

POLITICS

# The Voters Who Could Turn California Red

The state GOP's comeback runs through Latino communities.

By Christian Paz



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Trump supporters at a rally in Beverly Hills, California (Stanton Sharpe / Sopa / Sipa / AP)

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At the end of the 2020 election, California's Republicans had reason to feel hopeful. Although Joe Biden won the state by a landslide, Donald Trump won more votes (6 million) there than any other Republican candidate had ever. Increased Republican turnout led to victories in four competitive House races with large Latino populations. One of those districts even elected the state's first Republican Latino congressman since 1873.

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Hope hasn't been California Republicans' default emotion lately. Just three years ago, Democrats crushed the state GOP, cementing a supermajority in the legislature and winning four congressional seats in Orange County that had been in Republican hands for decades. But the 2020 results offered a taste of what a reinvigorated party could accomplish if it looked beyond its base and offered a palatable message to Latino voters. Trump won more votes from Latinos in California last year than he did in 2016, and he made similar gains around the country. With an effort to recall Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom now under way—the election is set for September 14—the party faces its first post-Trump test of whether it can be truly competitive in the state, and whether it's willing to distance itself from a toxic legacy to make gains with California's new, growing plurality.

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It's nearly impossible to overstate how far the GOP has fallen in California. No Republican has won office statewide since Arnold Schwarzenegger was reelected as governor in 2006. Nor has any Republican qualified for either of the two U.S. Senate races since 2016. The portion of registered voters who identify as Republican now hovers at 24 percent, not even its all-time low. That's barely more than those who identify as unaffiliated. But the explanation for the California GOP's struggles is widely understood: It has almost everything to do with the party's history of hostility toward Latino communities, starting with its push in 1994 to pass Proposition 187.

That ballot measure would have denied people suspected of being undocumented access to public services, such as nonemergency health care and public education. Painting immigrants and their families as invaders who "keep coming," California conservatives rallied around the slogan of "Save Our State." In response, a generation of Latinos, most of whom were Mexican American, protested, registered to vote, and acquired citizenship. The great majority gravitated toward the Democratic Party, elevating a roster of figures who would soon dominate California politics, including former Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, state Senate President Pro Tempore (and now Los Angeles City Councilmember) Kevin de León, Senator Alex Padilla, and Secretary of Health and Human Services Xavier Becerra. Although a federal judge eventually ruled that Proposition 187 was unconstitutional, the damage had been done: California, once a purple state, had become overwhelmingly blue.

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It's taken many years, but many Republican strategists now recognize that the party cannot be competitive in California, where a plurality of the population is Latino, unless it attracts a much larger portion of the Latino electorate. "If you're going to grow under California demographics, and you're going to grow your share of the vote, the Latino vote is exactly where you find the growth potential," Rob Stutzman, a former top adviser to Schwarzenegger, told me.

This is precisely what the 2020 election results revealed. Most notable were shifts away from Democrats in Latino communities, especially in Mexican American precincts in Los Angeles and Orange Counties. Congressional candidates Mike Garcia in Los Angeles County, Michelle Steel and Young Kim in Orange County, and David Valadao in the Central Valley played up traditional Republican messaging on economic opportunity, taxes, and jobs while deftly mediating their relationship to the Trump brand according to how partisan their voters were. Garcia and Steel embraced a brash pro-Trump message; Kim and Valadao veered toward the center. They all pushed hard to reopen businesses and lift pandemic restrictions; made appeals to social conservatives, including Catholic and evangelical Latinos; and toed a careful line on immigration, relying on their own immigrant heritage to appear more

inclusive than the national party.

Republicans should be adopting that measured strategy in the recall, the state's 2022 elections, and beyond, Reverend Samuel Rodriguez told me. Rodriguez identifies as a political independent and leads the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which represents 40,000 evangelical congregations, the largest network of its kind. "Our values are faith, family, and free enterprise. We're entrepreneurs. We want to thrive; we don't want to survive," he said.

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Stutzman concurred. "As you get to the second generation, Latinos who have gone to college or become middle class get more concerned about things like taxes and transportation issues, the cost of energy, and homelessness in their communities—the typical middle-class issues a Republican can try to attract," he told me.

Taking advantage of this generational change will require expansive candidate recruitment, a change in messaging, and a large investment in voter outreach. So far, there's not a lot of evidence that the party is making the effort. Core Republican issues, such as lower taxes and less regulation, "are not a problem," Kristin Olsen, the former vice chair of the California Republican Party, told me. "The immediate problem is that people don't like Republicans, because generally people think Republicans don't like them. Republicans need to do a better job of building relationships at a grassroots, neighborhood level. That takes focused, genuine effort to reach out to communities of new voters, whether they be Latino voters, female voters, African American voters, or Asian American voters. You have to be able to spend time with people in their communities, in their neighborhoods, in their businesses, in their churches, and get to know them and let them get to know you."

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The recall election spotlights some of this push and pull between Latinos and the party. Polls earlier this year showed that a plurality of Latinos were willing to recall Newsom, but more recent polling shows a mixed picture: A survey in July found that a majority oppose the effort, while another in August found a majority in favor. Both polls were consistent on one matter: The demographic that was most energized in toppling Newsom was conservative white voters—in other words, the GOP base. This presents a conundrum for the party. Moderate California Republicans have no incentive to pave a path between Democrats and Trumpism. Almost everyone who has tried to has been drummed either out of the GOP or out of office, making it harder to recruit Latino candidates.

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The party also has few candidates who are serious about engaging Latino communities. “With the recall, there’s an opportunity for Republicans to deliberately include Latinos in that strategy,” Mindy Romero, the director of the Center for Inclusive Democracy at the University of Southern California, told me. “But thus far, what we’re seeing from the proponents right now is not a lot of outreach to the Latino community, and I see some of the rhetoric that is being used as feeling very familiar to those that have been concerned about the GOP.”

Rodriguez told me he’s surprised that he hasn’t seen more candidates doing interviews with Spanish-language media or using social media to reach persuadable Latino voters online as part of their recall efforts. “We are people of social media,” he said. “Republicans need to permeate Facebook, Instagram,

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YouTube, and Twitter with content in Spanish, so you have an impact on both Spanish and English speakers.” When I asked him what message that content would push, he said Republicans haven’t pressed religious issues enough, in light of the governor’s restrictions on places of worship: “It takes less than 30 seconds, saying ‘He came after your faith, and he crossed the line.’”

Even if state Republicans are able to build on the ground that they gained in 2020, the recall election is just the first step in a long trudge to reverse the decades-long antipathy California Latinos feel toward Republicans. Despite the social, environmental, and economic problems California has faced while under Democratic governance, “people are still voting in greater numbers for Democrats. That’s how low the regard is for the Republican Party,” Mike Madrid, the former political director for the California Republican Party, told me. “Latinos would rather live in poverty, with homelessness, with a housing crisis, and step over needles, than vote for Republicans.”

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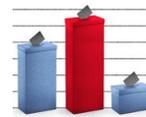
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