SEARCHLIGHT INSTITUTE

Searchlight 2026 Entrance Poll

What The Midterm Elections Were About, As Told By The Voters Themselves

Executive Summary

- Candidates who differentiated themselves from the still-unpopular Democratic party brand won big.
- Democrats' overall success was not driven by factional ideology. Cost of living was by far the biggest priority for voters, across all states and demographic groups.
- Democrats were more in line with voter priorities on costs than Republicans, although still seen as less cost-focused than voters themselves.
- Trump's historic unpopularity gave Democrats a massive opening that they took advantage of by running candidates who took positions specific to their states.

On Tuesday, the Democratic Party routed the GOP in the biggest wave election of the last 50 years. Democrats ran up the score in swing states like Georgia, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania, while expanding the Senate map into states that had long been written off — South Carolina, Kansas, Iowa and Texas.

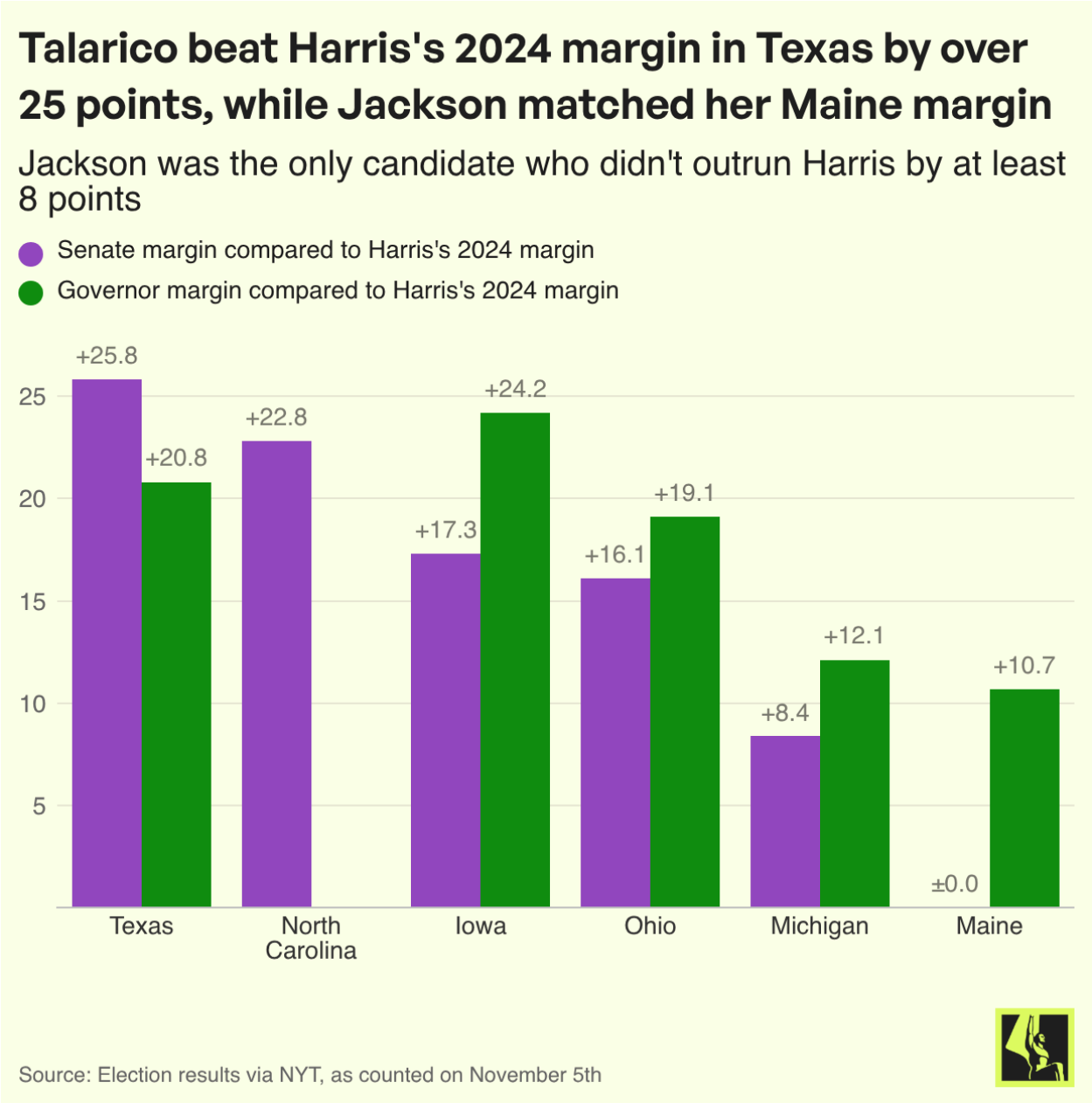
Many of these Senate races weren't even close: margins ranged from 4 points in Iowa to 20 points in North Carolina. Digging beneath the statewide results, we saw Democrats win suburban and rural counties that had previously backed Trump by as much as 30 points. The Republican coalition that elected a Republican trifecta just two years ago either stayed home or flipped to the Democratic candidate; this was driven by significant shifts among young men and Hispanics.

In the final two weeks before the election, Searchlight fielded an "entrance poll" in seven key swing states: Iowa, Alaska, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas. We wanted to know what was on voters' minds as they cast their ballots, so we asked them 51 questions ranging from candidate support to their perception of each politician's ideology. The findings were then re-weighted to match the election results to more accurately represent actual voting behavior. Alaska results are currently withheld until election results are finalized.

Democrats of all ideological stripes outperformed expectations on Tuesday night, but our "entrance poll" provides important insights about the individual factors that decided each race and ultimately produced the blue tsunami.

Overperformers

This was an unprecedented Democratic wave. In this dramatic election, the Senate candidates in our sample beat Harris' margin by an average of 15 points. The most impressive performances came from James Talarico and Rob Sand, who did 26 and 23 points better than Harris, respectively. Texas also stands out as the only state where the Senate candidate performed better than the gubernatorial candidate. In Maine, Troy Jackson had a lot of ground to make up, as Susan Collins typically outperforms the Democratic lean of the state, and he pulled his margin to just one point above Harris'. Both Maine and Michigan candidates showed smaller improvements than candidates in the other states, but the size of the overall wave (and baseline leans of the states) pulled them to victory.



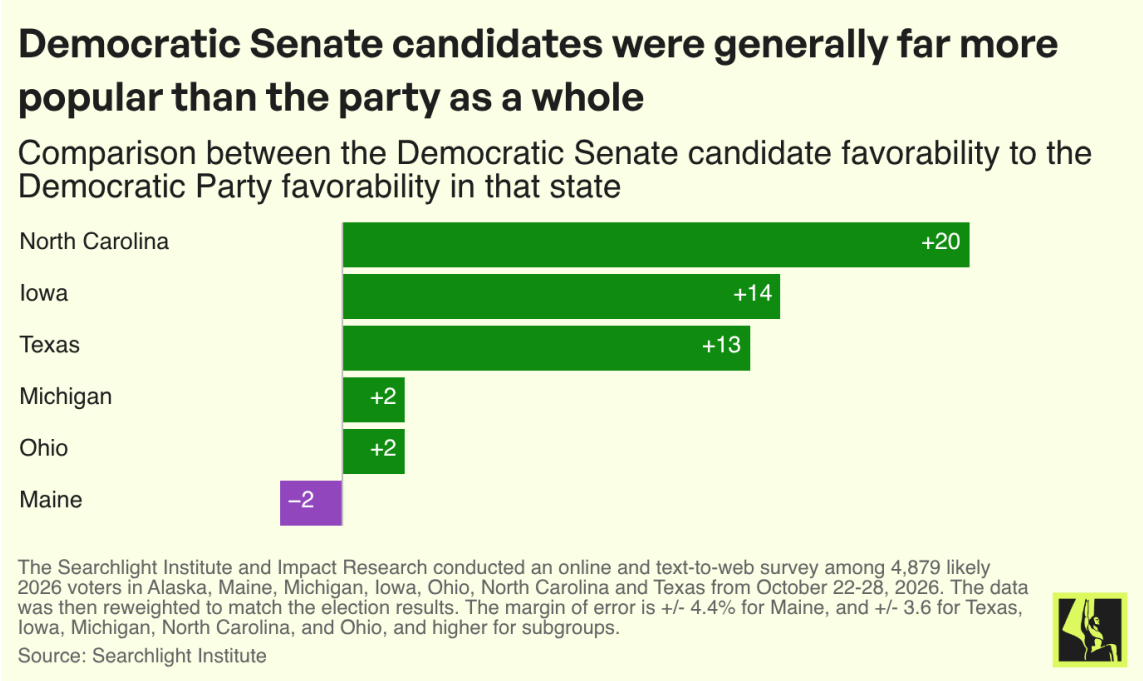
Our Results

Favorability

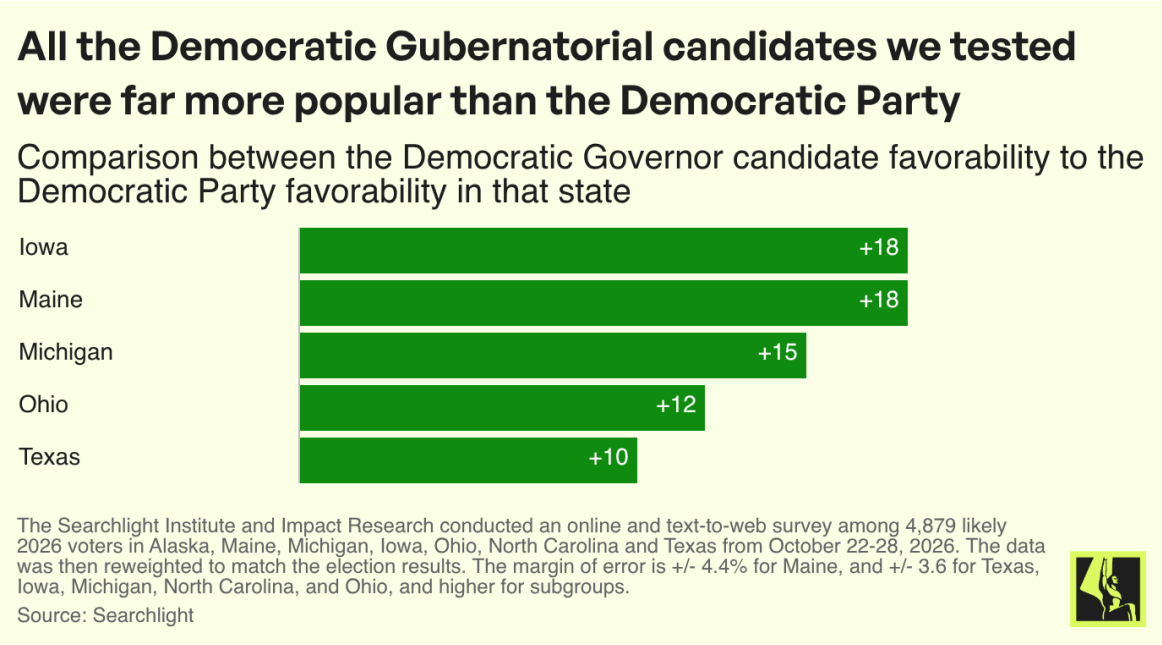
The closest elections were won by candidates who differentiated themselves from the unpopular Democratic brand. While Trump's low approval rating, high prices and the war in Iran drove the bulk of the blue wave, candidates in the most competitive seats needed to appeal to voters who were still unconvinced about Democrats broadly. Our polling showed the biggest overperformers were the ones who were viewed more favorably than the Democratic brand.

Candidate favorability was more closely correlated with vote-choice than ideology. While voters backed candidates who they perceived to be more ideologically aligned, overall favorability was still the strongest indicator. This finding should be interpreted as in-line with the structural anti-establishment sentiment that began during the primary season.

Among the Senate races we polled, the Democratic candidates were viewed more favorably than the national party in five of six; Maine was the only state where the Senate candidate was viewed less favorably, followed by Michigan and Ohio, were the candidates were just two percentage points more popular than the party. The margins in the other states exceeded ten points. It’s important to remember that these margins exist in the context of each state. For example, it’s easier for Josh Turek to be perceived more favorably than the Democratic Party in Iowa because the party brand is quite unpopular. Still, we believe these margins have strong explanatory power when it comes to understanding the factors that led to candidate overperformance.



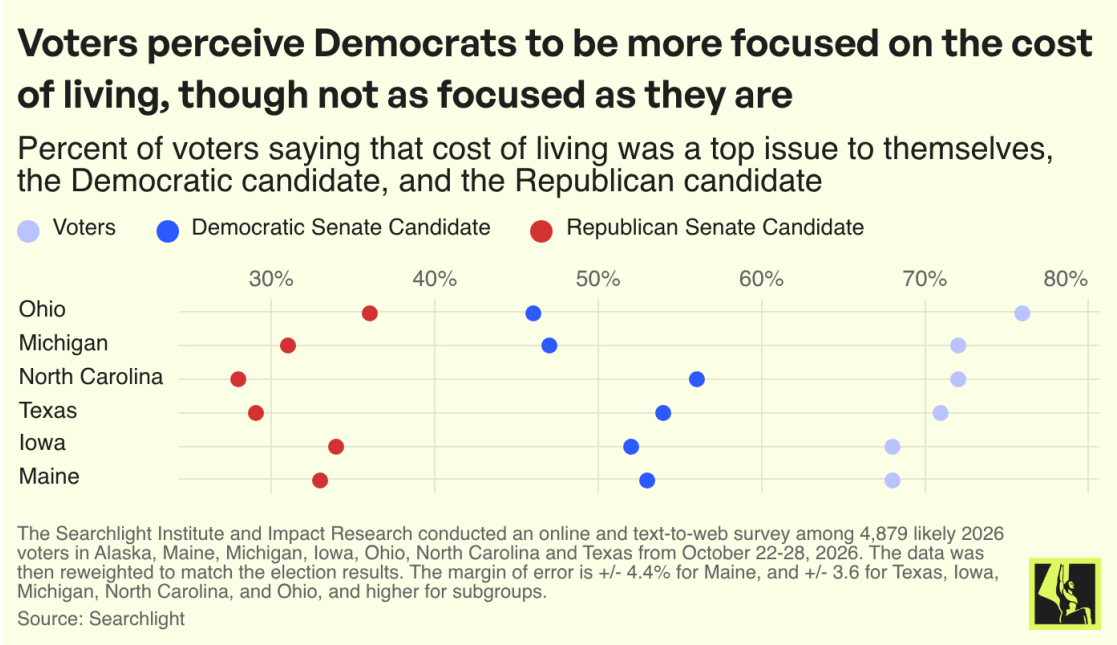
There were several gubernatorial candidates that were viewed much more favorably than the Democratic Party and the Senate candidate on the ballot. Amy Acton was viewed 12 points more favorably than national Democrats and 10 points more favorably than Sherrod Brown. Jocelyn Benson had a 15 point higher favorability rating than the Democratic Party and 13 point higher rating than Abdul El-Sayed. Hannah Pingree was 17 points more popular than the Democratic Party and 20 points more popular than Troy Jackson.



Our polling focused primarily on Senate candidates, however, these insights into the gubernatorial candidates serve as an important contrast when measuring factors such as overperformance.

Issue Priorities

The top issue in each state, by far, was cost of living. In each state, Democrats were perceived to be more focused on the issue than their Republican opponent. This is one of the most important factors that contributed to the Democratic Party's wave victory.



The focus on cost of living is consistent across every single demographic group. Democrats, Republicans, young people, Hispanic voters, and Black voters all reported that the cost of living was the most important issue to their Senate vote. When we gave them the opportunity to write in what the most important factor for their Senate vote was, voters once again emphasized cost of living, inflation, and the economy. This is key to understanding the blue wave. As voters saw it, this election was about costs. Notably, even though voters viewed Democrats as more focused on the cost of living than their Republican opponents, their individual prioritization of the issue still far exceeded where they placed Democrats.

While cost of living was always the top issue, there was some variance between each state on the other issues that mattered most. In Maine, corruption was identified as the next most important issue. In Texas, immigration was comparatively more relevant than in other major states, and it was one of the only issues where Paxton had the advantage over Talarico. Texas Latinos were no more likely to report immigration as a top issue than Texas voters overall, although they were more focused on corruption than most voters. In Ohio, data centers were a priority, but both candidates were perceived to be more focused on the issue than voters; 23% of voters listed it as one of their issues, while 31% said it was one of Sherrod Brown's top priorities, and 45% said the same about Husted.

Beyond the individual issues we polled, it's important to note that Trump was a major deciding factor this election cycle. 75% of Democrats we surveyed said this election was an opportunity to show how they felt about Trump, compared with 54% of Republicans. This discrepancy is largely explained by Trump's negative approval rating in each of the seven states we polled.

Split ticket voters, however, were less likely to be reacting to Trump than either group of partisans, with 50% saying their vote was not about the president. On the issues, these voters

still had roughly the same priorities as the median voter: cost of living and healthcare. They were also slightly more likely to care about Social Security as a top priority.

These ticket splitters did differentiate themselves from straight-ballot Republicans with a lower level of focus on immigration, and from straight-ballot Democrats with a lower focus on corruption. The primary reason why this group did not vote for Republicans was due to the perception that they were not interested in tackling the cost of living.

Ideology Scales

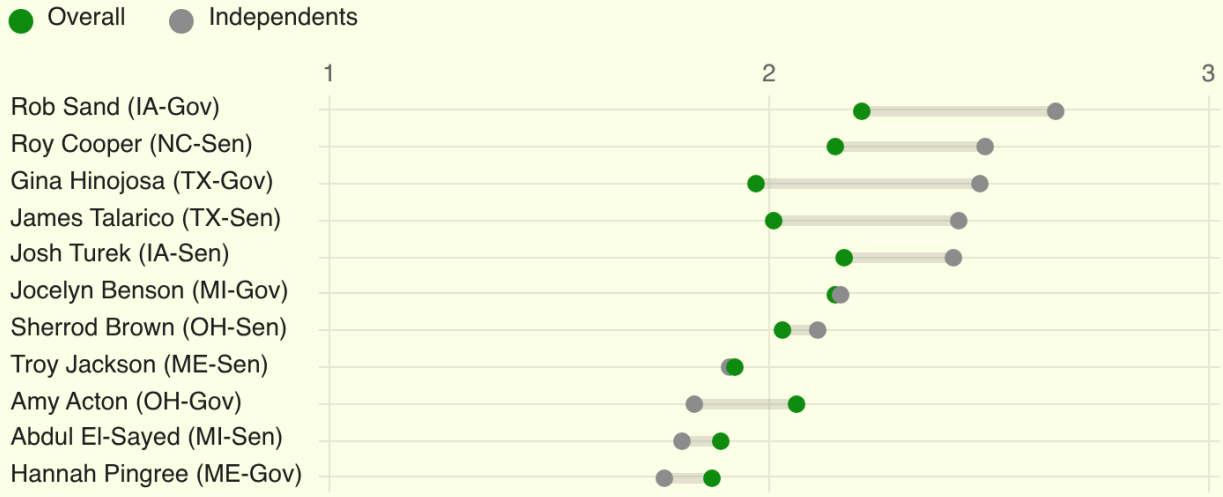
We asked voters in each state to evaluate each candidate's perceived ideology, from very liberal to very conservative on both economic and cultural issues. The most unusual candidate in the sample is, unsurprisingly, Susan Collins, who is seen as significantly more moderate than the typical Republican politician. Her notable breaks with her party is the main reason she's been able to hold on to her seat for so long, and why it took a massive Democratic wave to beat her.

Our best performing Democratic candidates, in Iowa, Texas and North Carolina, are perceived as *more* moderate by Independents than by Democrats. Republicans see every Democratic candidate as very liberal, but heterodox signaling by a candidate opens the door for swing voters to support them. This also suggests that Independents are more sensitive to position-taking by candidates than Democrats are, a promising sign for candidates trying to hold on to their base while also expanding their coalition. El-Sayed was seen as more liberal than typical Democrats by all types of voters. In this wave year, that did not stop moderates from supporting him over his unpopular opponent.

Independents put candidates who overperformed closer to 'moderate' than 'liberal' on an ideological scale

Where voters place Democratic candidates on an ideological scale for social and cultural issues.

1 = very liberal, 3 = moderate



The Searchlight Institute and Impact Research conducted an online and text-to-web survey among 4,879 likely 2026 voters in Alaska, Maine, Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, North Carolina and Texas from October 22-28, 2026. The data was then reweighted to match the election results. The margin of error is +/- 4.4% for Maine, and +/- 3.6 for Texas, Iowa, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio, and higher for subgroups.

Source: Searchlight Institute

Takeaways by state

Iowa:

Rob Sand and Josh Turek ran classic heterodox races, combining "prairie populism" with social moderation. This allowed them to establish personal brands that were completely independent from the national party — Turek was seen 14 points more favorably than the Democratic Party, and Sand 18 points more favorably.

On the issues, Iowa voters perceived Josh Turek to be more focused on the cost of living, while voters thought Ashley Hinson was too focused on immigration. Both Turek and Sand were also rated closer to the median Iowa voter on economic and social ideology.

Maine:

By far, the biggest factor in Maine was the structural anti-GOP environment. Susan Collins was able to defy gravity across each election cycle because voters viewed her to be heterodox and independent from the national GOP brand. The blue wave was simply too much to overcome this time.

While 37% voters — the highest of any GOP Senate candidate — viewed her to be not a "typical" politician, Democratic voters saw the election as primarily a referendum on Trump and by extension, the failure of Collins to truly stand up to him. Forty three percent of Jackson voters said they were voting more against Collins than for Jackson; this was the highest number out of any of our polls.

Michigan:

Jocelyn Benson overperformed Abdul El-Sayed because her net favorability rating was 13 points higher and voters perceived her to be more closely aligned with them on economics and social ideology. El-Sayed also benefited from a weaker GOP opponent than Benson; Mike Rogers had a favorability rating of -9, while John James had a neutral rating. Trump dragged down each of these candidates with his own -15 favorability rating in the state.

Still, Abdul El-Sayed's 7.5 margin of victory shows that candidates who are perceived as more ideologically liberal than the median voter can win swing states in a wave year. His laser focused message on healthcare costs also broke through to voters, who saw him as the most healthcare-focused of the Democratic candidates by 9 points. Benson's overperformance can also partially be explained by her own well-established reputation in the state, which very likely contributed to her high favorability rating.

North Carolina:

Roy Cooper didn't just flip a red seat, he won by the highest margin out of any Senate candidate we polled. He benefited from both a strong personal favorability rating, which was 19 points higher than the Democratic Party, as well as the fact that the Republican brand was -13.

Cooper had a sizable advantage on the issues voters care about: cost of living and healthcare. He was also viewed to be more ideologically aligned with the median voter, which was influenced by his well-established brand and the fact that he ran a locally focused campaign on grocery prices and public safety.

Ohio:

In Ohio, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party were both unpopular and Amy Acton was the only politician with a positive favorability rating; she was able to separate herself from the Democratic brand by a margin of 12 points. Sherrod Brown was also marginally more popular than the Democratic Party, with neutral (+0) favorability. Regardless, the blue wave was big enough to elect both candidates to comfortable margins over their deeply unpopular opponents.

Amy Acton overperformed Brown primarily because voters viewed him to be a "typical" Democrat, which was a negative in the anti-establishment environment of this year. Both Acton

and Brown benefited from very unpopular opponents, with Husted at -13 and Ramaswamy at -14.

Texas:

The blue wave hit Texas the hardest. James Talarico won by 12 points, beating Kamala Harris' margin in the state by a massive 26 points, and Democrats won nearly every statewide election. Our polling shows that this sweep was driven by an unpopular president, and candidates who broke from the Democratic Party brand. In particular, Latino voters (who we oversampled for additional accuracy) were more sour on the direction of the country, and on Trump, than voters overall. While immigration was a bigger priority than in other states, Texas voters (including Latinos) were still primarily focused on the cost of living.

Discussion

The story of the 2026 midterms was deep anti-Trump sentiment and frustration about increased cost of living. But that top-line finding should not obscure the fact that Democrats who ran on a heterodox set of issues clearly resonated with the electorate, especially the voters who needed a permission structure to cast their ballot for a Democrat.

Unsurprisingly, the best electoral performers were the ones who were able to carve out favorable individual approval ratings that were distinct from the unpopular party brand; James Talarico, Josh Turek, and Roy Cooper are examples of candidates who were successful in this strategy, whereas Sherrod Brown, Troy Jackson, and Abdul El-Sayed had overall ratings that were closer to the Democratic Party.

Still, the blue wave turned everyone into a winner on election night and the Democratic Party proved that it could be ideologically diverse and as well as electorally competitive.