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Campaigns shift focus to turnout on Tuesday

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Left: Campaign volunteers dance and wave at cars as Rep. Lizzie Fletcher speaks with a member of the community at a Halloween drive-thru giveaway in Cypress. Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer.
Right: Republican congressional challenger Wesley Hunt speaks with volunteers Saturday before they block walk from the campaign's west Houston headquarters. Mark Mulligan / Staff photographer.

On the final Saturday before Election Day, U.S. Rep. Lizzie Fletcher corralled campaign volunteers ahead of one of their final text- and phone-banking sessions.

The freshman Democrat's campaign has relied heavily on those efforts amid the coronavirus pandemic, and campaign officials said Saturday that they'd sent more than a half-million texts and placed the same number of calls to potential voters.

Across town, Republican challenger Wesley Hunt briefly spoke to about 30 volunteers before they headed out to homes in the surrounding neighborhood in search of voters.

"We want everybody to turn out," the former Army pilot said. "I want as many people to exercise their constitutional right to go vote, primarily because people died for it."

A day after Texas closed out an early-voting period that saw record turnout, campaigns and nonpartisan groups spent Saturday making among their final cases to potential or undecided voters in southeast Texas, hoping that last-minute get-out-the-vote efforts would bring out supporters on Election Day despite ongoing concerns about the risk of COVID-19.

Still, such voters have become harder to find in the closing days of the 2020 campaign. The reason? Early voting.

On Thursday, Harris County eclipsed its total number of votes in 2016, when 1.34 million voters cast ballots and broke the county's previous record for turnout. That number was reported with one day still left in early voting — including a 24-hour voting period that ended Friday.

"Campaigns have to be more strategic about who they target to get out on Election Day," said Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston. "Campaigns have to focus on people who are less likely to come out and harder to turn out to vote, and the key difficulty is making Election Day exciting when there's already been so many high points in early voting."

Fletcher and Hunt said they were not fazed by the comparatively small slice of the electoral pie left.

"It's critically important that we get out … everyone that can vote, and we're working on that around the clock," said Fletcher, whose 7th Congressional District covers western Harris County.

And nonpartisan groups continued their get-out-the-vote pushes as well.

Drive-thru voting suit

Meanwhile, a group of conservatives continued to mount a legal challenge to one of the cornerstones of Harris County's efforts to boost participation: drivethru voting.

Houston conservative activist Steven Hotze and three Republicans — state Rep. Steve Toth, congressional candidate Wendell Champion and judicial candidate Sharon Hemphill — are seeking an injunction in federal court requiring all memory cards from 10 drive-thru voting locations be secured and not entered or downloaded into the tally machine until the court issues a ruling on the merits of their complaint.

They argue that expanding curbside drive-thru voting constitutes a "scheme" that violates state and federal election laws.

More than 100,000 Harris County voters had already cast such ballots by the time of the lawsuit's filing.

Harris County Clerk Chris Hollins, who is the only individual named in the suit, defended the option on Saturday, calling it "a safe, secure and convenient way to vote."

"Texas Election Code allows it, the Secretary of State approved it, and 117,000 voters from all walks of life have used it," Hollins said in a statement. "The Harris County Clerk's Office is committed to counting every vote cast by registered voters in this election. In the event court proceedings require any additional steps from these voters, we will work swiftly to provide that information to the public."

U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen, an appointee of President George W. Bush, will hear the group's motion on Monday morning.

Last week, the Texas Supreme Court rejected a request by Republicans to halt drive-thru voting in the county. The majority did not explain its decision. This past week, however, the high court directed Harris County to respond to a new petition filed by the Hotze group.

Rottinghaus was skeptical of the plaintiffs' chances of winning a judgment that could deal a blow to Democratic candidates.

"It would definitely impact the election, and would likely hurt the Democratic vote share in places where they've been running strong," Rottinghaus said.

The challenge came "so late in the game," the political scientist added, after voters had legally cast ballots.

Mayor Sylvester Turner called the plaintiff's efforts "totally unacceptable."

"It is hard to fathom there is a group trying to throw out the ballots of more than 120,000 people in Harris County who used drive through voting approved by the Secretary of State and Texas Supreme Court," the Houston mayor said in a tweet. "I pray that most people vote Tuesday for change."

Democrats have been increasingly optimistic in the Lone Star State, where pollsters believe the party is in striking distance of turning the state blue for the first time in decades. On Friday, Democratic vice presidential nominee Kamala Harris made a last-minute Texas trip. Her swing included a stop in Houston, where she made another appeal to Black voters, who have already accounted for about 21 percent of the county's early voting total.

GOP turnout

That makes Tuesday all the more important for Texas Republicans, one expert said.

"Election Day turnout this year is going to be far more pivotal for Texas Republicans than Texas Democrats because Texas Democrats have done such a good job of getting their voters to the polls, helped of course by Donald Trump," said Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University. "If they can get their voters to the polls, they should be in reasonably good shape to win statewide and perhaps retain the Texas House."

"But if Republican Election Day turnout falters for any reason," he continued, "that's how Joe Biden wins Texas."

Regardless of the outcome, it's clear the election has brought out many new voters. According to The Metropolitan Organization, a coalition of faith-based nonprofits in the Houston area, "low propensity voters" — which the group defines as voters who are newly registered, infrequent, young, or from communities of color — are casting ballots at rates on par with or exceeding those seen in the 2016 election in nearly all of the precincts that the group is monitoring.

Metropolitan Organization leaders credit that in part to arecent ramping up of ongoing get-out-the-vote efforts, including having church leaders focus more on civic engagement within their congregations ahead of the election.

Joe Biggs, an organizer with the group, said it and other nonpartisan groups have spent months doing what one leader called "disciplined" outreach to typically disenfranchised groups. Some, he said, "didn't even know early voting was going on." *robert.downen@chron.com* *alejandro.serrano@ chron.com*