

Introducing “Letter from Texas,” a Monthly Report on Demographic and Political Trends in Texas

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Since joining the Political Science faculty at UH in 1966, I have been fascinated by the changes in Houston and Texas. In the mid-sixties, there were fewer than two million people in the Houston metropolitan area. The most recent U.S. Census estimate for these eight counties is 7.7 million, a fourfold increase. Texas had about 10.5 million people in 1966; the July 2024 Census estimate was 31.3 million.

In the 1960s, a large majority of Texans were “Anglos” – persons who said they were white, and not Hispanic. Today, more Texans identify as Hispanic than Anglo. Prior to 1980, the Black population percentage in Texas was declining as more African Americans were leaving the state than moving here. By the 1990s, that flow reversed. The 2020 Census showed Texas had surpassed New York and Georgia to have the largest Black population in the country. Fifty years ago, Asian Americans accounted for less than one percent of the Texas population. By 2020, that share was six percent.

Texas partisan politics has changed enormously since the 1960s. State and local politics were then dominated by conservative Democrats, while Republicans were competitive only in presidential contests. After an interlude of close state elections from 1978 to 1994, the Texas GOP became dominant in the late 20th century. Texas Democrats have not won a statewide contest since 1994 – the longest losing streak in modern American state politics. However, Democrats win most of the big cities in general elections and, more importantly, are making gains in the fast-growing suburban counties around Houston, Austin, Dallas and Fort Worth. Texas remains a “red” state in 2025, but Democrats have some reasons for optimism.

Given the demographic and political changes unfolding in our state and nation, a newsletter with my take on Texas politics might be of interest. The nation and Texas, now the fastest-growing large state, are entering a period of profound change. Voters are in a sour mood. Party control of the White House has switched in the last three presidential elections, something not seen since the 1880s and 1890s. The American economy has grown, but more slowly than in the second half of the 20th century. The fruits of increased productivity and wealth have increasingly flowed to the top .01 percent of Americans. The top one percent has also done exceptionally well, and the top 20 percent have seen real growth in income and accumulated wealth. Meantime, middle-class Americans have struggled to maintain their standard of

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living. Working-class/lower-income individuals have lost ground in terms of income and wealth levels since 2000.

Growing economic inequality has been accompanied by a renewed focus on cultural issues. A hundred years ago, cultural issues deeply divided Americans along religious lines, national origin and region. These differences faded after World War II. Twenty-first century cultural warriors clash over racial and gender identity, abortion, gay marriage, how to teach children the American story and so forth. Now the lines fall much more along lines of educational attainment. College-educated Americans are often on the progressive side of these issues, while persons with less formal schooling hold conservative positions. Place is also very important, but it is now less state-based but whether one lives in the cities and inner suburbs, or in exurbs, smaller cities or rural areas.

Immigration is again a deeply divisive issue, as a surge of new immigrants from across the globe has increased the share of foreign-born Americans from five percent in 1950 to 15 percent in 2024 – matching the previous high recorded by the 1910 Census. Most Americans agree the present system is “broken” and support tighter border controls, but disagree about what to do about the estimated 12-20 million undocumented persons now in the U.S.

These trends in the nation and Texas have been unfolding for years. So why launch a letter in the summer of 2025? In a word, or rather two: Donald Trump. If Kamala Harris had pulled out a close Electoral College win in November 2024, we would have had business as usual in Texas for the next four years, i.e., continued Republican dominance. But Harris lost, and, more importantly, Donald Trump won.

Seven months into the second Trump administration, we are not seeing a repeat of his first term. Mr. Trump ran as a disruptor in 2016, but mostly governed in a conventional Republican fashion. His signature legislative achievement was a 2017 tax bill that closely hewed to GOP orthodoxy, with most of the benefits flowing to higher-income earners and corporations. Candidate Trump assailed Mexican immigrants as bad people and criminals in 2015, but deported fewer persons than the Obama administration. Trump closed the border but eschewed aggressive efforts to round up and remove the millions of undocumented persons living in the United States. The President attacked the mainstream press, elite universities and political opponents in harsh and often crude terms, but did not unleash the wide range of powers a president now commands to destroy his perceived enemies.

Trump 47 is running a very different show. Humiliated and embittered by two impeachments late in his first term and four criminal investigations after he left office, Trump is seeking vengeance against those he sees as having tried to destroy him after January 6, 2021. Emboldened by a 2024 U.S. Supreme Court decision granting presidents virtually complete legal immunity, Trump has pushed the limits of executive power far beyond any predecessor in peacetime.

Trump unbound is, for better or worse, one of the most consequential presidents in American history. Previously, our most impactful chief executives – Washington, Lincoln and Franklin

Roosevelt – had to deal with crises they did not create. Donald J. Trump, by contrast, was sworn into office at noon on January 20, 2025, with the country at peace, a growing economy, low unemployment and inflation trending down. Undocumented border crossings had dropped sharply after the belated efforts of the Biden/Harris Administration. Violent crime was falling after a surge in the Covid years, and drug overdose deaths were finally falling. But Trump had campaigned on the premise that America is broken, and only he could fix it. He won and has launched a wide range of initiatives he deems necessary to restore American greatness.

Whether these initiatives, which include full-scale frontal assaults on the federal bureaucracy, universities, “woke” culture, prominent law firms, Democrat controlled cities and states, succeed or fail remains to be seen. Either way, the second Trump presidency is changing America in many ways. What happens in Texas will be, in my opinion, critical to Trump’s success or failure. If the Trumpian program succeeds in America’s fastest-growing state, it will help solidify a political realignment that transforms American politics for years, if not decades. Conversely, failure in the Lone Star State will undermine MAGA in myriad ways. The first test will come in the 2026 midterms, which are promised to be more competitive in Texas than any election cycle since 1994, even before President Trump ordered Texas Republicans to redraw the congressional map the GOP legislators had enacted in 2021.

This newsletter will focus on why Texas is becoming, somewhat surprisingly, a critical battleground after three decades of being sidelined in national politics. The reports will rely heavily on *data* – census reports, election results, public opinion surveys – that profile the changes occurring in Texas. The newsletter will *analyze* these numbers. Finally, I will share my *opinions* on what is happening, or might happen, in Texas. In that respect, my commitment is to separate my personal views from the data and analyses in these newsletters. The views expressed, of course, are entirely mine, not those of the Hobby School of Public Affairs or the University of Houston.

The first newsletter on September 2025 will focus on the tension between the “Texas Miracle” of a strong economy so proudly touted by Governor Abbott and other Republican leaders, and the Trump Administration’s crusade to restore a “Golden Age” of Made in America by imposing tariffs not seen in over 100 years, shutting off almost all immigration, and removing millions of undocumented persons. In Texas, many targeted for removal fill vital jobs in agriculture, construction, hospitality and other fields where there are serious shortages of workers. I do not know how Trump’s aggressive policies will play out, but the newsletters will track their rollout and the reactions of Texans as we move deeper into the president’s second term.

In full transparency, I have worked occasionally as a consultant for political candidates and/or office holders. Most of these were on the Democratic side of the political divide, starting with State Senator Barbara Jordan in her first race for Congress in 1971-72. Currently, I am consulting with the Texas NAACP’s attorneys and Black Congress members in Houston and Dallas on congressional redistricting. I have testified as a redistricting expert in approximately 20 federal cases. I have also directed many surveys for the University of Houston Center for Public Policy, including polls for state media.

Finally, as a longtime teacher of political marketing and campaigns at a public university, I maintained an “open door” policy of meeting with and giving candid advice to *any* candidate for public office without regard to party or ideology. Many have taken me up on this, including the current mayor of Houston.²

Obviously, I have long been involved in the political arena. This has, I think, enhanced my understanding of how the processes of running for office and governing work. Engaging in the political arena has not, in my opinion, compromised my objectivity. In any case, I will disclose past associations and activities that might raise questions of bias. Readers can then judge for themselves.

Finally, I welcome input from readers as the Hobby School of Public Affairs launches this new venture. Let me know what you think as we navigate through some of the most interesting times in our state and nation’s political history.

² John Whitmire was an undergraduate in my Fall 1971 Political Parties class. Mr. Whitmire stopped by my office as I was poring over a map of 23 new single-member Texas House districts in Harris County. He leaned in and noted one of the new districts included his former high school and current church. Maybe, he mused, his law school plans could wait while he used his savings to campaign full-time for this open seat. Six months later, John Whitmire won a hard-fought Democratic primary runoff and was elected to the Texas Legislature in November 1972. Ten years later, he won a state senate seat. Thirty years later, he became the Dean of the Texas Senate. In 2023, Whitmire ran for mayor of Houston. He won. I never worked in his numerous campaigns, but we have remained friends over the years.