an individual's district (Valenzuela, 2011) and the election year. We include the latter since 2012 was a presidential election cycle while 2010 was a midterm. Thus, turnout is significantly higher in 2012, a fact that will be accounted for with this dummy variable. Our measure of district competitiveness, taken from the Cook Political Report, classifies each district into one of four categories ranging from districts that were rated as solidly in one party's camp, likely for one of the parties, leaning towards one of the parties, and those that were rated as toss-up. We include dummy variables for each of the latter three categories.

Finally, our expectations center on the importance of partisanship in conditioning how Hispanic individuals respond to Latino candidates. We therefore use Catalist's partisanship score, which is a prediction ranging from 0 to 100 for how Republican or Democratic an individual is in terms of their behavior. The prediction is based on a range of factors, including registration with political parties and participation in party primaries (see Hersh 2015). We use the partisanship score given to each individual before the 2010 election. In the SI, we show that the partisanship score is highly correlated with party identification on surveys. However, we also duplicate our analysis in the SI using an individual's party registration in states that have party registration publicly available on the voter file.⁶

We restrict our analysis to individuals for whom turnout was possible in each election cycle and who did not move between 2010 and 2012. Thus, we only include those who were old enough to be eligible to vote in 2010.⁷ We also excluded individuals who Catalist marked as being deceased or probably being deceased. Additionally, we dropped individuals for whom a change of address had been registered at some point between 2010 and 2012 since moving would

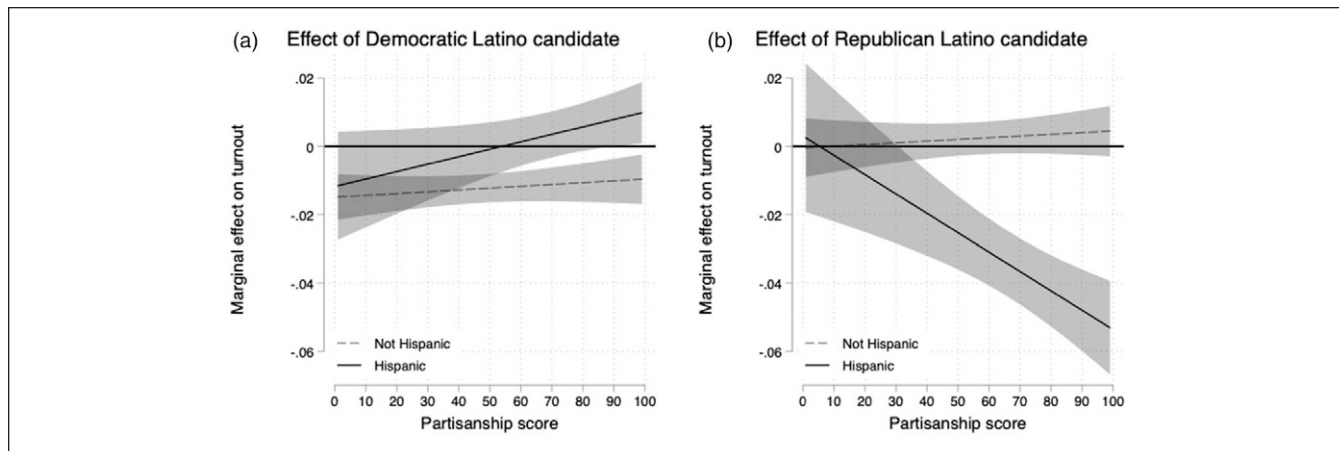


Figure 1. Marginal effects of Latino house candidates on turnout by Hispanic ethnicity and partisanship.
Note: Point estimates and 95% confidence intervals generated from second model in Table SI. 1.

increase the likelihood that an individual would observe a change in the ethnicity of candidates in his/her district, but moving is also negatively associated with participation (Wolfinger & Rosenstone, 1980).

Results

In the SI, we present full results from cross-sectional time series models estimated with individual fixed effects. The first model in Table SI.1 includes a single dummy variable for whether a Latino candidate was running in the individual's congressional election and an interaction term with whether the individual was identified as Hispanic (the Hispanic dummy variable is excluded since we are using individual fixed effects and Hispanic identification does not vary over time in the Catalist dataset). In following with the previous work on this subject (Barreto, 2010; Fraga, 2018), this model does not distinguish between whether the Latino candidate running in a district was a Republican or a Democrat nor does it account for possible interactions with an individual's partisanship. The results from this model indicate that the presence of a Latino candidate has a small, but statistically significant, negative effect on turnout for all individuals. Among non-Latinos, the presence of a Latino candidate leads to a 0.9 point decrease in turnout ($p < .001$), while it generates a 1.0 point reduction in turnout among Latinos ($p = .004$). Overall, the effect of the presence of a Latino candidate is not meaningfully nor statistically different for Hispanic voters than it is for those who are not Hispanic. This finding is consistent with the effect documented by Fraga (2016a).

The second column of results in Table SI.1 shows the estimates once we account for the partisanship of the individual and the partisanship of the candidate running. The model itself includes several interactions to test the effect of the presence of a Latino candidate conditional on the

partisanship of that candidate, the partisanship of the individual, and whether the individual is Hispanic. Since these interactions are difficult to interpret on their own, we plot the marginal effects in Figure 1. Specifically, the plots in Figure 1 show the marginal effect on turnout associated with the presence of a Democratic or Republican Latino House candidate. These effects are plotted across the range of the partisanship scale and are plotted separately for individuals who Catalist identifies as Hispanic and those who are not Hispanic.

Figure 1a shows the effect on turnout from having a Democratic Latino candidate, compared to the baseline turnout in races where a Democratic Latino was not running. The broken line in the plot is always below zero, indicating that there is a small but statistically significant drop in turnout among non-Hispanics when a Democratic Latino runs for office. However, since the broken line is flat, this indicates that the drop in turnout is consistent across the range of potential partisanship scores. In other words, there is a small (approximately 1.5 point) drop in turnout among non-Hispanics when a Democratic Latino candidate runs regardless of whether the non-Hispanic individual is a Republican or a Democrat. By contrast, the solid line shows the effects among Hispanic individuals. This line has a positive slope, indicating that partisanship does condition how Hispanic individuals respond to the presence of a Democratic Latino candidate. However, the impact on turnout is not particularly large. Among Republican Latinos, there is a small decrease in turnout, but this drop is not statistically distinguishable from zero. Among the most Democratic individuals (partisanship score = 95), the model predicts a small increase (0.9 percentage points, $p = 0.037$) in turnout from the presence of a Democratic Latino candidate.

Figure 1b is set up similarly to Figure 1a but in this case we estimate the marginal effects of the presence of a Republican Latino House candidate. The broken line

(representing non-Hispanic individuals) is flat and tracks along the zero centered reference line, indicating that turnout among non-Hispanics is not associated with the presence of a Latino candidate regardless of that individual's partisanship. The pattern for the solid line representing Hispanic individuals is strikingly different. Turnout is unchanged among the most Republican Hispanic individuals, but among Hispanic Democrats there is a large drop in turnout when a Republican Latino is running in the House election. In fact, for most Democratic Hispanic voters, the model predicts a decline in turnout of approximately 5 percentage points.

Trends Since 2010–2012

While the redistricting process provides a disruption in congressional districts which allows us to gain more causal leverage on understanding the role of Latino candidates on Hispanic turnout, it is also worthwhile to understand how these patterns might look in elections held since 2010 and 2012. To do this, we were able to obtain Catalist 1% national sample files following the 2012, 2014, and 2016 elections. For each election cycle, we divided individuals into four groups—those living in a district where neither candidate was Hispanic, those living in a district where the Democratic candidate was Hispanic, those living in a district where the Republican candidate was Hispanic, and those in districts where both candidates were Hispanic. We then calculate the Hispanic - White turnout gap (Fraga, 2018) by calculating the percentage of Hispanic registered voters who turned out in each type of election and subtracting the percentage of White registered voters who voted. For example, if the turnout rate among Hispanic individuals was 70% and among White individuals it was 80%, the turnout gap would be -10%. We calculate these gaps separately for voters that Catalist identifies as Democratic leaning (those with a partisanship score over 50) and Republican leaning (those with a score below 50). Our expectation is that the turnout gap will be smaller in elections where the co-partisan candidate is Hispanic since we expect the presence of that candidate will mobilize Hispanic voters from the same party.

Figure 2 plots the turnout gap for each type of election across each of the three election cycles. Generally, the findings from this plot are consistent with the results from the previous section, though there are some exceptions. On the left-side plots, we see that the turnout gap was smaller among Democratic voters in 2012 and 2014 in districts where the Democratic candidate was Hispanic. For example, in 2012 the turnout gap was 10 points when neither candidate was Hispanic, but 6 points when the Democratic candidate was Hispanic. In 2014, the presence of a Hispanic Democratic candidate reduced the turnout gap by 6 points among Democratic voters compared to races where neither candidate was Hispanic. However, in 2016, the turnout gap among Democrats was actually slightly larger in races with

a Democratic Hispanic candidate running (though it was smaller when both candidates were Hispanic).

Among Republican voters (the right-side plots), the patterns are largely similar. In both 2012 and 2016, the presence of a Republican Hispanic candidate reduced the Hispanic-White turnout gap among Republican voters. The gap was also reduced when both candidates were Hispanic. The exception to this pattern was 2014, when the turnout gap among Republicans was quite similar despite the presence of a Republican Hispanic candidate.

We caution that this second analysis is largely suggestive, as it does not rely on the same difference-in-difference design around a redistricting shock that gives us more confidence in the 2010–2012 analysis in the previous section. Nevertheless, the patterns we observe in subsequent elections are often, though not entirely, consistent with our earlier results. When co-partisan Hispanic candidates run for office, it often mobilizes Hispanic voters thereby reducing the turnout gaps in those districts.

Discussion

For over a decade, scholars of Latino turnout have debated whether the presence of a Latino candidate increases the level of turnout among the Latino electorate. In adjudicating between these two perspectives, we argue that these studies have not fully examined the conditional effects of shared partisanship on Latino turnout, thus obscuring a key contextual factor that helps predict Latino turnout when a Latino candidate appears on the ballot. Using individual-level data on turnout, and leveraging the exogenous shock of the redistricting process, we find that Latino turnout increases when a co-partisan Latino candidate appears on the ballot, and decreases when Latino candidates and Latino voters in a district do not share the same partisan identity.

Our findings suggest a number of avenues of future research. First, given the increasing partisan identification and sorting exhibited by Latinos (Sears et al., 2016), we hope that future work that explores the nature of Latino participation takes seriously the influence of Latinos' growing partisan attachments when seeking to explain and predict Latino turnout. Second, our discovery that Latino turnout increases with the presence of a Latino candidate who shares the partisan identity of Latino voters, and decreases among cross-partisan Latino voters, leads to questions regarding the strategies and tactics used by Latino candidates when mobilizing these voters. Do these candidates in their campaigns speak to Latinos' pan-ethnic and partisan identities in the hope of mobilizing co-partisan Latino voters? Related to this question, do these candidates, when seeking to mobilize cross-partisan Latino voters, emphasize their pan-ethnic identity and conceal their partisan identification? Finally, the increase in support among the Latino electorate for Donald Trump and Republican congressional candidates in South Texas and Florida during the 2020 general election further strengthens our contention

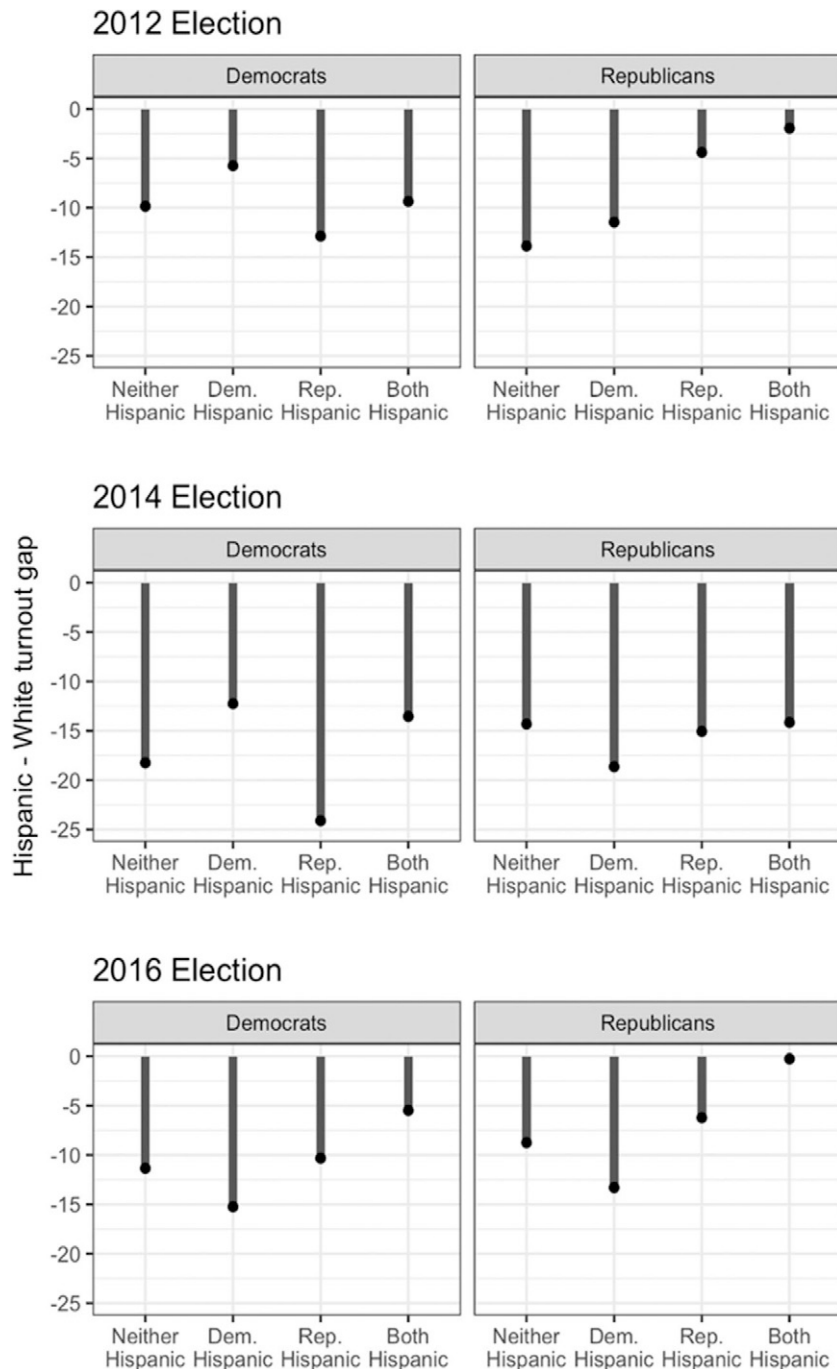


Figure 2. The Hispanic-white turnout gap by presence of Latino candidates, 2012–2016.

that the Latino electorate is far from monolithic, but that Latino support for Latino candidates is subject to conditional effects linked to partisanship.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests


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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. We employ the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” interchangeably in this paper.
2. Noe-Bustamante, Luis, Abby Budiman & Mark Hugo-Lopez. “Where Latinos have the most eligible voters in the 2020 election.” Pew Research Center, January 31, 2020. Accessed June 28, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/01/31/where-latinos-have-the-most-eligible-voters-in-the-2020-election/>
3. Jordan, Jewel. April 29, 2021. “2020 Presidential Election Voting and Registration Tables Now Available.” United States Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2021/2020-presidential-election-voting-and-registration-tables-now-available.html>
4. Initial analyses of Latino turnout in Texas and Florida indicates that the increased levels of support for Trump may be ascribed to specific mobilization efforts and (economic) issue appeals that found resonance with the Latino electorate (Ocampo et al., 2021; Garza, 2021; Solis et al., 2020).
5. Two documents produced by NALEO provide the raw data for coding the presence of a Latino candidate: (1) NALEO Educational Fund. (2010). NALEO 2010 Election Profile; (2) NALEO Educational Fund, (2012). 2012 Election: Latinos Opportunities in Congress. We code one candidate of Portuguese origin in the 2012 election as not Latino, but this decision does not meaningfully affect our results.
6. Because not all states have party registration, this approach reduces the number of observations for our analysis.
7. A very small percentage (0.05%) of individuals are over the age of 100 in 2012. We removed these observations from the analysis given the likelihood that many may have been deceased.

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