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# ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

*The IIH supports the production and dissemination of rigorous, non-partisan, and non-ideological research on immigration issues across a broad diversity of disciplines and perspectives, and the application of this research to local, regional, and national policy issues.*

## KEY FACTS

- Latinos are the largest ethnic or racial minority group in the U.S. electorate.
- With Latino voter potential at an all-time high, reaching out to Latinos by the parties has been a key variable in the plans to tip the scales in tight races across the country.
- The top five policy issues for Latino immigrants are, responding to the coronavirus (46%); lowering health care costs (32%); addressing racism and discrimination (27%); creating more jobs (24%) and immigration reform (19%).
- Almost a third of Latinos in our survey say they know someone who has died from COVID-19.
- The issues important to foreign-born Latinos are also important to native-born Latinos.
- Among the registered Latinos surveyed, 21% identified as Republican, 57% identified as Democrat, and 22% identified as Democrat. Among the foreign-born registered Latinos in our sample, 23% identified as Republican, 54% identified as Democrat, and 22% identified as independent.

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# Immigrant Latino Voters and the 2020 U.S. Election

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Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Brief 6.



## Background

The 2020 presidential election is a milestone for Latinos as they have become the largest ethnic or racial minority group in the electorate. Among the 32 million eligible voters, 23% or 7.5 million are immigrants. This figure may not surprise readers since Latinos are frequently equated with immigrants and immigration issues. Although most Latino voters are US-born citizens, foreign born Latino voters have been important in shaping political outcomes from California to New York and they will be pivotal in 2020. In an effort to understand the diversity of the Latino electorate, our focus here is on the political attitudes and behaviors of Latino foreign-born voters in this presidential contest.

## Methodology

On September 8, 2020 Latino Decisions<sup>1</sup> and the National Association of Latino Elected Officials Education Fund<sup>2</sup> launched the 2020 nine-week tracking poll<sup>3</sup> of the Latino electorate. On behalf of the NALEO Educational Fund, this survey will continue until the week of the election, with a survey sample each week of 400 Latino registered

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voters. At the conclusion of the project, we will have collected data from 3,700<sup>4</sup> voting eligible Latinos on political attitudes, their voting preferences, the impact of COVID-19, vote-by-mail, outreach, and voter enthusiasm. Interviews were conducted in English or Spanish, according to the respondent's choice. Surveys were conducted online and the results have a margin of error of +/- 4.9%. The data presented in this report contain 2,103 respondents collected through the first five weeks of the tracking poll, 30 percent of whom are 1st generation registered voters.

## Policy Issues

Latinos are not single-issue voters. The importance of different public policy issues varies across elections and varying identities. In this election, the top five policy issues for Latino immigrants are, responding to the coronavirus (46%); lowering health care costs (32%); addressing racism and discrimination (27%); creating more jobs (24%) and immigration reform (19%).

As long-time observers of Latino politics, this ranking is surprising for a number of reasons. First, addressing racism and discrimination emerges as a top issue. This is a radical departure from past surveys, where racism and discrimination rarely registered as important for Latinos. Clearly, Trump's rhetoric and the rise of racial violence against Latinos and other minorities have made this a top concern for them. Second, the importance of immigration reform

has fallen several spots. In past surveys, immigration reform was often among the top-three issues for Latinos and in some instances, it was the number one issue for immigrants. COVID and its disproportionate impact on communities of color has altered the landscape and is underlying a number of policy considerations in this election. Third, the issues important to foreign-born Latinos are also important to native-born Latinos. We find little evidence that Latino immigrant voters have policy preferences that are distinct from other Latino voters. We will come back to this theme throughout this report.

## COVID-19's Devastating Impact

The coronavirus is having a devastating impact on Latino communities and it is not surprising that it is the top concern for Latino voters in this election. In the tracking poll, we asked Latino voters a series of questions related to COVID. The findings illustrate how the virus is exacerbating existing health and economic disparities among Latinos. Respondents were asked if they knew someone who has passed away due to an illness from COVID-19? Among foreign-born Latinos, 35% personally knew someone who had passed away because of the disease. Those figures drop across generational status, reaching 26% by the third-generation. Clearly, immigration status increases one's vulnerability to the virus. It is important to note that the foreign-born sample are U.S. citizens and we suspect that rates of infection and mortality are higher among non-citizen Latinos. Nonetheless, across other questions, responses did not vary by nativity or generational status. Ten percent of foreign-born Latinos said that someone in their household had been sick or ill because of the coronavirus; 24% reported that someone in their household lost a job; 36% have had wages cut; 38% had to draw money from savings or retirement to pay for expenses and 23% reported being food insecure.

## Candidate Evaluations

The ongoing threat of the coronavirus and the other policy issues rated as important in this election are shaping Latino evaluations of the candidates and political parties. Respondents were asked if they approved or disapproved of how Donald Trump was handling the coronavirus/COVID-19 response. Among foreign-born Latinos, 71% said they disapproved (somewhat/strongly) of the president's response. That figure was similar across the other generational statuses. When asked to rate different candidates along a favorability-unfavorability continuum, 66% of foreign-born Latinos rated Trump unfavorably. That figure switches when asked about Joe Biden who has a 64% favorability rating among this segment of Latino voters. Earlier we noted that discrimination and racism emerged as a top issue for



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Latinos in this election. We asked respondents who they trusted more to bring the country together - Joe Biden or Donald Trump? By a three-to-one margin (61% to 19%); foreign-born Latinos said they trust Joe Biden.

## Party Evaluations

While candidates and representatives come and go, political parties are an enduring feature of our democratic system. Nonetheless, candidates and representatives may have an enduring impact on how citizens perceive the political parties. Using the same favorability-unfavorability scale, we asked respondents to evaluate the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Among foreign-born Latinos, the GOP has an unfavorability of 59%, while the Democratic Party is rated positively by 57% of respondents. A separate question asked respondents to evaluate the Latino outreach efforts of the different parties. Fifty-seven percent of foreign-born Latinos say the Democratic Party is doing a good job in reaching out to Latinos, while a mere 25% say the Republican Party is doing a good job reaching out to Latinos. Three-quarters (75%) of Latino immigrants say the Republican Party is being hostile or doesn't care too much about Latinos.

## Partisanship

Partisan identification has been an important predictor of vote choice across all groups. Latino partisanship has also been relatively stable over the last several decades, with almost a third of Latinos identifying as Republican since 2000. George W. Bush's victory in 2004 marked a high point in Latino vote choice for the Republican Party, with 40% of Latinos voting for President Bush in that election. With that in mind, Latino Republican partisan identification has been just above 20% throughout our survey. Among the registered Latinos surveyed, 21% identified as Republican, 57% identified as Democrat, and 22% identified as Democrat. Among the foreign-born registered Latinos in our sample, 23% identified as Republican, 54% identified as Democrat, and 22% identified as independent.

## Enthusiasm

Latinos responded to the election of President Trump with historic levels of voter turnout in 2018, and important indicator of future participation for 2020. Pew Research Center reports, "the number of Latino voters nearly doubled from 2014 to 2018, nearing presidential election year levels". When we asked respondents if they were more enthusiastic about voting in 2020 than they were in 2016, 60% of our foreign-born sample said they were. We also see high levels of respondents who say

they are certain to vote in this election, with 73% of registered Latino immigrants stating they plan to vote.

## Voter Outreach

With Latino voter potential at an all-time high, reaching out to Latinos by the parties has been a key variable in the plans to tip the scales in tight races across the country. While Latinos have traditionally been accepted as a key voting group in Texas, California, Nevada, Florida, and Arizona, they are now important coalition members in states like North Carolina, Georgia, and Wisconsin. This makes it exceptionally difficult to reach Latinos with a national strategy. Republicans have narrowed their focus to Latinos in South Florida and Texas, but the Democrats have been targeting Latinos

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across the country. Our polling shows a growth in outreach beyond what we have seen in the past, despite narratives in the media about low contact. COVID-19 is forcing campaigns to adjust, and we did observe lower levels of contact earlier in our tracking poll, but the Democrats in particular have improved contact over the last 8 weeks. In our latest results, 61% of Latinos say they have been contacted by a political party or political organization. Of those who were contacted, 56% say they were contacted by a Democrat, 39% say they were contacted by a Republican, and 30% say they were contacted by a political organization. In our combined sample for week 1 through week 5, 47% of foreign-born Latinos say they were contacted. The contact rate is similar across generational statuses suggesting that the political parties are not merely focusing on high propensity voters.

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## Broader Engagement

Voter participation is more than just voting. An important component of political participation is civic interactions with family and the community. We asked Latinos if they were participating in a number of activities in person or online, and we see high levels of participation among registered Latinos. For instance, 27% of Latinos say they attended a protest march, demonstration, or rally in our combined dataset. Among immigrant registered Latinos, that number was 25%. Among all registered Latinos, 81% say they have discussed politics with family and friends. Among immigrant Latinos, that number is 85%. When asked if they signed a petition regarding an issue important to them, 47% said they did. Among Latino immigrants, 46% said they signed a petition.

## Conclusion

The survey data presented here give us a snapshot in time of how Latinos are responding to this historic election in a difficult time. The impact of COVID-19 on the Latino community cannot be understated and Latinos reflect a group that has been hit disproportionately hard because of their presence in labor force as essential workers and their disproportionately low access to health care. Almost a third of Latinos in our survey say they know someone who has died from COVID-19. This is particularly distressing at a time many in our political system are depending on high turnout from a group that has historically had to face high barriers to participation. Despite these barriers, Latinos across immigration statuses are politically engaged and eager to play a pivotal role in 2020.

<sup>1</sup> Latino Decisions (2020). Website. Available at: <https://latinodecisions.com/>

<sup>2</sup> National Association of Latino Elected Officials Education Fund (2020). Website. Available at: <https://naleo.org/>

<sup>3</sup> Latino Decisions (2020) 2020 nine-week tracking poll of the Latino electorate. Available at: <https://latinodecisions.com/polls-and-research/naleo-2020-latino-weekly-tracking-poll-week-1/>

<sup>4</sup> Latino Decisions collected an additional 100 interviews in Week 5 due to the extraordinary event of President Trump's diagnosis with COVID-19.

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*This issue brief is also available in Spanish.*

### About the Authors

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## LATINO DECISIONS

Latino Decisions is the leader in Latino political opinion research. Founded by professors of political science, Dr. Gary M. Segura and Dr. Matt Barreto, our firm leverages a unique combination of analytical expertise and cultural competencies that are unparalleled in the industry. Our team is comprised exclusively of credentialed research scientists with established publication records, rigorous methodological training, and experience with large-scale collaborative research projects.

**ABOUT IIH**

The Immigration Initiative at Harvard (IIH) was created to advance and promote interdisciplinary scholarship, original research, and intellectual exchange among stakeholders interested in immigration policy and immigrant communities. The IIH serves as a place of convening for scholars, students, and policy leaders working on issues of immigration—and a clearinghouse for rapid-response, non-partisan research and usable knowledge relevant to the media, policymakers, and community practitioners.



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**Also in this series:**

Ramakrishnan, K. and Wong, J. (2020) “Asian Americans and the Immigrant Vote in the 2020 U.S. Election,” Immigration Initiative at Harvard Issue Brief Series no. 5, Cambridge MA: Harvard University. Available at: <https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/asian-americans-and-immigrant-vote-2020-us-election>

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**KEYFACTS**

- Immigrants will make up about 1-in-10 people eligible to register to vote in the upcoming U.S. election.
- Asian-origin immigrants will comprise about the same proportion of that voting bloc as those from Latin America.
- Most Asian American voters are immigrants or naturalized citizens.
- There is evidence of a lack of outreach to the Asian American electorate. The 2020 Asian American Voter Survey shows that only about half of all respondents were contacted by either major political party.
- A majority of Asian Americans (64%) plan to vote for Biden compared to just 30% who favored to support Trump. Vietnamese Americans are the only Asian American group surveyed that leans more Republican (53% favor Democrat, 28% favor Republican).
- Health care remains a top concern for Asian Americans.

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**Asian Americans and the Immigrant Vote in the 2020 U.S. Election**

Karthick Ramakrishnan, University of California, Riverside and Janelle Wong, University of Maryland

Immigration Initiative at Harvard Policy Briefs



Photo: Frederick J. Brown/AP/Getty Images

**Introduction**

Immigrants will make up about 1-in-10 people eligible to register to vote in the upcoming U.S. elections on November 3rd, and Asian-origin immigrants will comprise about the same proportion of that voting bloc as those from Latin America. And while the majority of people of Latinx heritage are U.S. born, the majority of Asian Americans were born outside the United States. Thus, most Asian American voters are immigrants or naturalized citizens. This issue brief explores how this group making its mark in 2020.

**Methodology**

This brief presents the results of interviews conducted by telephone and online from July 15th to September 10th, 2020 of 1,569 registered voters who identify as Asian American, producing an overall margin of sampling error of +/- 2%. Sampling was targeted towards the six largest national origin groups that together account for more than 75% of the Asian American adult citizen population. Interviews were conducted in English, Cantonese, Mandarin, Korean, and Vietnamese, and included landlines, mobile phones, and web surveys.

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