

Austin American-Statesman

# Suburban Swing: Once Reliably Red, Williamson Voters Back Both Biden, Cornyn

By Philip Janowski, November 7, 2020



For the second time in two years, Williamson County, once regarded as a bulwark for Republicans, voted to send a Democrat to federal office.

Former Vice President Joe Biden won the county narrowly in an election that saw massive turnout across the state. In Williamson County, turnout edged up to 76%, one of the highest turnout rates in the state.

But experts and politicians in the county directly north of Travis County do not see voting trends there as surefire evidence that Williamson County has flipped from red to blue even as the county ping ponged from favoring Donald Trump by nearly 10 points over Hillary Clinton in 2016 to supporting Biden over Trump by 1 point in 2020.

But the political makeup of a county that has seen its population increase 40% in the past 10 years certainly has changed.

“I don’t think anybody can objectively look at Williamson County and say that it is the red bastion that it used to be,” said Round Rock Mayor Craig Morgan. “If I looked at Williamson County as a state, I would say Williamson has become a swing state.”

What happened in Williamson is not isolated. Across Texas, many suburban counties that have been considered reliably red slipped more in favor of Democrats even as the party failed to meet projections of large gains in state and federal congressional seats.

In Collin County just north of Dallas, where Clinton lost to Trump by nearly 17 points in 2016, Trump won by just under 5 points this election. In nearby Denton County, Biden lost to Trump by 8 points — but Clinton got clobbered by 20 points there in 2016.

And the often unpredictable Hays County, which went for Trump by less than 1 percentage point in 2016, this time went for Biden by 11 points.

“I think the Trump elections — I include 2016, 2018 and 2020 — are a unique beast because he is so polarizing,” said Derek Ryan, a Republican consultant and election data analyst in Texas.

The remarkable thing, Ryan said, is that there were often large differences between the share of votes for Trump versus votes for down-ballot Republicans, who more often than not fared better than the president.

Take Sen. John Cornyn, who statewide beat his Democrat challenger M.J. Hegar by 10 points even as Trump bested Biden by about 6 points. In Williamson County, Cornyn actually edged out Hegar by 3 points, though Biden carried the county.

“It’s really interesting that we saw that in some of the down-ballot races, you had Republicans outperforming President Trump by five, six, seven percentage points,” Ryan said.

“In the local area, you look at Williamson County and if you weren’t the president and weren’t under indictment and running, you were all right,” Ryan said, referencing Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody, who **was defeated** by Democratic challenger Mike Gleason after being **indicted in September** on an evidence tampering charge connected to the **fatal use of force** against a man following a police chase.

Cornyn also outperformed Trump in Bastrop, Collin, Denton, Fort Bend and Hays counties.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, narrowly won reelection in District 52, which includes western Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. Talarico said that while the political makeup



Roy Spencer, 61, waves to passengers as cars exit the Williamson County Annex Center in Round Rock, where voting took place Election Day. Spencer said he voted for Donald Trump in 2016, but voted for Joe Biden this year. (Rebecca Macias/American-Statesman)

of Williamson County has changed as its population has boomed, he said he also heard anecdotally from several constituents who are traditionally Republican who said they were going to vote for him and Biden.

“The folks that are here are compassionate and logical and empathetic,” Talarico said. “I think the thing that’s changed is the politics around them, the Republican Party that most of my neighbors used to support. It’s not the same Republican Party.”

Talarico also might have gotten a boost from efforts from **Central Texas Interfaith**, a network of churches, synagogues and other religious organizations that held its own nonpartisan get-out-the-vote campaign.

The group targeted voting precincts with historically low voter turnout and church presence with a phone campaign aimed at individuals the organization identified as low propensity voters. By the end of early voting, they saw marked increases in 16 of the 17 precincts they targeted across the Austin area. Those included Williamson County precincts in Talarico’s district as well as State Rep. John Bucy III’s district. Bucy, D-Austin, also won reelection Tuesday.

Rev. Miles R. Brandon II, of St. Julian of Norwich Episcopal Church in Round Rock, said many of the people they contacted found it refreshing that they were being asked only to vote and weren’t being sold a particular candidate or political party.

“We don’t talk to people about candidates, but we talk to them about issues,” Brandon said. “I think, we don’t get hung up as much because we don’t represent a party or candidate.”

Of the nearly 18,000 people contacted, about 9,500 of them ended up casting a vote by the end of early voting, according to Central Texas Interfaith. Several candidates on the ballot who worked with the network of congregations, including Talarico, Bucy and State Rep. Vikki Goodwin, won their respective races.

At the Williamson County annex in Round Rock on Tuesday, Roy Spencer, 61, had been waving a “I’m Ridin with Biden” flag for roughly eight hours near the voting center. Spencer, who said he voted for Trump in 2016, predicted a landslide for Biden in Williamson County. That ultimately didn’t come true — Biden topped Trump by 3,808 votes in a county that cast more than 280,000 ballots — but Trump’s image certainly played a role in Spencer’s decision to back Biden.

“Trump simply cares about how he looks on television and does not care what is best for the American people. Biden does care and will do what is best for our country first,” he said.

*American-Statesman reporter Rebecca Macias contributed to this report.*