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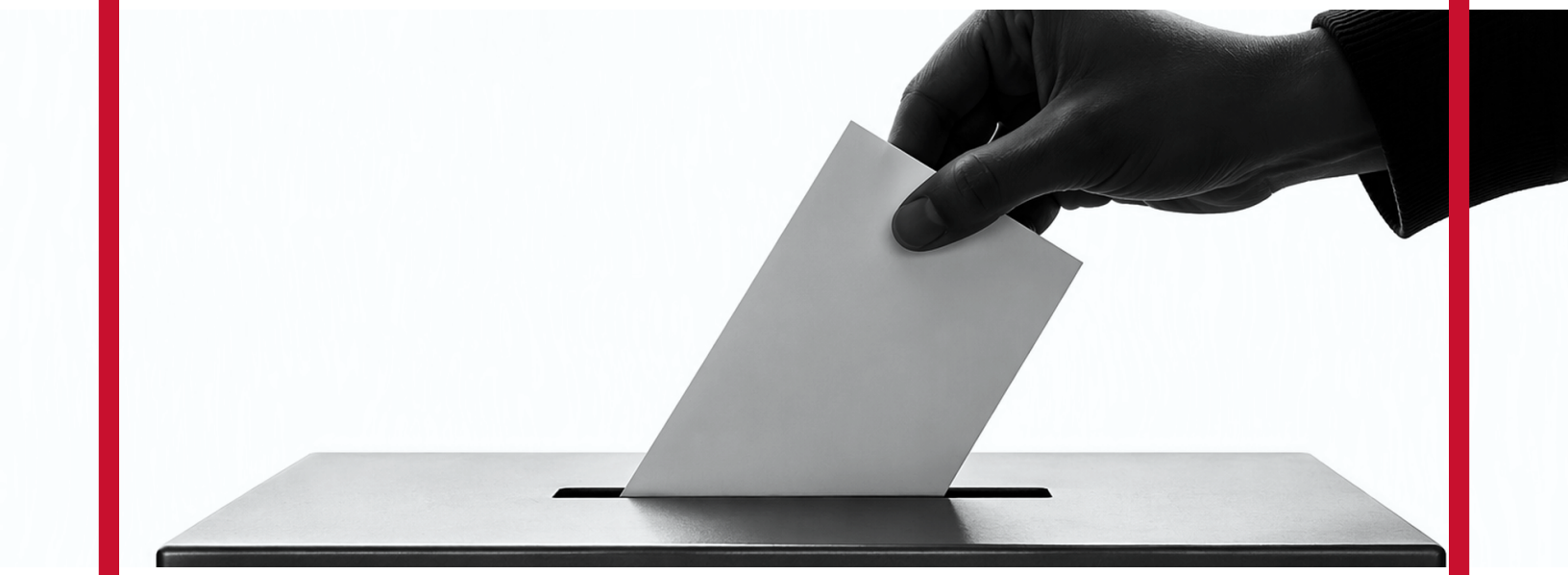

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Texas and Greater Houston: 2026 Midterm Election Perspectives and Policy Priorities

SPACE CITY PANEL

Center for Public Policy
Hobby School of Public Affairs

Key Takeaways

1. **Democrats became competitive statewide, with Houston strengthening their position, especially for the U.S. Senate.** Support for Talarico was higher in the Houston MSA than elsewhere in Texas across most demographic groups.
2. **Democratic support extends beyond the 2024 Harris coalition.** Nearly all Kamala Harris voters support Democrats, who also received support from roughly one in nine former Trump voters and nearly two-thirds of likely voters who did not vote in 2024.
3. **Houston independents stand out, particularly in the gubernatorial and senate races.** Among independents choosing between the major-party Senate candidates, 82% favor Talarico in Houston, compared with 78% statewide.
4. **The electorate remains sharply divided by race and age.** Black, Hispanic, and younger likely voters generally favored Democrats, while white and older likely voters generally favored Republicans. Hispanic support varied across offices, underscoring the limits of treating any demographic group as a uniform voting bloc.
5. **Participation shapes which preferences dominate the ballot box.** Older registered voters are much more likely than younger respondents to turn out to vote.
6. **Economic concerns unite voters whose other priorities diverge.** The economy and jobs lead the issue agenda across party lines, while healthcare, immigration, the war with Iran and other concerns distinguish partisan priorities.

Introduction

Texas's 2026 midterm electorate presented Democrats with opportunities beyond their established base: James Talarico in the U.S. Senate contest, Gina Hinojosa in the race for Texas governor, and competitive races for U.S. House seats received strong support in the ballot, which were also reflected in responses to the CH&EP survey. Greater Houston strengthened Democratic candidates' statewide standing, but support for Democratic candidates extended across the rest of Texas.

The Center for Public Policy at the Hobby School of Public Affairs is participating in the national Civic Health & Elections Project (CH&EP), a collaborative large-scale survey-based research program designed to generate data to improve civic discourse and decision-making. Led by NORC at the University of Chicago, CH&EP provides a deep understanding of the electorate's experiences, attitudes, and policy priorities in all 50 states using survey data collected in the final days of the 2026 midterm election cycle between Oct. 28 through the closing of polls on Nov. 3. The survey closed with 113,020 registered voters in all 50 states with 5,853 respondents (voters and non-voters) in Texas, including panelists from the SPACE City Panel.[1]

Results of the survey are publicly available on CH&EP's interactive dashboard. Individuals can use the dashboard to explore the public's mood, experiences, and policy preferences, and how these forces shape decisions at the ballot box. Comparisons with Texas, or the nation, highlight areas where Greater Houston area residents' views align with broader public opinion and where they differ. Additional analyses are available at the SPACE City Panel's webpage.

Here, we provide an overview the issues and choices that shaped the midterm elections in the Greater Houston area and Texas. We profile voters and likely voters, how those in the Houston MSA compare with the rest of Texas, their vote choices, and the issues that were on their minds as Texans went to the polls. The findings reveal both continuity and change. White and older likely voters generally favor Republicans, while Black, Hispanic, and younger likely voters generally favor Democrats. Yet Democratic support reaches beyond those who backed Kamala Harris in 2024, attracting some 2024 Trump voters and substantial support among people who did not vote in presidential election two years ago.

A companion report to be released next week will examine public attitudes toward data center development, including perceptions of government tax incentives, support for stronger regulations and safeguards, the distribution of costs and benefits for host communities, and the extent to which companies provide information about their energy and water use.

Likelihood of Voting

While age, gender, race, education, and party identification are good predictors of who is likely to cast a ballot, the propensity to vote also varies across election cycles. Who participates can matter as much as whom voters support. A candidate's advantage among registered voters may narrow or widen when attention shifts to those most likely to cast a ballot. strong support among younger voters, for example, translates into electoral strength only to the extent that they turn out.

Table 1 compares likely voter classification in the CH&EP

survey this election cycle broken down by race and ethnicity, age, education, and party identification among respondents in the Houston MSA and the rest of Texas. These estimates describe model-based likely-voter classification, rather than verified turnout.

	Houston MSA		Rest of Texas	
	% likely voter	n	% likely voter	n
Panel A: Race/ethnicity				
White	90.3	1007	90.7	1851
Black or African American	47.8	488	39.8	472
Latino or Hispanic	33.6	513	33.9	1003
Other	27.0	254	23.5	246
Panel B: Age Group				
18-24	17.7	148	23.0	207
25-29	37.1	207	29.7	268
30-39	36.9	464	41.8	625
40-49	58.9	473	57.3	724
50-64	76.6	515	79.8	918
65+	98.3	455	99.3	836
Panel C: Education				
High school or less	43.6	414	38.6	1023
Some college/Assoc. degree	52.9	707	59.6	1277
College graduate	63.4	626	73.8	735
Postgraduate study	76.7	518	80.7	541
Panel D: Party identification				
Democrat/Lean Dem	59.3	1205	60.6	1601
Republican/Lean Rep	64.1	808	68.5	1501
Independent	27.1	257	26.6	481
All respondents	55.6	2270	57.7	3583

Note: Weighted percentages of respondents classified as likely voters by the survey's likely voter model; the nonvoter share is 100 minus the value shown. n = unweighted number of respondents.

Table 1 Share of likely voters by demographic group, Houston MSA vs. rest of Texas

The survey shows that differences within Houston and the rest of Texas are much larger than the overall participation gap between them. The survey's likely-voter model classifies 55.6% of Houston-area registered respondents and 57.7% elsewhere in Texas as likely voters, but rates vary sharply by age, race and ethnicity, education, and party identification. The accompanying results in subsequent sections also show how these differences shape the electorate underlying the vote-choice results that follow.

Age is strongly associated with likely voter classification in both areas, with rates increasing among older respondents. Among younger adults, those ages 18–24 have lower classification rates in the Houston MSA than in the rest of Texas (17.1% vs. 23.0%), while the opposite is true for those ages 25–29 (37.1% vs. 29.7%). White respondents have the highest rates in both (90.3% and 90.7%), while Black respondents have higher rates in the Houston MSA than in the rest of Texas (47.8% vs. 39.8%) and Hispanic respondents have similar rates (33.6% and 33.9%). College graduates are also less likely to be classified as likely voters in the Houston MSA than in the rest of Texas (63.4% vs. 73.8%).

Beyond the 2024 Presidential Coalitions

The 2026 voting preferences of respondents with different presidential voting histories help explain the support for Democratic candidates. Figure 1 compares current preferences among likely voters who supported Kamala Harris, supported Donald Trump, cast another vote, or did not vote in the 2024 presidential election.[2] Nearly all voters who reported supporting Harris in 2024 backed Talarico, while nearly one in eight 2024 Trump voters did so.

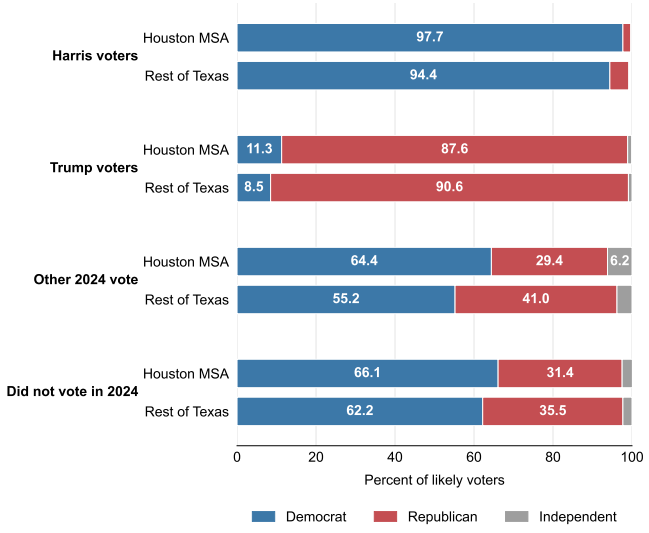


Figure 1 2026 Senate vote preference among likely voters, by reported 2024 presidential vote and region

Ninety-eight percent (97.7%) of Harris voters in the Houston MSA, and 94.4% elsewhere in Texas, favored Talarico. Most 2024 Trump voters supported the Republican candidate, Ken Paxton–87.6% in Houston and 90.6% in the rest of Texas–but 11.3% and 8.5%, respectively, supported the Democratic candidate, Talarico. Support for Talarico also reached 64.4% among those who voted for candidates other than Trump and Harris in 2024 in the Houston MSA. Among respondents who did not vote two years ago but are classified as likely voters in 2026, 66.1% in Houston and 62.2% elsewhere favored the Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate.

These patterns suggest that Democratic competitiveness this election cycle rested on retaining Harris voters while attracting some 2024 Trump voters and substantial support among 2026 non-voters. The similarities between Houston and the rest of Texas indicate that this broader appeal extends beyond the metropolitan area.

Gubernatorial Election

In the gubernatorial race Gina Hinojosa's statewide competitiveness was driven by strong support among Black and Hispanic voters, younger adults, and independents. Statewide, she was supported by 89.5% of the major-party vote among Black likely voters and 69.9% among Hispanic likely voters (Figure 2). She led among adults under 50 with 63.4%, held narrower advantages among older voters, and was close to Greg Abbott among white voters. Her support also rose with education, reaching 59.1.1% among respondents with postgraduate study.

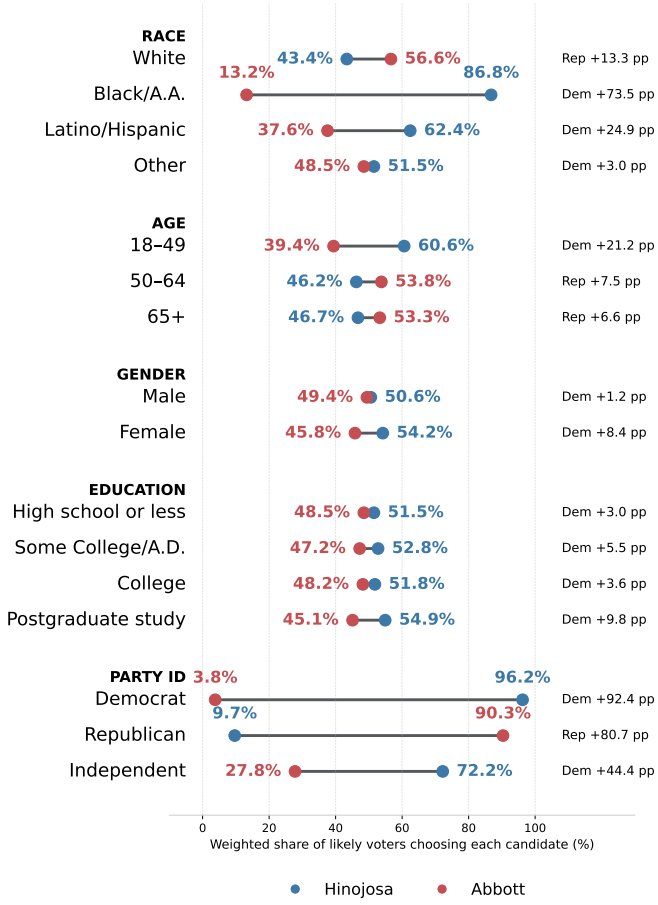


Figure 2 Governor vote Texas

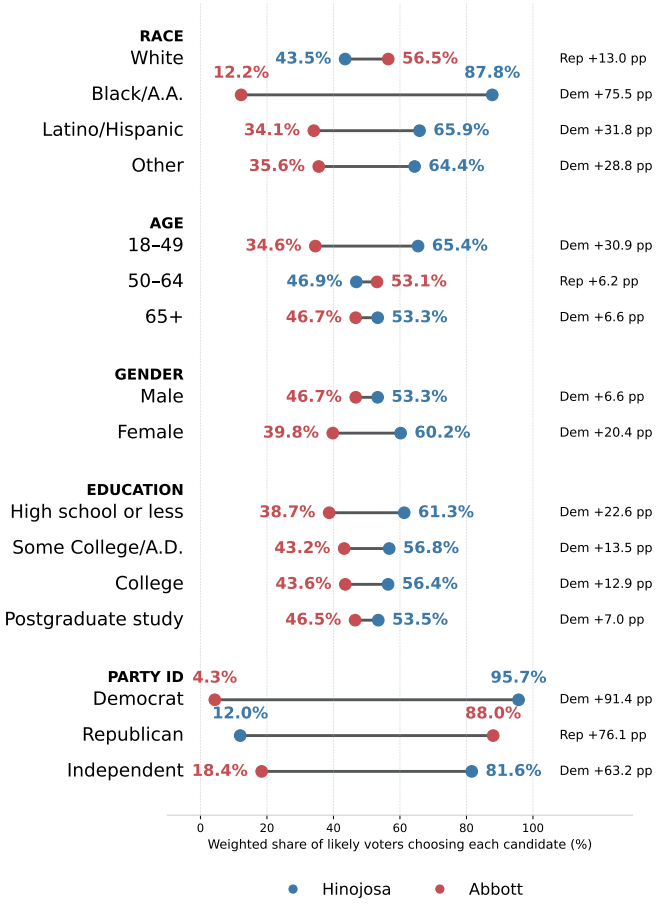


Figure 3 Governor vote Houston MSA

In the Houston MSA, Hinojosa also led among adults under 50 (65.4%), Black likely voters (87.8%), and independents (81.6%) (Figure 3). She led among Hispanic likely voters as well (65.9%). In the Houston MSA, Abbott led among likely voters 50–64 and older, winning 53.1%. Among white likely voters, Abbott held a clear lead in the Houston MSA (56.5% vs.43.5%). Houston female likely voters gave the strongest support to Hinojosa (60.2%) compared to all gender groups.

In both, the State and the Houston MSA

U.S. Senate

In the U.S. Senate race, Talarico combined strong support among Democratic identifiers with a substantial advantage among independents, particularly in Houston. As Figures 4 and 5 show, he received 78.4% of the major-party vote among independents statewide and 81.7% in the Houston MSA. He also attracted 14.1% of Houston MSA Republicans, compared with 12.7% statewide, while retaining more than 97% of Democratic leaning voters. Talarico also got advantage in all gender groups, particularly Female, both in Houston MSA (61.9%) and the State (58.2%). In contrast to the Senate and governor races, the House votes showed almost no gender gap among men (less than 1pp margin). Female voters, however, remained more likely than male voters to support Democratic candidates in the State and the Houston MSA.

Vote choice in the Senate race also differed sharply by race and age. Talarico had the support of 88.8% of Black likely voters in the Houston MSA and 89.5% statewide, along with roughly two-thirds of Hispanic likely voters in both. His support among likely voters under 50 was higher in the Houston MSA (68.3%) than statewide (63.3%). Paxton, by contrast,

led among white likely voters (54.7% in the Houston MSA and 54.2% statewide). Statewide, both older age groups were roughly evenly split.

Vote choice across education reveals different patterns in the Houston MSA compared to the whole state. Statewide, Talarico's support rose from 54.0% among respondents with high school or less to 59.1% among those with postgraduate study. In Houston, that relationship reverses: his support is highest among respondents with high school or less (62.9%) and declines to 55.5% among those with postgraduate study. His Houston coalition therefore brings together strong independent support, some Republican crossover (14.1%), and substantial backing among younger voters and respondents with less formal education.

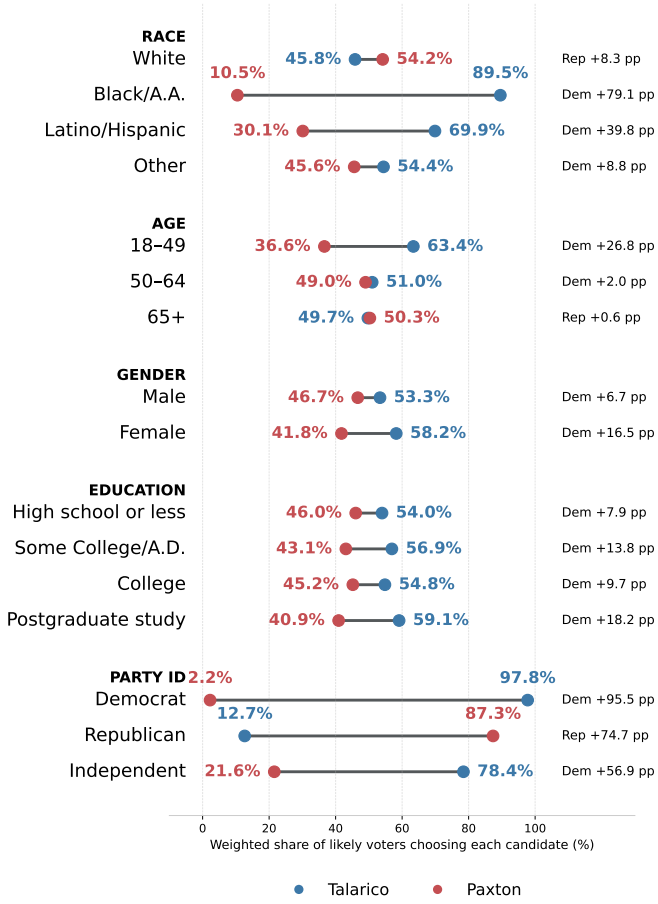


Figure 4 U.S. Senate vote Texas

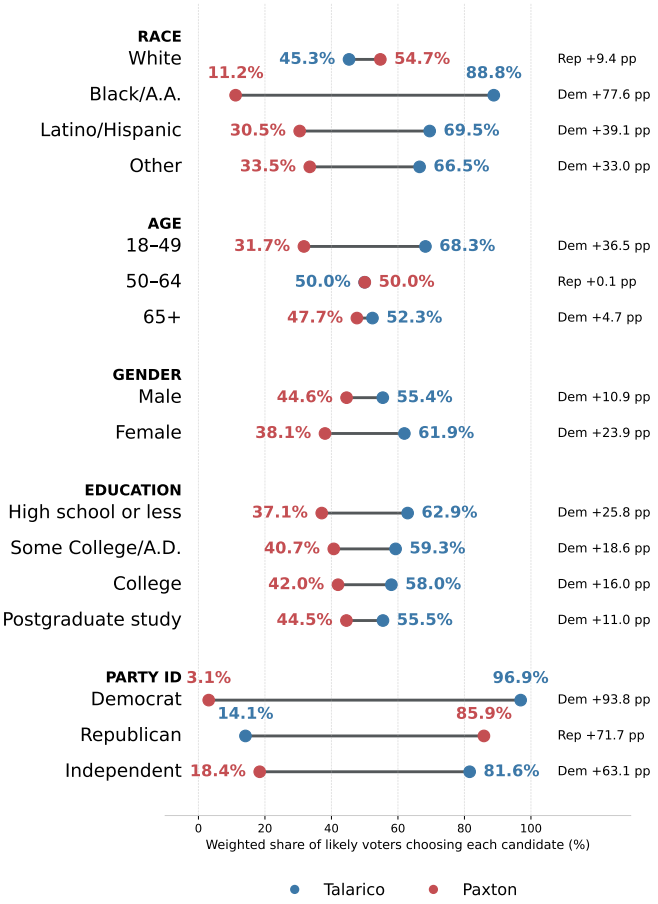


Figure 5 U.S. Senate vote Houston MSA

House of Representatives

The contests for U.S. House of Representatives seats also revealed sharp racial and age divisions both the Houston MSA and statewide. Figures 6 and 7 show that Democratic candidates received approximately 87% of the major-party vote among Black likely voters in the Houston MSA and beyond. Similar shares of Hispanic likely voters in both the Houston MSA and the rest of Texas reported favoring Democratic candidates (64.0%). Among white voters, however, support for Democratic candidates was slightly lower in the Houston area than statewide: 41.5% of white likely voters favored a Democratic candidate for the U.S. House compared to 42.8% of the Houston MSA.

Voters under 50 favored Democratic candidates in House races in both the Houston MSA and the rest of Texas, though the margin was smaller outside the Houston MSA. Among older voters, support was closely divided, with margins of eight points or less. All education groups leaned Democratic. In the State, the Democratic margin was largest among likely voters with postgraduate study (54.1% to 45.9%) and narrowed with less education. In the Houston MSA, the pattern changes: voters with postgraduate degrees also favored Democratic candidates (43.6% to 56.4.9%) while those with high school or less were almost equally divided (44.8% to 55.2%).

Independents favored Democratic House candidates in both the Houston MSA (65.3%) and Texas (69.9%). We also saw a similar percentage of crossover among Republican likely voters: about 8% of Republicans preferred Democratic House candidates, compared with less than 3% of Democrats who preferred Republican candidates.

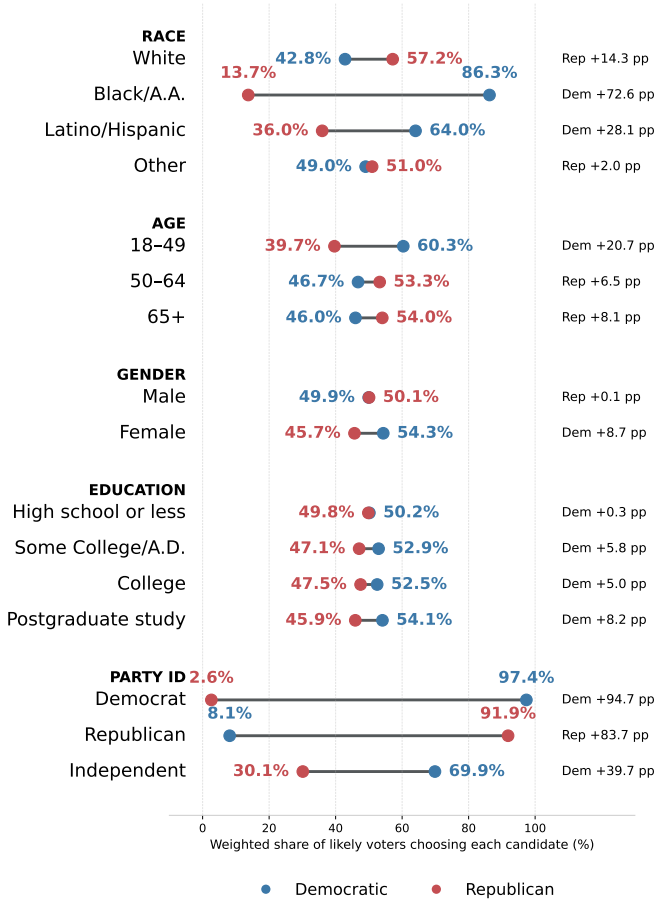


Figure 6 U.S. House vote Texas

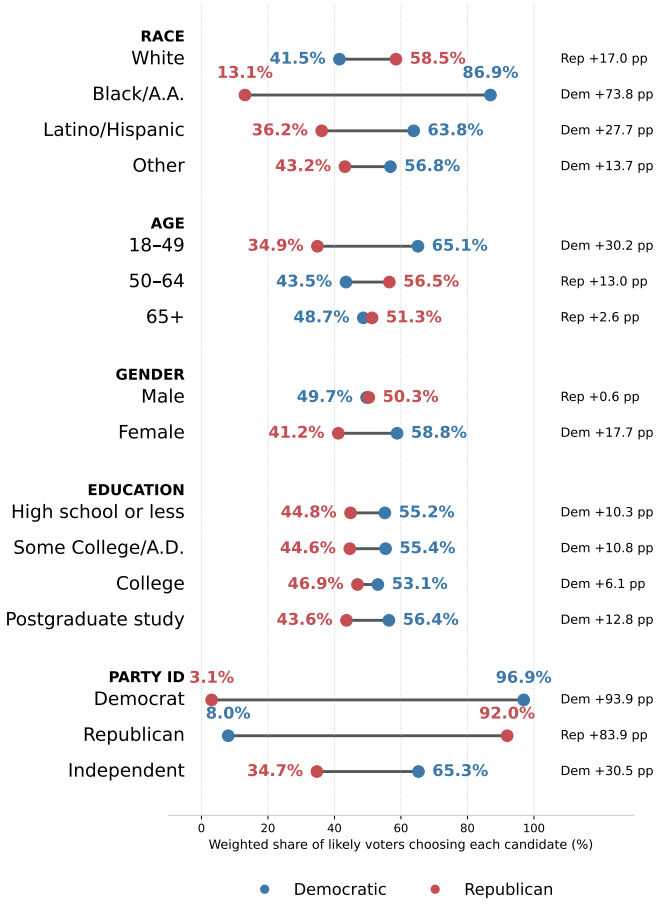


Figure 7 U.S. House vote Houston MSA

Most important issues facing Texas and the Greater Houston area

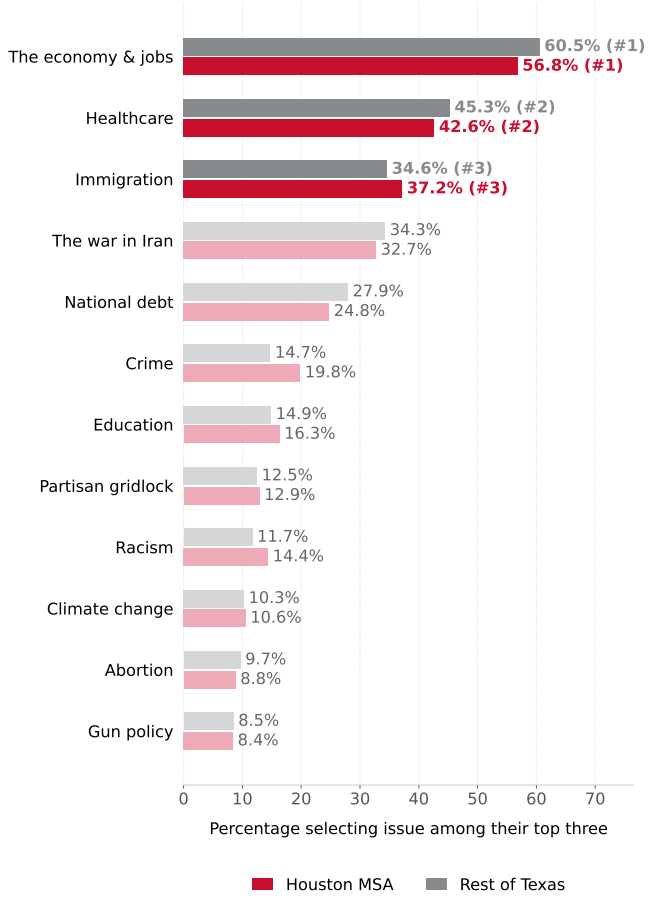
In addition to vote choice, likely voters were asked to identify up to three issues they considered the most important facing the country. Figure 8 compares the issues selected by respondents in the Houston MSA and the rest of Texas, highlighting similarities and differences in their top concerns. The economy and jobs ranked as the top issue in both the Houston MSA and Texas, identified by (56.8%) and (60.5%) of likely voters, respectively. Healthcare and immigration were also among the most frequently cited concerns, although their relative importance differed by geography. In the Houston MSA, 42.6% of likely voters identified healthcare as one of their top three concerns, compared with 45.3% in the rest of Texas. Immigration was identified as one of the top three concerns by 37.2% of Houston MSA voters and 34.6% of voters elsewhere in the state.

As shown in Figure 9, Texans' policy priorities vary by partisan identification. Overall, the economy and jobs were a shared concern across party lines, but priorities beyond the economy reflected clear differences in the issues emphasized by each political group. Although Democrats, Republicans, and Independents share concerns about the economy and jobs, their priorities differ on other key issues. The economy and jobs ranked as the top issue across all three groups, identified by 61.0% of Democrats, 57.3% of Republicans, and 65.9% of Independents.

Beyond the economy, Democrats identified healthcare (56.4%) and the Iran war (37.4%) as their next most important issues. Republicans, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on immigration (50.8%) and the national debt (35.4%), while Independents aligned with Democrats in prioritizing healthcare (39.4.0%) and the war in Iran (35.9%).

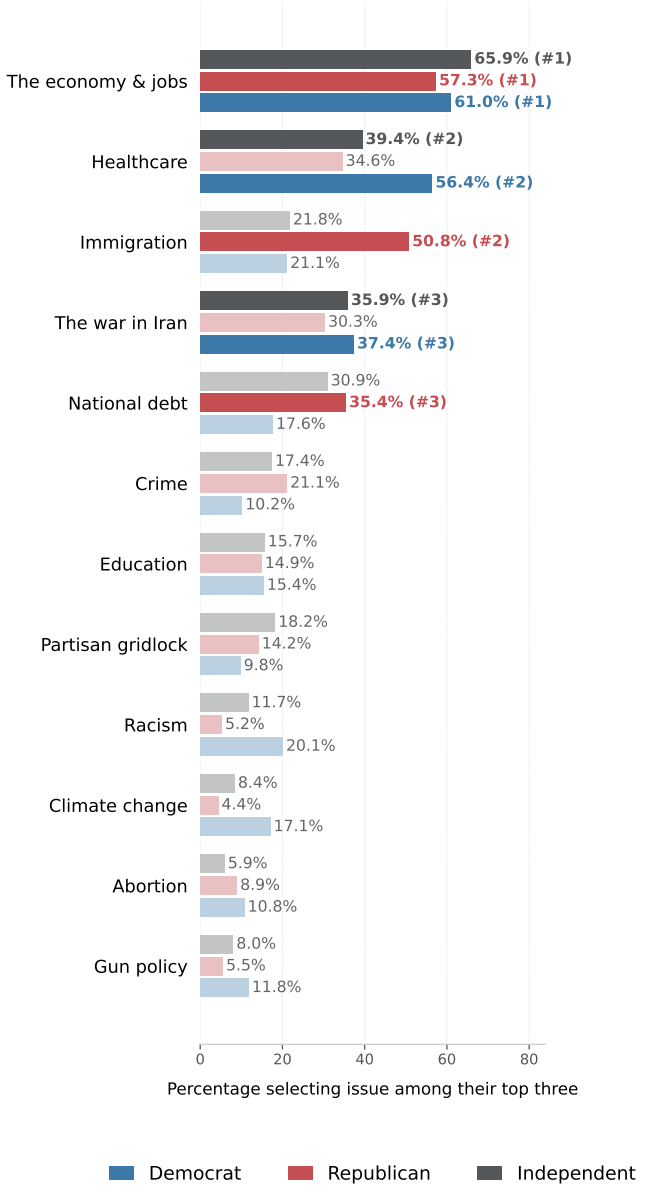
Notes

1. Further information about the methodology of the CH&EP project can be found here: NORC Civic Health & Elections Project: 2026 General Election Methods Statement
2. Note that these percentages describe preferences within each group; each group's contribution to the statewide outcome also depends on its size and turnout.



Note: Percentages are survey-weighted. Respondents could select up to three issues. Rankings are calculated separately within each party.

Figure 8 Most Important Issues Facing the Country for Texas vs. Houston MSA Among Likely Voters.



Note: Percentages are survey-weighted. Respondents could select up to three issues. Rankings are calculated separately within each party.

Figure 9 Most Important Issues Facing the Country for Texas likely voters, by party identification.

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