

The Dallas Morning News

Latino voters could make a difference in national and North Texas races

Democrats, and increasingly Republicans, are making a push to get Latino voters out in the 2020 high-stakes election

By Nic Garcia - November 2, 2020

The San Juan Diego Catholic Parish in northwest Dallas was a flurry of activity Saturday afternoon.

Family members marched into the church behind a young woman in a sparkling blue ball gown to celebrate her quinceañera. A group of mothers hung decorations for a [Dia de los Muertos celebration](#).

And under the giant kiosk, or kiosk, a small group of volunteers for the Dallas Area Interfaith met to discuss their final push to energize voters — especially Latinos — to cast their ballot on Tuesday.

The nonpartisan political nonprofit is one of several groups in Dallas and across the state working to get Latinos to the polls. The goal is to boost candidates who are more likely to support progressive policies that would expand health care and police reform as well as establish drivers licenses for immigrants without documentation.

The group has targeted six statehouse races in North Texas where they hope to energize voters to pick candidates who support their agenda.

These races have attracted big money as partisan control of the legislature hangs in the balance for the first time in decades. In order to reach voters, the interfaith group has hosted a candidate forum and relied heavily on phone calls and text messages to voters.

The goal on Saturday was to maintain the momentum and keep calling.

“Organized people will have an impact in these races,” Josephine Lopez Paul, the lead organizer for the interfaith group, told her team leaders Saturday.

The group’s efforts underscore how Texas is increasingly becoming a true battleground state in large part because of Latino voters.



Josephine Lopez Paul, right, speaks to a group of volunteers during a Dallas Area Interfaith meeting Oct. 31 at the San Juan Diego Catholic Parish to discuss mobilizing Latino voters. (Jason Janik/Special Contributor)

Nearly [400,000 Latinos — about the same number of people who live in Arlington — have turned 18 since the 2018 midterm elections](#) when Democrat Beto O'Rourke narrowly lost to Republican U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz.

While still a loss for progressives, the race sent shockwaves through the once reliably conservative state. And after that election, [political observers hypothesized](#) if the Latino turnout continued to grow, their participation would boost Democrats to power for the first time in a generation.

On Monday, the Texas Organizing Project PAC, which is supporting Democratic candidates, announced it had reached by phone, text and door-knocking more than half a million new or infrequent voters in eight counties, including Dallas and Tarrant. Of the 544,448 voters, 45% were Latino.

While there is little doubt Texas Latinos will turn out in record numbers this Election Day, it is not a guarantee that they will hand power over to Democrats.

Latinos are less monolithic in their political support, especially compared to Black Americans who have historically — and overwhelmingly — supported Democrats. That is especially true in states such as Texas and Florida.

A recent survey by [Latino Decisions and Univision found](#) 66% of Latinos here support former Vice President Joe Biden, while 22% support President Donald Trump.

It should not surprise observers that nearly one in four Latinos support Trump, said Orlando Sanchez, the former Harris County treasurer who this year launched a political nonprofit. That's despite Trump being widely considered hostile to non-white Americans, especially immigrants.

Sanchez, a naturalized citizen, argues Latino cultures that place a strong emphasis on families, religion and rule of law naturally align with conservatives.

“They want to make their own determinations on their finances, where their children are going to be educated and are family-oriented,” he said. “We're the largest ethnic group in Texas. We have several needs in our community which are very unique. And we're arguing we need to apply conservative principles to those issues.”

This year, Sanchez launched Texas Latino Conservatives, a political nonprofit and political action committee, which can raise money and endorse candidates for state offices.

His group — fueled by hundreds of thousands of dollars from mega Republican donors such as Dallas' Robert B. Rowling and Harlan Crow — has targeted 80,000 Latino conservatives in 25 state House races who have inconsistent voting records.

“They haven’t been inspired,” he said. “Both political parties have failed immigrants and the Latino community.”

One North Texas Republican who hopes to build a broad, multi-ethnic coalition is state House candidate [Will Douglas, who is challenging incumbent Rhetta Bowers](#). She was first elected to represent southeastern Dallas County cities such as Sunnyvale, Balch Springs and Seagoville, where residents are mostly Black and Latino, according to state data.

On a recent Saturday, Douglas and a team of volunteers knocked on 2,000 doors in Garland, targeting Spanish-speaking voters.

“Texas is changing,” said Trevor Naglieri, Douglas' campaign manager. “We’re building a diverse campaign and doing things Republicans don’t traditionally do — it’s about creating opportunity for all Texans, regardless of creed, gender, religion or race.”

While immigration was a driving force in Republican turnout in 2016 and 2018, the issue hasn’t gotten as much attention as the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit the Latino community hard.

Latinos are more likely to have a higher risk of exposure due to working essential jobs in grocery stores, construction and other service industries. In Dallas County, Latinos have made up 46% of all COVID-19 related deaths, slightly higher than their share of the overall population.

And once they contract the virus, they’re more likely to get sick because of preexisting conditions such as diabetes.

The pandemic is one reason why Melinda Banda, a volunteer with the progressive interfaith group, has decided to vote this year.

Both her mother- and sister-in-law have battled severe cases of COVID-19, resulting in hospitalization and oxygen to help them breath. Banda’s sister-in-law is still having trouble walking after being under heavy sedation.

The 37-year-old Pleasant Grove resident became an American citizen in 2018 after participating in an interfaith program that helps immigrants obtain legal status.

Born in Mexico, Banda has volunteered for interfaith in a variety of ways, including setting up a forum for state House candidates.



Josephine Lopez Paul, center, speaks to volunteers during a Dallas Area Interfaith meeting to discuss mobilizing Latino voters at The San Juan Diego Catholic Parish in Dallas, TX, on Oct. 31, 2020. (Jason Janik/Special Contributor)

“It’s important for candidates to hear from us what our needs are, to hear from them and not just read what is promised on their website,” she said.

And since the pandemic, she has convinced her native-born husband to vote for the first time.

“He thought his vote didn’t matter,” she said. “Unless we vote, people with more power will keep it.”

Lopez Paul, the interfaith group’s leader, said 220 volunteers have made 9,367 phone calls to voters. About 4,700 voted infrequently and 600 of them were Spanish-only speakers.

Margarito Garcia Jr., 32, is one of those volunteers making phone calls, despite the fact he cannot vote in this election. He lives in the U.S. under the DACA program, which was put in place by President Barack Obama to give young immigrants brought here as children the ability to remain in the country.

“A citizen isn’t someone who is born here, but someone who cares about the community they live in,” he said about his work in the political process.

When Latino voters come out, he said, it reminds candidates that they are part of this country.

“Latinos have a voice,” he said. “Politicians need to know that when they make decisions, we are important and that we exist.”

CORRECTION, 1 p.m. Nov. 3, 2020: An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified Orlando Sanchez. This post has also been updated to clarify the **Dallas Area Interfaith** group is nonpartisan and supports progressive policies, not specific candidates.