

Majority Makers: Texas' 23rd Congressional District



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Majority Makers is an ongoing series zeroing in on congressional districts that have flipped, or came close to flipping, since 2016. Some flipped up and down the ballot, while some split their results. Some became more favorable towards Democrats, some less so. By looking closely at these districts, we can better understand who gave Democrats their majorities and what they should prioritize to deliver on their promises and build on their strengths in the midterms.

The [first installment](#) in our series looked at Georgia's 6th district, a suburban district outside Atlanta. Our [second installment](#) looked at Michigan's 8th, which delivered a split result in 2020. For this third installment, we zero in on a district where Democrats did not prevail in 2020: Texas' 23rd district.

Democrats had high hopes for Texas in 2020. They identified eight competitive seats across the state they hoped to flip. They hoped to pick up a number of state legislative seats. And with a

competitive Senate and presidential race, they even saw a chance to finally flip the state blue. Texas' 23rd district was at the heart of these ambitions. With a Cook Political Index of R+1, it was the only congressional district across the state drawn back in 2011 to be a competitive district, with a nearly equal number of Democrats and Republicans. Gina Ortiz Jones came within a point of flipping the district in 2018, and Democrats were optimistic that she would carry it in her second run after Republican Will Hurd, a moderate who held the seat previously, retired from Congress. The Cook Political Report rated the seat "Lean Democratic."

But on election night, Jones lost by four points. Joe Biden lost the district by just under two points, after Hillary Clinton carried it by four in 2016 and Beto O'Rourke carried it in his 2018 Senate run by five. This makes the district one of just two Clinton-Trump districts across the country.

At first glance, the story seems clear. Nearly 70% of the district is Hispanic, a group with which Democrats underperformed in 2020. But by digging beneath the data and looking at some key fault lines in the district, we can begin to parse why exactly Democrats failed to prevail here in 2020 and what lessons it offers Democrats for the future. Studying the district makes a few key problems for Democrats clear; we can see that Hispanic voters, particularly some specific groups of Hispanic voters in west Texas, turned away from Democrats. On the issues, the downsides of the coronavirus issue and the necessity of virtual campaigning stand out, as do the ever-challenging subjects of policing and immigration.

District Overview

Texas' 23rd district stretches along the majority of Texas' border with Mexico, from western San Antonio to just outside of El Paso. The district is predominantly rural with a handful of population centers, anchored in San Antonio. It spans a whopping 520 miles, and two-thirds of the district is classified as "very low density" or "low density" by the Citylab congressional district density index. Its primary industries include farming, ranching, oil and mineral extraction, manufacturing, and tourism. In its population centers, some of its top employers include federal and local law enforcement like Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and ICE. It also contains several military bases.

A large majority of the district is Hispanic; just under 70%, while just under 25% is non-Hispanic white. About 1 in 7 voters in the district were born outside of the United States. The district's educational attainment is slightly below the national average, as is the median household income.

The district has long been a political battleground. It has swung between Democrats and Republicans five times since the early 1990s. This is no accident; its latest boundaries are the result of a 2006 U.S. Supreme Court case which ruled that the previously drawn district violated the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by infringing on the rights of Hispanic voters. As a result, a three-judge panel redrew the district's boundaries for the 2006 election to ensure that it remained a majority-

minority and competitive district. It has been contested in almost every congressional election since.

But despite the competitive nature of the district, Democrats have not won it since 2012, ironically when Mitt Romney carried the district. Will Hurd flipped the district in 2014 and represented it from 2015–2021. During a stretch of this time, he was the only Black Republican in the House, although the district is only 3% Black. Gina Ortiz Jones challenged him in 2018, coming within a point of winning the seat. When Hurd announced his retirement before 2020 and Jones announced that she would run again, Democrats identified the seat as one of their best pick-up opportunities. But in an upset, Republican Tony Gonzales won last November, keeping the seat in Republican hands.

Democrats' repeated losses in this seemingly winnable district raise some key questions for the party. Because both Jones and Biden lost the district in 2020, it would seem that neither candidate had an intrinsic vulnerability, but rather, the Democratic brand as a whole has lost some appeal in the district. Which voters swung against Democrats? We know that Hispanic voters trended towards Republicans this year, but is there a particular group of Hispanic voters that Democrats struggled with most? What happened to turn these voters off from Democrats? What might they do to win them back?

Texas' 23rd district is notoriously difficult to poll because of higher than average poverty rates, lower than average college education rates and rural parts of the district. Because of this, perhaps Democrats should have been prepared for a potential upset. But nonetheless, because the district's results was one of the top surprises in 2020, its results are important to parse.

The story of Texas' 23rd district highlights Democrats' wavering strength with Hispanic voters, which was particularly dramatic in south and west Texas. It also highlights Democrats' struggles with rural voters, including both white rural voters and Hispanic rural voters. The district's policy debates help us see the challenges for Democrats of virtual campaigning as well as the immigration issue. Finally, it shows the perils of Democrats' increased reliance on votes from urban areas, as their strength there was not enough to put Biden and Gina Ortiz Jones over the top in this largely rural district.

Demographics

Texas' 23rd district is heavily Hispanic and Spanish-speaking, and it has a high proportion of residents born outside the country. Its median household income is slightly below the national average, and the district is less college-educated than the country as a whole. Nearly 70% of the district is Hispanic, and less than a quarter (24%) of the district is non-Hispanic white, compared to 76% of the country.

While the district's majority-minority status suggested a strong pick-up opportunity for Democrats, a few aspects of the district's demographic makeup were not in Democrats' favor. The

district is less suburban than many of the other districts across Texas that Democrats contested in 2018 and 2020, rated a “rural-suburban mix” by the [Citylab congressional density index](#). Democrats’ strongest performances in 2018 and 2020 were in “dense suburban” districts, and they made gains in some competitive “sparse suburban” districts. This district, by contrast, is about two-thirds very low or low density, helping explain why Democrats struggled despite the large Hispanic population.

The district is also less college-educated and less wealthy than many other Democratic targets in Texas. An example of a Texas district where Democrats have thrived in recent years is Texas’ 32nd district in the city of Dallas and some of its immediate suburbs. The 32nd district is dense suburban and 45% college educated, with a median income about 20% higher than the rest of the United States. Texas’ 23rd district, in contrast, is 24% college educated, with a median income below the national average. The combination of those three traits made Texas’ 32nd district fit the mold of a Democratic pick-up opportunity. The fact that Texas’ 23rd lacks all three of these traits helps explain Democrats’ 2020 struggles.

National exit polls add additional context for Democrats’ lack of appeal to rural voters, including rural voters of color. Biden won Hispanic voters in all area types: urban, suburban, and rural. But his margins were tight with rural Hispanic voters; he won a narrow majority of 53%. Meanwhile, he lost white rural voters 65–34%. Because Democratic margins with rural Hispanic voters were not that large, these voters likely did not provide sufficient cushion for Democrats to win this district, given their deep losses with the white rural voters.

Some additional wrinkles in the Hispanic vote here help explain why the district’s majority-minority status does not guarantee victories for Democrats. Some Hispanic voters in the district are “[Tejanos](#)” – Hispanic people who are descended from those who lived in Coahuila y Tejas or another part of New Spain or Mexico before the Republic of Texas existed. Tejanos are heavily concentrated in San Antonio and the border. Many Tejanos were never immigrants, or are several generations removed from their family’s immigration experience. They therefore may identify more with the experiences of other rural communities or their white counterparts than they do with new immigrants and people seeking asylum at the border, and often have different views on the issue of immigration. Those different views may lead them to vote differently than other Hispanic voters.

Finally, the district’s actual electorate dilutes Democrats’ advantages with Hispanic voters, as many Hispanic people in the district typically do not turn out to vote. Though the district is 70% Hispanic, a Republican gerrymander in 2003 and 2011 intentionally grouped as many low-turnout Hispanic voters into the district as possible. Based on Catalist estimates, this makes the actual electorate in the district 59% Hispanic and 34% non-Hispanic white. This is particularly acute in the portion of Bexar County included in the district, where many Hispanic people are [non-voters](#). In 2012, Democrat Pete Gallego [won](#) the district not by sweeping Bexar County but by winning six, mostly

western rural counties, and performing better than Democrats typically do in the remaining rural counties. These details of the Hispanic vote add complexity to the typical Democratic equation of winning by sweeping urban and suburban areas; in this area, urban counties simply do not contain enough votes.

Texas' 23rd District Demographics and Statistics

	District	National
Age	34.4	38.2
Median household income	\$59,074	\$61,937
Persons below poverty line	15.5%	10.5%
Median home value	\$158,000	\$229,700
% College Grads	23.9%	36.0%
Persons with language other than English spoken at home	52.6%	21.9%
Foreign-born population	15.1%	13.7%
Non-Hispanic White	23.9%	76.3%
Black/African American	2.9%	13.4%
Hispanic	69.6%	18.5%
Asian	1.9%	5.9%

Source: American Community Survey 2019 1-Year Estimates.



Past Election Results

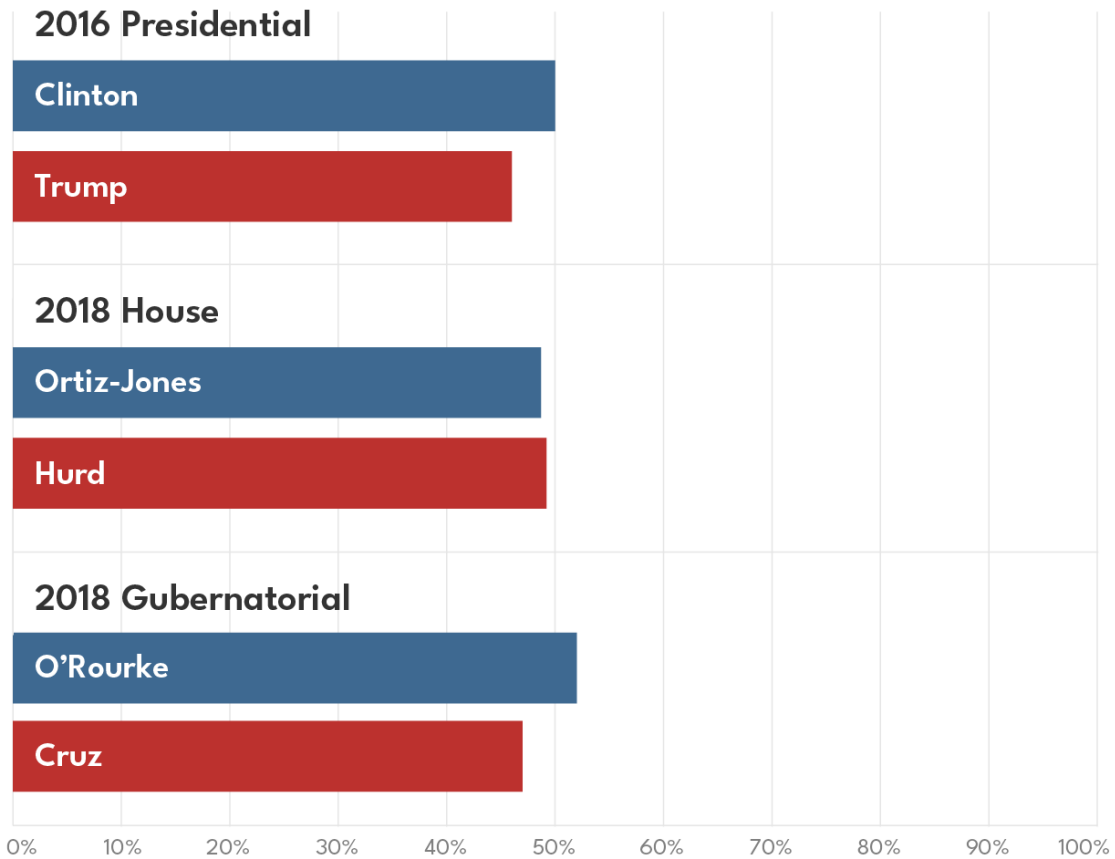
Texas' 23rd district has been hotly contested ever since 2006 when the district's lines were redrawn to make it more competitive. And yet, Democrats have not held the seat since losing it in 2014, when Republican Will Hurd claimed the seat in a narrow race. Congressional races since then have been close, with Republicans finishing ahead by narrow margins.

At the top of the ticket, the district was decided by three-point margins for several presidential elections in a row. Obama carried the district by three points in 2008 and lost it by three in 2012. Hillary Clinton won the district by three points in 2016. In 2018, Beto O'Rourke carried the district by five. While Gina Ortiz Jones lost the district by half a point that year, because of Clinton's recent victory and O'Rourke's even more convincing margin, Democrats saw the district as a solid pick-up opportunity, or even a shoo-in for 2020.

Texas' 23rd district encompasses 26 whole counties and parts of three others, including parts of El Paso County (El Paso) and Bexar County (San Antonio). While the district as a whole is a swing district, many of the counties included in it are traditionally staunchly Democratic or Republican. Biden lost 12 counties in the district by over 40 points, though 10 of those 12 counties include less than 5,000 people, and all include less than 12,000 people. Meanwhile, some counties in the district are overwhelmingly Democratic, such as Zavala, Presidio and El Paso counties, which are each over 80% Hispanic, and Biden won them by over 30 points.

Democratic victories in the district have relied on running up the margins in predominantly Hispanic counties. Ten counties in the district are over 75% Hispanic, and Clinton won nine of them by large margins. These counties are also some of the more populous counties in the district, including Maverick County, which Clinton won by 56 points, Frio County, which she won by 15 points, Val Verde County, which she won by eight, and Zavala County, which she won by 60. Democrats expect to be crushed in many of the tiny counties with larger white populations across the district, but they can overcome those margins by running up the score in bigger, overwhelmingly Hispanic counties and the areas closer to San Antonio and El Paso cities.

Past Election Results in Texas' 23rd District



Source: Texas Secretary of State.

2020 Election Results

A county-level analysis indicates where Democrats fell short in 2020. In certain counties, Democrats dramatically underperformed their 2016 performance, contributing to their losses in the district and statewide.

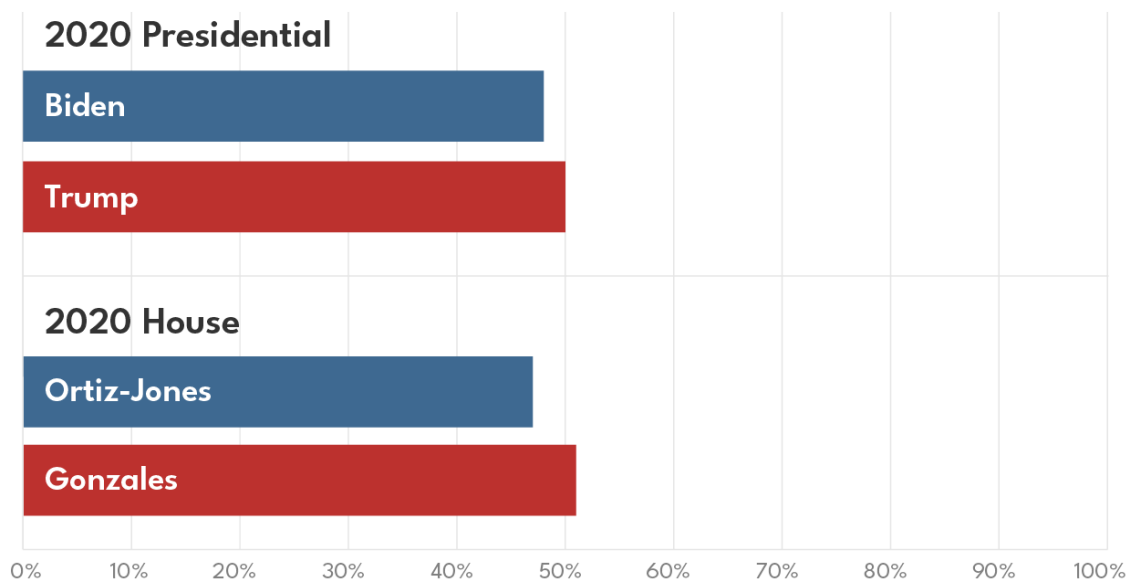
Democrats' underperformance in overwhelmingly Hispanic counties is most striking here. All of the 11 counties in the district where Democrats lost the most support since 2016 are majority Hispanic, and nine of the 11 are over 70% Hispanic. In Maverick County, a 60,000-person county that is 96% Hispanic, Democrats' support dropped 47 points, as Biden won the county by nine points after Clinton's 56-point victory in 2016. In Zavala County, a 94% Hispanic county with 12,000 people, Democrats' support fell 27 points. Democrats gained support in only four of the 29 counties included in the district. While 26 of these counties are majority Hispanic, the counties where Biden gained are all less Hispanic than the district as a whole. Democrats lost support in all but one of the rural majority-Hispanic counties, as well as in El Paso County.

Medina County, a suburban county outside of San Antonio, stands out as a deciding county in 2020. It is the third-largest county in the district by vote share after Bexar and El Paso counties. Biden lost this county by 39 percentage points, as Jones lost it by 42. Medina County alone very nearly gave Gonzales his entire margin of victory over Jones. Interestingly, Maverick County has a larger population than Medina and is historically overwhelmingly Democratic, but its 95% Hispanic population casts fewer votes than Medina’s population, which is only 52% Hispanic. It is important to note that while Medina County is technically a suburb of San Antonio, many communities outside San Antonio are insular and define themselves independently of the city. It has remained reliably red and pads the Republican vote in the district. One likely cause is the county’s low share of college-educated voters; only 19% of the county hold a college degree, compared to 36% of the United States as a whole.

Because Democrats expect to be blown out in many of the small rural counties with whiter populations in this district, they need to hold strong margins in the overwhelmingly Hispanic counties, including both the urban and rural Hispanic counties. By slipping so dramatically in support in the overwhelmingly Hispanic counties, Democrats underperformed their 2016 numbers and were unable to pull off victories in this swing district.



2020 Election Results in Texas’ 23rd District



Source: Texas Secretary of State.

Qualitative Analysis: Local News and Campaigns

Digging into congressional debates and advertisements in Texas' 23rd district can help us parse what issues are most pertinent in the district and why Democrats came up short. In the run-up to the 2020 election, Democrat Gina Ortiz Jones and Republican Tony Gonzales debated key issues in the district, and flashpoints emerged on healthcare, immigration, and virtual versus in-person campaigning during the pandemic. In ads, Gonzales and the NRCC sought to portray Jones as too liberal and out of touch.

Jones and Gonzales' debate was held a month before the 2020 election as voters were making their final decisions, and it gives us insight into the district's key issues and attitudes. In their debate, Jones leaned heavily into the Affordable Care Act (ACA), attacking Gonzales for wanting to repeal the law and take care away from those with pre-existing conditions. Gonzales said he did want to repeal the law, calling it "broken," but said he would vote to repeal it while ensuring those with pre-existing conditions were still protected. Gonzales made the conversation personal, saying that he has a pre-existing condition himself, but did not actually explain how he would protect care for those people while repealing the ACA. Jones steered the subject back to the ACA repeatedly throughout the debate, recognizing that the issue is a strength for Democrats, particularly in a highly uninsured state like Texas.

The two candidates clashed on immigration as well, particularly when speaking about Trump's border wall. Gonzales talked about a tour he did with the border patrol. He supported a border wall "where it makes sense" as well as more resources to DHS, ICE, the border patrol, and new technology for securing the border. He attempted to strike a more moderate tone on legal immigration, saying he is focused on "legal immigration reform" and supporting the American Dream, realizing that it "doesn't always start in America." He also spoke about reopening the southern border during the pandemic to resume economic activity between southwest Texas and Mexico, as the two economies are so intertwined. Jones focused more specifically on the DREAM Act and a path to citizenship for DREAMers, but she did not focus on a broader solution to the immigration issue. She attacked Gonzales for having said in the past that he supported finishing the wall, and she called the wall wasteful and a drain on resources from areas that need it more, like military bases.

Jones and Gonzales repeatedly disagreed on COVID-19 precautions, as Jones ceased holding in-person events during the pandemic while Gonzales did not. While Jones criticized Gonzales for flouting safety by campaigning in person, Gonzales sought to portray Jones as a Washington bureaucrat who did not care enough to hold in-person campaign events. He brought up her lack of in-person campaigning at all opportunities during the debate, arguing, for example, that she could not speak to the issue of immigration reform having never visited the border in-person. He derided her use of Zoom for most campaign events, seeking to paint her as absent from the district and the campaign trail and saying she would be an absent representative.

Looking at attack ads against Jones in the district, several different tactics and themes were used to claim that Jones was too liberal or closely tied with Democrats in Washington. Environmental issues came up as a major flashpoint, and were used as an economic attack. Ads claimed that Jones supported the Green New Deal, which simultaneously sought to convince voters that Jones was too liberal overall, and made the claim that electing her would be bad for oil and gas jobs in the district. Jones did not support the Green New Deal, but it is worth noting that Jones did not publicly come out against the Green New Deal nor directly push back against that characterization of her views.

Republican attack ads also used Defund the Police to tie Jones to liberals in Washington and make her seem out of touch with the district. Because of the large number of voters in the district employed by military bases, ICE and CBP, the district is notoriously conservative on security-related issues. One ad falsely stated that Jones wanted to shut down military bases to pay for people's gender reassignment surgeries, tying the idea of defunding security to LGBTQ issues and weaponizing cultural issues to make voters suspicious of Jones.

Attack ads in the district turned personal as well, as the NRCC used anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and images against Jones, who is lesbian. An NRCC website instructed outside groups advertising in the race to remind voters of Jones' sexuality, particularly highlighting the talking point that "Jones and her female partner lived and worked near Washington, DC, not Texas" prior to Jones' congressional run. Where policy arguments were not in Republicans' favor in the district, they used sexuality to alienate socially conservative voters.

One additional factor may have influenced the race, distinct from the candidates' actual views and positions: the GOP's success in recruiting candidates of color in the 2020 cycle. While in the past, Republicans struggled to find candidates that represent the diversity of districts like Texas' 23rd, this year they succeeded. Because Tony Gonzales is Hispanic, he was likely able to peel off some Hispanic voters from Jones.

Judging by the congressional debates and campaign advertisements, clear top issues in the district were healthcare, immigration, energy, security and policing, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Healthcare was undeniably a strength for Jones in the campaign, but the issue likely did not have quite the same salience as it did in 2018 when Republicans were actively seeking to repeal the Affordable Care Act. Meanwhile, the Democratic Party brand on immigration, security, COVID-19 precautions, and energy policy may have proven to be weaknesses that were too much for Jones to overcome.

Conclusion

Texas' sprawling 23rd district is hard to summarize and categorize. It is a unique, diverse and complicated district. But analyzing the district's detailed election results and internal debates helps us understand why Democrats fell short. Losses with rural Hispanic voters, on top of existing weaknesses with rural white voters, made the district increasingly difficult for Democrats in 2020.

Issues such as climate policy and immigration may have stood in the way, compounded by the struggles of campaigning virtually. Jones leaned heavily into important policy strengths, but in a tough year for Texas Democrats, Texas' 23rd simply remained out of reach.

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