The derision of Latinas/os and Latin American immigrants has been a central and calculated strategy of the Trump administration from the infamous 2015 campaign announcement maligning Mexican immigrants as “criminals” and “rapists” and continues through to the dismissal of Puerto Rico after the devastation of Hurricanes Maria and Irma, the execution of a “zero tolerance policy” on undocumented families on the U.S-Mexico border, the incarceration of more than 2,400 children, the challenge to birthright citizenship, the deployment of 5,200 troops to the border, and prolonged derision of a caravan of Central American migrants. Even the 35-day government shutdown and the recent declaration of a national emergency rest on racialized narratives casting immigrants as “animals,” “thugs,” “national security threats,” and “terrorists” to justify a costly border wall. These attacks once again became the campaign “dog whistle” of the 2018 midterm elections as several Republicans banked on a relentless strategy of derision to consolidate a nationalist identity, assuage a fragile masculinity, and ultimately mobilize white voters.

However effective Trump’s manipulation of racialized and gendered tropes proved in his 2016 Presidential bid, the same strategies worked against much of the Republican national field in the
2018 elections.

Hypermasculine discourse and racialized attacks have undermined Republican party efforts to expand beyond a narrow base of rural white voters and advance substantive legislation. With a net gain of 40 Congressional seats, Democrats regained control of the House of Representatives (earning more than nine million votes across all House races—more than any party in any previous midterm election).

Polling indicates that racialized attacks actually turned some white voters away from Republican candidates, particularly in competitive districts. For instance, data from the 2018 Latino Decisions Election Eve Poll reveals that 57% of white voters in competitive districts said that Mr. Trump’s words and deeds made them angry while 50% agreed that Trump’s policies have had a negative impact and/or are intended to hurt Blacks/Latinos/Asian Americans/Immigrants and minorities. Republican House candidates, who carried 60% of the white voters in 2016, retained only 54% of white voters in 2018, according to data from the National Election Pool. The bulk of Republicans who mirrored Trump’s derisive narrative on immigrants lost their elections, including 31 House Republicans. In other words, the GOP not only failed to mobilize white voters, but also lost ground with white voters (including moderate Republicans and independents).

While an increasing number of suburban, younger, female and independent voters defected from the Republican party, Latinas/os were especially important to the outcome of the 2018 midterms.

Pre-election polling from Latino Decisions suggests a record high turnout for Latina/o voters in 2018, with approximately 74% casting their vote for Democratic House candidates and only 24% supporting Republican candidates. This result exceeds even Latina/o Democratic partisan affiliation, and reflects increased support for Democratic candidates from both Cuban American voters and Puerto Rican voters in longtime GOP strongholds like Florida. Latina voters registered and supported Democrats more than Latinos, highly motivated to reject the administration’s anti-immigrant attacks (70% reported that Trump made them angry and 72% that they felt disrespected).

California was particularly important to Democratic prospects of flipping Republican seats to solidify control of the House. Seven seats previously held by white Republican representatives went to Democrats (including Latino Gil Cisneros in the 38th district) as coalitions of Latinas/os, women, younger, independent/no-party affiliation, and college educated voters joined the party faithful. According to UCLA’s Latino Policy and Politics Initiative, some of California’s most populated counties saw significant increases in voter turnout; 75% of Latino dominant precincts saw a rise of more than 40% in ballots cast over 2014 levels.

Meanwhile, the 2018 midterms saw the rise of candidates and voters who embodied raced and gendered resistance.

Record numbers of women and Latinas/os became part of the electoral process as advocates, fundraisers, donors, campaign staff, commentators, canvassers, organizers, voters, and, most importantly, candidates. Women of color won a record number of Congressional seats and proved significant in shifting the balance of power in the House. Ayanna Pressley became the first woman of color in the Massachusetts congressional delegation, Rashida Tlaib (MI) and Ilhan Omar (MN) became the first Muslim women in Congress, and Sharice Davids (KS) and Deb Haaland (NM) became the first Native women elected to Congress. In New Mexico, Michelle Lujan Grisham became the first Latina Democrat elected as Governor. In fact, Latinas won five new seats in Congress, joining all seven Latina incumbents seeking re-election and increasing the total number of Latinas in the House of Representatives by 30%.
Texas sent its first two Latina representatives to Congress: Veronica Escobar and Sylvia Garcia who won in congressional districts 16 and 29, respectively. Escobar and Garcia foregrounded struggles around Medicare and economic instability, while pushing back against the racialized attacks on immigrants in their states. As Escobar told the Texas Observer, “[As] the Trump administration... is targeting communities like mine... [I will] push back against the politics of hatred.”

In the end, as Trump’s attacks on Latina/o immigrants grew more intense throughout 2018 and the administration threatened key Democratic initiatives such as DACA and the Affordable Care Act, Latina/o support for Republican candidates declined.

At the same time the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee invested 30 million in targeted Latina/o outreach and mobilization. In other words, as the Democratic party became more racially, ethnically, religiously, and regionally diverse, the Republican party – guided by Trump’s racialized narrative – opted to constrain diversity and become more invested in whiteness, masculinity and a shrinking population of rural voters. Heading into the 2020 election season the continued investment of Trump and his Congressional allies in racialized attacks aimed at Latinas/os promises to further alienate the Republican party from the expanding Latina/o electorate and further distance the party from moderate Republicans, independents, and women who increased their support for Democratic party positions and candidates in 2018.

Ultimately, the historic government shutdown that did lasting damage to the economy and hundreds of thousands of Americans prompted by Trump’s insistence that Congress allocate $5.6 billion for a border wall, underscores the degenerative nature of Trump’s attacks to both the Republican party and the country. It is a strategy that helped fuel resounding Republican defeats in 2018, dominates the party’s domestic agenda, and is crushing the future of the Republican party.

— Anna Sampaio is Associate Professor and Ethnic Studies and Political Science at Santa Clara University and Chair of the Department of Ethnic Studies. Her most recent book, Terrorizing Latina/o Immigrants: Race, Gender, and Immigration Politics in the Age of Security (Temple University Press, 2013), won the 2016 American Political Science Association award for the Best New Book in Latina/o Politics.