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Could Republicans Lose Texas in 2020?

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When John F. Kennedy, a Democrat from Massachusetts, ran for president in 1960, he knew that no Democrat had ever won the White House without carrying Texas. Therefore, he prevailed upon Senator Lyndon Johnson of Texas to be his running-mate. When Kennedy was preparing to run for reelection in 1964, he became concerned because internal fighting within the Texas Democratic Party was threatening his chances to win a second term.

Because of this, Kennedy scheduled a trip to Texas in November 1963, in an effort to keep the Lone Star State in the Democratic column, and the rest is, as they say, history.

Texas was already in the beginning stages of its move to a Republican state, a process that would take a few more years to complete. Jimmy Carter of Georgia was the last Democrat to win the state in a presidential election (1976), but then Ronald Reagan of California won two resounding victories there, and no Democrat has really come close to carrying the state in a presidential contest since.

But 2020 may be different.

In fact, some Republicans fear that the pendulum may very well be swinging back to the Democrats in what has been a reliably conservative “Red” state since the 1980s. While Donald Trump tended to do better than 2012 Republican nominee Mitt Romney in most states, Trump’s margin of victory in 2016 in Texas was nine percentage points, compared to Romney’s 16-point win over incumbent Democrat President Barack Obama.

Then, in 2018, incumbent Republican Senator Ted Cruz was severely pressed by a Democratic challenger, Representative Beto O’Rourke, in his reelection bid. Cruz recently told an interviewer that he is quite concerned about whether Texas will remain in the Republican column in next year’s presidential election. “The president’s reelection campaign needs to take Texas seriously.”

Cruz is optimistic that Trump and other GOP candidates, such as his fellow Texas Republican Senator John Cornyn, will ultimately win next year, though he warned that it is “by no means a given” that Trump will win the state in 2020.

Texas has 38 electoral votes — the most of any state that has been reliably Republican for presidential candidates since Reagan — and its loss would almost make certain a 2020 Democratic Party victory in the Electoral College. Even more ominously for the Republicans, it could portend an impossible Electoral College map for Republicans in presidential elections for the future.



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What has happened?

Cruz pointed to political changes that are happening in the suburbs, such as those in the areas outside Dallas-Ft. Worth, Austin, and Houston. “Historically, the cities have been bright blue and surrounded by bright red doughnuts of Republican suburban voters. What happened in 2018 is that those bright red doughnuts went purple — not blue, but purple,” Cruz said. “We’ve got to do a more effective job of carrying the message to the suburbs.”

The suburbs appear to be the areas that are now deciding U.S. elections, in Texas and across the country. In the past, large cities have tended to go to the Democrats, with rural areas going Republican. In fact, states such as Illinois and New York would be mostly Red, were it not for Chicago and New York City. Texas continues to be Red because of its vast rural farming-dominated counties (there are more than 250 counties in the state). But even Texas has its liberal cities, such as Houston and Austin. Hillary Clinton carried all four of the state’s liberal cities, and did well in their suburbs.

The cities and suburbs in Texas are growing, with people moving into the economically vibrant state, often bringing their more liberal politics with them from northern states. And, of course, Texas is experiencing a rising tide of immigrants from south of the Rio Grande River. While many of these newer immigrants cannot legally vote, their children born in Texas legally can, as they are considered U.S.

citizens by an incorrect interpretation of the 14th Amendment. This process has been going on for a number of years now, and it is contributing greatly to the process of turning Texas from bright red, to lighter red, and now, verging on purple. If these demographic trends continue, Texas might become another blue state, sinking Republican chances of winning national elections.

Fortunately for the Republicans, voter registration laws in Texas tend to make it more difficult to vote unless a person is actually legally qualified to do so.

Another saving grace for the Republicans is that most of the bigger names in Texas politics are Republicans, with few such comparable big names among the Democrats, who have been out of statewide power since the 1990s. O’Rourke, for example, has opted not to run against Cornyn. Another Democrat big name — Representative Julián Castro — decided on a long-shot run for president, rather than run a probable losing race against Cornyn.

In addition, to Cruz and Cornyn, Governor Greg Abbott has continued to be quite popular in the state.

But, considering that Republicans overcame all the Democrat “big names” in Texas politics from two generations ago to take over the state politically, the Democrats might manage to mount a comeback over the next few years.

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