

The New Political Geography of the Lone Star State: How Surging Metropolitan Growth is Changing the Partisan Balance in Texas

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Metropolitan Areas Versus Most of the Rest of the State

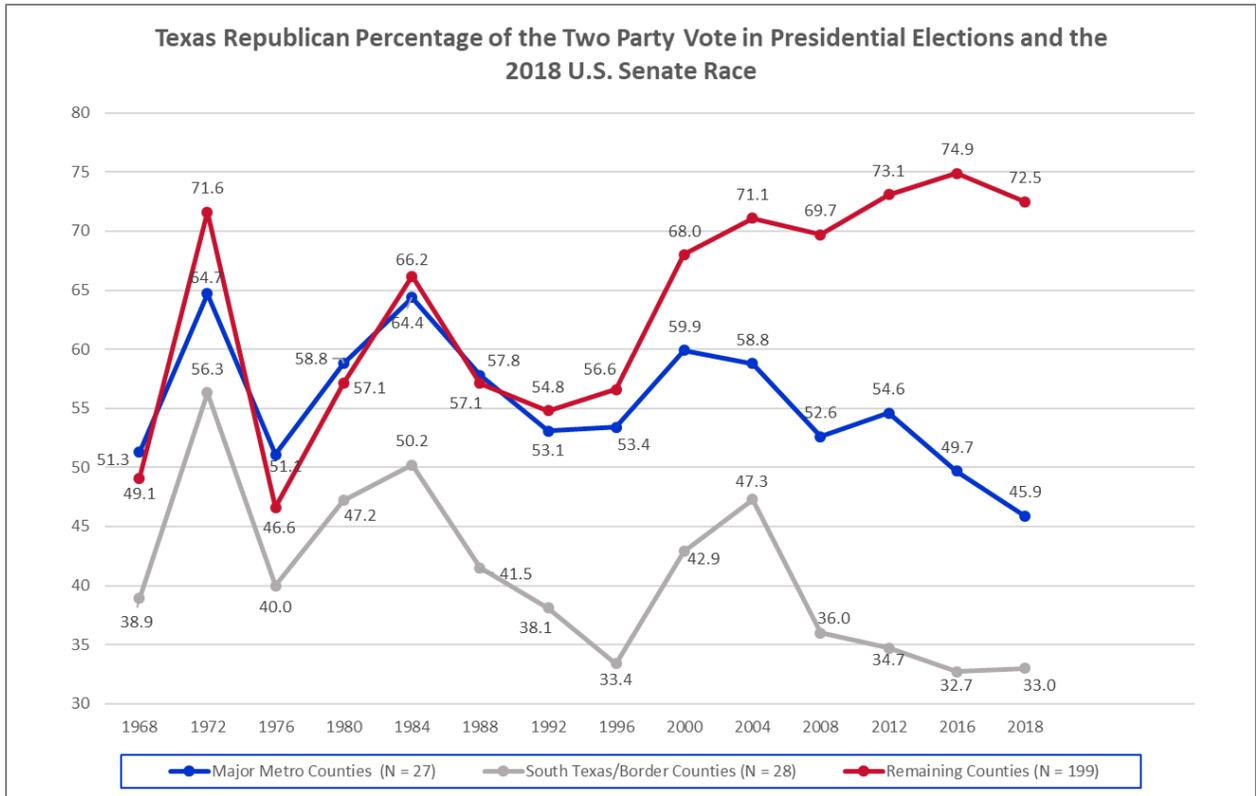
The political landscape of Texas in the 1960s contained several well-defined political and cultural regions. East Texas, settled before the Civil War, was home of the culturally conservative “Yellow Dog Democrats” and a sizeable African American population. The Gulf Coast including Houston was heavily industrialized, with a significant organized labor presence, and well on its way to becoming the center of the national and international oil and gas industry. Central Texas was mostly Anglo, thinly populated except for Austin, and solidly Democratic in partisan politics. San Antonio and South Texas were also Democratic, with Mexican American majorities in most counties. North Texas was dominated by Dallas and Fort Worth, conservative and Republican in politics, and home to a large corporate sector featuring banking, insurance, and real estate interests. West Texas, predominately Anglo except for El Paso, was the most Republican part of the state in national elections, but still had numerous county courthouses dominated by local Democrats.

That Texas of 50 years ago no longer exists. Today, rural elected Democrats are extinct outside South Texas and the border counties. More importantly, a vastly different political map (excepting South Texas and the border counties) has emerged in the early 21st century, where the political fault line now runs between the four large metropolitan areas that anchor the “Texas Triangle” and the rest of the state. The large metro areas include the nine county Dallas/Fort Worth region, the eight county Houston region, the five counties around Austin, and another five in the San Antonio area.¹ Excluding the 28 heavily Latino counties in South Texas and along the Mexican border, what remains are 199 predominately Anglo counties, which include a dozen smaller metropolitan areas as well as most of the rural environs and small towns of the state.

If one looks at how Texans voted in the 14 high turnout general elections from 1968 to 2018 (the 13 presidential elections from 1968 to 2016 and the 2018 midterm election) in Figure 1, there is a notable shift in partisan voting patterns. For the first half of this period, there was essentially no difference in the two-party presidential vote between the large metro areas and the 199 largely non-Latino counties. Yet after 2000, we see these county groupings start to diverge with the large metro counties becoming less and less supportive of Republican presidential candidates while the remaining counties, excluding the Latino areas, become more supportive of the GOP nominees. By 2016, the gap was more than 25 points as Republican candidate Donald Trump received almost 75 percent of the vote in non-metro counties but less than 50 percent of the metro vote. This pattern continued in the 2018 general election, which featured near-presidential level voting. Senator Ted Cruz won about 73 percent of the non-metro vote while receiving less than 46 percent of the vote in the large urban areas. Cruz lost all big four metropolitan regions — something no top-of-the-ticket Republican nominee had done since Barry Goldwater in 1964. Senator Cruz won, but only by 2.6 percent, the smallest Republican margin in a statewide election since 1994.

¹ The following counties are included in each metro area: Dallas/Fort Worth: Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Johnson, Kaufman, Parker, Rockwall, and Tarrant; Houston: Brazoria, Chambers, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Montgomery, and Waller; San Antonio: Bexar, Comal, Guadalupe, Kendall, and Wilson; and Austin: Bastrop, Caldwell, Hays, Travis, and Williamson.

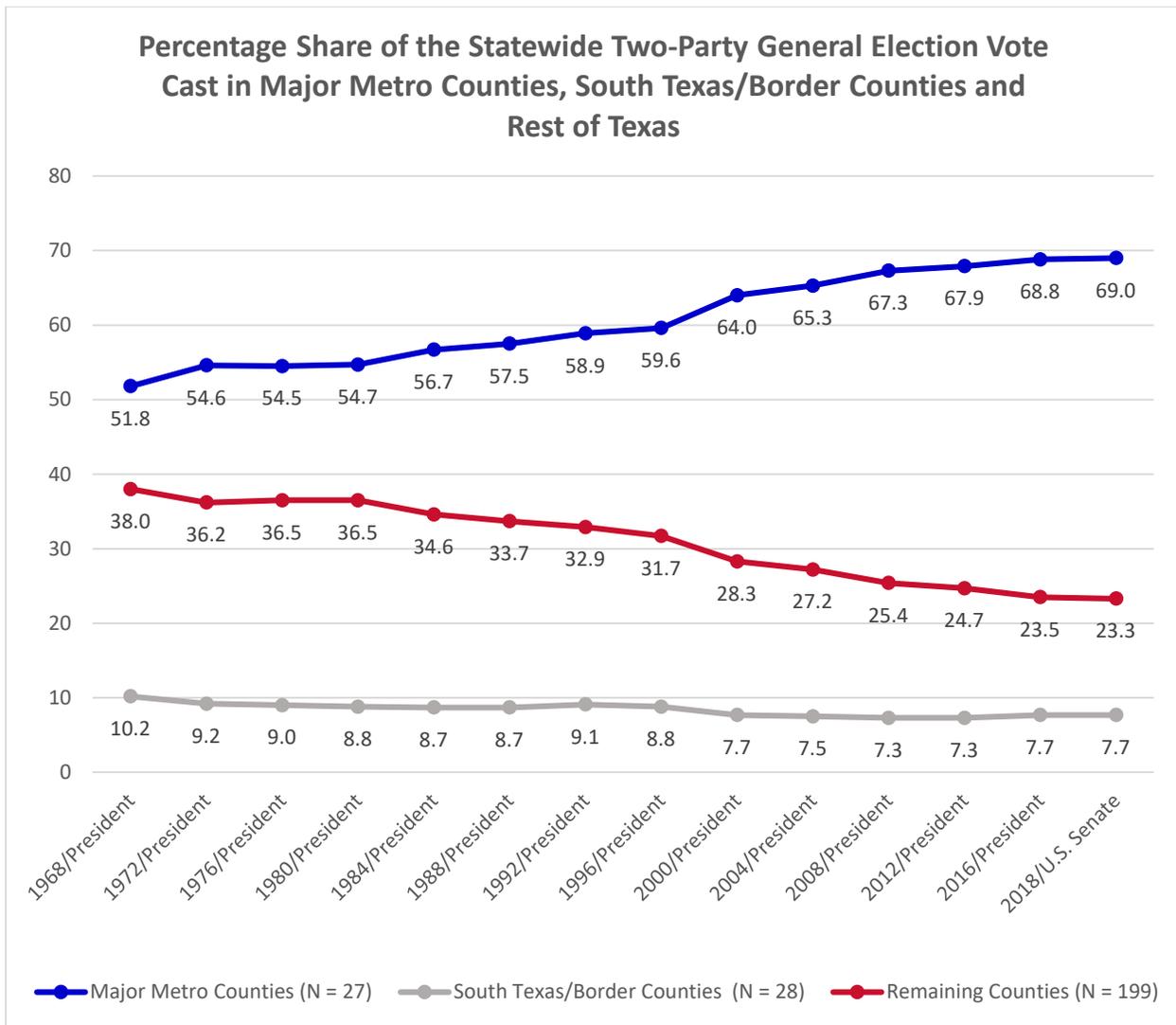
Figure 1



Source: Texas Secretary of State Election Data

What should make this trend worrisome to Republicans is not solely their declining percentage of the two-party vote in the large metro areas, but also the fact that these fast growing counties combine to cast a larger and larger share of the total state vote in every election cycle. Figure 2 (page 3) tracks what percentage of the statewide presidential vote since 1968 and the 2018 senatorial vote was cast in each of the three county groupings.

Figure 2



Source: Texas Secretary of State Election Data

In 1968, about 52 percent of the total vote came from the 27 big metro counties, 10 percent from the 28 South Texas/border counties, and 38 percent from the remaining mostly Anglo counties outside the large metropolitan areas. By 1996, the metro counties share was almost 60 percent, compared to less than 32 percent for the 199 county group, and under nine percent for the South Texas/border group. In 2018, the respective shares were 69 percent, 23 percent, and 8 percent.

The obvious explanation for the steady trends in Figure Two is that the four big metropolitan areas anchoring the “Texas Triangle” — Dallas/Fort Worth at the top; Houston at the southeast corner, and Austin/San Antonio on the southwest — constitute the strongest economic region in the United States as measured by job creation and population growth.

Table 1 summarizes the population growth from 2010 to 2018 in the state, each metropolitan component, the predominately Latino counties, and remainder of the state.

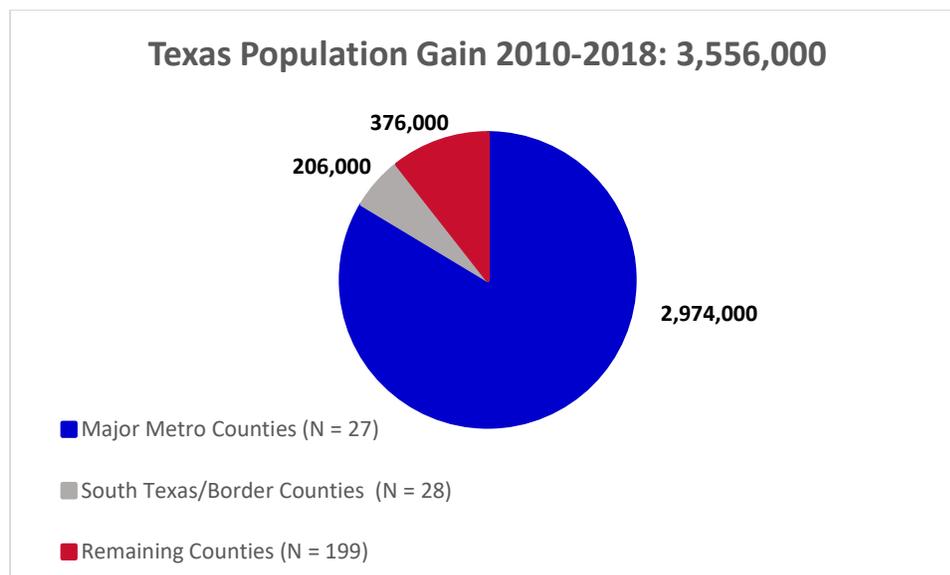
Table 1

Population Change in Major Metropolitan Areas, South Texas/Border Counties and the Remainder of the State: 2010 - 2018 (in thousands)				
Area	2010	2018	Numerical Change	Percentage Increase (+)
Dallas/Fort Worth (9)	6,221	7,305	1,084	17.4
Houston (8)	5,892	6,967	1,075	18.2
San Antonio (5)	2,031	2,394	363	17.8
Austin (5)	1,716	2,168	452	26.3
Metro Total (27)	15,860	18,834	2,974	18.7
South Texas/Border (28)	2,958	3,163	206	7.0
Rest of State (199)	6,327	6,703	376	5.9
State Total	25,145	28,700	3,556	14.1

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

From 2010 to 2018, Texas' population grew by an increase of 3.556 million people. This growth was larger than the population of neighboring Arkansas in 2018 (3.014 million). The Dallas/Fort Worth metro area had the largest population increase in the nation with a gain of 1.084 million people, closely followed by Houston with 1.075 million. Austin had the highest percentage gain in the nation (+26.3%), and was seventh in total population gain, adding 452,000 people while San Antonio added 363,000. In total, these 27 metropolitan counties, accounting for less than nine percent of the land mass in Texas, added close to 3 million residents between 2010 and 2018, or 83.6% of the state's total gain as shown in Figure 3. Comparatively, the South Texas/border counties added just 206,000 net residents, a 7 percent gain. The smallest growth in percentage terms (5.9%) was in the remainder of the state.

Figure 3



Source: U.S. Census Bureau

These data explain the shift in total state voting toward the Texas Triangle metro counties. The Triangle's diverse and increasingly interconnected economies have thrived in the global economy of the late 20th and early 21st century. That has resulted in robust job growth and population gains leading to sharp increases in voter registration and turnout. Meanwhile, the rest of Texas has struggled economically. Of the 227 Texas counties not included in the major metro areas, 92 lost population between 2010 and 2018, and another 38 registered gains of less than three percent.

What is driving the metro/non-metro partisan gap in 21st century Texas?

Demography is Important

There is no mystery why more and more of the statewide vote in Texas comes from major metro areas — that's where most Texans now live. What is not so obvious is why there is an ever-growing gap in general election voting between the metro counties and the rest of the state (with the exception of the border/South Texas area). Why did the metro counties vote the same as outlying majority Anglo counties in the 20th century as shown in Figure 1, but become significantly less supportive of Republican presidential candidates after 2000, while the rest of the state, excluding Latino counties, went in the opposite direction?

One big factor is demography. For much of the 20th century, the large urban areas grew by attracting mostly Anglo residents from elsewhere in Texas and neighboring states. This growth pattern did not create a meaningful cultural, racial/ethnic, or political divide between the metropolitan counties and the other mostly Anglo counties around the state. Politically, as one can see in Figure 1, if Texas voters in presidential elections moved toward the Republican nominees as in 1972 and 1980 or toward the Democratic candidate in 1976, the shift occurred simultaneously in both metropolitan areas and elsewhere in the state.

Yet since the late 1980s, metropolitan Texas growth not only surged while the rest of the state stagnated, but the sources of growth fundamentally changed. Fewer and fewer people moving to Dallas/Fort Worth and other big urban areas came from elsewhere in Texas, and more and more came from outside the United States, or non-southern states like California, New York, and Illinois. International immigration was heavily Latino (mostly Mexican) in the late 1980s and 1990s, and has become more Asian in the 21st century as migration from Mexico declined after 2007. New international residents, both Latino and Asian, have fairly high birth rates and relatively low numbers of deaths. Coupled with a sharp decline in Anglo birth rates in Texas, as in the nation, and the aging of baby boomers, natural population increase in metropolitan areas is also increasingly non-Anglo. These trends have resulted in much faster minority growth in metropolitan Texas than in the 199 predominately Anglo counties in the rest of the state. The most recent report from the U.S. Census Bureau for the 2010 – 2018 period estimated that of the 2.97 million population gain in the four major metropolitan areas, just 628,000 or 21 percent were non-Latino whites.

These trends are accelerating. Texas is growing at a rate of 1,000 persons per day. Half of this growth is due to more people moving to the state than leaving. And the majority of these new migrants are now coming from outside the United States, according to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data.²

Political Choices Also Matter

As the state's population was becoming more diverse in the late 20th century, the Republican Party in Texas was replacing the long dominant Democrats in power. The statewide GOP takeover in the 1990s was driven to a great degree by the fast-growing metropolitan suburban counties like Collin, Denton, Fort Bend, and Williamson where Republican candidates rolled up majorities that offset losses in central cities like Houston and Dallas. South Texas and the border remained Democratic in local elections, but most of the rest of the state became dark red as the Democratic Party collapsed in rural areas and smaller cities.

² According to the U.S. Census population estimate for July 1, 2018, of Texas' net gain of 187,545 people over the previous year, 56 percent came from other countries and 44 percent from other states.

Republican success in Texas was, in our opinion, greatly facilitated by the “big tent” vision of the party promoted by George W. Bush and his strategist Karl Rove during the former’s tenure as governor (1995 – 2001) and president (2001 – 2009). As Michael Bernhard and Daniel O’Neill noted in a recent article:

Bush and Rove knew that the new immigrant communities had members with very strong entrepreneurial and socially conservative values that were congruent with ideological strains within the Republican Party. To capture this population required a more inclusive stance on issues of immigration...³

This strategy worked remarkably well in Texas. George W. Bush won reelection as governor in 1998 and his two presidential elections in Texas by more than 20 percentage points. The GOP won every statewide election from 1996 through 2018, the longest continuous winning streak of any state party in the United States. The “big tent” approach did not produce Republican majorities among the fast growing minority communities of Latinos and more recently Asian Americans, but it did yield a sizeable GOP vote share in these communities and arguably contributed to their relatively low turnout.

A decade after President George W. Bush left office, the big tent has folded. Strains were evident during President Bush’s second term when Congress failed to pass the Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2007 despite the President’s support. Then, in the midterm election of 2010, a Tea Party surge brought to power in Washington and Texas a new set of leaders deeply opposed to any immigration concessions that might open a path to citizenship for persons who had not legally immigrated to the United States.

Some Texas Republican leaders from the big tent era including Governor Rick Perry and then-Attorney General Greg Abbott survived, but others such as Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison did not when she lost her bid for governor against Perry in the 2010 Republican primary election. Consider also Lt. Governor David Dewhurst, a moderate conservative who had won four statewide elections and was the early favorite to replace Hutchison when she chose not to seek reelection to the U.S. Senate in 2012. However, Dewhurst was handily defeated by Ted Cruz, a first-time candidate with strong Tea Party support, in the quest for her seat. Part of Cruz’s success against Dewhurst was his opposition to the Bush/Rove strategy of expanding the GOP’s base by appealing to the growing minority vote in Texas.

The turn to a hard right position on immigration within the national Republican Party seemed less likely after Mitt Romney’s loss to President Obama in November 2012. An “autopsy report” commissioned by the Republican National Committee concluded that the party was doomed to irrelevance in a changing America and recommended a future course as a more inclusive GOP. That effort gained some traction when a bipartisan group of senators passed a comprehensive immigration reform bill in 2013, but it died in the U.S. House of Representatives, in large part because Senator Ted Cruz rallied his Freedom Caucus allies in the House to kill the bill.

The collapse of this effort, two years before Donald J. Trump declared his presidential candidacy, signaled that a return to the Bush/Rove playbook was not going to happen in Texas or the nation. Any doubt of that was removed when candidate Trump, running on a strong anti-immigrant message, dominated the 16-person Republican presidential field in 2015-2016, and staying on that message, defeated Hillary Clinton in the 2016 general election.

President Trump and the Texas Electorate

Some thought President Trump, having scored the greatest political upset in American presidential history, would pivot toward the center in an effort to expand his vote base. Such a move has yet to happen in the third year of the Trump presidency. President Trump has governed as he campaigned — breaking or disregarding many of what were thought to be the rules of the game and doubling down on his anti-illegal immigration message — to the delight of many of his supporters, especially older whites without college degrees in the declining manufacturing areas of the Rust Belt. Such voters in Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio,

³ Bernhard and O’Neill, “Trump: Causes and Consequences,” in *Perspectives on Politics*, June 2019, Vol. 17, No. 2, American Political Science Association.

and Pennsylvania provided his close, but critical margins, to win the Electoral College in 2016 while losing the popular vote.

Trump's campaign message and persona is also popular in Texas — outside the major metro areas. Trump ran ahead of Mitt Romney's vote percentage in 205 counties in Texas, but he trailed the previous Republican nominee's percentage in every county in which more than 200,000 votes were cast. Yet his relative weakness with metropolitan voters and strength with voters elsewhere across the state is not simply a matter of his position on immigration policy. Most African Americans in Texas are concentrated in the large urban counties, and they have been staunchly Democratic since the Goldwater/Johnson election of 1964. And while President Trump has solidified support among evangelical Christians and with many rural and smaller city voters by delivering on his campaign commitment to appoint conservative federal judges, such appointments draw considerably fewer supporters in the diverse metropolitan areas.

The 2016 exit polls showed Trump ran far better with those who lacked a college degree as opposed to graduate and postgraduate voters. In Texas, those with more formal education are much more likely to live in the large metropolitan areas than elsewhere. Consider also that Trump in 2016 and Cruz in 2018 ran well behind the previous Republican vote percentages in affluent urban precincts in Houston and Dallas, where Republican female voters contributed to a widening gender gap. This gap is mostly an urban phenomenon. Anglo men and women elsewhere in Texas do not differ greatly in their partisan vote preferences, but they diverge in metropolitan areas. Finally, younger voters have moved to the left on key social issues like race, climate, and the role of government.⁴ The Texas Triangle electorate includes many more of these younger voters than the other parts of the state.⁵

Texas in 2020 and Beyond

In summary, the new political demography of Texas with fast-growing urban and suburban areas voting quite differently than Texans outside the big metropolitan centers is partly a function of the different demographics of the two sets of counties. Especially important is the sharp decline of Anglo population percentages in the Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston areas, which are experiencing very large increases in both Latino and Asian American voters. Also important has been the Texas Republican Party's movement to the right in the post-President George W. Bush years. And finally, the emergence of President Trump and his dominance of the GOP has sharpened this metro/non-metro polarization in Texas.

President Trump remains very popular in most parts of Texas, but these areas cast a smaller and smaller share of the statewide vote in each election cycle. There is still a large Republican vote in the Texas Triangle counties, but it has fallen sharply over the last two decades. This combination — steadfast GOP strength statewide but weakness in the big-vote venues — points to a very competitive Texas in the future. But is that future in 2020, or farther down the road?

No one can accurately answer that question for many reasons in 2019. While the GOP is most likely to have President Trump at the top of their 2020 ticket, any one of a dozen candidates could end up being the Democratic nominee in Milwaukee next summer. And will that nominee opt for a strategy that includes contesting Texas? Republicans must win Texas. Democrats have other options.

⁴See Kim Parker, Nikki Graf, and Ruth Igielnik, "Generation Z looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues," Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019.

⁵ Precinct 0361 in Harris County is the Rice University campus. Except for a few faculty who live in resident dorms, voters are Rice students mostly between the ages of 18 and 22. In 2004 George W. Bush lost the precinct to John Kerry 556 votes to 202 votes. In 2012 Mitt Romney lost the precinct to President Obama 643 to 167. In 2016, Donald Trump got 67 votes to Hillary Clinton's 882. In 2018, Ted Cruz lost the precinct to Beto O'Rourke 1266 to 81. Data are from HarrisVotes, the website of the Harris County Clerk.