



## What This Election Taught Us About the Latina Vote

Journalists Jennifer Medina and Patricia Mazzei of the New York Times break down how we voted this election, and what the mainstream media so often gets wrong about it.

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Alicia Menendez:

Joe Biden won the presidential election with the support of over 60% of Latino voters, and those votes were especially helpful in states like Arizona and Nevada. But if you read some of the headlines following the election, you might get the sense that Latinos were more of a hindrance than a help for Democrats. You might also get the sense that no one anticipated the improvement among some Latino voters. That's not true either. I spoke with Jenny Medina and Patti Mazzei about what really happened, why it matters, and the role Latina reporters played in this incredible election.

Jenny, what is your theory of the case of what happened with Latino voters in this election? I will take your early observations.

Jennifer Medina:

Oh, it's still too early for me to have a unified theory of the case. Part of me thinks this was exactly what has happened historically, like this is no different than what's happened in history, where 30% of Latinos more or less vote for a Republican. The thing that's so shocking I think to everybody is that even with Trump, even with somebody who has used demagoguery and used racist rhetoric, that there was still 30%. I think that's shocking to lots of people, both Latinos and non-Latinos, but where I still joke that any Latino you talk to has at least one family member who's a Trumper.

Every single person I know, no matter if they live in East L.A., or New York, or wherever, they have at least one relative who's there. So, it's sort of like, "Well, if you know the lay of the land, this is all very predictable."

Menendez: Patti?

Patricia Mazzei: I think maybe 2016 was an aberration that we think was going to be historical, right? If you build off of what you think is gonna happen in 2020 based on 2016, you might forget that in 2016, then candidate Trump used all that rhetoric about immigration, about, you know, Mexicans who cross the border, and turned off a lot of people who might have otherwise voted for a Republican in that election, and they were Latinos in many cases, and in the case of Florida, right? Because I come from a South Florida lens, there was a lot of hard feelings still over how Trump had sort of vanquished Marco Rubio, and even Jeb Bush, both who were sort of considered favorite sons, beloved by Americans in Miami who may have not voted for Trump in '16.

That doesn't mean they voted for Hillary Clinton. Maybe they sat out the election. Maybe they voted third party. But Clinton's margins in '16 may have been an aberration in how large they were, and then I think some people sort of thought that's what the margin would be with Trump the second time around and they didn't consider that he would have four years under his belt of policies that in some cases people like, and that people would revert to, "Okay, well, he's been president. He's maybe not that unusual of a candidate now that he's been in office for four years." And like Jenny said, they are the people in your family who are Republicans, or who were leaning towards Trump anyway and now were just openly doing so.

Menendez: I think also part of what happens, Patti, is that there is what happens inside of our community, and then there's the analysis of people outside of our communities, where there's this assumption that immigration is a motivating factor for all of us, and that when we hear the president's rhetoric, that we all internalize it as applying to us. What I found in my reporting was there are a lot of people who felt very apart from what he was saying, right? A lot of Latinos who felt he's saying that about someone else.

Mazzei: Not about me. If immigration was the gateway issue in the past, where you speak nicely to immigrants so that immigrant populations or the children of immigrants will listen to your policies on the other subjects, right? Even if immigration is not their top issue. This was an election where it wasn't like Joe Biden was talking about immigration much either, because he was the vice president for Barack Obama, who Jorge Ramos called the deporter in chief, and so how do you defend that?

So, this was not an election where anyone wanted to talk about immigration, and to your broader point, I think not just on immigration, Alicia, it's the Latino vote. Does it exist? What does it mean and why does it have to be immigration driven when polls and reporting show that the economy, education, religion, healthcare, matter just as much if not more?

Menendez: Jenny?

Medina: The thing that I found fascinating every time I went out reporting on Latino Trump supporters is that there's them, those people that Trump is talking about, and there's me and my people, and those two things are not aligned. I grew up in California. I grew up in the Prop 187 era, where there was lots of anti-immigrant sentiment. I'm surprised. I remember going to Miami in January and having coffee with Patti and being like, "Wow!" Because I'd been at an evangelical church talking to hundreds of Trump supporters and every single one said the president's not talking about me. They also said that they didn't know people who were undocumented, which I never knew if I believe that or if they're deluding themselves or what, but I found that fascinating because if you're in California, if you're in Arizona, and you're Latino, there's no way you don't know somebody who's undocumented.

So, it's just these regional differences are so, so major.

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Menendez: A majority of Latino voters did vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. They played a critical role in states like Arizona, like Nevada. They played in Pennsylvania. Part of my theory of what happened is that because Florida went first, what happened in Miami-Dade set the narrative about Latinos around the country in the eyes of people who don't know our communities that well and were providing a lot of that analysis, and it then became a wave of headlines that took what was a part of the story, because I think there are two parts of the story. There was both the truth that Latinos turned out in incredible numbers for Democrats and the truth that Donald Trump made inroads among some communities within the Latino community. Both things can be true.

They didn't get weighted equally in the way that we talked about it.

Jenny Medina: I also think, you know, most of the national media is based on the East Coast. So, there's a tendency to see things through that lens. Miami comes in first, Miami is where people tend to think of a power center of Latinos, being Latinos in Miami are much more powerful than Latinos elsewhere. But then when you step back, as you're saying, Alicia, the majority of Latino voters are actually not in Florida. They're all over the Southwest. They're also in the rust belt. They made a difference not only in Pennsylvania, but I think also maybe even in Wisconsin. And we tend to forget about those places, or we tend to gloss over them really easily and I do think a lot of that has to do just based on where the national media is based..

Menendez: Let's talk then, Jenny, about what did happen in Arizona, because that story provides such a narrative counterweight to what we saw happening in Florida, especially because it was a story that was 10 years in the making.

Medina: You have to go back to Senate Bill 1070, which was known as the, "Show Me Your Papers" law, and came at the same time period as Sheriff Joe Arpaio, so there was this huge anti-immigrant sentiment within the government of Arizona, and all these young people, some undocumented themselves, some not, took to the streets. They did tons of protests and then they started to organize. There are I would say half a dozen organizations that came out of that era that now register people to vote in Arizona, knocked on doors to get people out to vote, sort of sold the messaging to get people to vote. Not just for Biden, but for people down ballot. They were really trying to flip the state legislature.

And a lot of these organizations, by the way, are not big Joe Biden fans. I mean, they like Biden better than Trump, and they certainly wanted to get Trump out of office, but it was much more about getting Trump out of office than voting for Biden.

Menendez: Right. It's what a lot of people have called a one-time Biden coalition, that the group of people who voted this time for Joe Biden are not gonna be there in four years in the same formation because Donald Trump will not be on the ballot, which means the Democrats are gonna have to reconfigure a lot of their strategy.

Patti Mazzei: Well, that's where the Florida story matters. Not for the national narrative of this election, but the fact that they were so off in what they thought was going to happen in Florida from the Democratic Party side that they lost so big to Trump. I mean, even those of us who were covering it and knew that Trump was going to do better than he had in 2016 in South Florida, et cetera, he did so much better than people thought in so many more places that it was a real devastating blow to the Florida Democratic Party.

And so, that just reinforces your point that where does the party go from here, because this was such a sort of unique set of circumstances nationally and in the state, it sort of makes it look bleak for the future of Democrats.

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Menendez: I think one of the oversimplifications coming out of this election became this idea that it was only Cuban and Cuban Americans in South Florida that voted for Donald Trump, and I thought that your reporting out of Arizona helped broaden our understanding of who Latinos who were voting for Trump really were.

Medina: Yeah. I mean, I think the thing that is actually perhaps most significant is not the Florida Trump supporters. We sort of knew that they were there, but the place... The people elsewhere, the people in Arizona, the people in Texas, those are significant populations that Democrats... I think it is fair to say that Democrats took for granted. They thought they would vote like Black voters have voted historically, 90% for Democrats, and although there are a lot of them, but Alicia, as you said, it's kind of hard to find them, or it's kind of hard to find them and have them open up about why they think the way they think.

Menendez: So, what did you glean from those who were willing to speak with you?

Medina: Well, there is a sense of counterculture, like, "I'm cool because I vote for Trump." It's kind of a punk rock cool, like, "I'm different." There is also... I hesitate to use the word

machismo, because people get like, “Oh, we can’t say machismo.” But it is. It’s machismo. This sense that, “He’s a boss, he’s a millionaire, he made himself, I believe in this up-by-your-bootstraps philosophy. If he can be a millionaire, I can be a millionaire. I love the way he was on The Apprentice.” When I was reporting on this story about men who support Trump, The Apprentice came up in almost every conversation. They would bring up having seen him on The Apprentice as teenagers or as young men.

And then of course there’s also the religious aspect. There’s a whole bunch of people who support President Trump because of his supposed stance on abortion and appointing members to the court who are going to support pro-life policies. That was a huge factor that I would hear from people over and over again. I did not hear in Arizona a massive sense of anti-socialism. I mean, there’s a little bit of that, but there’s not this obsessiveness of it as there is I think in South Florida.

Menendez: Patti, that was a message that was tailored for Cuban voters to some extent, Venezuelan voters, quiet overtures to Nicaraguans, to Colombians. It spread, though, that socialism. It became bigger than just Cuban voters.

Mazzei: We saw this in 2018 work in Florida. It helped Ron DeSantis get elected and the playbook was just nationalized afterwards without Democrats having a response to it, but my argument was it worked for non-Hispanic voters. I was interviewing seniors in Fort Myers, which is a very Republican part of Florida, and they were voting for Mr. Trump and saying it was because they are against socialism. This was an Anglo voter, nothing to do with Latinos, and nothing to do with South Florida, so I think there is a spillover effect to people who remember the Cold War, to Midwestern types. However, in Miami, I think you’re right. There was sort of a Cuban solidarity effect that I think people forget about with a lot of other Latin Americans who sort of also feel like they left places that are either in danger, or under threat from the left.

And so, Venezuelans are not that many voters, but Colombians are. There’s a lot more Colombian voters in South Florida than there are Venezuelans, and so that appealed to them, too. Your earlier point about how Latinos out West were not voting like people expected them to made me think about Puerto Ricans. The socialism message that was in Florida was not tailored to Puerto Ricans at all, but they have a lot of sort of that evangelical crossover that Jenny was talking about, and also I remember being in Puerto Rico one of the times that Trump said he was the best thing that ever happened to Puerto Rico, and having to interview people about that comment, and that was on the island. Not... People on the island can’t vote for president. The ones in the States can. But Puerto Ricans are able to say... You know, when the president, he was calling all the Puerto Rican leaders corrupt. And they were saying, “Well, we think our government on the island has some corruption problems and he’s right about that. We don’t like his style. We don’t think he should come in and tell us what to do.” But they’re able to sort of differentiate between the things that they agree with Trump on and the things they don’t.

And at the end of the day, he made some inroads with Puerto Ricans in Central Florida. Whether it was for that reason or not, I don’t know, because I haven’t gone to ask them after the election, but I think it’s that sort of level of nuance that is often missing from some of the national political reporting, especially from people who don’t live in those communities and are just not familiar with Latinos being just as complicated as everybody else.

Medina: I think the economy played for so many people. That's what they wanted to know, and they felt like they weren't hearing from the Biden campaign, and that's what a lot of people gave Trump credit for. Their unemployment rate for Latinos was at a historic low before the coronavirus. And Trump took a lot of credit for that and people bought it.

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Menendez: Part of what I was hearing about Texas going into the election was like what would happen if Democrats came within one point of winning the state but didn't clinch it, that there would be a lot of blame gaming about who visited the state, who didn't visit the state, where money was spent, but that the flip side was that if they were able to come really, really close, that there would be the argument made that Texas was the next Arizona, that you had to look at the organizing model of what happened in Arizona, the investment that was made in Arizona, and apply it to Texas. What I have not been certain of is that that model is transposable, in part because you had an inciting incident like SB-1070 in Arizona, and I don't know if you need that one big event that feels cataclysmic in order to incite the type of organizing necessary to turn a state the size of Texas blue.

Medina: A lot of people thought that the El Paso shooting was going to be that. I talked to lots of Democrats in the fall of 2019 who thought that El Paso was going to be for Texas what 187 was for California and what 1070 was for Arizona. This, as you just described it, a cataclysmic event that changed people's minds, that motivated them politically. That never turned out to be true. I mean, some polls showed that Latinos across the board felt more racism, but it was never something that people organized around, and relying on my colleagues who have spent way more time there than me, there are Latinos in El Paso who the main thing they wanted to do after that shooting was go out and buy a gun for themselves.

Menendez: I wonder for both of you how much you bring your Latina identity and your Latina upbringing to the reporting that you do.

Mazzei: I think it comes up a lot, in part because Miami is as bilingual as it is, some of my interviews just start in Spanish, and then you can hear my Venezuelan accent, and so people... They bring it up, or then I guess their accent and they wonder how I know that they're Cuban, or Colombian, or Nicaraguan, or whatever the case may be, and so that leads down the whole like there's a point of connection there. It's just an inevitable... They know I'm an immigrant.

When I would interview some people, they would realize I'm Venezuelan, they would bring up the socialism thing. For, or against, or whatever the case may be. They don't have to explain it to you in the same way. There's like a shorthand. And so, I feel like when you then write the story, you have to remind yourself that your readers don't get the shorthand,

and so you can sort of spell it out in the quotes from the interview, right? They mean this, because they are from so-and-so. They fled this. Et cetera.

But there's a constant, that code switching that is happening all the time when you're going from the interview, and then listening to the tape, and then writing it on the page, where you have to remember not everybody understands where we were coming from from this conversation.

Medina: This happened a lot in Arizona, where people would be like, "Where are you from? Where's your family from?" And my Spanish kind of stinks. I mean, it's decent, but I have bad grammar and I speak what I call Pocho Spanish, and I used to be pretty ashamed of it, but now, like lots of people that I'm talking to also speak Pocho Spanish, so nobody cares. And even native Spanish speakers who speak perfect Spanish, most of them are kind enough that they don't bother with my grammar.

But then, so people start to ask me questions, like where am I from, where's my family from-

Menendez: How do you answer that question?

Medina: I usually just tell people my parents immigrated from Panama and that I grew up in L.A. The way that I started to think about this job, the job of covering politics, and I was mostly covering voters as opposed to the candidates, is trying to think of it as being a translator for readers of the New York Times. Here's this person I've met who's going to share with me what they think and of course I can't possibly understand their totality of their life, but I can understand the context, and I can ask them about the context, and I'm gonna translate that into a way that is fair and accurate for readers.

I think it is extremely hard to do and it's really easy to think that you screwed up. I mean, for me it's easy to think I've screwed up.

Menendez: Well, I think there are limits to anecdotal reporting. That's part of the challenge.

Medina: But there's this whole discussion in our media world about polling and does polling stink or not. I just don't really think it's an either-or proposition. We have to have both polling and anecdotal reporting, and the best stories, the best reporting you can do marries both of those things. Right? And that's our job, is to try to think about both what the polling is showing and what we are seeing on the ground.

Mazzei: Jenny probably remembers this from a staff meeting, where I was like, "You know, I know what the polls say in Florida, and to me that means that it's tied. It's always tied, but Miami feels Trumpy and I don't know what to make of that because I have not traveled across the state of Florida," right? And so, then we had a colleague fly into Tampa and another one go to Orlando and they both had the same conclusions, like they were like, "I know what you mean now. Tampa feels Trumpy. Orlando feels Trumpy."

But that is a feeling. It is something you can't really put your finger on. And so, they also then started to look at the polling, being like, "Okay, this is either tied, but it's not... You know, Biden's not up by four. Give me a break." And when it comes to Latinos, we definitely need polling, but we need good polling. You can't have a sample size of Latinos that is tiny in a state, especially where you have lots of different types of Latinos like you do in Florida. Every time you see one of those polls you sort of roll your eyes and be like, "They talked to two Cubans and a Puerto Rican and called it a day."

But I will say the feeling that as reporters you also have to not dismiss it. Florida felt Trumpy. It was not made up. There's not a figment of our imaginations. That was actually happening.

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Menendez: Patti, in addition to your colleagues at the Times, one of the things that I loved watching from afar was the fact that there was a cohort of Latina reporters reporting from South Florida, that there was you, and Sabrina Rodriguez, who's now at Politico, that there was Bianca Padró, who is at Miami Herald, which is where you were in one of your previous lives. Did that make the experience different?

Mazzei: Yes, and I believe the L.A. Times sent people to Florida, too. And here's why. When I was at the Miami Herald, where I spent the first 10 years of my career, I was named the political writer right before... political writer for the Miami Herald, and I remember even before I got that job doing a lot of the sort of translation work that Jenny was talking about, also literally translation work, but also having access to a part of the campaign that monolingual reporters could not, which was all the stuff that happens in Spanish language media, right? On the radio, where the campaign starts much earlier, because there's all this time to fill on the air that they do 24 hours of current events, and so candidates are going there all the time.

And it was a lot to be the only Spanish speaker who would go to Tallahassee for the legislative session. Like when that immigration bill was attempted to be passed in 2011, I was the only Spanish speaker in the Tallahassee press corps. And so, who could speak to the immigrants who were praying in the lobby at the capital but the girl from Miami who was there and happened to have this fall in her lap? It's not that way anymore because you have Bianca, and Sabrina, and just more bilingual people in general. People who decided to spend more time with this community.

Jenny and I wrote a story about just disinformation in Spanish because she and I saw it in part of the country, and we know we were about to get beat by Politico on it, but we still wanted to do it, but it was nice that other people were also writing about it, you know? And I remember Sabrina and Bianca and I ended up at an Obama off the record mini campaign stop towards the end of the season, and it was like just the three of us reporters, you know? And it felt nice. You sort of have like a little cohort of friends who all support each other and can understand all of the stuff that we're talking about with having anybody explain it to them.

Menendez: Jenny, your work has been described as finding the humanity in tragedy. I wonder how you took that scale and applied it to this new assignment?

Medina: The way that I approach this job was to talk to people. I mean, that sounds so simplistic, but really when I agreed, when I decided that I was going to take this job, the way that I wanted to approach it was by talking to voters. Not doing like diner stories that we all mock and rightly make fun of, but by just talking to lots of different people. Like I was



genuinely curious what people think and why they think it. And that's what I did. I just... What do you think about this? And why?

I spent a lot of time asking why. You spend time talking to people who you disagree with, right? Like it's the nature of the job that you're going to talk to people who don't see the things the same as you do, obviously. But so, learning how to listen to people who my friends would be appalled by was a really interesting and enlightening thing. There was this podcast that we did, an episode of The Daily that we did that you mentioned in Arizona that was partly about how Arizona has turned blue over the last 10 years, and that ended with this one Trump support who we randomly found outside of a Latinos for Trump campaign office.

And he was really generous with his time and with his thoughts, and I just loved it. I absolutely loved it. We got a lot of great feedback. The thing that sticks out in my mind whenever I think about it is that the criticism that I heard from friends and from others was that we did too much to humanize him. And I thought that was sort of appalling and devastatingly sad, to say that humanizing a Trump supporter was a negative thing. It's just absolutely mind blowing and devastating to me. It does not speak well for the future of our country.

Menendez: What did I miss? Anything?

Mazzei: Appreciation for Latina reporters.

Medina: No, but... Well, that was what I was about to say, is that like there was this thing that happened at the end of the campaign that was like appreciation for each other, and both... I mean, I deeply appreciate Patti. I think Patti knew that before this election.

Mazzei: I did a lot of leaning on Jenny during this election.

Medina: I did a lot of leaning back. And I deeply appreciate other journalists. Just appreciating each other, and like if you don't have somebody to lean on and if you don't have somebody to sort of give you a gut check, I think about how many times I called Patti saying like, "Can you just give me a gut check on this and make sure I'm not screwing-"

Mazzei: We shadow edited each other. I mean, that's what you do.

Medina: Yeah. I just think that's enormously helpful and realizing that you are... that you almost always have a team... I mean, that you should have a team behind you to rely on and to back each other up has been just a really poignant reminder for me.

Menendez: Thank you, Jenny. Thank you, Patti.

Mazzei: Thank you. This was a pleasure.

Medina: Thank you. Super fun.

Menendez: Thanks for joining us. Latina to Latina is executive produced and owned by Juleyka Lantigua-Williams and me, Alicia Menendez. Virginia Lora is our managing producer. Cedric Wilson is our producer. Carolina Rodriguez mixed this episode. Manuela Bedoya is our social media editor. We love hearing from you. Email us at [hola@latinatolatina.com](mailto:hola@latinatolatina.com) and remember to subscribe or follow us on RadioPublic, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, wherever you're listening, and please, please leave a review. It is one of the fastest, easiest ways to help us grow as a community.

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