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POLITICS COUNTS: TWO BIG STATES' BIG SPLIT ON IMMIGRATION

By Dante Chinni
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In the current immigration debate, California and Texas look like very similar terrain. The two electoral behemoths are both "border states" familiar with the issue. And in both Hispanics make up the exact same percentage of the population according to the latest Census numbers: 38.2%.

And yet, as the debate continues, the issue is starting to play out very differently in them.

In California, at least four Republican U.S. House members have now come out in favor of a pathway to citizenship in the current immigration reform fight. In Texas, two Republican House members were part of the "gang of eight" legislators that favor compromise legislation that includes a pathway to citizenship, but others have been relatively quiet or come out strongly against a pathway. And Texas's two GOP senators have taken strong stances against a pathway to citizenship.

It may be tempting to simply write off any differences to the partisan divide between the two states – California is deep blue and Texas is ruby red – but the numbers show a more complicated demographic picture. The 38.2% Hispanic population number in the two may be dead even, but the spread of those populations is very different, and it looks to be playing a big role in how their delegations see the immigration issue.

You can see the differences in the states in simple maps of their Hispanic residents. Look here at the [line of blue that runs through California](#) from the south to the north, representing the Hispanic population. Now look at this map of Texas's distribution and you see [concentrations primarily based along the border and in the west of the state](#). Those distributions have a big affect on the make-up of California's and Texas's congressional delegations.

The California/Texas Hispanic Delegation Divide

	Percent Hispanic (total population)	CDs that are more than 38% Hispanic
California	38.2%	22 Districts (41%)
Texas	38.2%	9 Districts (26%)

In California, 22 of the 53 House districts are above the state average in terms of Hispanic population. In Texas, only 9 of 34 House districts are above the average percentage, and only one of those is held by a Republican.

California's big Hispanic districts are also spread throughout the state, from the 51st district by the Mexican border to the 9th up by Sacramento. It is a broad geographic distribution that isn't easily pegged to one region or community or type of community.

And if you take the definition of big Hispanic districts down to those that are at least 30% Hispanic, more than half of California's House districts fall into that category – as well as all of the four California Republican House members who favor a path to citizenship.

Why do big Hispanic populations at the district level matter? Because polls suggest they have big effects on attitudes toward immigration overhaul. A recent Pew Research Center survey found that 90% of Hispanics believe that undocumented immigrants in the United States "should have a way to stay legally."

Of course, there are other ways California is different from Texas on immigration. In 1994, California passed Proposition 187, a GOP-supported ballot initiative that banned illegal immigrants from using many state services. The initiative was found unconstitutional in the federal courts and is thought to be a driving force behind the Republicans declining fortunes in the state.

That kind of history can sway for a congressperson on the fence with a large Hispanic constituency at home.

And some of the California's district differences may be attributable to how the state drew its congressional lines – or indeed to how Texas drew its lines to create higher concentrations in fewer districts. A good electoral cartographer can use demographic splits like an artist.

But the general distribution of the Hispanic population in California suggests the differences are more than just good map work. They are fundamental differences in geography. And the data indicate that the Hispanic diaspora currently on display in California is occurring across the country, particularly in Texas.

[Look at this map of Hispanic population growth by county in Texas](#) and you'll see a complement to [current Hispanic population map](#).

The Texas Hispanic population is growing and spreading throughout the state, with the biggest increases happening in places with smaller Hispanic populations. That is, the spread is looking more like California.

Does that mean California is Texas's future?

No. There are a number of ways the states are different. California is much more diverse overall, with ethnic and immigrant groups that stretch far beyond Hispanic and non-Hispanic white, and, for a variety of factors, more politically liberal.

But in a larger sense, the lesson of the California/Texas split is that the role of the Hispanic vote in the immigration fight is complicated and closely tied to its geography. And whatever does or doesn't happen regarding a comprehensive immigration overhaul this fall, the demographic and political maps around immigration are not static. The issue environment could look very different in next few years.