

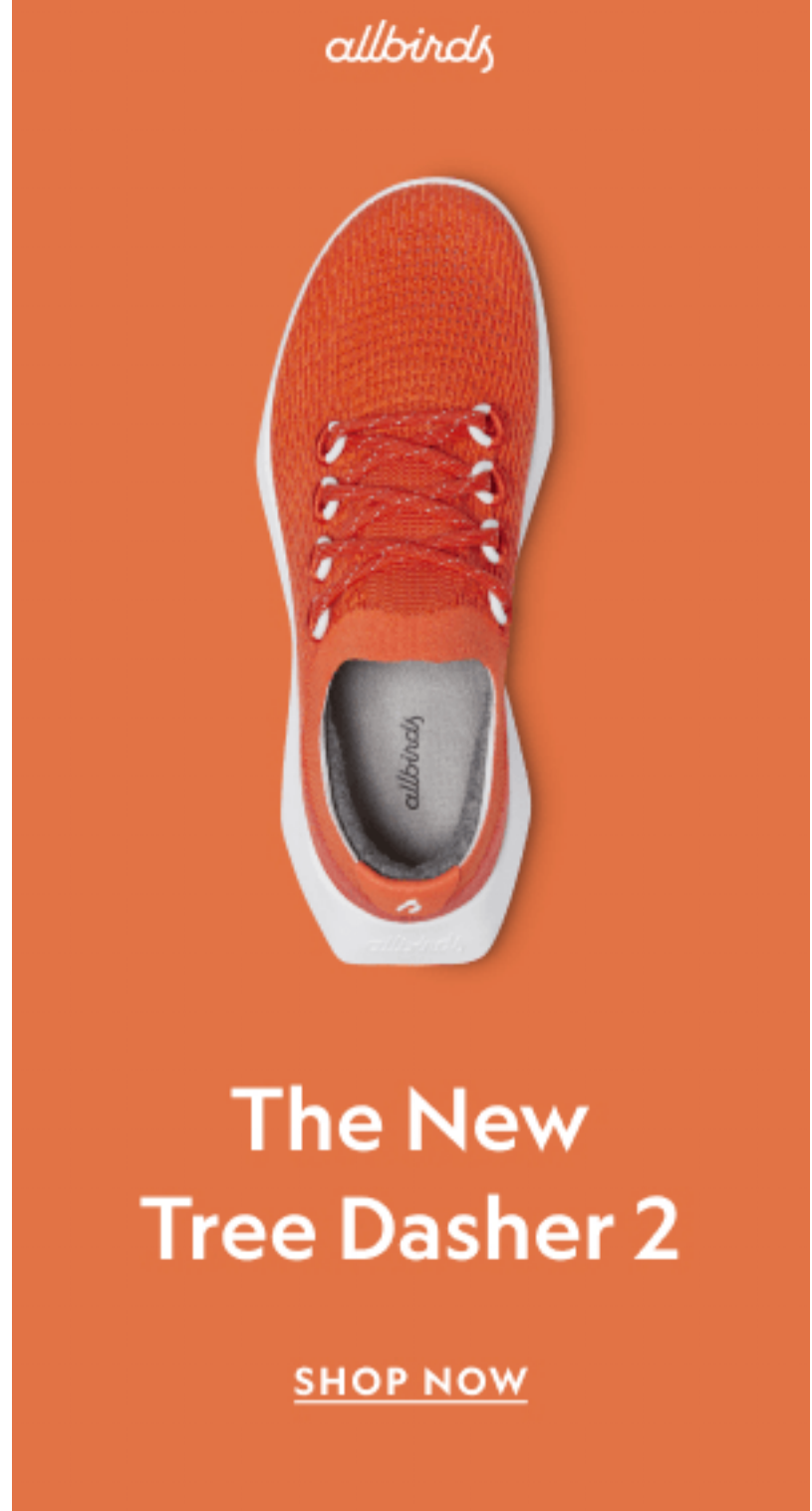
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OPINION // OUTLOOK

# Opinion: Texas Democrats flopped in 2020 but could flip the House in 2022

Paul Stekler  
Jan. 27, 2021



Former Texas congressman Beto O'Rourke, left, meets Phil Enano, while canvassing the Brookstone neighborhood for Texas House District 121 Democratic candidate Celina Montoya, Tuesday, Oct. 27, 2020. O'Rourke joined with the Texas Organizing Project to campaign for various Democratic candidates including Montoya.  
Jery Lara, Staff / San Antonio Express-News

The November election results were a disaster for Texas Democrats. There were strong candidate recruits across the board, campaign contributions pouring in, hope for flipping the Texas House, even talk of Joe Biden winning the state – all for naught. No new Democratic member of Congress, no state House gains. Now that the dust has settled, what actually happened?

Texas Democrats were always going to be hard-pressed to match the expectations of surpassing their strong 2018 results. That year, they had a giant advantage in turnout, driven by Donald Trump's unpopularity, his absence from the ballot and the grassroots efforts on behalf of Beto O'Rourke. This time around, [record early voting](#) made it seem like a blue wave was coming, raising expectations. But the presence of Trump on the ballot in 2020 brought out a red wave of voters that matched and exceeded Democratic efforts. A closer look at the actual results, though, reveals a more complex end result.

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If you flip [10,784 votes in nine state House races](#), less than one-tenth of 1 percentage point of the total state turnout, Democrats would have taken control of the chamber. [Flip 52,019 votes](#) and Democrats take five GOP congressional seats. Their problem, in those contested seats, was that their share of the vote declined 1 percent to 2 percent from 2018. Ultimately, you can't win new seats by losing a share of the vote in districts, no matter how close the previous races had been.

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In hindsight, maybe this was all predictable.

Republican efforts to do away with straight-ticket voting paid dividends. For example, in Fort Bend County, a county that turned blue in 2018, Democratic drop-off in 2020 from voting in down-ballot races was [7 percent to 8 percent, much greater than that for the GOP](#).

Messaging during the summer, with nightly news images of violence in cities such as Portland, coupled with the drumbeat of Republican appeals against defunding the police and socialism, probably took a toll on Democratic candidates. Abandoning door-to-door campaigning, so crucial in 2018, didn't help. Finally, Trump also showed surprising appeal to working-class Latino and African American men.

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So is there any reason to think that the cycle of Democratic expectations and election letdowns will ever end? I think there is.

If you look at the examples of recent states turning blue – Colorado, Nevada with the efforts of the state Culinary Workers Union, Arizona in part and this year's Georgia victories – all of them have been built on relentless grassroots organizing. In Georgia, a decade of registering and keeping in contact with the growing rolls of Black and minority voters, led by Stacey Abrams, paid dividends in the historic January runoff wins. If Democrats want better results, they must reconnect with Mexican American Trump voters along the border. The grassroots efforts have to redouble now, not in 2022.

Two years is a lifetime in politics. If Biden's administration can right the COVID-19 vaccine distribution mess and pass a stimulus plan that gets the economy going in a country weary of White House dysfunction, maybe the off-year elections will not be so bad for Democrats. If the new Texas Legislature slips back into social issue crusades in a time of a budgetary crisis, maybe the Democratic brand gets another chance. The explosion in minority population may mitigate any attempts to gerrymander districts. And as we saw in 2018, sometimes a single unexpected charismatic candidate cures many ills. Finally, remember that statewide totals are trending Democratic, with Biden closing the gap to [under 6 percent](#) and most of the Republican candidates in [2018 held to 53 percent or less](#).

Years ago, I interviewed Karl Rove in the White House about how the Texas Republican Party rose to dominance. He talked about running strong candidates with resonating messages, but also looking for opportunities, accidents and upsets, because ultimately it was results that mattered. Those results ultimately belong to those who pick themselves up and try to do better next time. Now is no time to quit.

*Stekler is a professor of public affairs and radio-television-film and a documentary film maker at The University of Texas at Austin. His film "Last Man Standing: Politics, Texas Style" can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/226210605>.*

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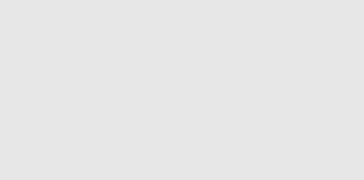
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