Massive early vote in Texas improves the Democrats' chances of breaking their 32-year losing streak

Richard Murray, Senior Research Associate, Hobby School of Public Affairs

As we entered the final stretch of one of the most consequential midterm elections in American history, the New York Times ran a front-page story "Flipping the Senate Won't Be Cinch for Democrats." The article noted:

> Control of the Senate hinges on victories in red states that favored Mr. Trump by significant margins in 2024, including some that Democrats have not won in decades. Republicans are out-spending them by eye-popping amounts in the races. And after its performance in 2024, the Democratic Party as a brand still remains unpopular with voters.
>
> All of that left some in both parties wondering: Could the much-discussed blue wave end up looking more like a splash?[1]

That question is appropriate in Texas. Donald Trump beat Kamala Harris by almost 14 points here in 2024. No Democrat has won a U.S. Senate seat in Texas since 1988. Elon Musk, the world's richest man (and a recent Texas transplant) has poured $158 million into a super PAC supporting Ken Paxton, the GOP nominee, assuring that the race will be the most expensive Senate race in U.S. history.

We will find out whether these factors will keep the Texas seat red very soon, with strong evidence suggesting that it is going to be difficult. Late polling consistently shows Democrat James Talarico maintaining a lead over Paxton while vastly outraising his opponent in direct campaign contributions.[2] Prominent Republicans like former Supreme Court Chief Justice Tom Phillips have broken ranks to endorse the Democrat, and Senator John Cornyn has refused to appear with the Attorney General who defeated him in the GOP primary.

Two other factors make Texas a tougher state for Republicans in 2026. One is the accelerating pace of demographic change in Texas in recent years. Growth has surged, and most of that increase has occurred in the four large metropolitan areas that are increasing racially and ethnically diverse. Voters in greater Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston, San Antonio, and Austin now account for 70 percent of the Texas electorate, and they are much less supportive of Republicans than voters in smaller metropolitan areas and rural Texas. Second, most Texans now vote *before* Election Day, and analyses of the 7.6 million votes already cast show GOP nominees are facing great danger in this election cycle.

---

[1] Lisa Lerer, "Flipping Senate Won't Be Cinch for Democrats," The New York Times, October 26, 2026, p.1.

[2] A non-partisan poll by Texas Public Opinion Research on Oct. 23 showed Talarico leading Paxton by four points, while Governor Greg Abbott had a three percent lead over State Representative Gina Hinojosa.

Everything is bigger in Texas, including the number of residents (and voters)

Readers of these *Letters from Texas* know I emphasize how dynamic the state has become in recent years. The "economic miracle" touted by Texas Republicans like Governor Abbott has created more than five million net new jobs in this century, resulting in a population surge from 20.8 million in 2000 to an estimated 32.1 million in 2026.[3] Since few people retire to Texas from other states (in sharp contrast, for example, to Florida), and natural population increase has slowed with sharply lower birth rates, most of these new Texans are movers from other states and, increasingly, from outside the U.S. The Texas population that identifies as white/non-Hispanic ("Anglos") is now about 37 percent, compared to 41 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Black, and seven percent Asian/Pacific Islander. The Anglo percentage of registered voters is higher (now about 55%) but is steadily dropping.

A couple of facts illustrate these shifts and their political consequences. A July 1, 2026 report, noted that "Texas Leads the Nation as Black Population Growth Reshapes America's Largest Metropolitan Areas."[4] The Dallas-Fort Worth area gained 181,778 Blacks between 2020 and 2025, followed by Houston with 174,056. Those gains amount to 82 percent of the entire population of the Texas Panhandle, the most Republican region of the state.[5] Politically, this growth was reflected in Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett's strong U.S. Senate primary campaign in March 2026. The African American candidate carried Dallas, Harris, and Tarrant Counties with about 90% of the Black vote, while narrowly losing to James Talarico. One should keep in mind that Blacks in Texas are the most solidly Democratic of all racial/ethnic populations in general elections.

In percentage terms, Asian population growth has outpaced all other groups since 2000. Collin County, north of Dallas, is the most populous suburban county in Texas and, until recently, a solidly Republican area. George W. Bush got 75 percent of Collin County's votes in 2000, compared to 52 percent for Donald Trump in 2020. In 2000, the Census counted just 33,902 Asians (6.9%) in Collin County. In 2010, the number increased to 87,276 (11.2%). In 2020, Asians accounted for 206,884 (19.4%) of the county's 1,064,465 population. Asian Texans are extremely diverse, usually lag Anglos and Blacks in voter participation, and split their votes between Democratic and Republican candidates. Recent Republican attacks on Muslims and Hindus, however, coupled with sharp reduction in legal immigration, have triggered a backlash. Ken Paxton, who has led the anti-Muslim effort, could lose his home county this year.

[3] World Population Review, https://worldpopulationreview.com > states > Texas.

[4] https://blackdemographics.com/texas-leads-the-nation-as-black-population-growth-reshapes-americas-largest-metropolitan-areas/.

[5] The Panhandle's 26 counties had 434,358 people in 2020, and local voters gave Kamala Harris just 18% in the 2024 election.

The magnitude of the changes in Texas is reflected in Table 1. From November 2018 to October 2026, the Texas Secretary of State reports registered voters increased from 15.8 million to 19.2 million. Texas does not record race or ethnicity (or party identity) for voters but given the fact that there has been only about a five percent increase in Anglos over the last decade, the vast majority of additional voters are Hispanic, Black, or Asian American.

Table 1: Voter Registration Changes in Texas County Groups 2018 to 2026 with 2018 U.S. Senate Vote and 2026 Party Primary Vote

Area	Change in Registration				US Senate Vote 2018			Primary Vote 2026		
Big Metros	2018	2026	Gain	%	Rep	Dem	D%	Rep	Dem	D%
Dallas/FW	4,010	5,030	1,020	25.4	1,093	1,164	51.6	554	701	55.9
Houston	3,538	4,471	943	26.7	919	998	52.1	420	545	56.5
San Antonio	1,395	1,738	343	24.6	335	377	52.9	166	226	57.6
Austin	1,344	1,753	409	30.4	288	529	64.7	149	330	68.9
Combined	10,287	12,992	2,705	26.3	2,635	3,058	53.7	1,289	1,802	58.2
Other Metro Counties (18)	1,748	2,013	265	15.1	588	296	33.5	282	166	37.1
Rural Anglo Counties (176)	2,087	2,331	244	10.5	751	245	24.5	495	99	16.7
South Texas, Border Counties (30)	1,631	1,881	250	15.3	226	447	66.5	101	252	71.4
State Totals	15,793	19,174	3,381	21.4	4,261	4,045	48.7	2,166	2,319	51.7

Source: Office of Texas Secretary of State. Data are in thousands.

The four big metropolitan areas (DFW, Houston, San Antonio, and Austin) have added over 2.7 million registered voters since 2018. That is especially significant in this year's high profile U.S. Senate race. Beto O'Rourke carried all the big metro areas against Ted Cruz in 2018, building a lead of over 420,000 votes. Nevertheless, O'Rourke lost statewide because of Cruz's margins in smaller metro counties like Lubbock and Smith, and the Republican's huge advantage in rural Texas.

The Republican areas, however, have added voters at a far slower pace than the metro counties comprising the Texas Triangle. The 2026 primary vote patterns show these areas are not only casting a larger share of the total statewide vote but are also becoming more Democratic in this election cycle. Bottom line: If the 2018 Cruz/O'Rourke race were rerun in 2026, with exactly the same vote partisan division across the 254 counties, the result would be a slight Democratic advantage, rather than a 215,000 vote loss.

Robust early voting signals a further Democratic advantage this year

Most Americans vote on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years (that's November 3 this year). The great majority of Texans, however, had voted (a few by mail, mostly in-person) by Friday, October 30. Since in-person early voting started on October 19, we have seen record midterm participation, providing insight about how this election is trending. Cast votes are not tabulated and released until the polls close on November 3, but we can track where and who is voting. The signs are encouraging for Democrats as a statewide report and Harris County voting patterns show.

Derek Ryan's Early Voting Report

Derek Ryan is an Austin-based consultant who works mostly with state Republican candidates and campaigns. Despite his political connections, he provides a non-partisan analysis of daily voting patterns from all 254 counties (I am a subscriber). The following data is from his Day 9 report based on 5.7 million votes cast by that point.

One important element of Ryan's work is to match the primary vote history of people casting ballots in general elections to create six voter categories. These categories are as follows:

Rep (No D) ….. GE voters who have voted only in Republican primaries

Mixed Pri / R … GE voters who have voted in both, but most recently in a Rep. primary

Dem (No R) … GE voters who have voted only in Democratic primaries

Mix Pri / D … GE voters who have voted in both, but most recently in a Dem. primary

Gen Only … GE voters who have no primary history

No History ….. Voters with no primary or general election history in Texas

Since Texas has been a state dominated by Republicans since the 1990s, more people have voted in GOP primaries than Democratic ones, especially in midterm elections when presidential candidates are not on the ballot. Consequently, there are more Texans with a Republican primary history than Democratic history and thus, when the general elections occur, we usually see more GOP primary voters show up than those with a Democratic background.

Table 2 on page 5 shows that was very much the case in the 2024 and 2022 general elections when, according to Ryan's report, the two Republican categories outnumbered the two Dem groups by 857,862 voters in 2024 and 487,020 in 2022 by the end of in-person early voting. However, by the 9th day of early voting this year, those with a Democratic primary history exceeded Republicans by 70,835.

Table 2: Which party has advantage in getting more of their primary voters to vote in the General Election? Comparing 2026 to 2024 and 2022 on the 8th day of early voting

Data are in thousands.

	2026 Voters	2024 Voters	2022 Voters
Rep Prim	1,841	2,289	1,572
Rep Mix	86	132	84
Total Rep	1,927	2,421	1,636
Dem Prim	1,885	1,497	972
Dem Mix	113	67	90
Total Dem	1,998	1,442	1,062
Party Adv	Dem 71	Rep 794	Rep 437
Gen Only	1,394	1,975	711
No History	356	565	143

Source: Ryan Data & Research, Early Voting Report: Texas, Day 8

Rep Prim … Voter has previously voted only in Republican primaries
Rep Mix … Voter has voted in both party primaries but most recently in Rep primary
Dem Prim … Voter has previously voted only in Democratic primaries
Dem Mix … Voter has voted in both party primaries but most recently in Dem primary
Gen Only … Voter has no primary history, but has voted in one or more general elections
No History … Voter has no primary or general election history in Texas

Across the country, Democratic voters have been telling pollsters for months they are more highly motivated to vote than Republicans. Now that more than 30 million people have voted, including more than seven million in Texas, we are seeing that at the polls. Democrats, *and Independents,* are outvoting Republicans in most states. That is a flashing red alarm for Republicans in Texas. Even as the GOP pulled slightly ahead on this party advantage measure on the last day of early voting, Republicans do not have the usual big cushion of more primary voters to offset any weaknesses with people who have only voted in election voters or never voted before.

Depending on winning among folks with no primary history is dicey for Republicans in this midterm environment. The president's party almost always fares poorly in these contests, but that is even more likely given Donald Trump's historically low job approval rating. Little wonder that President Trump is back in Texas this week, trying to pump up the party base with less than a week before voting concludes.

That danger is evident in Derek Ryan's analysis of county-level voting. A great deal of attention has been focused on Tarrant County (Fort Worth). It is the only big urban county in America where Republicans control the local government, although Democrats like Beto O'Rourke in 2018 and Joe

Biden in 2020 have eked out narrow wins locally. A Democratic state senate candidate won a special election in a mostly Republican part of Tarrant County in January 2026, and there is a rematch for the full term. After nine days of early voting, 437, 041 ballots have been cast. Among those with a primary history, Democrats have a 37% to 31% advantage in a 50/50 county in the 2018 Cruz v. O'Rourke race. I am not a fan of focusing on "bellwether" counties or states, but if Tarrant joins Harris, Dallas, Bexar, and Travis Counties in producing a solid Democratic majority, catching up in the exurbs, smaller cities, and rural counties may be a bridge too far for Republicans in 2026.

Data from the Office of Texas Secretary of State as early voting wraps up makes this clear. The big urban counties and suburbs had high midterm early voting. The four big metro areas accounted for 71.9% of the statewide early vote, their largest share ever. Statewide turnout was 40.2%, led by Travis (48.0%) and the big suburban counties of Williamson (49.3%), Collin (48.3%), Denton (47.2%) and Fort Bend (47.1%). Since all of the big metro areas have been trending Democratic, this is encouraging news for Democratic candidates.

The greater concern for Ken Paxton, Greg Abbott, and other Republicans should be the poor turnout in rural Texas during early voting this October. Twenty-three counties had turnout below 25%, all are rural except for Ector in the Midland/Odessa area. Eight years ago, they cast 59,335 votes for Republican Ted Cruz compared to 28,007 for Beto O'Rourke. A larger group of 44 rural counties had turnout between 25.0 and 29.9%. They supported Cruz over O'Rourke in our last competitive senate election by 118,879 votes to 51,375. It is possible, of course, that there will be a huge surge of rural voting on Election Day to close the big city/suburban versus rural gap but that is unlikely given the facts that there are almost no competitive local elections in these counties and no recent history of people waiting to vote on Election Day.

Turnout patterns in Harris County at the conclusion of early, in-person voting

Harris County is the most populus in Texas, with 5.1 million residents and nearly 2.8 registered voters. Evenly split a few years ago (President Obama won the county in 2012 with 587,044 votes to 586,073 for Mitt Romney), the county has become bluer as Anglos continue to move out, while Democratic leaning minority populations grow. Despite its blue tint, the Harris County electorate casts by far the largest number of Republican votes in Texas (Trump received 722,695 votes locally in 2024, while losing the county by about five percent to Kamala Harris). Statewide, Republicans do not have to carry Harris County, but they need to keep Democratic margins down to win.

Daily voting updates provided by Colby Wright on a dashboard he maintains for the Harris County Democratic Party show a big reason Republicans face a difficult election this year. Wright, like Derek Ryan statewide, tracks the primary vote history of General Election voters. He uses the following categories:

DDDs – Individuals who voted in the last three Democratic primaries
DDs – Individuals who voted in two of the last three Democratic primaries
Ds – Individuals who voted in one of the last three Democratic primaries

RRRs – Individuals who voted in the last three Republican primaries
RRs – Individuals who voted in two of the last three Republican primaries
Rs – Individuals who voted in one of the last three Republican primaries

Mix – Persons who voted in both party primaries recently

GE Only – Persons who voted in general elections with no primary history

New voters – Persons with no vote history

As Table 3 shows on page 8, at the end of early voting in Harris County, 1,081,010 votes had been cast, a midterm record. Wright's data show a consistent pattern among voters with a primary vote history. In each of the partisan categories, primary Democrats are outvoting primary Republicans in percentage terms. The differences are small among the DDDs (94.1% turnout) and RRRs (91.2% turnout) but widen between DDs (85.0%) and RRs (78.8), and Ds (75.0%) and Rs (62.4%). Overall, voters with only a Democratic history are outvoting Republicans by 5.6%, but because there are more people in Harris County with a history of voting in Democratic primaries (the reverse is true statewide), the combined primary early vote favors Democrats by 116,038.

Table 3: Who is voting in Harris County? Recent primary vote history and turnout in the 2026 at the conclusion of early In-person voting

Voter Group	Reg Voters	Voted	TO %	% of Total Vote	Dem Advantage in Votes
DDDs	88,647	83,416	94.1	7.7	
RRRs	95,140	86,791	91.2	8.0	- 3,375
DDs	89,170	75,769	85.0	7.0	
RRs	77,616	61,137	78.8	5.7	14,632
Ds	250,768	188,276	75.0	17.4	
Rs	133,597	83,495	62.4	7.7	104,781
Combined Ds and Rs					
Ds	428,585	347,461	81.1	32.1	
Rs	306,353	231,423	75.5	21.4	116,038
Mixed Ps	19,811	17,169	86.7	1.6	
GE Only	878,115	358,339	40.8	33.1	
New Voters	--	126,618	--	11.7	

Source: Harris County Democratic Party, HCDP Dashboard, built and created by Colby Wright.

That alone is not nearly the advantage Democrats need from Texas' largest county. O'Rourke won the county by 201,000 votes but lost statewide. Democrats have to also win a large majority of the people here who have voted in general elections but not party primaries (probably about 500,000 after Election Day), and persons with no vote history in Texas (probably about 200,000).

Voting patterns across neighborhoods in this diverse county provide insight into the totals Weight reports. There are over 1200 voting precincts in Harris County. In heavily Hispanic boxes, turnout has roughly doubled from 2022 and has passed early voting in 2018 which was the highest before this year. An example is Precinct 0093 in the City of South Houston. In 2018 this precinct recorded 807 early votes compared to 1,131 in 2026, a 40% increase. Black precincts are also on track to double their 2022 early vote and reach or exceed their turnout in the Cruz-O'Rourke midterm election. Polls have shown Black voters are unusually united in supporting Democrats in the cycle, so Talarico, Hinojosa, and all other Democrats are posed to do well in Harris County, which has a million African American residents. But to run up their margins to 250,000 or more, these Democrats not only need robust Election Day turnout in heavily Mexican American areas, but also to win at least 70% in these precincts.

Conclusion: We are going to have a very competitive election in Texas

The bevy of late polls in Texas show a 4 to 6 percentage point advantage for James Talarico in the U.S. Senate race, with other statewide Democrats running even or slightly behind their GOP opponents. Beyond these polls, we can now look at voting patterns that have emerged with about three-fourths of likely Texas voters having cast ballots. Several things stand out:

(1) There is no Republican advantage this year in having a bigger part of the General Election electorate including more people with a Republican primary history than a Democratic voting record. The 2026 electorate will be equally balanced in terms of past vote history for partisans – a first in 21st century Texas.

(2) This means the final results will depend on how the vote divides among people who have voted only in past general elections or have no vote history. That makes for an exciting election night.

(3) Overall, Anglos will still cast a sizeable majority of the total Texas vote (over 60% I estimate), but this will be their smallest share ever.

(4) Black voting is robust this year and will likely reach the 2018 vote in percentage terms. Population growth since 2018 means African Americans will be a somewhat larger share of the electorate, but the Democratic vote share cannot increase much: Beto O'Rourke got about 95% of the Black vote in 2018.

(5) Hispanic turnout is elevated and will exceed their 2018 levels. Polls have shown a big Latino swing away from Republicans after a record GOP performance in 2024. But how big? Can Democrats get back to the levels of support Hillary Clinton had in 2016 or O'Rourke in 2018? With a record Hispanic turnout now assured, one of the most interesting questions is what will be the Democratic margin. Winning 70% of the two million or so Hispanic voters would yield an 800,000 lead for Gina Hinojosa – and probably push her ahead of Greg Abbott. By contrast, if Governor Abbott can get 40% or more of Latino votes, the Democratic nominee will likely fall short.

(6) We have very high early voting turnout in the diverse urban counties of Collin, Denton, Fort Bend and Williamson, with a bit lower turnout in Montgomery County, the most Republican of these vote-rich units. Fort Bend and Williamson will produce Democratic majorities, as will Montgomery for Republicans – but how big will these be? Collin and Denton look to be very closely divided from early voting and will be, in my opinion, the most interesting to watch on election night.

(7) Polls show little voter movement in Texas despite $300 million in late campaign advertising. Did late megadonors and PACs waste their money in Texas? We are about to find out.

In closing, I return to the question posed by the New York Times article: Is the much discussed blue wave going to end up looking more like a splash? With 7.6 million votes cast, there is a blue wave in Texas and that should be sufficient to carry James Talarico over the finish line. That would return a Democrat to this seat for the first time since Lyndon Baines Johnson gave it up to be sworn in as vice-president in January 1961.

However, given the high red seawall in the Lone Star State, that blue wave that does not assure a Democratic statewide sweep. That would take a tsunami — driven by a combination of a big swing back toward Democrats among Hispanics, elevated Democratic support from Asian voters, and first-time voters turning out to punish the Trump Republican Party. This could happen, as Senator Ted Cruz has been warning. But it may not. Texas is still a steep hill for Democrats to climb, even as short-term factors have all broken in their favor this cycle.

On November 3, the eyes of the nation will be closely watching elections in Texas for the first time in this century. Now let's see what happens.

We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Reach out to us at rmurray@cougarnet.uh.edu; your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.

Renée Cross contributed to this report.