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Julián Castro, lawyer and politician from San Antonio, speaks Nov. 16, 2022, during a Georgetown University online dialogue titled "How Are Latinos Changing Politics and How Are Politics Changing Latinos?" (CNS photo/courtesy Georgetown University)



by Mark Pattison

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Latinos may be changing American politics more than politics is changing Latinos.

To hear speakers at a Nov. 16 Georgetown online forum, politics is trying harder to bring Latinos into the fold.

Jens Manuel Krogstad of the Pew Research Center, in his work studying Latino demographics and politics, noted that Latinos do not identify as strongly with either the Democratic or Republican parties as do other Americans.

"Latinos support for the two parties has ebbed and flowed over the decades," Krogstad said during a forum sponsored by Georgetown University's Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life on: "How Are Latinos Changing Politics and How Are Politics Changing Latinos?"

Democratic support peaked at 70% during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and Barack Obama, while GOP support got as high as 40% for George W. Bush and 38%

for Donald Trump.

"At the same time, about half of Latinos say they don't see a great deal of difference between the parties," Krogstad said.

"Latinos who are Catholic tend to be more progressive than Latinos who are evangelical and Protestant," said panelist Alejandra Molina of Religion News Service.

"Latinos are not a monolith," declared Olivia Perez-Cubas of the Winning for Women Action Fund, which recruits and gives financial backing to Republican women candidates. "The GOP depends on its ability to build a tent to diversify the party -- which we're not very good at but I think we're working on -- to speak to a diverse group of voters, and Latinos are very much a big part of that equation."

The upshot of the Nov. 8 midterm elections for Latinos is that " the community is consequential -- it is very consequential -- in which party will control Congress, in which party will prevail in presidential elections," said Julián Castro, a former U.S. secretary of housing and urban development, a former San Antonio mayor and himself a 2020 presidential aspirant.

Krogstad said U.S.-born Hispanics are adding 1 million new potential voters to the population each year. He noted that in the 1980s and 1990s, "largely immigration from Mexico was the primary driver of Hispanic population growth in the U.S." but said Hispanic immigration from that country has "slowed to a trickle."

Hispanics now account for about 14% of the electorate, double the figure of 2000. They also view the Democratic Party more favorably than the Republican Party.

"Latinos have overwhelmingly expressed support for abortion rights, especially after Roe was overturned," Molina said. "There's been an assumption that Latinos are inherently religious and therefore conservative and against abortion, and it's not as black and white as that."

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Molina, though, acknowledged the pull of "high-profile Latino evangelical pastors" -- noting one of them is the Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference -- "who in the past have spoken in support of

(former president Donald) Trump because they said he stood against communism, against socialism."

Castro, who is currently a visiting professor at Harvard Law School, said the communism card has been played by the GOP, especially in appeals to Cuban and Venezuelan Americans.

"Traditionally a lot of the outreach from the Democratic Party centered around civil rights and themes like equality and also aspirational themes and issues like access to better education and health care and better jobs, those things that I think really resonate with hard-working Latino families," he added.

Perez-Cubas said, "Republicans were hoping, like, gas, the economy, inflation were going to be that key message -- and quite frankly it fell flat, and we saw that across the board, not just Latino voters."

"There's a broad recognition by millions of people in the country whether Latino or (from) different backgrounds that our political system is fundamentally broken," said Michael Okinczyc-Cruz, executive director of the Coalition for Spiritual & Public Leadership.

He also is an adjunct professor at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University Chicago and a community organizer in the Chicago suburbs.

The answers, he suggested, are found less in "how we can turn out communities (to vote) but what role ordinary people can play in shaping the forces and factors that come into play in their lives when it comes to schools, the local economy, the environment, opportunities for their children and the future."

The "more urgent and necessary question," Okinczyc-Cruz said, "is whether we can organize grassroots power in such a way that it is in the collective hands of everyday people, our grandparents, working-class people, youth, and that that power can be controlled by people and exercised by people in ways that are responsible, strategic and true."

Castro remembered when "my mother was a Chicana activist in the 1970s and they were very frustrated with the system -- this is mostly Mexican Americans (in) Texas and the Southeast -- and their answer was to leave the Democratic Party but not go to the Republican Party."

"They started a third party" to build the power to address their issues, he said.

"We have to look to ourselves," Okinczyc-Cruz said. "My mom would take me to church four days a week. It drove us crazy, but that's what helped shape who I am today."