

Texas Borderlands 2009

Democracy's Front Line



Texas Senator Eliot Shapleigh
District 29
El Paso, Texas
February 2009

Leading up to the 2008 election, general unhappiness with the state of the country created a mad rush to increase voter turnout. Presidential candidates utilized popular social networking Web sites (e.g., MySpace and Facebook) and text messaging to reach individuals who might not have otherwise sought political information. Potential voters had several reasons for their lack of interest in the political process, including a lack of focus by the presidential candidates on the truly important issues and distrust by the people that the political process is a genuine avenue for change.

Despite the excitement surrounding the presidential election, there were few changes in voter turnout in Texas. Areas of the state with historically low voter turnout did not experience a significant increase in participation that would have reversed past voting trends. Notably, these regions of the state also rank poorly in terms of health care, education and housing. Texas' working families are at the front line of our economy, but they often give up much of their power by not casting their vote.

Nationwide voting trends help us to understand which individuals are more likely to vote. In addition, election outcomes help to highlight differences within communities and senate districts. This chapter will describe national and state voting trends and identify some of the barriers to increasing voter turnout.

National Voting Trends

Among those eligible to vote are U.S. citizens who are 18 years of age or older. The number of citizens of voting age increases with every election. For example, the voting age citizen population in the 2004 Presidential election increased from the 2000 election by 11 million people.¹ Even with the increase in voting age citizen population, voter turnout reached a record high at 64 percent in 2004.² The total number of people who voted was 126 million, which was a 15 million increase from the 2000 presidential election.³

Historically, young voting age citizens have the lowest turnout, while older age citizens over the age of 55 have the highest voter turnout. One reason for this is that young adults are less likely to register because they move more often than other age groups. In 2004, the voting rate for citizens 55 years and older was 72 percent as compared with 47 percent among 18 to 24 year-old citizens.⁴ According to Thomas Patterson, a professor of government at Harvard University and author of the book Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty, "[y]oung people in every democracy turn out at lower rates than other older adults."⁵

Voting rates vary depending on educational attainment and income. Young adults with at least a bachelor's degree are more likely to vote than young adults with lower levels of educational attainment.⁶ In 2004, the voting rate among citizens living in families with annual incomes of \$50,000 or more was 77 percent as compared with 48 percent for citizens living in families with incomes under \$20,000.⁷

Differences in voting rates among different race groups are largely due to registration. The majority of registered voters among all racial and ethnic groups voted in the 2004 election—

89 percent of non-Hispanic whites, 87 percent of blacks, 82 percent of Hispanics, and 85 percent of Asians.⁸ It is estimated that 12.1 million Latino voters were registered prior to the 2008 general election—the vast majority of them after 2006—and that 9.7 million Latinos voted in 2008, a turnout rate of 80 percent. This decline in turnout is attributed to the large increase in Latino voter registration in Texas and California, which, as uncontested states, were not targeted with voter turnout efforts by national campaigns.⁹

The Latino vote is complicated because of the lack of data on the Latino or Hispanic population. In the past, research has been conducted using surveys that do not provide a large enough sample of the Latino population.¹⁰ Research conducted using a large sample suggests that nationally, Latinos are more likely to have large components of the population with characteristics that predict high levels of non-voting: relative youth, low levels of income, and low levels of formal education.¹¹

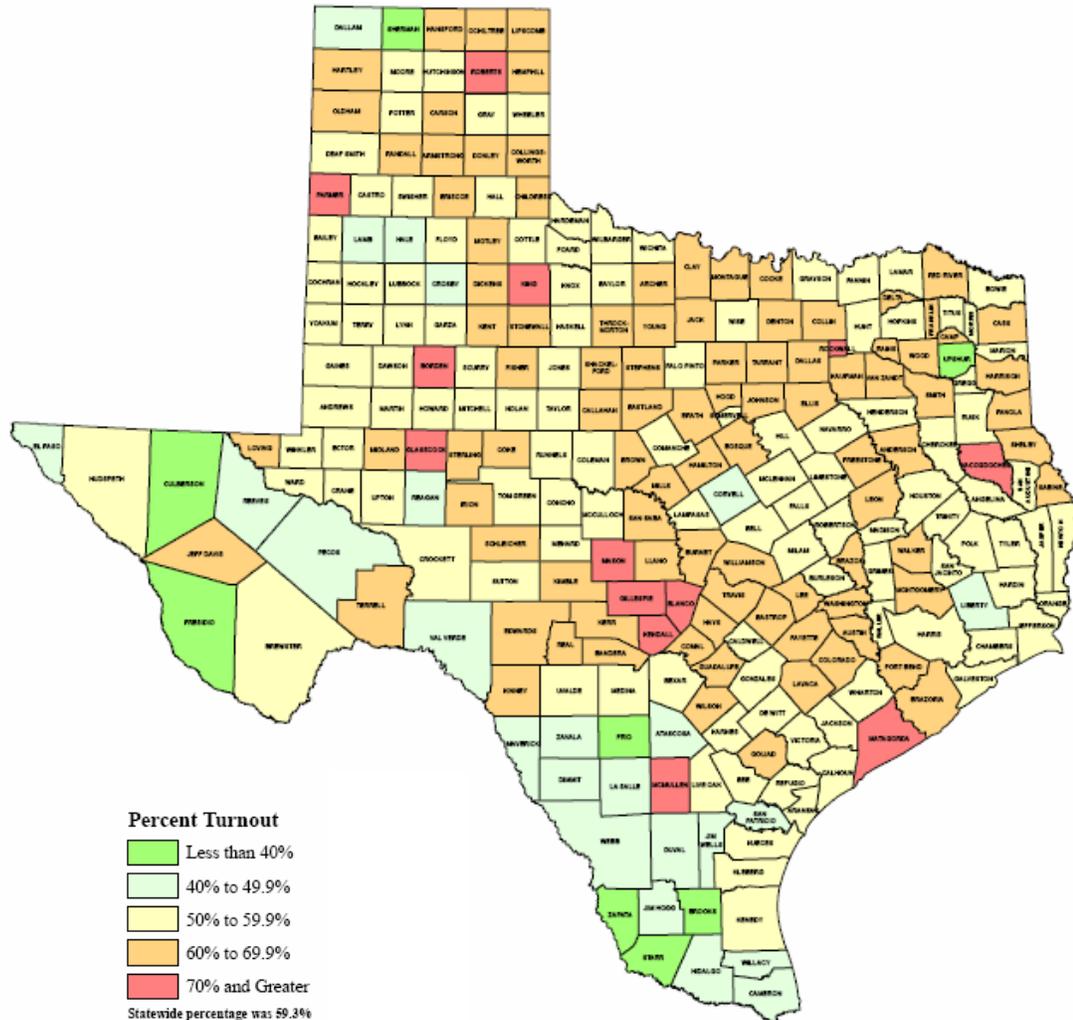
The Latino population in the United States is diverse and heterogeneous. The three largest Latino groups are Mexican Americans, Cuban Americans, and Puerto Rican Americans. Each of these Latino groups have differences in educational attainment, family income, residential stability, country of origin, and length of time living in the United States. These differences are reflected in voter preferences in the 2008 general election in which Mexican and Puerto Rican voters favored Obama over McCain by 46 and 50 points, respectively, and Cuban voters favored McCain by nearly 40 points.¹²

An important factor to remember about the Latino population is that the Latino voting age population is greater than the population of Latinos who are U.S. citizens and eligible to vote. Based only on the voting age population, the Hispanic voting rate for the 2004 Presidential election was 28 percent.¹³ This figure suggests that Hispanics are disinterested and don't care about voting. Yet, when the Hispanic voting rate is calculated based on voting age citizen population, the rate jumps up to 47 percent.¹⁴

Statewide Voting Trends

In the 2008 general election, overall turnout in the state was 59.3 percent, up from 50.3 percent in 2004.¹⁵ In 2008, 1.6 million votes were cast by Texan Latinos, representing statewide increase in voter turnout among Latinos of 20 percent.¹⁶ However, turnout did not increase uniformly across the state. In the 2008 general election, turnout along the border region did not change significantly from the November 2004 election. The *2008 General Election Voter Turnout* map illustrates voting rates across the state on a county-by-county basis. The map clearly demonstrates that the counties along the Texas border region have the lowest voter turnout rates in the state.

2008 General Election Voter Turnout



Source: Texas Legislative Council

The border county with the highest percentage increase in voter turnout was El Paso County, with a 2.07 percent point increase. In contrast, Dallas County had an increase of 5.35 percentage points. Although voter turnout in Hidalgo County only increased from 42.13 to 42.83 percent (by about 27,000), the number of registered voters increased significantly (35,505). The increase in participation in Hidalgo County was a major success for the border region. Nonetheless, voting in the non-border region surpassed that of the border region. In Tarrant County, the number of registered people increased by more than 46,000 and voting increased by more than 68,000. While some counties experienced large increases in registration and voting, other counties increased voting without a dramatic increase in registration. In El Paso County, registration only increased by about 7,000 but turnout increased by a couple of percentage points. Dallas County actually experienced a slight decrease in registered voters but still had a higher increase in turnout than those counties that significantly increased their number of people registered.

2008 General Election Results by County

County Name	Total Votes	Registered	2008 Turnout %
Harris	1,171,472	1,959,284	59.97
Dallas	738,463	1,206,543	61.2
Collin	298,583	425,091	69.76
Tarrant	628,553	965,232	65.11
El Paso	185,233	388,498	47.67
Hidalgo	130,784	305,316	42.83
Cameron	75,657	174,428	43.37

2004 General Election Results by County

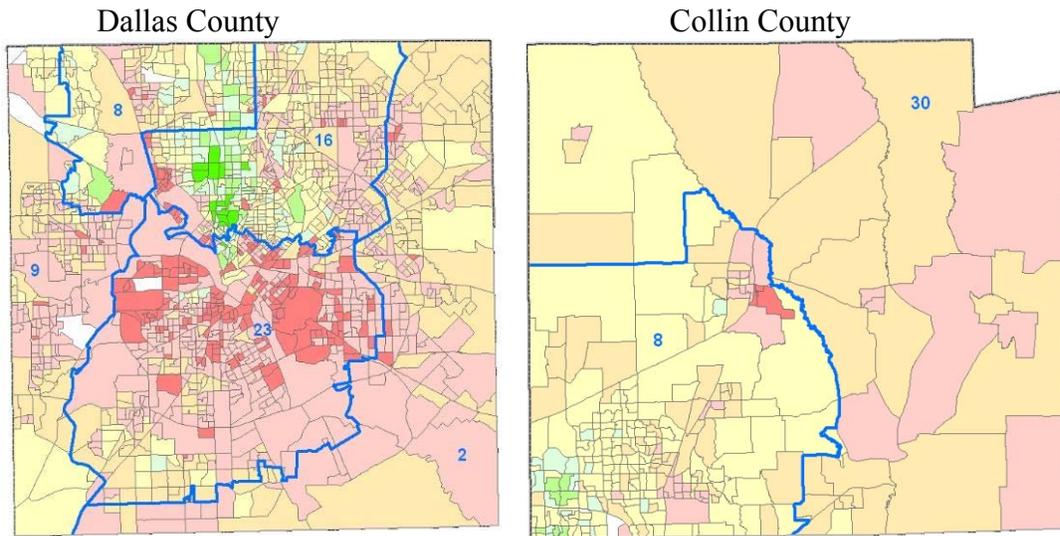
County Name	Total Votes	Registered	2004 Turnout %
Harris	1,067,968	1,937,072	55.13
Dallas	687,709	1,231,291	55.85
Collin	245,154	369,412	66.36
Tarrant	560,141	918,656	60.97
El Paso	169,573	371,856	45.60
Hidalgo	113,683	269,811	42.13
Cameron	69,156	162,369	42.59

Source: Texas Secretary of State, <http://www.sos.state.tx.us/> (last accessed Nov. 22, 2008)

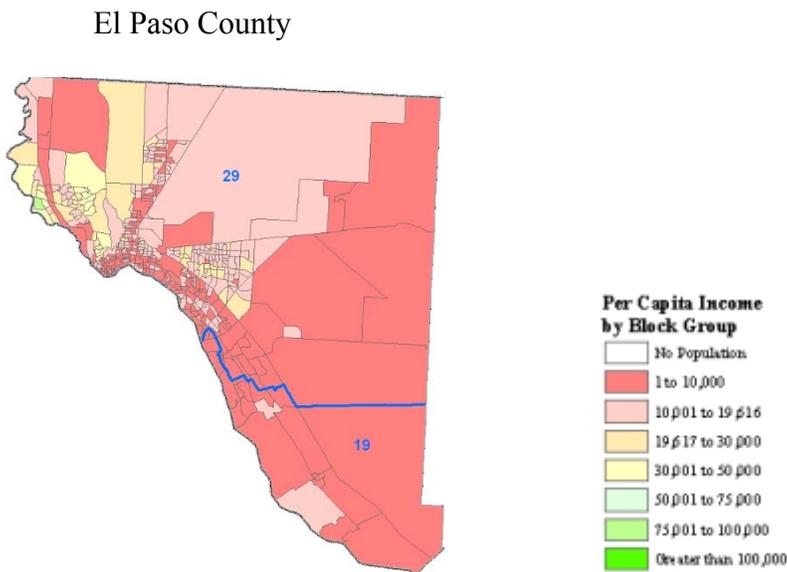
While it is difficult to generalize national trends, there is substantial evidence that supports that individuals with less income tend to vote less.

A comparison of voter turnout during the 2006 general election and income of residents in Texas Senate Districts 8 and 29 demonstrates that lower voter turnout is more prevalent in areas with lower levels of income. The population of Senate District 8 is 63 percent from Collin County and 36 percent from Dallas County while Senate District 29 is entirely made up of El Paso County residents. Voter turnout in the 2006 general election in District 8 was 47 percent, but only 28 percent in District 29. The maps below demonstrate major differences in income levels between the two districts. District 8 has an income distribution primarily above \$19,617 per capita while District 29 has an income distribution that is predominantly lower than \$19,617 per capita.

District 8



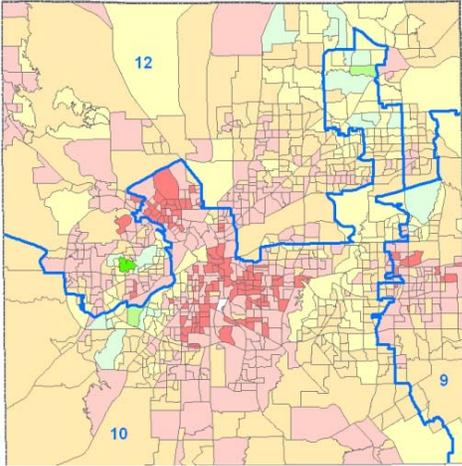
District 29



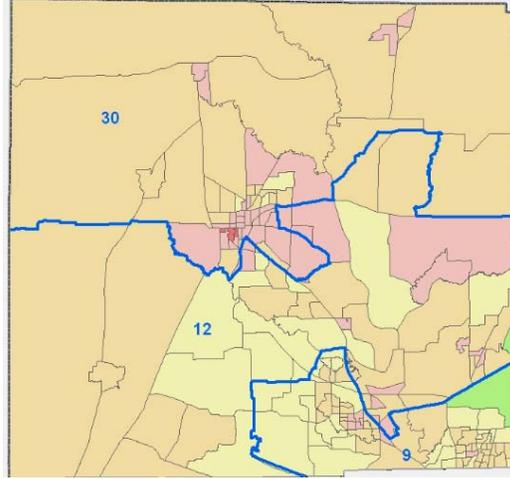
Texas Senate Districts 27 and 12 are similar to Senate Districts 29 and 8. In District 27, 40 percent of the population is made up of Hidalgo County residents and the other 60 percent is made up of residents from four other counties (Cameron, Kenedy, Kleberg, and Willacy). The population of District 12 is made up of 80 percent Tarrant County residents and 20 percent Denton County residents. Voter turnout for the 2006 General Election in District 12 was 42 percent but only 24 percent in District 27. As shown in the maps below, the income distributions of District 12 and District 27 are as unevenly matched as the income distributions of District 8 and District 29.

District 12

Tarrant County

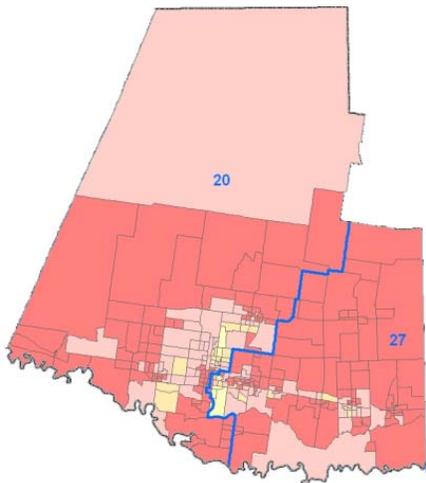


Denton County

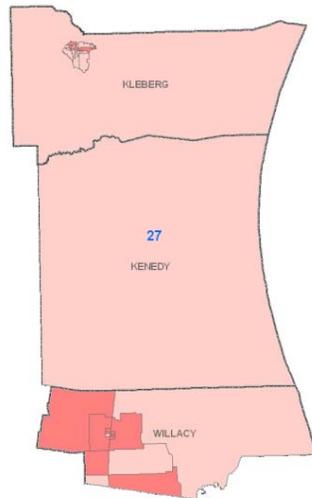


District 27

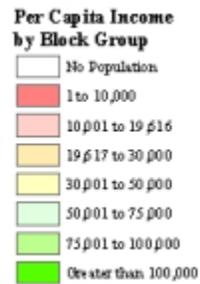
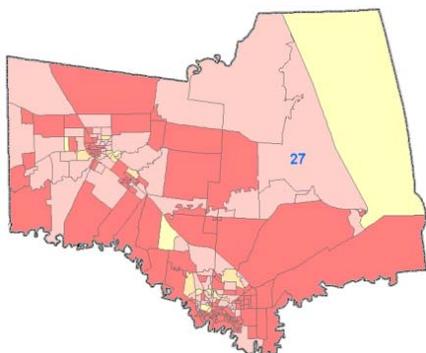
Hidalgo County



Kleberg, Kenedy, and Willacy Counties



Cameron County



Income level impacts voting, but it is only one of the characteristics that is significantly different among different Texas Senate Districts. For example, Texas Senate District 29 is a much younger district than District 8. As shown in the chart below, the 2008 estimated voting age citizen population of District 29 is below that of District 8. Although the registration numbers for the 2008 election were relatively high in both districts, turnout in District 29 lagged behind at 49 percent as compared to 69 percent in District 8.

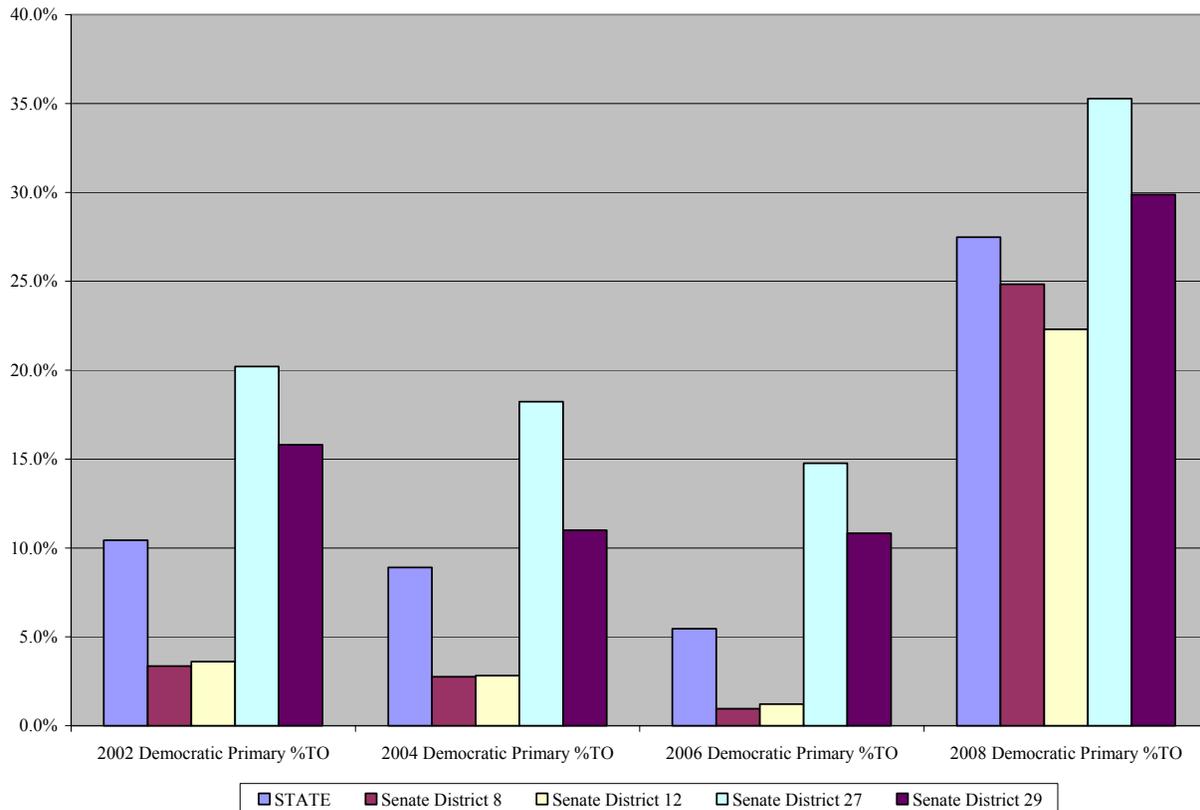
2008 Voter Turnout for District 29 and 8

	Texas Senate Districts	
	29	8
Population (2007 Estimates)	686,229	878,719
Voting Age Citizen Population (Allocations based on 2007 American Community Survey Estimates from American FactFinder Table B05003 , updated to November 2008.)	379,900 = 55%	570,400 = 65%
Registered to Vote (2008 General Election)	370,906 = 97.6%	517,702 = 90.7%
2008 Election Turnout	182,434	357,091
Percent Turnout	49.2%	69.0%

Texas State Demographer, and Texas Legislative Council

The border region had a high turnout in the 2008 Democratic Primary Election. According to the chart below turnout for the democratic primaries had been decreasing in Senate Districts 8, 12, 27, and 29 from 2002 to 2006. Notably, the heavily Hispanic-populated Senate Districts 27 and 29 had much higher turnouts in the 2008 primary election than they did in 2002.

2002-2008 Primary Elections by Senate District



Source: Texas Legislative Council

Barriers to Voting

Early voting has been viewed as a way to increase voter turnout. Statewide, more than eight million voters voted early in the 2008 presidential election.¹⁷ However, the border region had the lowest turnout at the end of early voting time period.¹⁸ While Texas has instituted changes like “no excuse” early voting and increased the number of voting locations, not enough is being done to increase participation among racial and ethnic minorities or young voters. In fact, the state has actively engaged in efforts to reduce voter participation.

For instance, certain elected officials, specifically Lt. Governor Dewhurst and GOP affiliates, are pushing for a voter ID bill to combat the perceived problem of rampant voter impersonation.¹⁹ Most voting fraud occurs with mail-in ballots or properly cast ballots tampered with by someone other than the voter. Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott has been unsuccessful in prosecuting voter fraud despite spending \$1.4 million in his efforts to do so. Notably, the resulting 26 violations from the Attorney General’s investigations were not violations that could have been prevented by photo identification²⁰.

In addition to lack of evidence that voter impersonation presents a considerable problem, studies indicate that voter ID requirements would disenfranchise already vulnerable voters—individuals who are poor, elderly, disabled, or members of ethnic minority groups.²¹ Furthermore, it may be difficult for some people to provide the documents required to verify identity. Some individuals who are unable locate their birth certificates may not be able to afford to obtain one. In reality, voter ID is a poorly disguised poll tax.

Between July 2006 and July 2007, Texas added 401,949 members of all minority groups to its population, including 308,000 Hispanics. It is therefore more important than ever to secure the rights of minorities instead of putting up barriers to keep them from voting.²² For example, the federally enacted “Motor Voter” law (1993) helped to increase registration by making forms available at DMVs. In some states, Election Day registration is allowed and in others, balloting is done by mail. Another initiative that has been proposed in several states is universal voter registration, which would make the state government responsible for automatically registering all eligible citizens who apply for a state driver’s license or identification card. Some states have been very active in trying to increase voter participation by youth. For example, New York passed a law requiring public high schools to provide voter registration applications to all graduating seniors when they receive their diplomas. The law also requires colleges to make voter registration forms readily available.

Civic Participation

Emphasizing to our youth that civic participation is important has been identified as a solution to addressing perceived voter apathy among young people. However, a research study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) indicates that today’s college students are more engaged than Generation X.²³ The study also showed that the main reason why young people engage in volunteer activities is to help others. They are eager to improve and want to help change things, but consider voting to be the least effective in creating lasting change. As a result, today’s youth prefer to engage in social action rather than political action. Students from the research study viewed the government as being inaccessible and described the political process as slow moving and marred with bad deals. In addition, the students resented being targets of manipulation by the media and political candidates.

In the 2008 election, Democratic candidates realized that they could utilize technology to engage young voters, especially through social networking Web sites and text messaging. Several organizations have used the media and technology to help reach young voters, including “Rock the Vote.” Yet, dozens of experiments indicate that the most effective way of increasing turnout is face-to-face contact.²⁴ According to Get out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout, a book authored by Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, “[f]ace to face interaction makes politics come to life and helps voters to establish a personal connection with the electoral process.”

Conclusion

So much information is unknown about why people make the decision to vote. However, information about past elections alerts us to trends among groups with certain characteristics. Even less information is known about the Latino population, which is expected to be the majority in Texas by the year 2040.²⁵ Blame has often been placed on citizens for their lack of electoral participation, but as Thomas E. Patterson explains, “[o]fficials, candidates, and the media have failed in their responsibility to give Americans the type of politics that can excite, inform, and engage them—and that will fully and fairly reflect their will.”²⁶ Developing a message that the political process is about the people and increasing opportunities for youth to engage in political action could increase voter turnout.

The Texas border region has shown an increase in voter turnout, but is still behind non-border regions. With the increase in the minority population in Texas, it is important that efforts are focused on increasing minority voter participation rather than impeding the minority vote. "Democracy was made for the people, not the people for Democracy."²⁷

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- ¹ US Census Bureau. "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004." March 2006.
- ² Id.
- ³ Id.
- ⁴ Id.
- ⁵ Adler Ben, "How Significant is '08's Youth Turnout?" Politico.com, accessed on 3/18/2008.
- ⁶ US Census Bureau. "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004." March 2006.
- ⁷ Id.
- ⁸ Id.
- ⁹ [Gonzalez, Antonio and Steven Ochoa. "The Latino Vote in 2008: Trends and Characteristics." The William C. Velasquez Institute. http://www.wcvi.org/data/election/wcvi_nov2008nationalanalysis_121808.pdf](http://www.wcvi.org/data/election/wcvi_nov2008nationalanalysis_121808.pdf)
- ¹⁰ Highton Benjamin, Burris Arthur L. "New Perspectives on Latino Voter Turnout in the United States." Sage Publications. 2002. <http://apr.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/30/3/285>.
- ¹¹ Id. Page 288
- ¹² [Gonzalez, Antonio and Steven Ochoa. "The Latino Vote in 2008: Trends and Characteristics." The William C. Velasquez Institute. http://www.wcvi.org/data/election/wcvi_nov2008nationalanalysis_121808.pdf](http://www.wcvi.org/data/election/wcvi_nov2008nationalanalysis_121808.pdf)
- ¹³ US Census Bureau. "Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2004." March 2006
- ¹⁴ Id.
- ¹⁵ [US Census Bureau "Reported Voting and Registration of the Total Voting-Age Population, by Sex, Race and Hispanic Origin, for States: November 2004." http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/cps2004.html](http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/voting/cps2004.html)
- ¹⁶ Gonzalez, Antonio and Steven Ochoa. "The Latino Vote in 2008: Trends and Characteristics." The William C. Velasquez Institute. http://www.wcvi.org/data/election/wcvi_nov2008nationalanalysis_121808.pdf
- ¹⁷ Guerra Carlos. "It's Time That We Brought Texas Elections into the 21st Century." November 08, 2008. Accessed on 11/11/2008. http://www.mysanantonio.com/news/columnists/carlos_guerra/34129454.html.
- ¹⁸ Hoppe Christy. "More Than Two-Thirds of Texans Expected to Cast Ballots." DallasNews.com, Nov. 4, 2008. Accessed on November 5, 2008.
- ¹⁹ Associated Press. "Dewhurst Wants Texas Version of Voter ID Law." Houston Chronicle- April 29, 2008.
- ²⁰ Austin American-Statesman. "Texas AG's Wild Goose Chase." May 22, 2008.
- ²¹ From a recent study presented to the United States Election Assistance Commission and cited by the New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/11/washington/11voters.html?ex=1333944000&en=fdeb2bb80fd0b00f&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss>
- ²² Valdez Diana W. "Hispanic Population Increase is Challenge for U.S., State." *El Paso Times*. May 1, 2008.
- ²³ The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. "Millennials Talk Politics: A Study of College Student Political Engagement." Report Released November 2007. <http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/CSTP.pdf>
- ²⁴ Gerber Alan S. and Donald P. Green. "Get Out The Vote: How To Increase Voter Turnout." Brooks Institute Press, 2008.
- ²⁵ Valdez Diana W. "Hispanic Population Increase is Challenge for U.S., State." *El Paso Times*. May 1, 2008.
- ²⁶ Patterson Thomas E. "The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty." 2002, 2003.
- ²⁷ Id.