



Letter from Texas: November 2025

What does the Blue Wave on November 4, 2025 portend for next year's midterm elections in Texas?

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Thomas “Tip” O’Neill, Speaker of the U.S. House from 1977 to 1987, often noted that “all politics is local.” That remains true in many respects. Candidates still need to win primaries and general elections in districts or states where understanding local voters’ hopes, fears, and passions is a great asset. Issues vary from one place to another, while ethnic and racial groups cluster in specific neighborhoods, cities, and counties. That said, American politics and elections are much more nationalized than they were in Tip’s day. Partisan identities have hardened, voters are more polarized and ticket-splitting is even rarer. Meanwhile, national news and leaders crowd out local stories and candidates.

The nationalization of American politics accelerated in the Trump era. The 45th—and now 47th—president dominates the nation’s political space. Mr. Trump is the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. He tweets dozens of messages a day on a myriad of subjects, alternately pleasing and angering millions. Voter choices are now driven more by deeply held feelings about the occupant of the White House and how people rate the job he is doing as opposed to state or local candidates and issues.

This was evident as election returns began rolling in on November 4, 2025. From tightening voting rules in Maine, to electing a new mayor in New York City, retaining judges on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, choosing governors in New Jersey and Virginia, public service commissioners in Georgia, or okaying a new congressional map in California, the verdict was clear: Whatever or whomever President Trump was for, voters were against.

The President’s defenders stress he was not on the ballot, that Republicans had a uniquely weak candidate for governor in Virginia and a two-time loser nominee in New Jersey, that most of the states voting were bluer than the nation, and the party in the White House usually does poorly in off-year elections. All true, but the breadth and depth of GOP losses earlier this month is undeniable.

In this latest edition of *Letter from Texas*, I review the national results and what drove these voting patterns. I focus in particular on the high-profile governor’s races in New Jersey and Virginia, where exit poll data are available. Texas elections were not on the national radar this year, but it is worthwhile to compare how voting patterns in our state compare to results in other states. Finally, I speculate on what these most recent results will mean for the upcoming midterm elections in Texas.

From Maine to California, Democrats run the table on November 4th

The months after a presidential election are a dry season for election junkies. Aside from a few contests to fill vacant seats, no partisan elections are scheduled. But things pick up in November after a presidential election. New Jersey and Virginia hold off-cycle gubernatorial elections, with all members of the lower legislative house in both states also on the ballot. New York City holds its mayoral election on the same date.

These contests were joined by additional elections in 2025, including the following:

- A referendum in Maine on a Republican-sponsored proposal to limit mail-in ballots and require photo IDs for in-person voting.
- Retention elections for three Democratic Pennsylvania Supreme Court judges.
- Two of the five seats on the Georgia Public Service Commission, which, among other things, regulates electric rates in that state.
- A California vote replacing a nonpartisan congressional map with a Democratic gerrymander countering the Texas redistricting plan President Trump had demanded.
- A long-delayed special election in the 18th Congressional District of Texas to replace Democrat Sylvester Turner, who died in March 2025.

Together, these elections provide a broad test of the political waters one year after President Trump’s decisive victory over Vice President Kamala Harris. A guide to these off-year elections was posted by political analyst Ryan Brune three days before the votes were tallied. Table 1 shows his scorecard.

Table 1: Ryan Brune’s benchmarks for how good a night November 4th is for Democrats.
Each item gives one point.

Virginia	Spanberger Wins		
Virginia	Spanberger Wins by More than Harris (5.8%)		
Virginia	Spanberger Wins by More than 14%		
Virginia	Democrats Win at least 56 seats in HoD	0-3	Catastrophic Night
Virginia	Democrats Win at least 60 seats in HoD	4-6	Bad Night
New Jersey	Sherrill Wins	7-10	OK Night
New Jersey	Sherrill Wins by more than Harris (5.9%)	11-14	Good Night
New Jersey	Sherrill Wins by more than 10%	15-18	Fantastic Night
New Jersey	Democrats Net Gain in the Assembly		
New Jersey	Democrats Gain 3 or more seats in the Assembly		
California	Proposition 50 passes by double digits		
California	Proposition 50 exceeds Harris Margin (20.1%)		
Pennsylvania	Democrats retain Supreme Court seats		
Pennsylvania	Democrats sweep statewide judicial races		
Georgia	Democrats win a PSC seat		
Georgia	Democrats win both PSC seats		
Texas	Total Democrat % in Texas 18 > Harris % (69.0%)		
Texas	Total Democrat % in Texas 18 > Harris % +5% (74%)		

Posted 9:31 PM, November 1, 2025 @BruneElections

The Democrats had a “Fantastic Night,” according to Brune’s scorecard, winning all 18 possible points. The Democrats’ margins were often well above Brune’s thresholds. Mikie Sherrill won her race for governor in New Jersey by 14%, not 10%. Democrats won 63 of 100 seats in the Virginia House of Delegates, beating Brune’s benchmark of 60. In Pennsylvania, the Democratic judges did not just win, they won in landslide margins of 62% to 38%. In Georgia, where no Democrat had won a statewide election for a nonfederal office since 2006, their Public Service Commission candidates won by 63% to 37%. And in California, 11.5 million voters turned out for a single ballot issue—the redistricting proposal pushed by Governor Gavin Newsom—exceeding the 10.8 million who voted in the regular 2022 midterm election. California voters approved the new Democratic map by 64.6% to 35.4% (a 29.2-point margin) compared to Kamala Harris’ 20.1-point lead over Donald Trump in November 2024.

Elections not scored by Brune were uniformly anti-Trump. In New York City, the President endorsed the “bad Democrat” Andrew Cuomo over the “Communist” Zohran Mamdani. Mamdani won with 50.4% to Cuomo’s 41.6%. In Maine, a Republican-backed ballot security measure was voted down 64% to 36% (Harris won the state by just seven points in 2024). Democratic candidates in Miami’s mayoral election received 56% of the total vote; Republicans’ combined vote was 38%. Miami has not elected a Democratic mayor in three decades.

What Drove the November 2025 Blue Wave?

Wave elections typically occur when a party’s supporters turn out in larger numbers than the opposing party’s base, *and* that party wins a larger share of persuadable voters. Both occurred in November 2025.

Turnout

A CNN poll before the election reported a sizeable enthusiasm gap between Democrats and Republicans for voting in the 2026 midterm election. More Democrats said they were “extremely motivated” to vote in next year’s election than Republicans, 67% to 46%. This gap occurred despite the fact that Democrats viewed their party less favorably (65%) than Republicans (80%).¹

That enthusiasm gap was evident in this year’s voting. Michael McDonald at the University of Florida looked at turnout rates in the 2025 Virginia election. He found that turnout in localities where Donald Trump outperformed Kamala Harris in 2024 lagged behind voting levels in 2025 where the Democrat won. That pattern led McDonald to opine, “Something else is likely driving turnout, and most reasonably it is Donald Trump...Trump is driving up Democratic voting enthusiasm.”² The 2025 CNN exit polls lend support to Trump’s impact. In Virginia, 52% of voters said they strongly disapproved of President Trump versus 25% who strongly approved. Thirty-eight percent said opposing Trump was one reason for their vote, while just 16% said supporting Trump was a reason for voting. The same was true in New Jersey. Forty-eight percent of voters said they strongly disapproved of Mr. Trump

¹ The CNN poll was conducted by SSRS from October 27-30. A total of 1,245 US adults were interviewed online or by phone.

² Michael McDonald, “Turnout Rates for the 2025 Elections,” November 7, 2025, the U.S. Elections Project, p. 3.

compared to 27% who strongly approved. Among Garden State voters, 41% cited opposing the president as a reason for their vote, compared to only 13% who said supporting Trump was one reason for their vote.

Professor McDonald noted that the enthusiasm gap was even more important in the lower-turnout Pennsylvania and Georgia elections, where Democrats won by large margins.

Persuasion

Most 21st-century voters are committed to their parties and their candidates. There are, however, some persuadable voters. In 2024, for example, Donald Trump did better with minority voters, younger voters, self-described political moderates, persons who had not attended college, and Independents than he did in 2020. Table 2 shows that Mikie Sherrill in New Jersey and Abigail Spanberger in Virginia gained ground with these votes.

Table 2: Democratic % Governor in 2025 compared to Harris % in 2024

		Harris 2024	VA Governor Spanberger 2025	NJ Governor Sherrill 2025
Race/Ethnicity	Blacks	86%	93%	94%
	Latinos	51%	67%	68%
	Asians	55%	80%	82%
Age	Under 30	54%	70%	69%
	30-44	51%	62%	67%
Education	No college	43%	50%	50%
Party Identification	Independent	49%	60%	56%
Ideology	Moderate	58%	69%	62%

Source: CNN exits polls for US in 2024 and Virginia and New Jersey in 2025.

The November 2025 elections in Texas

The high-profile elections on November 4 were a thousand miles or more from Texas. There were, however, meaningful ballot tests in the Lone Star State. Let’s look at three. In the 18th Congressional District of Texas, voters finally had an opportunity to fill the seat of the late Sylvester Turner. A special election for a state senate seat was held in North Texas. And a nonpartisan school trustee election in the largest suburban district in Texas featured a clash between Texas Republicans and Democrats.

Texas Congressional District 18

Sixteen candidates filed for the open seat: seven Democrats, five Republicans, three Independents and a Green Party member. The national wave swept through Houston, as Democrats outperformed the usual partisan vote in this blue district. In November 2024, Turner, the Democrat, got 69.4% of

the vote compared to 30.6% for the Republican nominee, a margin of +38.8 points. On November 4, the Democratic candidates got 83.0% compared to just 14.6% for the Republicans, a margin of 68.2 percentage points.

The Democratic improvement in this congressional race was driven in large part by a stronger performance among Latino voters, as was the case nationally. Table 3 compares the Democratic margin in nine majority-Hispanic New Jersey cities in 2024 with November 2025 and the Democratic performance in nine voting precincts in CD18 where the voting-age population (VAP) was at least 66% Hispanic. In New Jersey, the swing ranged from 31% to 52%; in the 18th District from 16% to 44%. Democrats had underperformed with Hispanic voters in 2024, but regained ground nationally and in Texas this year.

Table 3: Comparing the Blue Shift in Hispanic Areas in New Jersey and Harris County, Texas: 2024 to 2025

New Jersey Cities at Least 60% Hispanic				Hispanic Precincts (66%+) in 18 th CD			
	2025 Gov Dem %	2024 Pres Dem% Swing %		Precinct	2025 Cong Dem %	2024 Cong Dem % Swing %	
Union City	+69	+17	+52	0043	+38	+12	+26
Perth Amboy	+56	+ 9	+47	0117	+37	+17	+20
West New York	+57	+13	+44	0264	+36	- 8	+44
Passaic	+26	- 7	+33	0299	+52	+19	+33
Guttenberg	+52	+20	+32	0446	+56	+37	+19
North Bergen	+35	+ 6	+29	0496	+59	+24	+35
Prospect Park	+55	+16	+39	0610	+26	+ 7	+19
East Newark	+37	+ 6	+31	0628	+51	+10	+41
Paterson	+71	+28	+43	0868	+57	+41	+16

Sources: New Jersey data from the NBC Politics Desk, November 5, 2025. Harris County data from the Office of the Harris County Clerk, <https://www.harrisvotes.com/>.

Texas Senate District 9

The other district election in Texas was triggered by the resignation of a Fort Worth-area state senator. Senate District 9 had been carefully crafted in 2021 to assure a safe Republican seat. Reflecting that, in the November 2022 election the GOP nominee, Kelly Hancock, won the district by 60.1% to 39.9%.

Three candidates filed for the open seat. The Republicans were John Huffman, a former local mayor and council member, and Leigh Wambsganss, a Christian conservative activist. Huffman was endorsed by *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, the mayor of Fort Worth, and had the backing of Miriam Adelson, principal owner of the Dallas Mavericks NBA team and a casino tycoon whose pro-gambling groups poured more than \$2.7 million into the race. Ms. Wambsganss

was endorsed by President Trump, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, Senator Ted Cruz, and West Texas billionaire Tim Dunn.³ She spent \$1.4 million on her campaign.

The Democrat was Taylor Rehmet, a first-time candidate, union leader and Air Force veteran who garnered few endorsements and spent just \$120,000. Despite being vastly outspent, Rehmet led with 47.6% of the vote to 36.0% for Wambsganss and 16.5% for Huffman. This was a striking result in a district Donald Trump carried by 17% last year.

This is all the more impressive because the 9th District is a heavily Republican part of Tarrant County, arguably now the most important swing county in Texas. Republicans may well win the runoff scheduled for January 29, 2026, but whatever the final result, the November 2025 result was a red-flag warning for the Texas GOP.

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District School Trustees

School trustee elections in Texas are nonpartisan, and most are held off-cycle from the partisan races for president, U.S. Congress, and major state offices. The Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (CFISD) fits that pattern, scheduling its election for three trustee positions on November 4, 2025. While officially nonpartisan, the increasing polarization in national politics was on vivid display in the local district's election this month. Two weeks before the election, Governor Greg Abbott stopped by a barbecue joint in the district to signal his support for three staunch conservative incumbents and announced, "I've got \$90 million in my bank account, and I'm going to spend most of it in Harris County, Texas, to make sure, precinct-by-precinct, we turn out voters who voted in presidential elections, turn out voters who never voted before. We got to win Harris County and make Harris County dark red."⁴

That might work next year, but the 2025 Cy-Fair results suggest that could be a steep hill to climb in Texas' most populous county. The three conservative incumbents were defeated by margins of 10.6 percentage points, 10.9 percentage points, and 17.1 percentage points. This flipped a 6-1 majority to a 3-4 progressive-controlled board committed to rolling back some of the CFISD's recent aggressive policies, including book-banning and deleting chapters in assigned texts discussing vaccines, diversity, and climate change.

There are good reasons to focus on this particular school trustee election. First, Cypress-Fairbanks is the largest suburban school district in Texas with 118,000 students. Second, the district reflects the rapid demographic and cultural changes occurring in the state. Entering the 21st century, Cy-Fair was a majority Anglo school district. The district's website lists the current racial/ethnic makeup of the student body as 46% Hispanic, 21% Black, 20% white, 10% Asian, and 4% multi-racial. Third, like Tarrant County in North Texas, the Cy-Fair ISD area is a key part of the increasing competitive Texas Triangle, discussed in the September *Letter from Texas*.

³ Kayla Guo, "Democrat Rehmet, Republican Wambsganss head to runoff in special election for North Texas Senate seat, *The Texas Tribune*, November 5, 2025.

⁴ Alejandro Serrano, "Greg Abbott vows to spend mightily to turn Harris County red." *The Texas Tribune*, November 21, 2025.

The district's voters pack a punch in statewide elections. For example, as of November 2025, there were 381,986 registered voters in Cy-Fair ISD. By comparison, the 26 counties in the Texas Panhandle had a total registration of 254,350. Politically, the Panhandle counties are among the darkest red in America, but their share of the statewide vote is steadily declining. Cy-Fair ISD is a swing area whose vote share increases with each election cycle.

Forecasting the 2026 election in Texas

The Texas results in November 2025 fit the national pattern of a Democratic rebound from Donald Trump's sweeping victory in November 2024. These results have little to do with the party, which remains in poor odor with its own identifiers, is fractious, and suffers from a vacuum of national and state leadership. Rather, what we saw across the board on November 4th was, in my opinion, a rejection of the course set by the new administration and the leadership of the 47th President.

Will that trend continue into the 2026 midterms, less than a year away? Will the minority party in the Lone Star State find a way out of the wilderness after three decades of statewide losses? The answer is maybe, but the probability of Texas being a competitive state next year, which I define as a difference of less than three percent in the top-of-the-ticket U.S. Senate and Governor races, has certainly increased. The principal reasons are as follows.

President Trump's unpopularity in Texas

A bevy of national polls shows Americans disapprove of the president by margins that range from 10 percentage points to 20 percentage points. Fewer polls are available in Texas, but their results show the same pattern. The *YouGov* poll for *The Economist* magazine pegged the president's net approval rating in the Lone Star State at -18% in mid-November 2025, slightly below his national net approval rating of -16%.⁵ The biggest shift away from Mr. Trump has been among Americans under 30 years of age, followed by his ratings with Hispanics and Blacks. A separate bipartisan-run poll of 400 Hispanic Texas voters found nearly one-in-five Texas Latinos who voted for President Trump have expressed buyer's remorse based on concerns about the cost of living, healthcare, housing, and wages.⁶

Polls can certainly change, and the President's supporters assert his economic policies of tariffs, deregulation, and making deals with foreign governments and companies will lead to strong economic growth and improved poll numbers next year before the midterm elections. That could happen, but presidential job approval historically declines rather than improves in the second year of a term-limited presidency. *If* the normal pattern prevails, Donald Trump will be a drag on Republican candidates in Texas next year, just as he was in the elections earlier this month.

⁵ Updated November 21, 2025.

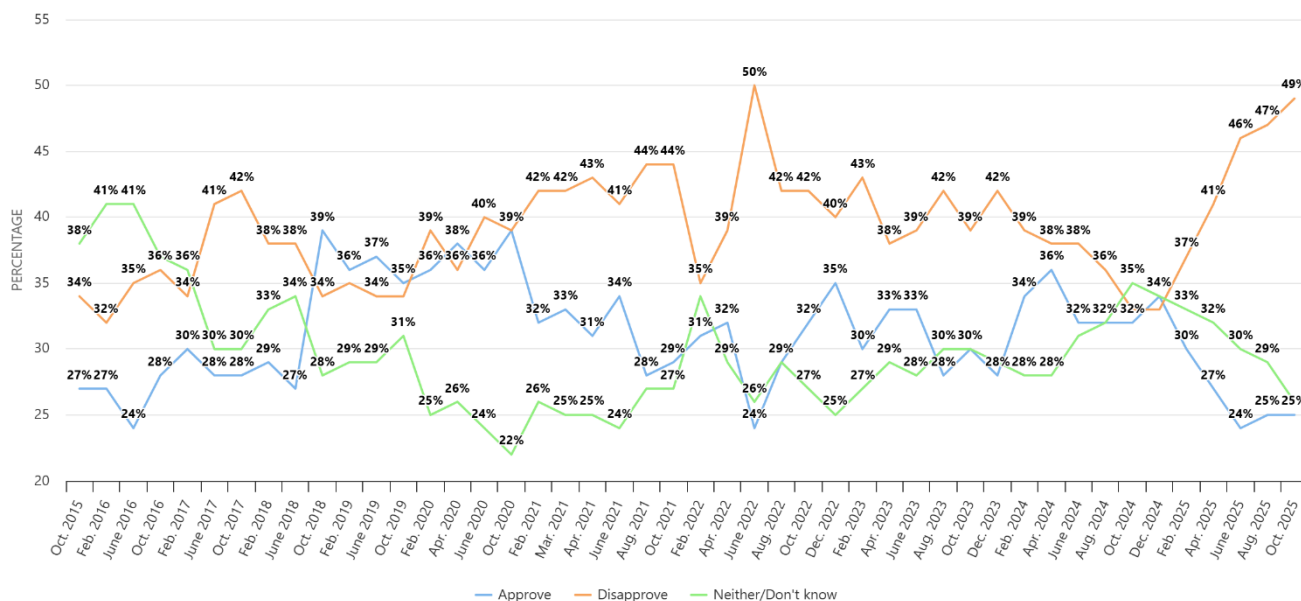
⁶ Bayliss Wagner, "Nearly one in five Texas Latinos who voted for Trump regret their choice, poll finds," *Austin American-Statesman*, November 7, 2025.

The GOP polling problem in Texas extends beyond the President's low ratings

Of course, President Trump will not be on the 2026 ballot in Texas, so his poor approval numbers might not matter that much. It is possible, but more likely his absence will create a greater problem of getting MAGA voters to show up at the polls.

That aside, more than a decade of polling data from the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin is flashing bright red for Republicans heading into next year. U.S. Senator John Cornyn, Governor Greg Abbott, and Attorney General Ken Paxton are all running next year, so their job approval ratings are relevant. Senator Cornyn is deeply underwater in the UT Texas Politics Project trending poll, with 49% disapproving to just 25% approving of the job he is doing. Governor Greg Abbott's disapproval rating is 50% with 39% approving—this net -11% is the lowest of his 10-plus years in office. Paxton's approval rating as Attorney General is 29% with 45% disapproving.⁷

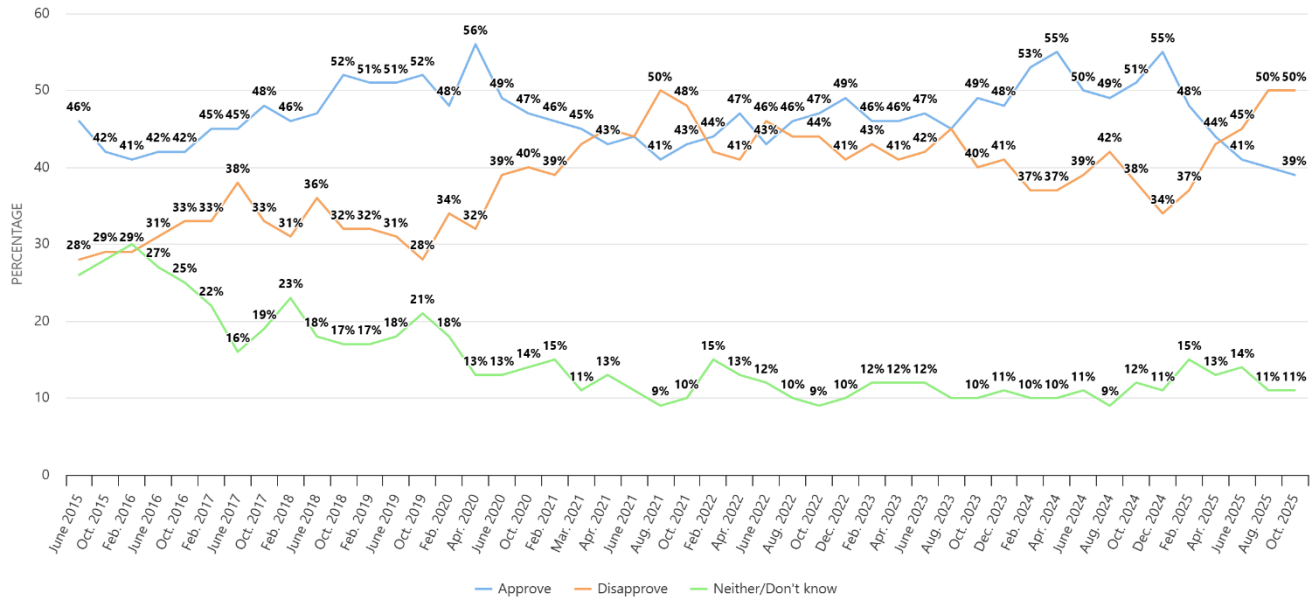
JOHN CORNYN JOB APPROVAL TREND



University of Texas / Texas Politics Project affiliated polling

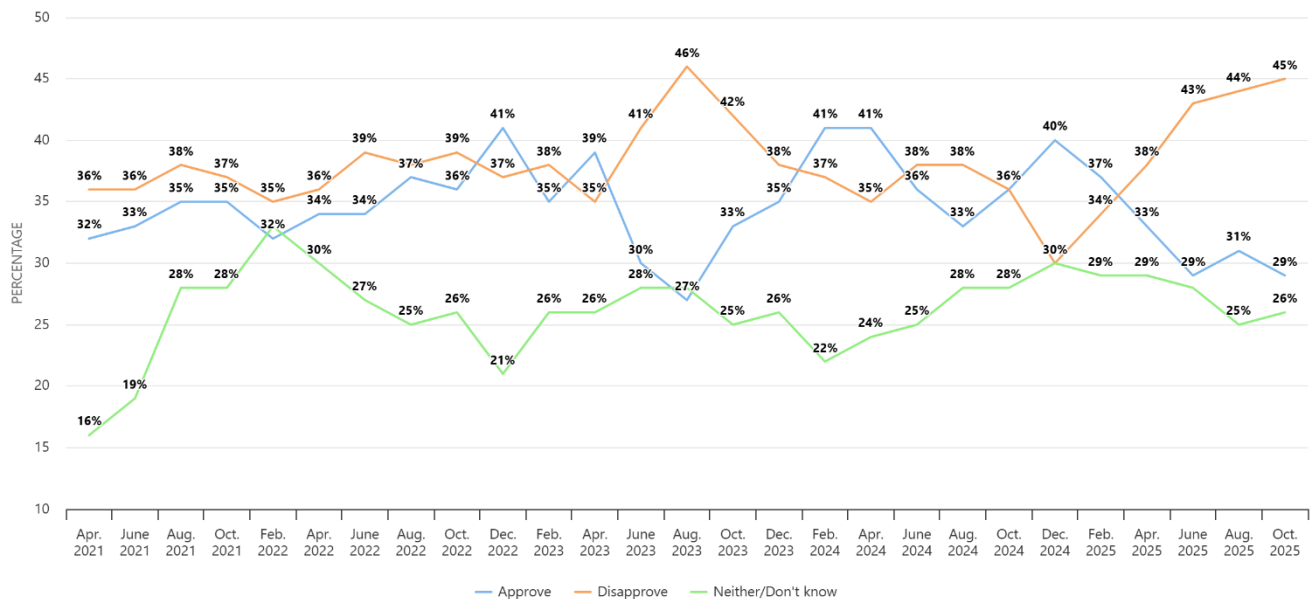
⁷ The approval/disapproval ratings and graphs come from the University of Texas/ Texas Politics Project affiliated polling. Percentages reflect the October 2025 ratings available from <https://texaspolitics.utexas.edu/blog/job-approval-trends-texas-statewide-incumbents-and-other-trend-data-texas-politics-project-p-12?>

GREG ABBOTT JOB APPROVAL TREND



University of Texas / Texas Politics Project affiliated polling

KEN PAXTON JOB APPROVAL TREND



University of Texas/Texas Politics Project Polling.

Of course, poor job approval ratings for Republican officeholders in 2025 are not dispositive for 2026 elections. A strong state economy continuing into 2026 would lift GOP nominees, who will likely enjoy superior funding in nonfederal races, and the Democrats may field flawed candidates as happened in 2018, when a weak Democratic gubernatorial nominee (Lupe Valdez) was no help at all to Beto O'Rourke's competitive campaign against U.S. Senator Ted Cruz.

The Trump-ordered congressional gerrymander has energized Texas Democrats and alienated Independents

The summer of 2025 was a season of discontent for Democrats. Deeply bruised by their sweeping defeat in November 2024, without forceful or popular leaders in Congress, unable to stop or even slow down the tornadic Trump multi-front offensive, Democrats were arguably at their weakest point since the 1920s. But in early July, President Trump ordered Texas Republicans to find him five more seats to ensure the GOP did not lose control of the U.S. House as happened in 2018. Governor Abbott and legislative Republicans quickly fell in line. But Texas Democrats fought back, leaving the state to protest a new gerrymander on top of a congressional map enacted in 2021 that gave the GOP 25 of the state's 38 U.S. House seats.

As at the Alamo, this was a fight the Texas Democrats could not win. The map was passed in August. Their spunky fight, however, drew national attention. Prominent Democrats, including Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker and California Governor Gavin Newsom, rushed to support the Texas Democrats. Finally, at long last, Democrats in Texas were fighting back. Governor Newsom, who had been trolling President Trump for weeks, took a longshot gamble and quickly pushed to get his state's legislature to suspend California's nonpartisan redistricting process and approve a counter-gerrymander to flip five Republican seats. That required voter approval of a constitutional amendment—not at all assured, as the existing process approved by voters in 2010 was popular. The legislature provided the supermajority to put the issue on the ballot. Voters approved it by a 64% to 36% margin.

Back in Texas, Democrats and minority groups sued in federal court, alleging the new map violated the constitutional rights of minority voters and was an illegal racial gerrymander. Plaintiffs won a 2-1 decision setting aside the Trump-ordered map, which has been stayed pending a Supreme Court review. Whichever map is used next year, the brouhaha has clearly energized state Democrats and helped juice fundraising for U.S. Senate candidates Colin Allred and James Talarico.⁸ A final benefit for Democrats is that the mid-decade redistricting is unpopular with Independents and draws lukewarm support from Republican voters.

Bottom line: The 2026 midterm election in Texas is shaping up to be competitive

In November 2018, voters delivered a sharp rebuke to President Trump. Democrats flipped 41 seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, returning Nancy Pelosi to the speakership. Two of those House seats were in Texas, and Democrats netted two state Senate and 12 House seats in the Texas Legislature. Congressman Beto O'Rourke lost to Senator Ted Cruz by 2.6 percentage points, the best statewide performance in 20 years. Democrats also lost close races for Attorney General (-3.6 percentage points) and Lt. Governor (-4.4 percentage points).

Heading into 2026, the parallels are striking: Trump is again president but not on the ballot. Trump is badly underwater in job approval. Democrats have had a great off-year election (better than in 2017). Polls show Democratic voters are again highly motivated to vote in the midterms; Republicans less so.

⁸ Talarico, a state representative who left the state to protest the new map, raised \$6 million in just 20 days for the July 1-September 30 federal reporting period.

This means, in my opinion, we are going to have a very interesting year ahead in Texas politics. Republicans may overcome the national blue wave that seems to be building, as they narrowly did in 2018. However, there is an important difference between that past and the coming midterm. The Office of the Texas Secretary of State reported there were 15.8 million registered voters in Texas in November 2018. The office reports there are 18.5 million registrants in November 2025. Texas does not ask voters their race or ethnicity, but 95% of the population growth in the state since 2018 has been among non-Anglos. The net 2.7 million added since the Cruz-O'Rourke contest are largely non-Anglos.

Republicans did pretty well with minority voters in November 2024. They did much less well with these voters in November 2025. Which will it be in November 2026? A lot hinges on the answer to that question.

We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us at murraytx@couqarnet.uh.edu; your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.

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