

Florida Healthy Elections: Final Report

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Summary of Findings

- Florida has historically been divided among voting modes, with significant vote-by-mail operations in all counties. However, mail voting did increase dramatically in all of the state's administered elections this year, with nearly half of votes cast by mail in the general election and in the presidential preference primary.
- With the increase in mail voting, there were concerns that different groups of voters would be significantly and disproportionately impacted by having their ballots go uncounted; in the presidential preference primary, Black and Hispanic voters were twice as likely as white voters to have their ballots uncounted. Although we don't have demographic data on uncounted ballots for the general election yet, overall rejection numbers for the general election (an estimated 0.2%) were much improved over the presidential preference primary (1.3% overall).
- Voter registration was also impacted by the pandemic, with registration rates dropping from record-breaking levels in January to just a fraction of previous years' registration numbers in March and April. While overall registration numbers recovered over the months leading up to the general election, the recovery was not equal among all groups: Black and Hispanic voters, especially, recovered more slowly than white and "other" voters.
- One thing that might be interesting to note for voter registration is that while Hispanic voter registrations have paced behind 2016 volume, the volume and proportion of Republican-affiliated registrations increased in 2020. Other groups saw some minor shifts this year, but nothing as major as what we see among Hispanic voter registrations.

I. Status Quo

Florida has been relatively divided among voting modes for many years, and all counties have experience running significant vote-by-mail operations. In 2016, [nearly 30% of votes in the presidential election were cast by mail, 40% were cast early, and the remaining 30% were cast in person on Election Day.](#)¹

Historically, Florida has not seen much of a partisan tilt for mail voting; for example, in the 2016 presidential election, [Trump received 41% of the mail-in vote in Florida, and Clinton received 38%.](#)²

II. March 17 Presidential Preference Primary

A. Turnout

More than 2.9 million voters turned out for Florida's 2020 presidential preference primary, compared to more than 3.4 million for the primary in 2016. By party, however, more Democrats cast votes in 2020 than in 2016 (1.7 million as opposed to 1.5 million), reflecting the high level of competition among Democratic candidates in the Florida primary, while Republican turnout dropped (1.2 million as opposed to 2.0 million), as President Trump ran in the Republican primary essentially unopposed.

¹ Meyer, Christopher. Florida: 2020 Election Policies & Practices.

<https://healthyelections.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/florida-110220.pdf>

² Florida Department of State. 2016 General Election Early Voting and Vote-by-Mail Report.

<https://dos.myflorida.com/media/697363/early-voting-and-vote-by-mail-report-2016-gen.pdf>

B. Vote Mode

Amid growing health concerns at the time of the primary on March 17, many Florida voters shifted to vote-by-mail as their preferred method of participating in the presidential primary — [46 percent of voters chose to vote by mail in 2020, compared to 29 percent in 2016](#). In contrast, Election Day voting fell from 50 percent in 2016 to 32 percent in 2020. Early voting essentially held steady from 2016 to 2020.³

Vote Mode by Party

These broad patterns were true for both parties, although Republicans were more likely than Democrats to vote by mail in the 2020 presidential preference primary (55 percent vs. 40 percent).

Viewed another way, in 2016, the two parties were indistinguishable in how their members cast ballots in the primary, with almost exactly half of each party voting on Election Day, 30 percent of each party voting by mail, and 20 percent voting early. But in 2020, voter behavior diverged slightly depending on party registration. In 2020, Republican Election Day voting declined by 22 percentage points as compared to 2016, while early voting declined another four points. To balance out these in-person declines, the share of Republican voters casting mail ballots grew 26 points. In contrast, the Democratic decline in Election Day voting was only 14 points, balanced by a growth in vote-by-mail of only 11 points and a small, three-point increase in early voting.

Vote Mode by Race

The percentage of votes cast by mail increased across all racial groups as well. White and Hispanic voters moved away from Election Day voting relative to 2016 (falling 15 and 18 percentage points, respectively). Black voters made a similar shift, though to a lesser degree, dropping in-person voting by 11 percentage points. In 2016, the dominant mode for all racial groups was voting on Election Day during the presidential preference primary; in contrast, in 2020, Election Day voting was the dominant mode for Black voters only. Whites and Hispanics favored voting by mail, albeit by small margins.

³ Cao, Diana. Election Administration Challenges in Florida.
<https://www.lawfareblog.com/election-administration-challenges-florida>

C. Uncounted Mail Ballots

According to the state’s voter history file, 1.3 percent of ballots returned by mail voters in the 2020 primary were not counted. The voter history file does not contain information about why these mail ballots were unsuccessful; however, it appears that mail ballots were not counted due to two major causes: being returned after the deadline, and arriving on time but having a defect that prevented them from being counted.

Uncounted Mail Ballots by Party and Race

The uncounted mail ballots were not distributed equally among groups of voters: Democrats (1.6 percent) were more likely than Republicans (1.1 percent) to have their ballots uncounted; Blacks (2.3 percent) and Hispanics (2.2 percent) were more likely than whites (1.1 percent) to have their ballots uncounted.

D. Unreturned Mail Ballots

In Florida, Republicans have often been more likely to vote by mail than Democrats — and this held true for the 2020 Presidential Preference Primary. However, [in 2020](#)⁴, voters from both parties were more likely to request mail ballots and then not return them, in comparison with voter behavior [from 2016](#).⁵

Republicans went from not returning 23% of requested mail ballots in 2016, to not returning 32% of requested ballots in 2020. Democrats went from not returning 33% of requested mail ballots in 2016, to not returning 38% of requested ballots in 2020.

⁴ Florida Department of State. 2020 Presidential Preference Primary Early Voting and Vote-by-Mail Report. <https://dos.myflorida.com/media/703187/2020ppp-ev-archive.pdf>

⁵ Florida Department of State. 2016 Presidential Preference Primary Early Voting and Vote-by-Mail Report. <https://dos.myflorida.com/media/696916/early-voting-and-vote-by-mail-report-2016-ppp.pdf>

E. Polling Place Considerations

Several counties in Florida consolidated or moved polling places in preparation for the March 17 presidential preference primary. [Palm Beach County](#), for example, moved polling places out of assisted living facilities out of concern for the more vulnerable elderly population, and several other counties had to consolidate polling locations due to staff dropping out from safety concerns.

III. August 18 Primary

A. Turnout

More than 3.8 million voters turned out for Florida's 2020 state primary, compared to 2.5 million for the primary in 2016. Turnout increased across parties for the state primary in 2020 compared to 2016.

B. Vote Mode

Like in the March primary, voters shifted to vote-by-mail for the August 2020 state primary, with 60% of voters opting to cast a ballot by mail, a 19-point increase over 2016. Both in-person Election Day voting and early voting percentages fell, with poll voting dropping 14 points from 2016, and early voting dropping 4 points.

Vote Mode by Party

There was a notable shift in the usage of mail voting by party in the August 2020 state primary. While in 2016, Republicans and Democrats in Florida were about equally as likely to vote by mail (41% vs. 39%), in 2020, Democrats were much more likely to vote by mail (68% vs. 48%). This is in contrast to

the presidential preference primary in March, just a few months earlier, when Republicans actually took greater advantage of mail voting.

Vote Mode by Race

While all racial groups shifted towards mail voting in 2020, Black voters were the most likely to vote early and the least likely to vote by mail.

Vote Mode	Black	Hispanic	White	Other
Voted at Polls	27%	23%	26%	22%
Voted by Mail	52%	64%	61%	66%
Voted Early	21%	14%	13%	12%

C. Uncounted Mail Ballots

According to the state’s voter history file, 1.4 percent of ballots returned by mail voters in the August state primary were not counted. Again, the voter history file does not contain information about why these mail ballots were unsuccessful, though major causes include being returned after the deadline and arriving on time but having a defect that prevented them from being counted.

Uncounted Mail Ballots by Party and Race

Although the uncounted ballots were distributed more evenly by party than in the March primary, with 1.3% of ballots from Democratic voters uncounted and 1.2% of ballots from Republican voters uncounted, there were still disparities in the percentage of uncounted ballots by race: Black voters (1.8 percent) and Hispanic voters (2.4 percent) were more likely than white voters (1 percent) to have their ballots uncounted.

D. Unreturned Mail Ballots

Republicans and Democrats had similar rates of requesting a mail ballot and then not returning it in the August primary, with 41% and 42% unreturned, respectively. This represented a two-point decrease in return rate for Republicans from the state primary in 2016, and a two-point increase in return rate for Democrats.

E. Polling Place Considerations

Even though the majority of polling places appear to have operated smoothly on August 18, some locations were closed and consolidated. For example, [SOE Shirley Anderson closed five polling sites in Hernando County.](#)

There was some confusion around polling places, particularly in Broward County. According to news reports, unpublicized polling place closures and location changes created confusion, with [“voters bouncing from location to location and seeking drop boxes for their vote-by-mail ballots, only to find their voting precinct had been combined with another, closed due to COVID-19 or was simply an early voting site that was never meant to be open on Election Day at all.”](#)

IV. General Election

A. Turnout

More than 11.1 million voters turned out for Florida’s 2020 presidential election, compared to more than [9.6 million for the general election in 2016.](#)

There was an increase in turnout for candidates of both parties, though support for Trump grew more: Votes for Trump increased from 4.6 million in 2016 to 5.7 million in 2020, while Biden

received 5.3 million votes in the 2020 general election compared with Clinton’s 4.5 million votes in 2016.⁶

Counting was over fairly quickly on election night in Florida — by the end of the night on November 3, 2020, 99% of votes had been counted.

B. Vote Mode

In 2016, [nearly 30% of votes in the presidential election were cast by mail, 40% were cast early, and the remaining 30% were cast in person on Election Day.](#)⁷ In 2020, reflecting the same shift towards mail voting that we saw in the primaries, [44% of votes were cast by mail, 39% were cast early, and the remaining 17% were cast in person on Election Day.](#)

Vote Mode by Party

While both Republicans and Democrats shifted away from in-person voting on Election Day, with a 7-point decrease and a 9-point decrease, respectively, Democrats were much more likely to vote by mail. While 41% of votes for Biden were cast by mail, just 27% of votes for Trump were also cast by mail. Instead, Republicans continued to rely heavily on early voting, with 35% of votes for Trump cast early. Note that this is in contrast to the presidential primary preference in March 2020, when Republicans were more likely to vote by mail than Democrats.

Vote Mode by Race

Voters across racial groups shifted significantly away from voting in person on Election Day this year and towards mail voting. Black voters also shifted away from early in-person voting (53% in 2016 to 46% in 2020), though Hispanic and white voters were about as likely to vote early as they did in 2016 (45% to 43% for Hispanic voters and 38% in both 2016 and 2020 for white voters).

⁶ Florida Department of State Election Results. <https://results.elections.myflorida.com/Index.asp>

⁷ Meyer, Christopher. Florida: 2020 Election Policies & Practices. <https://healthyelections.org/sites/default/files/2020-11/florida-110220.pdf>

2016 General Election			
Race	Voted at Polls	Voted by Mail	Voted Early
Black	28%	19%	53%
Hispanic	28%	26%	45%
Other	31%	26%	43%
White	33%	29%	38%
2020 General Election			
Race	Voted at Polls	Voted by Mail	Voted Early
Black	13%	41%	46%
Hispanic	15%	42%	43%
Other	14%	48%	38%
White	16%	46%	38%

C. Uncounted Mail Ballots

Despite concerns about the large influx of mail-in ballots for the November election, the percentage of ballots that were uncounted for signature reasons was lower than in previous elections, including the primaries held this year.

Although Florida does not list reasons for mail ballots not being counted, the overall percentage of uncounted ballots out of returned mail ballots was about 0.25%.

Uncounted Mail Ballots by Party and Race

Although the overall percentage of uncounted ballots out of returned ballots was lower for the general election compared to previous elections, differences by uncounted rates still followed the same trend noted in the primaries. White voters were the least likely to have their ballots uncounted (0.2%), while Black voters and Hispanic voters had slightly higher percentages of uncounted ballots (0.32% and 0.37%, respectively).

Despite demographic trends, Republicans were slightly more likely to have their ballots go uncounted than Democrats (0.26% compared to 0.2%, respectively).

D. Unreturned Mail Ballots

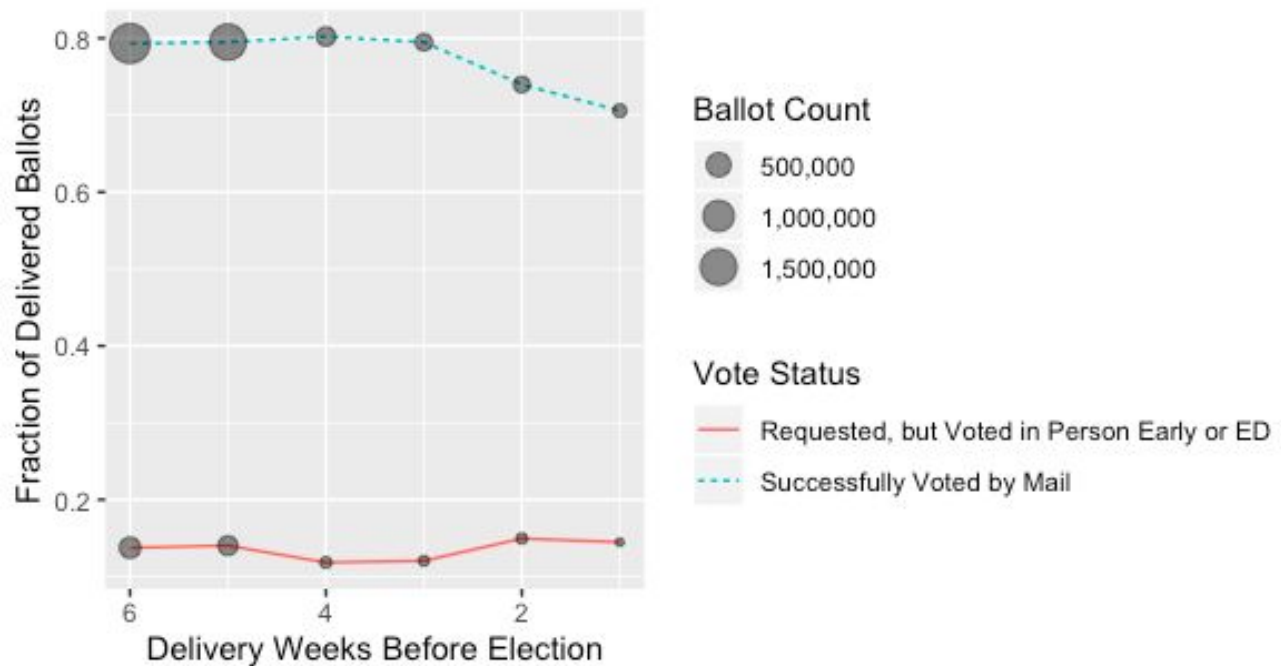
There was an increase in the volume of both requested and unreturned ballots this year — but the overall percentage of requested ballots that went unreturned only increased by about half a point.

Republicans were less likely to return a requested ballot this election in comparison with the 2016 general election (a 4-point decrease to an 81% return rate), while Democrats were more likely to return their ballots this year (2-point increase to an 82% return rate).

Out of 1.1 million voters with unreturned mail ballots, approximately 680,000 voters went on to cast a vote in person, either through early voting or on Election Day.

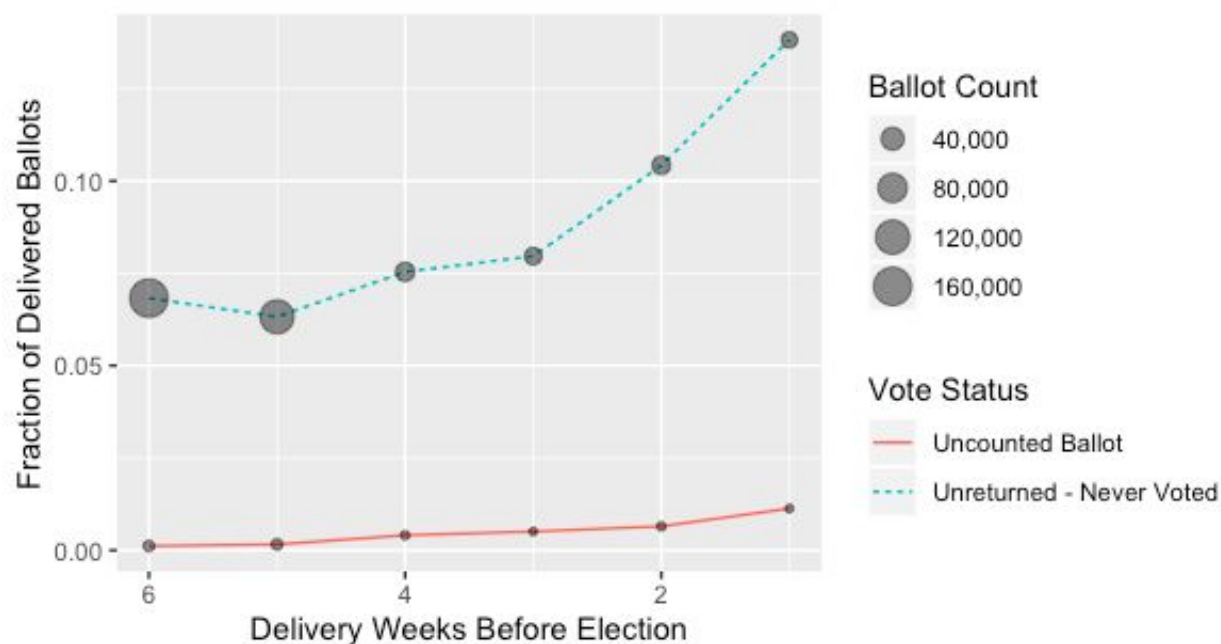
The figures below show the percentage of delivered mail ballots broken down by final voter status, depending on the week that the ballot was delivered to voters, and the ballot count bubbles indicate the volume of ballots by final voter status. The first figure shows that voters who were delivered mail ballots within 2 weeks of the election were somewhat less likely to vote by mail successfully — though the drop is less drastic in Florida than in other states like Georgia ([we can link here](#)) — and we see a slight uptick in the percent of voters who were delivered ballots opting to vote in person either early or on Election Day close to the election.

Florida Delivered Mail Ballots: Mail and In-Person Votes



The second figure shows that as the election approached, mail ballots delivered to voters were more likely to go to voters who did not eventually vote, and were more likely to go uncounted. The rate of delivered ballots going uncounted, while remaining much lower than in the primary elections, peaked for ballots delivered during the last week (we might reasonably expect these ballots to be more likely to be late). The share of ballots delivered to people who ended up never voting nearly doubled from almost 7% six weeks out from the election to almost 14% by the last week.

Florida Delivered Mail Ballots: Uncounted and Unreturned Ballots



Polling Place Considerations

There didn't seem to be any notable issues with polling locations in Florida during the 2020 presidential election.

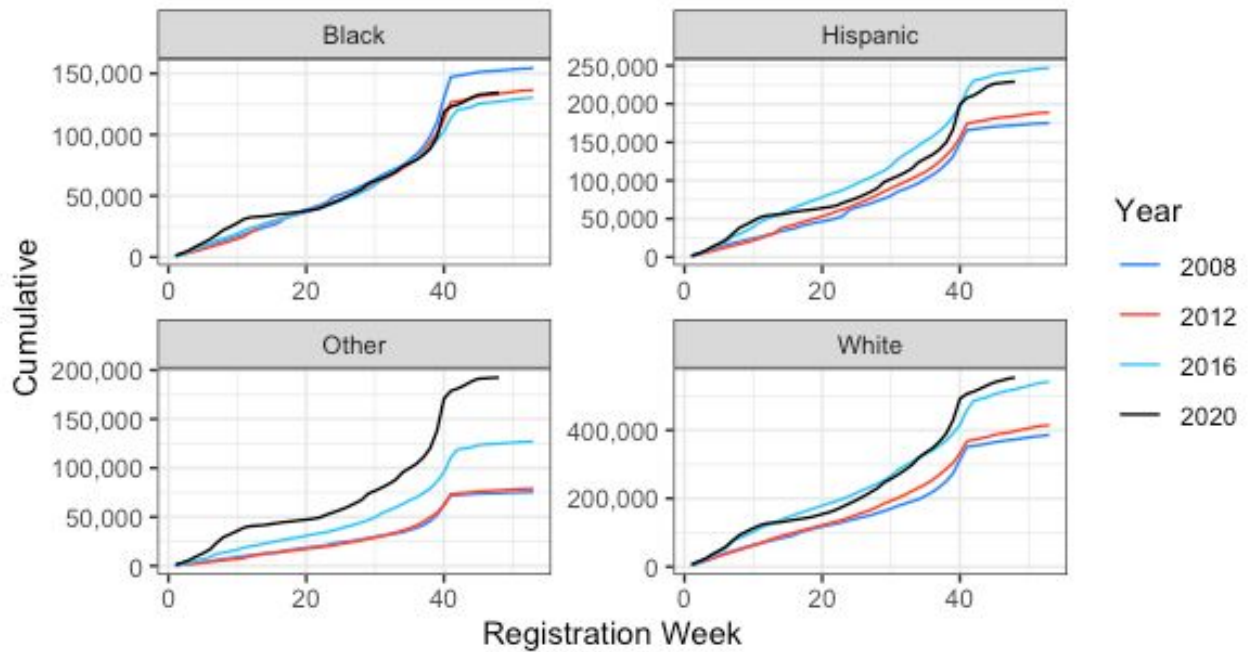
V. Voter Registration

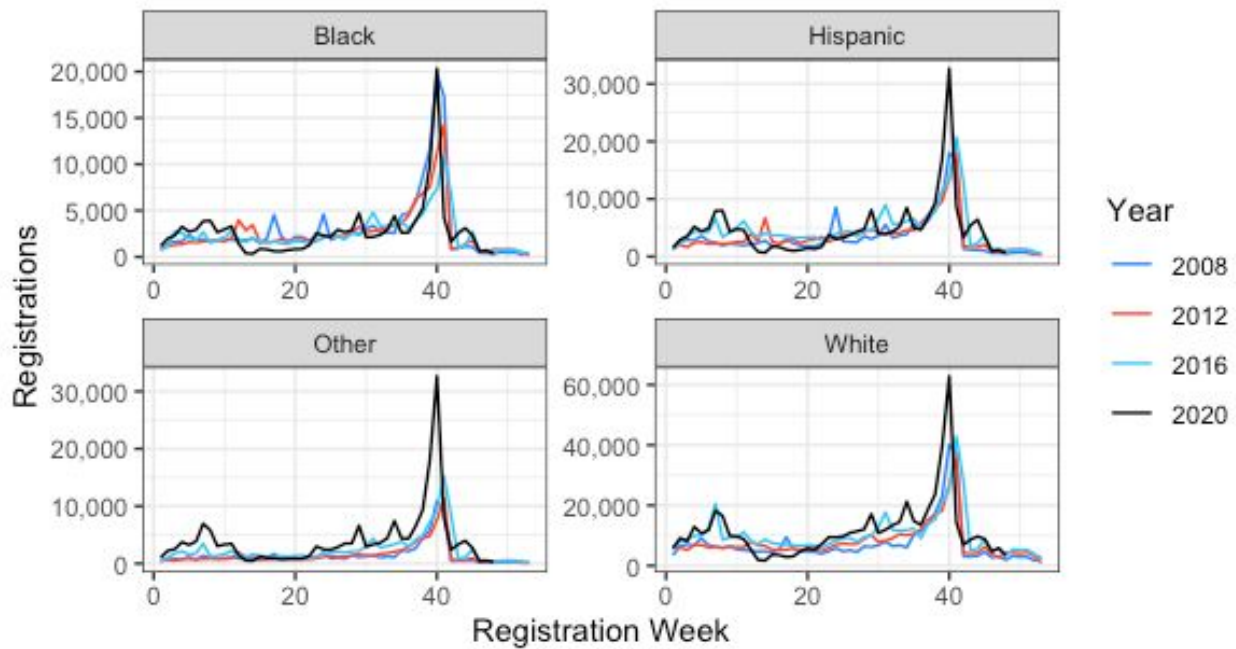
A. Overall Registration Trends

At the start of the year, registrations in Florida greatly outpaced 2016 registration volume by month. However, in March 2020, registrations fell to below 2016 levels, then nosedived further in April. Numbers began recovering in May, rebounding to be more on par with 2016 numbers by the summer and then once again outpaced 2016 numbers in September, preceding the election.

B. Voter Registration by Race

Not all groups recovered equally after the drop in registrations in March and April. While white and “other” voters outpaced 2016 registrations by the end of October, registrations for Hispanic voters still trailed behind 2016, and Black voters were about on pace with 2016.





One thing that might be interesting to note is that while Hispanic voter registrations have paced behind 2016 volume, the volume and proportion of Republican-affiliated registrations has increased in 2020. Other groups saw some minor shifts this year, but nothing as major as what we see among Hispanic voter registrations.

C. Hispanic Voter Registration by Party

