

March 2026 Letter from Texas

Texans (at least some of us) have voted: What did we learn from the March 3 Primaries?

Part One

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From the start of early voting on February 17, it was clear that the 2026 Texas midterm primaries were different. Republican voter turnout was robust, on track to exceed the record set in 2022. But Democratic midterm turnout was soaring, and for the first time in 20 years, running ahead of GOP voting. This was interesting. Combined Republican campaign spending was outpacing Democratic outlays by more than four to one, with the most expensive U.S. Senate party primary in history leading the way. Many more Republicans than Democrats were seeking their party's nominations statewide and across the 254 Texas counties that make up the Lone Star State. This in a state rated "solid red" for 2026 by most analysts.

That dark red shading makes sense. There have been about 180 statewide partisan elections in Texas since 1994. Republicans have won every contest – usually by margins of more than ten percentage points. Locally, Democrats dominate about 25 counties in Texas, mostly along the border and in South Texas. In contrast, Republicans hold every partisan office in more than 200 of the state's 254 counties. Ambitious candidates statewide and in most of Texas understandably file as Republicans rather than Democrats. Successful campaigns require lots of money in populous states, and savvy "investors" with interests in Austin or local courthouses are far more likely to contribute to Republicans than Democrats. "Losers don't legislate" as the saying goes in the political village.

So, why were more voters getting in the "loser line" (the Democratic Party queue) at joint polling locations across Texas rather than going with the "winners" who have been running things here for a quarter century? Simple question which, hopefully, an analysis of the voting patterns in the March primary will shed some light on. This letter focuses on the makeup of the surprisingly large primary electorates. What drove the surge, especially in the Democratic Primary? Where did these voters come from? Were Republican voters different from people in the Democratic line? Will the primary vote pattern carry into the November General Election?

The following April Letter will analyze the choices primary voters made in March and possible consequences for the November General Election.

The 2026 Texas Primaries in Context

Because only a handful of states are truly competitive and gerrymandering has left few "swing" districts" in the U.S., the effective election in most places is the dominant party's primary. Win that, and you waltz to victory a few months later.

Texas certainly fit that pattern for most of its 190-year history. For a century after white conservatives regained control of state politics post-Reconstruction, the end-all and be-all election in Texas was the Democratic Primary. Blacks were excluded and Latinos marginalized so this was an election among white folks.

Federal pressures forced small cracks in this edifice in the 1940s and 1950s. Big ones followed in the 1960s and 1970s. Most important were the passage of the federal Voting Rights Act in 1965 and the inclusion, in 1975, of Hispanic voters under its protections when the VRA was extended by Congress.

Two Texas Democrats were critical in both cases. Lyndon Baines Johnson of Johnson City had fought his way to power in Texas under the old one-party primary system and onto the winning national party ticket with Senator John F. Kennedy in 1960. Sidelined for nearly three years as VP, Johnson was thrust into power by the assassination of JFK in November 1963. The “accidental” Texas president, long a *bete noire* of national liberals, turned out to be a far more effective champion of Black civil and voting rights than his Democratic predecessors, including JFK. Johnson’s mastery of the legislative process was indispensable in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Fair Housing Act of 1968, but most importantly, in overcoming the southern filibuster against the Voting Rights Act in 1965. But President Johnson, in breaking with his segregationist colleagues from the Solid South, set in motion forces that doomed Democratic Party dominance of Texas elections.

An immediate beneficiary was Barbara Jordan of Houston, Texas. Ms. Jordan, a young Black lawyer, ran for the Texas House of Representatives in 1962 and 1964. In both cases she won huge majorities in the fast-growing African American precincts in central Harris County. However, the conservative Democrats controlling Texas elections required that all twelve local House members run at-large in the county, dooming the chances of a Black woman like Barbara Jordan in a racially polarized county where Anglos cast 75% of the votes.

The passage of the VRA and federal court rulings ended the at-large legislative election system Texas Democrats had partly relied on to hold power. With new rules in place Ms. Jordan won a state senate seat in Harris County in 1966 and a new congressional district in 1972. A few months after being sworn in, Barbara Jordan starred in the televised U.S. House Judiciary Committee hearings on Watergate. Congresswoman Jordan later used her powerful voice to ensure that the reenactment of the Voting Rights Act in 1975 extended its protections to Hispanics.

The Johnson/Jordan actions earned strong support from minority voters but helped drive white conservatives out of a party they had long dominated. Former Governor John Connally, a close LBJ associate for decades, led “Democrats for Nixon” in the 1972 presidential contest and became a Republican shortly after the election. A white southerner, Jimmy Carter, managed to eke out a close victory in Texas over President Gerald Ford in the wake of the Watergate scandal, but no Democratic presidential nominee has carried the Lone Star State since 1976.

The presidential realignment of Texas into a solid red state took longer to work its way down to statewide and local elections. There was a transitional period from the 1970s and to 1990s when statewide contests were close, and the governorship changed partisan hands in five consecutive elections from 1978 to 1994.¹ That competitive period ended in November 1996 when Texas Republicans won every statewide office – a feat repeated in each General Election over the last 30 years.

The Democratic collapse reflected several factors in addition to the migration of white conservatives into Ronald Reagan’s GOP. The national party wrote Texas off after 1988 and focused on swing states elsewhere. With no statewide elected leaders, holding the Democratic coalition of urban progressive Anglos, Blacks, and Hispanics proved extremely difficult after Governor Ann Richards’ defeat in 1994. Republicans took maximum advantage of Democratic weakness. Governors George W. Bush (1995 – 2001) and Rick Perry (2001 – 2015) focused on building a “big tent” party that welcomed new Texans from other states and nations while reaching out to the fast-growing Hispanic population. However, the most important factor in cementing GOP dominance, in my opinion, was that *under Republican state leadership, the Texas economy vastly outperformed the national economy after 2002.*

¹ Democrat Dolph Briscoe lost the 1978 party primary and was succeeded by Republican Bill Clements. Clements was defeated by Democrat Mark White in 1982. Clements defeated White in a 1986 rematch. Ann Richards, a Democrat won an open seat in 1990 but lost reelection to Republican George W. Bush in 1994.

Primary Voting in Texas: 1990 – 2026

The return of one-party control in the 2000s had two interesting impacts on party primary voting. Table 1 shows voting in midterm Democratic Primaries dropped sharply – which makes sense because these elections were far less important than was the case when the party was competitive in the 20th century. However, there was only a modest increase in Republican Primary voting in these elections despite the fact that all important state offices were being decided in these elections. A principal reason for this was that relatively few Black and Latino Texans – now a majority of the state’s population – chose to vote in GOP primaries.

Consequently, while voter registration in Texas steadily rose after 1990, combined primary voting dropped sharply. In March 2006 fewer than ten percent of the 12.7 million qualified voters voted in the Texas primaries, and between 1994 and 2022 the combined turnout never exceeded 18% of registered voters. There was, as noted, a sharp uptick in the 2026 primaries. Republican turnout rose from 1.954 million in 2022 to 2.155 million – a gain of 212,000 voters or 10.8%. This increase paled in comparison to the Democratic jump from 1.076 million in 2022 to 2.312 million, a gain of 1.236 million, or 114.9%.

Table 1: Party Primary Voting in Midterm Texas Elections, 1990 – 2026

| Year | Reg Voters | Dem Voters | Rep Voters | Total Voters | Turnout Percent |
|------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|-----------------|
| 1990 | 8,285 | 1,487 | 855 | 2,342 | 28.4 |
| 1994 | 9,042 | 1,037 | 557 | 1,594 | 17.6 |
| 1998 | 11,160 | 665 | 597 | 1,262 | 11.3 |
| 2002 | 12,218 | 1,003 | 622 | 1,625 | 13.3 |
| 2006 | 12,723 | 509 | 656 | 1,165 | 9.2 |
| 2010 | 13,023 | 681 | 1,485 | 2,166 | 16.6 |
| 2014 | 13,601 | 560 | 1,358 | 1,918 | 14.1 |
| 2018 | 15,250 | 1,068 | 1,550 | 2,618 | 17.2 |
| 2022 | 17,183 | 1,076 | 1,954 | 3,030 | 17.6 |
| 2026 | 18,658 | 2,312 | 2,166 | 4,478 | 24.2 |

Source: Office of Texas Secretary of State. Registration and voting data are in thousands.

Why this big increase in primary voting? There was a U.S. Senate seat up in 2026, which was not the case in 2022. There were spirited contests for that seat in both party primaries, which is rare in Texas. On the Republican side, Senator John Cornyn drew two strong challengers in Congressman Wesley Hunt and, more importantly, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a favorite of the Tea Party/MAGA GOP base. And Democrats, who have struggled to field viable statewide candidates since 1994, ended up with two rising young stars, Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett of Dallas and State Representative James Talarico of Austin, going head-to-head.

Money poured into the senate races. Washington DC-based PACs spent over \$70 million to defend Senator Cornyn and attack his challengers. Representative Talarico raised more than \$20 million and a supportive PAC spent several million dollars questioning the electability of Congresswoman Crockett. National and state media gave extensive coverage to the Democratic and Republican contests.

But something else drove turnout – especially on the Democratic side: The 47th presidency of Donald J. Trump. Since President Trump’s return to office, his aggressive policies on tariffs, mass deportations, and addressing (or not addressing) voter concerns about the economy have driven his approval ratings below 40 percent. The Trump 47 presidency has become a turnout machine, driving voters to the polls even when he is not on the ballot. And in this highly polarized environment, Trump’s critics are more likely to show up to the polls than his supporters.

The electoral consequences are starkly evident. The 2025 Democratic gubernatorial nominees in New Jersey and Virginia won easily, outperforming polls by about 10 points. More than 70 special elections across the country in 2025 and early 2026 had Democrats running 10 – 15 points above Kamala Harris’s vote share in 2024. In Texas, there was a runoff election on January 31, 2026 for a Tarrant County state senate seat. The Democrat, Taylor Rehmet, won by 14% in a district Donald Trump carried by 17% in 2024.

A few days ago, Democrats “flipped” two Florida legislative seats from red to blue. Since November 2024, 30 state legislative districts have changed from one party control to the other party. Democrats have won every one. As University of Florida political scientist Michael McDonald noted in his recent US Elections Project Newsletter, “The data from these special elections added to a rising mountain suggests ... Republicans find themselves in a very unfavorable election environment.”²

The elevated Democratic Primary turnout in Texas is thus part of a national pattern where Democratic voters and Independents are more highly energized than Republican voters. The result: with a record 4.5 million voters cast, 51.6% were in the Democratic Primary compared to 48.4% in the Republican Primary. Primary turnout does not predict the November 2026 results, when we expect more than ten million votes will be cast, but the March voting patterns are a powerful early indicator of political trends.

² The US Elections Project Newsletter, March 25, 2026, p. 3.

Breaking down the 2026 Results

Texas is a big, diverse state. How did the 2026 primary results break down across the state? One way to organize the data is to look at vote performance in the 30 counties that are part of the four large metropolitan areas that now cast about 70% of the total state vote; the 30 predominately Hispanic counties along the Mexico border that usually constitute about 10% of the vote; and the remaining 194 counties outside the big metro areas that usually contribute about 20% of the total vote.

Table 2 shows midterm primary vote turnout in the county groupings in March 2022 compared to March 2026. Republican primary turnout in 2026 was up in all county groupings but the gain in Democratic primary voting was far higher. In the ten-county Dallas/Fort Worth metropolitan area, the Democratic vote increased from 284,000 to 701,000 – a 147% gain compared to 19% for Republicans. In the Houston metro counties, the gain was 125% compared to just 9% in the Republican Primary. The Austin and San Antonio metros gains were 113% and 105%, compared to 13% and 11% in the GOP primary. The same pattern held in the 194 non-big metro/non-Hispanic counties where Democratic Primary voting increased by 120% from 2022 to 2026 compared to just five percent for Republicans.

Table 2: Change in Midterm Primary Voting across Texas Counties from 2022 to 2026

| Metro Area Counties | Vote in March 2022 | | Vote in March 2026 | | Percent Change | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|----------------|-----|
| | Dem | Rep | Dem | Rep | Dem | Rep |
| Dallas/Fort Worth (10) | 284 | 462 | 701 | 554 | 147% | 20% |
| Houston (8) | 242 | 386 | 545 | 420 | 125% | 9% |
| Austin (6) | 155 | 132 | 330 | 149 | 113% | 13% |
| San Antonio (6) | 110 | 149 | 226 | 166 | 105% | 11% |
| Border/South Texas Counties (30) | 164 | 82 | 252 | 101 | 54% | 23% |
| Rest of Texas Counties (194) | 121 | 743 | 266 | 778 | 120% | 5% |

Data are in thousands.

Democratic Primary voting vis-à-vis Republican voting was up 54% compared to 23% for the GOP in the South Texas/border counties. This more modest gain reflected the fact that in most of these counties, local offices in both 2022 and 2026 were decided in the Democratic Primary. That was not true statewide where the Republican Primary was the effective election in both 2022 and 2026 for most local officials.

The sharp contrast between the Democratic Primary electorate and voters in the Republican Primary

The surge in Democratic Primary voting compared to more modest GOP gains has been widely noted. Less attention has been paid to the big differences in the 2.32 million Democratic voters compared to the 2.17 Republican voters. Table 3 shows that these nearly equal pools of Texas voters who cast ballots in late February and early March differed greatly in age, gender, recent primary vote history, and race/ethnicity.

Table 3: A Tale of Two Electorates – 2026 Democratic and Republican Primary Voters

| | Democratic Voters (2,319,187) | Republican Voters (2,168,528) |
|-----------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Age | | |
| Under 30 | 14.3% | 3.6% |
| 30 to 49 | 19.3% | 17.6% |
| 50 to 69 | 34.7% | 45.3% |
| 70 or Older | 31.7% | 33.5% |
| Gender | | |
| Female | 59.0% | 48.5% |
| Male | 37.6% | 49.1% |
| Other/NA | 3.4% | 2.3% |
| Vote History | | |
| Dem Primary Only | 55.5% | 1.5% |
| Mixed Primary History | 4.7% | 3.5% |
| Rep Primary Only | 2.8% | 76.2% |
| General Election Only | 33.0% | 17.4% |
| No Vote History | 4.0% | 1.4% |
| Race/Ethnicity | | |
| Anglo | 45.4% | 84.9% |
| Black | 20.7% | 2.3% |
| Hispanic | 27.6% | 8.9% |
| Asian | 3.0% | 2.3% |
| Other | 3.3% | 1.7% |

Sources: The Age, Gender, and Vote History data are from Derek Ryan’s reports of March 18, 2026. Ryan had information on about 95% of Republican Primary voters (2,069,592) and 97% of Democratic Primary voters (2,241,330). The Race/Ethnicity data are from a private analysis of 2.73 million early voters, and does not include data on persons who voted in-person on Election Day (ED). However, my analysis of ED voting shows no difference in early vote racial/ethnic early voting patterns compared persons voting on March 3, 2026.

Two reports released by Republican consultant Derek Ryan on March 18 provide a picture of these electorates in terms of relative age, gender, and primary vote history. Ryan's principal findings were:

Age: While both electorates skew toward older voters, the Republican Primary was overwhelmingly dominated by older voters. Just 3.6% of GOP voters were under 30, and 78.8% were over 50. In contrast, 14.3% of Democratic voters were under 30, while 66.4% were 50 or older.

Gender: The Democratic Primary electorate was disproportionately female. Ryan's breakdown identified 59.0% of these voters as women, 37.6% as men, with the remainder identifying as other or have no information. Republican voters were almost equally female (48.5%) or male (49.1%).

Primary Vote History: Ryan's data base tracks the primary vote history of the 4.5 million Texans who went to the polls in this spring. Republican primary voters were mostly "repeaters." The great majority (76.2%) had a history of only voting in GOP primaries, with a few (3.5%) having a mixed primary history. Most of the remainder (17.4%) were past General Election voters who had skipped the primaries. Only a tiny number (1.5%) were "crossover" voters with a Democratic primary voting record. An even smaller number (1.4%) had no primary or General Election vote history.

By contrast, a much smaller majority (55.5%) of Democratic voters were "repeaters" who had previously voted only in their party's recent primaries. More 2026 Democratic voters (4.7%) than GOP voters had a mixed primary history. There were also about twice as many "crossover" voters (2.8%) with a history of voting voted only in Republican Primaries. A third of 2026 Democratic voters had voted in General Elections but had no primary history – double the Republican percentage. Ryan found the Democratic primary voter group with "No Vote History" was small (4.0%), but about three times the size of the 2026 GOP vote. Democrats expanded their primary electorate in 2026 beyond the usual suspects. Republicans did not.

Race/Ethnicity: Texas does not record the race or ethnicity of registered voters. Both parties, however, maintain data bases that assign almost all registrants to five categories: Anglo, Black, Hispanic, Asian, or Other. A racial/ethnic breakdown of the 2.73 million early voters in the 2026 primaries is summarized in Table 3.

The 2026 Republican electorate was overwhelmingly Anglo (84.8%), with a small minority (8.9%) of Hispanic voters, and even smaller shares of Black (2.3%) and Asian (2.3%) voters. The 2026 Democratic primary electorate was far more diverse. The Anglo primary vote was estimated at 45.4%, the Hispanic vote share at 27.6%, and the Black vote at 20.7% followed by Asian/Other at 6.3%.

Geographic Distribution: Finally, if we look back at Table 2, we see very sharp differences in where the Republican and Democratic primary votes came from. The four large metro areas contributed 78% of the total Democratic vote, but just 59% of the GOP turnout. The 30 border/South Texas counties accounted for 11% of the Democratic turnout, but less than five percent of the state GOP vote. The "Rest of Texas" 194 counties outside the big metro areas and South Texas/Border region contributed just 11% of the total Democrat state vote, but 36% of the Republican state vote.

The biggest jump in Democratic Primary voting in 2026 was in the five largest suburban counties outside Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, and Austin. Table 4 shows primary voting in Collin, Denton, Fort Bend, Montgomery, and Williamson Counties in 2018, 2022, and 2026. These five counties have had the largest population gains in Texas in recent years and have become more racially and ethnically diverse as Black, Hispanic, and Asian voters move into these suburban counties along with many new arrivals from other states and international migrants.

Table 4: Midterm Primary Voting in the Five Biggest Suburban Counties in Texas: 2018 - 2022

| | <u>2018</u> | | <u>2022</u> | | <u>2026</u> | |
|-------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| | Dem | Rep | Dem | Rep | Dem | Rep |
| Collin | 34,669 | 66,078 | 36,701 | 80,075 | 95,839 | 102,689 |
| Denton | 27,025 | 49,474 | 27,516 | 68,442 | 82,802 | 87,274 |
| Fort Bend | 29,322 | 34,707 | 39,885 | 45,705 | 85,423 | 55,008 |
| Montgomery | 9,701 | 48,921 | 10,700 | 71,855 | 31,392 | 79,029 |
| Williamson | 25,681 | 35,675 | 26,272 | 47,628 | 64,860 | 52,291 |
| Total Vote | 126,598 | 234,855 | 141,074 | 313,705 | 360,316 | 376,291 |

These five counties saw steady growth in Republican Primary voting from 2018 to 2026. However, GOP gains were overshadowed by huge increases in Democratic Primary voting in 2026. In Collin, the most populous suburban county, the GOP vote rose from 66,078 in 2018 to 80,075 in 2022 and 102,689 in 2026, a gain of 55.4% over eight years. In contrast, Democratic primary participation increased from just 34,669 in 2018 to 36,701 in 2022, but shot up to 95,839 in 2026, a gain of 176.4% from the 2018 midterm vote. In 2018 and 2022, Republican primary voters outnumbered Democrats by about two-to-one in these five counties. In 2026, the margin GOP edge was 51.1% to 48.9%.

What are the takeaways from the voting patterns in the 2026 primaries?

First, voters were far more engaged this year than in a usual midterm election. Turnout was at a level only seen in previous primaries where one or both national parties had competitive presidential contests. This year there was no Clinton/Obama clash as in the 2008 Democratic Primary or a Donald Trump/Ted Cruz cage fight as in the 2016 GOP Primary.

Second, the geographic makeup of the primary electorates was different in 2026. Primary turnout was up everywhere in 2026 compared to the 2022 and 2018 midterms, but Democratic turnout soared in the Dallas/Fort Worth, Houston, Austin, and San Antonio metropolitan areas. Conversely, the 194 counties outside the booming metro areas were less important this year. Ditto for the 30 South Texas/Border counties. Each contributed a smaller share of the total state primary vote than in previous years. These 224 counties are growing much more slowly than the 30 that comprise the large metropolitan areas in Texas.

Third, as Democratic Primary electorate surged past Republican turnout in 2026, differences between the two voting populations were starkly evident. The GOP voter universe was overwhelmingly Anglo, older, mostly made up of folks with a history of voting in Republican primaries, and about evenly female/male.

Metropolitan area voters were a majority of Republican turnout, but a far smaller share (59%) than was the case on the Democratic side (78%). Female voters dominated the Democratic electorate, and while Anglos were the largest voting group (45%), Blacks (21%), and Hispanics (28%) were very important contributors to the statewide Democratic vote surge.

Fourth, the makeup of the 2026 primary electorates is encouraging for Texas Democrats while raising red flags for Republicans. Democrats did much better in the fast-growing big suburban counties while regaining ground in South Texas and along the Mexico border where Mexican Americans dominate. Black turnout surged with over 97% of African American voters casting ballots in the Democratic Primary. Republicans maintained near-parity with Democrats in total primary voting only because they dominated with older Anglo voters and in non-metropolitan counties. Neither segment is growing much these days in Texas, in contrast to the metropolitan suburbs.

The March 2026 primary voting pattern does not predict the General Election in November. To repeat, about 4.5 million votes were cast in the primaries. This fall's election turnout will likely exceed ten million. A lot will happen between March and November. That said, the primary results with more people choosing the Democratic line is an indicator that Texas will be much more competitive state in November 2026 than has been the case in any General Election since the mid-1990s.

The April Letter from Texas will focus on the choices Democratic and Republican primary voters made in these contests. Most important were the U.S. Senate results. The Democrats nominated State Representative James Talarico over Jasmine Crockett while Senator John Cornyn was forced into a May runoff with Attorney General Ken Paxton. What accounted for Talarico's come from behind victory after trailing in polls released in January and February? How did John Cornyn, who was also trailing in virtually every survey, end up with more votes than the Attorney General? How important is it that Democrats got their senate nomination settled on March 3 while Republicans have a runoff in late May?

Beyond the U.S. Senate results, what else do the primary results tell us about other statewide elections on the ballot this year? How does the new Republican congressional gerrymander map look given primary voting patterns? And do Democrats have any hope of taking control of the Texas House of Representatives where they are now outnumbered 88 to 62?

In closing, I note that on February 28 - the day after early in-person primary voting concluded in Texas - President Trump announced the United States and Israel were launching a military campaign against the Islamic Republic of Iran. Most primary votes had been cast by that point, and there is no evidence that Election Day voting was impacted by this development. That will almost change as the war/incursion unfolds.

President Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu chose to start the war. The president will greatly influence but does not control how the conflict proceeds. A month in, no one now knows when or how the war will end. New unknowns have now been injected into the 2026 midterm elections (the price of gas, possible American casualties, achieving (or not achieving) war goals, Wall Street's reactions, etc.). The Iran war assures, in my opinion, that what was already going to be a historic national midterm election will be even more the case in 2026. And while the Texas midterm election was shaping up to be the most competitive General Election since 1994, it is all the more so due to the Iran conflict. Recent events and trends portent both a record voter turnout in the midterm election and a real opportunity for Texas Democrats to break their long losing streak. This is going to be very interesting.

We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these letters. Please reach out to us at murraytx@uh.edu; your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.

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