

## NO EASY MOLD TO FILL TO BECOME A LATINO TEXAS POLITICIAN

*There are more Latino elected officials in Texas than any other state, and even though most are Democrats, they represent an electorate split along racial, ethnic, party and socioeconomic lines.*

BY MANNY FERNANDEZ ~ OCT.23,2016

HOUSTON — It was a brief but telling glimpse of the new Texas.

On a visit to Dallas in March, [President Obama](#) stood in a country and western club, Gilley's, and jokingly plucked a black-felt cowboy hat off the head of an exuberant supporter and tried it on. The hat in question belonged to someone who evoked Texas' future as much as its past, a Mexican-American man named David Espinosa, a native Texan and school board member from the Dallas suburb of Grand Prairie.

Yet here, under the surface, was the old Texas, too. Mr. Espinosa's Grand Prairie school district is 65 percent Latino, but the seven-member school board is majority white. Mr. Espinosa is the board's lone Latino.

Only one thing about Latino political power in Texas is certain: It's complicated.

Texas has the second-largest Hispanic population of any state — roughly 10 million of the state's 27 million residents are Latino, second only to California's 15 million Hispanics. There are more Latino elected officials in Texas than in any other state — 2,536 at the local, state and federal levels, nearly double the number in California, the state with the second-largest amount.



In both states, a majority of Latinos are Democrats, but Texas Hispanics find themselves in an overwhelmingly Republican state. The Latino electorate in

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Texas fails to vote in large numbers, and many who are poor and uneducated are disconnected from politics.

Yet at the same time, generations of Mexican-American families have built political dynasties in parts of Texas. The Velas of Brownsville are but one: Filemon B. Vela Sr. was a federal judge there; his wife, Blanca Sanchez Vela, became the mayor; and their son, Filemon B. Vela Jr., now represents Brownsville in Congress. Latinos have plenty of power in Texas — it just depends on who, what, when, where and how.

To become a Latino elected official in Texas — to win a seat, to keep a seat, to simultaneously appeal to fellow Latinos and white voters — there are unspoken rules. There are ways of politically navigating a majority-minority state that struggles to fully embrace its Hispanic identity and is split along racial, ethnic, party, geographic, economic, urban and rural lines.

Rule No. 1: No Spanish? No problem

In today's partisan world, what do two of Texas' top Hispanic Democrats have in common with its most powerful Hispanic Republican? Spotty Spanish, for starters.



Representative Joaquin Castro, left, on the day in 2013 that he was sworn into Congress, and his twin, Julián, then the mayor of San Antonio. Credit Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call, via Getty Images

The Castro twins — Julián Castro, the youngest member of Mr. Obama's cabinet and the former mayor of San Antonio, and his brother, Joaquin Castro, a San Antonio

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congressman — are not fluent in Spanish. Neither is Senator [Ted Cruz](#). There are, of course, vast differences in style, policy and ideology between the Castro brothers and Mr. Cruz. The twins — who were raised by a single mother and their grandmother, an immigrant from Mexico who worked as a maid and a cook — appeal to and inspire Mexican-Americans in Texas. Mr. Cruz, meanwhile, is regarded as a conservative firebrand who happens to be Hispanic.

But all three are products of Harvard Law School and all three are symbolic of the Texas Latino political bench these days. It is packed with post-Hispanic Hispanics — academic, ambitious, lawyerly superstars who identify with their party first and their ethnicity second. Some of the most influential Hispanic Democrats and Hispanic Republicans are the Texas-born sons and daughters of immigrants, or the grandsons and granddaughters of them, but they themselves do not embody the Latino immigrant experience so much as serve as a bridge to it.

State Representative Rafael Anchia, a Dallas Democrat, is a corporate-finance lawyer who was appointed by Mr. Obama to a trade-policy advisory committee. State Representative Jason Villalba, a Dallas Republican, is a corporate-finance lawyer as well, and his majority-white district includes one of the wealthiest neighborhoods in Texas, Preston Hollow, which is home to former President George W. Bush. Vince Perez, a Democratic county commissioner in El Paso, studied at Georgetown University and was the communications director for former Texas congressman Silvestre Reyes, a Democrat.

Some of them speak perfect Spanish, while others have had to take lessons since getting elected. Perhaps there was a time when not speaking Spanish was a liability for a Texas Latino politician, but that time is gone. Maybe it ended in San Antonio around 2011, when Julián Castro won re-election as mayor with nearly 82 percent of the vote. Or maybe it ended in El Paso that same year, when a county commissioner's race was heating up.

Mr. Perez, the Georgetown graduate, was seeking the commissioner's seat held by Willie Gandara Jr., who criticized Mr. Perez's lack of fluency in Spanish. Mr. Gandara told reporters that Mr. Perez failed to fit the area's "criteria" and that voters wanted a Spanish-speaking commissioner. "There's a difference," Mr. Gandara told ABC-7, "between living it and not living it."

Mr. Perez won the election and was later named the 2016 National County Leader of the Year for his work overhauling the local criminal justice system.

## Rule No. 2: Houston is behind the curve

The state's biggest city — the cosmopolitan, left-leaning metropolis that is 44 percent Hispanic and crammed with wealth, traffic, museums and megachurches — has one Hispanic on the 16-member City Council. Houston voters have never sent a Hispanic to Congress. The school district, the largest in Texas, is majority-Latino, but only two of the nine school board members are Hispanic.

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Representative Gene Green at a town hall meeting in Houston in August. Mr. Green, who is white, grew up in a predominantly Latino community and now serves a similar constituency.

“My office gets calls from Hispanics from other council districts asking for assistance,” said Robert Gallegos, the sole Latino on the City Council.

If Mr. Gallegos ever wants to run for mayor, one glass ceiling has been broken for him, but the other remains intact. Mr. Gallegos is gay, and it was back in 2009 that Houston became the largest city in the United States to elect an openly gay or lesbian mayor. Yet Houston, founded in 1836, has never had a Latino mayor, although San Antonio has had three since 1981.

Black Houston voters have rallied behind black mayoral candidates as an energized bloc, and the city has had two black mayors in the last 18 years as a result. But Latino voters have not done the same for Latino mayoral candidates, and Hispanics make up only about 19 percent of registered voters, a far lower percentage than blacks.

“I am worried about stunted growth,” said Adrian Garcia, the former Harris County sheriff who unsuccessfully ran for mayor last year. “For me, taking chances is what we ought to be doing.”

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## Rule No. 3: It gets ugly

In 2014, Ramon Romero Jr. became the first Latino elected to the Texas Legislature from Fort Worth's majority-white Tarrant County. For the first time, the Fort Worth Stockyards — a tourist attraction with cattle drives and rodeos that is home to the Texas Cowboy Hall of Fame — is represented in Austin by the son of Mexican immigrants.

On a recent drive through his majority-Latino district, Mr. Romero, a wealthy businessman and Democrat, had something on his mind.

“I was in a little buggy with an old rancher the other day, and we were going to go up to a campfire,” Mr. Romero said. “And one of them joked — and I don't even think he even realized he said it — he said, ‘Where's my Mexican?’ We were on the buggies and we needed to open up a gate. I hear it all the time in the pool business. We're building somebody a pool and they'll say something like, ‘No, you don't need to do that. I'll just have my Mexicans do that.’ They don't even have names.”

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State Representative Ramon Romero Jr., the first Latino elected to the Texas Legislature from the majority-white Tarrant County, in his office this summer. Credit: Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

Latino politicians in Texas have some of the thickest skins in the business. Bigotry, discrimination and slurs fester, overtly and subtly. Some ignore it. Some speak out. But they push on, keeping their feet planted in two worlds — a Latino culture that prizes assimilation and a white culture that believes that bigotry is a thing of the past.

In 2010, a prominent Hispanic Republican, Victor G. Carrillo, was the chairman of the Texas Railroad Commission, which regulates the oil and gas industry. With support from then-Gov. [Rick Perry](#) and other Republicans, he was expected to easily win re-election. But Mr. Carrillo lost the Republican primary to a little-known white opponent, David Porter.

In a letter to supporters, Mr. Carrillo blamed his loss on his Hispanic surname.

“Given the choice between ‘Porter’ and ‘Carrillo’ — unfortunately, the Hispanic surname was a serious setback from which I could never recover although I did all in my power to overcome this built-in bias,” Mr. Carrillo wrote.

A number of Republican officials disagreed, saying he lost because of a lackluster campaign. They pointed to the Hispanic Republicans who have won similar Republican primaries for statewide seats, including Eva Guzman, a justice on the Texas Supreme Court. But others sided with Mr. Carrillo.

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“They saw the Latino name,” said Jason P. Casellas, an associate professor at the University of Houston and an expert on Latino representation. “He had all the support of Gov. Perry and all the establishment, but he had to face a Republican primary with mostly Anglo voters.”



Dario Castro, 14, and Fatima Pacheco before her quinceañera at All Saints Catholic Church in Fort Worth in July. Credit Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

## Rule No. 4: Don't assume Latino districts vote for Latinos

Consider the 10 most Latino congressional districts in the country. Five are in Texas, three are in California and two are in Florida. The percentage of Hispanics in those districts ranges from 70 percent to 87 percent. There is the 34th Congressional District in South Texas, which is nearly 84 percent Hispanic and includes Brownsville. There is the 40th Congressional District in Southern California, which is nearly 87 percent Latino and includes East Los Angeles.

Now picture a room, and put the 10 lawmakers who represent those heavily Hispanic districts inside. It would, not surprisingly, be populated by Hispanic men and Hispanic women, with two exceptions. Eight of the 10 most Hispanic congressional districts in America are represented by Hispanics, but two are represented by white Democrats from El Paso and Houston.

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That is how Latino politics operates in the state. A total of six congressional districts in Texas that are majority Hispanic have non-Latino representatives: four whites and two African-Americans.



Skateboarders from the Northside neighborhood at a skatepark in Marine Park in Fort Worth. Credit Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

There is no clear-cut answer as to why. To some, it shows the sophistication of the Latino vote. To others, it is proof the Republican-dominated Legislature weakened Hispanic voting strength, through its redrawing of political district maps and its voter ID law, which required government-issued ID at the polls. To those non-Latino representatives, it is absurd to suggest they cannot represent Latino-majority districts as well as a Latino can.

“Having grown up in a predominantly Mexican-American community, I felt like I understood the values, the family, the faith,” said Representative Gene Green, the white, Democratic congressman from Houston’s 29th Congressional District, which is 77 percent Hispanic. “I don’t think I just walked into it.”

Rule No. 5: Be reddish. Be bluish.

It is not just red or blue in Texas. For many Latino politicians, it is reddish-blue or bluish-red.



Andrea Perez listening to Father Stephen Jasso during a morning service at All Saints Catholic Church. Credit Tamir Kalifa for The New York Times

Latino Democrats openly talk about their guns and their church. Nobody blinked in 2014, when a prominent Latina Democrat from San Antonio who was running for lieutenant governor, Leticia Van de Putte, spoke of her nuanced stance on gun rights. She opposed open carry but supported concealed carry. “Pete and I have guns,” Ms. Van de Putte, referring to her husband, said at a Texas Tribune event. “Several.”

When the Legislature passed some of the toughest restrictions on abortion in the country in 2013, there were six Democratic state lawmakers who voted for the bill. Five of the six were Latinos from South Texas. “Latinos in my district are predominantly Catholic and in so doing are pro-traditional family, pro-life and pro-business,” said State Senator Eddie Lucio Jr., a Brownsville Democrat who voted for the abortion-restrictions bill. “I’m one of those.”

Mr. Villalba, the Hispanic Republican from Dallas, has at times angered liberals as well as conservatives.

“The right and the left have a hard time with me,” Mr. Villalba said, “but the people who I go to church with and the people I sit on the sidelines with at soccer games are supportive of me, which is why I’ve been successful at winning elections.”