

Statesman

Newspaper: Texas Latinos underrepresented in local politics

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AUSTIN, Texas

A newspaper analysis has found deep patterns of underrepresentation of Texas' fast-growing Hispanic population on city councils and county commissioners courts across the state.

The Austin American-Statesman (<http://atxne.ws/2ewO5X7>) reports that more than 1.3 million Hispanics in Texas live in cities or counties with no Hispanic representation on their city council or commissioners court. The disparities remain high even when accounting for noncitizens.

It's an imbalance that's especially acute at the highest levels of local government. In a state where Hispanics make up 38 percent of the population, only about 10 percent of Texas mayors and county judges are Hispanic.

In county government, Latino representation has largely stagnated during the past two decades. In 1994, Latinos made up 10 percent of county commissioner positions; today, the percentage has inched up to 13 percent — even though the state's Hispanic population nearly doubled during that time.

Lydia Camarillo, vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project, said that while some areas of the state — notably South Texas — have seen sharp rises in the number of Latinos elected to local office, the Statesman's findings show "there is still disparity in your face" across Texas.

Statewide election experts and Hispanic officeholders in some of the state's most underrepresented regions say the disparity defies easy explanation. They point out several factors: Texas laws that have made registering to vote more difficult; redistricting efforts designed to dilute Hispanic influence; and a virtual abandonment by statewide political parties. And even in districts with favorable demographics, Hispanics often turn out to vote in small numbers.

While the most glaring disparities are clustered in a largely rural swath of West Texas, through the High Plains region and into the Panhandle, the newspaper's analysis found similar patterns across the state.

Medina County, just outside San Antonio, has a 50 percent Latino population but no Hispanic county commissioners. Odessa, where 63 percent of city residents are Hispanic, has just one Hispanic city council member. In Central Texas, while Hispanics

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in Guadalupe and Gonzales counties make up about a third of eligible voters, neither county has a Latino commissioner.

The most underrepresented areas also tend to be heavily Republican, which observers say also limits the participation of Texas Hispanics, who more often vote Democratic. In Medina County, County Judge Chris Schuchart said he believes the lack of Hispanic elected officials is more attributable to party than to ethnicity. "The county votes Republican, and ... we generally have very few Democrats on the local ballot," he said.

Amado Morales is the lone Hispanic member of the commissioners court in Floyd County in northwestern Texas. Hispanics make up 53 percent of the population in the county.

The 64-year-old pumpkin farmer got involved in local politics more than 35 years ago.

Thanks in part to a lawsuit that forced officials to move from an at-large election system to single-member districts, he was elected to the Floydada City Council in 1980. After the Voting Rights Act was amended in 1975 to explicitly cover Latinos, advocates and lawyers filed hundreds of lawsuits throughout the state challenging voting procedures.

But once elected, Morales recalled, the cotton processors whom he did business with said his political ambitions were threatening to cost them customers in the conservative county. He said, "They told me, 'We need to get rid of this guy.'"

After five years as a council member, Morales moved to the school board, and then ultimately to the commissioners court, where he won election after three tries, including a disputed count that he sued over. "They don't want to share power," he said.

In the Panhandle city of Amarillo, Mercy Murguia was appointed in 2011 to fill an unexpired term on the Potter County Commissioners Court when she was 32. She has since won re-election twice.

Since joining the commissioners court, she has sought to expand the Latino vote in the Panhandle. "We know apathy is a big reason — we're not naive — but we also know that many Hispanics lack a basic understanding of where to vote, whether or not they're registered and so forth."

Murguia has also helped other Hispanics run for the school board. "The little things — just finding out how to run for school board, where to get the forms (to declare candidacy) — was difficult."