

# California's Latino Voter Turnout: What Happened?

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Has the “Sleeping Giant” gone back to sleep, and will the Giant wake up for in time for 2016? Since passage of the controversial anti-illegal immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994, Latino voter turnout in California has mushroomed and with it Latino political clout. That is, until 2014 when turnout took a dive and many Latinos suddenly lost interest in voting.

Much was written about the awakened “sleeping giant” of Latino voters rushing to the polls after 1994, and indeed they did. A major reason for the collapse of California’s once vibrant Republican Party was Latino anger over Proposition 187 that was championed by former GOP Gov. Pete Wilson.

From around 10 percent of California’s electorate before 1994, Latino turnout rose to 23 percent of the state’s voters in 2012, according to the William C. Velasquez Institute which carefully monitors Latino voting behavior. That amounted to 3,157,000 Latino ballots cast in 2012, up from 2,961,000 voters, or 21 percent of California voters, in 2008.

Even in the non-presidential year 2010, Latino turnout was impressive; some 2,058,000 voters, or 19 percent of turnout, according to the Velasquez Institute. Latino turnout was also 19 percent of the electorate in 2006. And while the overall electorate dropped between 2008 and 2012, the Latino share of the turnout went up.

And then we have 2014. Last year’s turnout of only 7.5 million voters casting ballots was a huge drop from the most recent non-presidential election years, 2006 and 2010 when 9 million and 10 million Californians cast ballots. But among Latino turnout the drop was even more dramatic.

According to Political Data Inc., California’s premier analysts of voting behavior, only 1,317,000 Latinos cast ballots in 2014, or just 15 percent of the total, a huge drop not only from presidential year Latino turnout but even from comparable non-presidential years. Not only did Californians stay home in droves in 2014, but Latinos outpaced them.

And the results were apparent; well funded Latino Democrats lost both of the premier State Senate races in 2014, in Orange County and in the Central Valley, because Latino turnout in these races was unusually low. Latinos now have fewer State Senators than they had just two years ago.

And the lack of interest in voting continued into 2015, when long time Orange County Democrat Lou Correa lost a special election for county supervisor to a Vietnamese American Republican even though he was running in a heavily Latino district and against three Vietnamese Americans.

What’s going on here? Could it be that after two decades expanding participation in California politics, Latinos now find little evidence their lives are being made better by political participation, so they are turning off like so many other voters?

Certainly there is no reason for Latinos to vote Republican given Congressional Republicans hostility to any kind of immigration reform. In 2014, California Latinos even refused to vote for fellow Latino Republicans, causing two Latino Republicans to lose legislative races they were expected to win.

But what about the Democrats? One salient feature of the Obama years has been the collapse of the Democrats among rural and blue collar working class voters; Republicans now hold almost all the governors in the industrial heartland states, and the Democrats have disappeared in rural states that were once reliably Democratic such as Oklahoma, Arkansas and West Virginia.

However, in California Latinos are the rural and blue collar workers. When California Democrats ban plastic bags, it's Latinos who lose jobs; stop fracking and Latino oil workers will be out of jobs; cut off agricultural water and rural Latinos lose work. But they are not going to vote Republican under any circumstances, so feeling abandoned by a Democratic Party fixated with climate change and green policies, they simply dropped out of politics.

It is hard to see Latinos accounting for more than 15 percent of turnout in the 2016 primary; that will probably not be enough to get a Latino into the runoff in the US Senate race against favored Democratic Attorney General Kamala Harris.

But none of this means Republicans have a chance for gains. Even in an historically low Latino turnout year like 2014 they got swamped for statewide offices and actually lost a seat in Congress.

Had Republicans not gone on a two decade Latino bashing binge, they might have rebuilt their party with blue collar Latino voters. But they did not; and with Democrats not really caring about their job needs, the sleeping giant has simply gone back to sleep.

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