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The Blue Wave Lapped at the Shores of Texas This Year - and it was Powered by Latino Voters

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Though Republicans held on against the current in statewide races, Latinos helped send El Paso's Veronica Escobar and Houston's Sylvia Garcia of Houston to Washington, D.C. They'll be the state's first two Latinas in Congress.

Democrats won 12 Texas House seats, including five in Dallas, and unseated two North Texas Republican state senators.

And the surge of Latino voters across the state almost made the difference in the nationally watched Senate race between Beto O'Rourke and Ted Cruz.

That has Latino voter mobilization groups and political experts confident that enthusiasm around the 2018 race, paired with natural population growth, is likely to make Texas a truly competitive state by 2020 and maybe even a shade of blue.

Bernard Fraga, an assistant political science professor at Indiana University, said the Texas population is already that of a purple state and the only reason it isn't a swing state is that many residents don't vote. But he said that may have changed this year thanks to Latinos.

Fraga analyzed early voter turnout in some of Texas' largest, most diverse counties and found that Latino turnout matched that of the 2016 presidential election, when turnout is generally higher.

"What we're seeing is that it can be done as long as Democrats employ a strategy for reaching Latinos who aren't registered and don't usually vote," Fraga said. "I don't think it's guaranteed, but a continued, all-hands-on-deck effort to reach young, Latino voters could make Texas fully competitive."

In Dallas County, where about 40 percent of the population is Hispanic, 300,000 more people voted in this election than in 2014. The heavier turnout helped lift several Latinos to political victories.

Figures for the 2018 midterm are not yet available, but an early analysis from Latino Decisions, a national polling group, found that overall turnout surged in Texas from 2014 to 2018 in heavily Latino counties, especially those along the border:

- Dallas County — 86 percent increase
- Hidalgo — 105 percent increase
- Cameron County — 115 percent increase
- El Paso County, O'Rourke's home county — 168 percent increase



Guillermo Araujo, first time midterm voter, and his children, Angela, 9, and Roman, 4, at their house in Oak Cliff on Thursday, Nov. 9, 2018. Araujo said he is trying to teach his children not to vote for who is popular but to "know the candidates and vote for who best represents you." (Daniel Carde/Staff Photographer)

National Latino voter turnout has been on the rise steadily, according to the Pew Research Center. About 12.7 million Latinos voted in 2016; 11.2 million voted in 2014; and 9.7 million voted in 2008.

Many voted for Democrats, although there's plenty of evidence the Latino vote should not be taken for granted. Though younger Latinos tend to favor progressive candidates, many older Latinos tend to vote in line with traditional, sometimes Catholic values.

Election polling by Latino Decisions in Texas found that about 70 percent of Latinos supported Democratic candidates. And a national Associated Press exit poll found that nearly 70 percent of Latinos reported voting Democratic.

Statewide, Associated Press exit polls showed that 69 percent of Latinos reported voting for O'Rourke compared to 30 percent for Cruz. Similarly, 63 percent of Latinos reported voting for Lupe Valdez for governor over incumbent Gov. Greg Abbott, who got 35 percent.

Guillermo Araujo, a 26-year-old Oak Cliff resident and father of two, was among the Latinos to make their way to the polls this election.

He said three things drove him to vote this year: immigration, health care and O'Rourke's message. When the El Paso candidate's campaign reached out to Araujo via text this year, it was the first time he'd ever been contacted by a campaign or political party.

"I was excited," Araujo said. "It felt like I was finally going to be able to help."

The personal outreach of O'Rourke's campaign, said Cristina Tzintzun, director of Jolt Texas, a Latino voter mobilization group, was key in this election, and it's an example of how parties and candidates should motivate Latinos come future elections.

"There has to be real investments in non-presidential years. Democrats can't just depend on [Latinos] being disgusted by rhetoric or a single candidate," Tzintzun said. "There needs to be a solid investment in outreach efforts — especially for young people."

Historically, Latino politicians who head to Congress have come from both parties. Nearly six decades ago, the first Latino to the U.S. House of Representatives was a Democrat, Henry B. Gonzalez of San Antonio, in 1961. The first Latina to head to Congress was a Republican, Florida's Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen in 1989.

The first Latino to reach the U.S. Senate was a Republican, Octaviano Ambrosio Larrazola in 1928 from New Mexico. The Mexico-born lawyer had also run before as a Democrat.

And O'Rourke, of course, is not Latino, despite his use of his Spanish nickname "Beto" rather than his birth name, Robert. Cruz, whose birth name is Rafael and nickname is Ted, is the son of a Cuban immigrant.

Araujo, whose two younger siblings also turned out for O'Rourke, said he's looking forward to 2020.

"I hope we can keep the enthusiasm up," Araujo said. "I hope people don't get discouraged just because Beto didn't win. He almost did it."

Latinos heavily favored Democrats

Dallas resident Carmen Ruiz, 19, voted for the first time this year. She voted a straight Democratic ticket because of her concerns about immigration.

“Voting is important for everyone but especially for my family,” Ruiz said. “I am the only one who can vote.”

Nancy Richer, the Dallas County GOP’s Hispanic engagement director, said she was happy to see many new Latino voters make their voices heard at the polls, though she feels Republicans may have fumbled the conversation around immigration, leading many Latinos to support Democrats.

“This was a concern for us,” Richer said. “Many Latinos may have felt discouraged from voting Republican. Many Latinos put immigration above everything else.”

A survey released last month by Jolt Initiative, a Texas Latino issues think tank, found that younger Latinos in Texas prioritize health care for all, immigration reform and social justice issues above most issues. Almost a third openly identify as Democrats, though most are independent.

Looking to future elections, Richer said that young voters tend to be more about following the hype and are likely to change their minds later.

“Their motivation and passion are nice, but they need guidance,” Richer said. “When you’re young, you have a lot of ideas about changing the world. A lot of these younger Latinos favor immigration changes and LGBT issues. [Republicans] are not against those things, but we also believe in structure.”

But social change may have been at play in some statehouse upsets. Ana-Maria Ramos bumped out Republican incumbent Linda Koop in northeast Dallas County for House District 102.

Koop used a variation of President Donald Trump’s language about “terrorist threats on the rise” and supported troops at the border. Ramos, an attorney, played up her immigrant parents and an endorsement from former President Barack Obama in bilingual messaging.

Matt Barreto, the co-founder and pollster at Latino Decisions, said a big part of Texas Latinos voting for Democrats was the voter courtship employed by O’Rourke, who paid many visits to the border community to the southeast of his own border hometown of El Paso.

“It was one of the first times you had a candidate going there competing for votes, and voters responded to that,” he said. “It is exactly what produces turnout, when a candidate goes into a community and fights for votes. ... When they are neglected, year after year, then they turn out at lower rates.”

Exit polling from The Associated Press found that Latinas favored O’Rourke by 74 percent compared to 63 percent of Latino men.

“We saw a much higher rate of anger over Trump’s rhetoric among women — about 10 points higher in the rejection of the rhetoric,” Barreto said.



David Sanchez, civics engagement director at Jolt, center, stands and listens during a Jolt workshop to help its canvassers find employment in Garland on Thursday, Nov. 9, 2018. (Shaban Athuman/Staff Photographer)

A reckoning for anti-immigrant attacks

In North Texas, voters pushed out state Rep. Matt Rinaldi, who called Immigration and Customs Enforcement on several Hispanic protesters at the Austin statehouse last year. Replacing Rinaldi will be Julie Johnson, who will be one of Dallas-Fort Worth's first openly gay representatives.

"I have no regrets," Rinaldi said Friday. He stands by his tough immigration stance and praised passage last year of so-called anti-sanctuary city legislation.

"This was a Beto-driven wave that took down everyone in my district," he said. "The suburbs turned blue. That is the problem."

Added to the enthusiasm for O'Rourke was a backlash against Trump, Rinaldi said. "Donald Trump was performing badly in the suburbs, even last election, and when you combine it with Beto O'Rourke, it produced a very strong wave."

Cruz lost House District 115 by 17 points, Rinaldi noted.

Rinaldi's district in northwest Dallas County was one of five targeted by **Dallas-Area Interfaith**, a group that organized canvassing and phone banks to pump up voter turnout.

At an election night watch party at Holy Trinity Catholic Church in Dallas, a television report flashed on the screen and showed that Rinaldi was losing. Lily Rodriguez shouted out: "Why don't you call immigration now?"

Rodriguez said she had quietly fumed when Rinaldi called ICE on protesters, but took action and began pushing parishioners at another Catholic church to vote.

She'd talked to them about the size of the Hispanic population, which in Dallas County is 40 percent and larger than any other group. "Hispanics are the majority and we continue to think like minorities," Rodriguez said.

Interfaith organizer Socorro Perales said members were determined to get more people to the polls. Two weeks before polling began, the nonpartisan group held a community event at a church that brought in 2,000 people and five candidates, all Democrats.

"They are learning to organize, strategize, and this actually works," Perales said.

All five candidates won, including Colin Allred, the Democrat who beat Republican incumbent Rep. Pete Sessions, a staunch ally of Trump, in the District 32 race for Congress.

Perales said she didn't go after the low hanging fruit — those registered who had previously voted. Instead, she sifted through lists of registered voters who didn't vote in the last election.



Dallas-Area Interfaith organizer Socorro Perales (left) and Lily Rodriguez on Thursday, Nov. 8, 2018 at Thanksgiving Tower in Dallas. (Ashley Landis/Staff Photographer)

“They are just not used to voting,” Perales said. “There are enough registered voters and, if we can broaden the base, we can win. And we did.”

A road map to a blue Texas

Some Latinos were disappointed with Tuesday’s results.

Ofelia Faz-Garza, a community arts instructor, was glum in her post-election analysis. She saw plenty of excitement among young and old and in heavily Latino neighborhoods like West Dallas, where many seniors wore Beto T-shirts.

“We didn’t get out as many as I was expecting. This happens after each election,” said Faz-Garza, who was hoping for an O’Rourke victory.

But over the next 10 years, 2 million Latinos will turn 18 in Texas and about 95 percent of them will be eligible to vote.

This natural growth, said Jolt director Tzintzun, is what makes her feel optimistic about Latinos making more of an impact in future elections.

The Texas Youth Power Alliance hopes to hone that growth in order to make Texas more competitive.

The four-organization effort — which includes Jolt Texas, Texas Freedom Network, Move Texas and Youth Rise — aims to register 300,000 new, mostly Latino and black voters between 18 to 25 by 2020. This demographic largely tends to favor Democratic, liberal candidates, Tzintzun said

Despite Cruz’s victory, Tzintzun said, this election served as a road map to getting Latinos to the polls and turning Texas purple or maybe even blue.

“I’m excited because Republicans are shaking in their boots,” Tzintzun said. “They could lose Texas by 2020 if we’re successful in getting people to turn out and vote. We are determined to make sure that it’s Latinos who change the direction of our country and end the politics of hate.”