



## Silent majority

Texas' booming Hispanic population deeply underrepresented in local politics

Irene Favila, a former Plainview City Council member, talks in front of 'la playa,' a region prone to flooding in the San Jose community, which officials say is too costly to clean up after heavy rains. San Jose is located in Deaf Smith County, which is nearly 70 percent Hispanic but does not have a Hispanic member on its commissioners court.

More than 1.3 million Latinos in Texas live in cities or counties with no Latino representation on their city council or commissioners court.

**By Jeremy Schwartz and Dan Hill / Published October 21, 2016**

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- In Texas, Latino representation on county boards has stagnated over the past two decades
  - Hispanic underrepresentation is felt at higher levels: local positions often first steps to state, national office
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# Statesman

Isabel García has learned to fear “la playa” — the beach. Most years, the sunken field in front of her house is a riot of long grasses and cattails swaying in the Texas Panhandle wind. But heavy rains can turn that area into a lake that floods the former migrant labor camp of San Jose, home to hundreds of low-income Hispanic residents just outside the city limits of the county seat,

After the last major flood six years ago, county officials voted to stop cleaning up San Jose, saying it was too costly. Instead, they told residents — many of whom have lived there for generations — to move.

“I feel like we have been abandoned,” said García, 46, who was born and raised in San Jose and lives next to her elderly mother. “Every time we go to (county officials) it’s like, ‘Oh, you again.’ We pay our property bills like everybody else. But they won’t listen to the Hispanic voice.”

Deaf Smith County, an agricultural hub in the northwest tip of Texas, is nearly 70 percent Hispanic, as are the majority of its eligible voters, according to Census Bureau figures. But not a single member of its commissioners court is Hispanic.

The area is far from alone. A first-of-its-kind American-Statesman analysis has found deep patterns of underrepresentation of the state’s fast growing Hispanic population on city councils and commissioners courts across Texas. 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.

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

In some parts of Texas, little progress has been made since the **voting rights movements** of the 1970s birthed hundreds of lawsuits aimed at opening up local elections to greater Hispanic participation.

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 into 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 under-represented 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 in small numbers.

Locally, residents and activists say the lack of representation can mean their community needs go unmet. But the impact can be felt well beyond city halls and courthouses, since local positions are often a training ground for candidates who later ascend to state and national offices.

Advocates fear the outlook for Hispanic candidates could deteriorate.

This will be the first presidential election in Texas since the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a section of the Voting Rights Act that required local entities to “pre-clear” changes in voting procedures — such as new district boundaries, changes in polling places or shifts in voting systems — with federal officials to make sure they don’t limit minority voting.

Federal records show that more than any other state, Texas governments have tried to introduce changes that violate those rules. Since 2000, the Department of Justice issued more pre-clearance **objection letters** — 16 — to Texas officials than any other state.

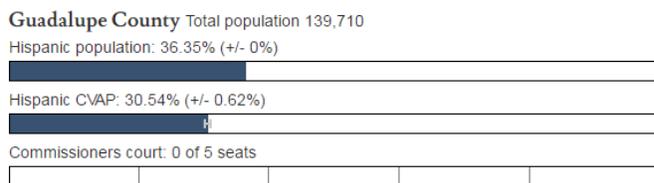
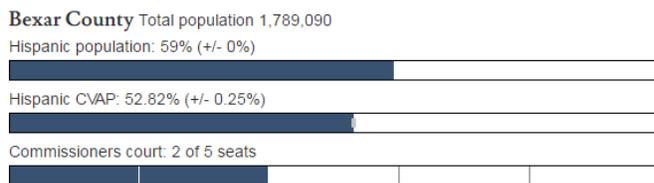
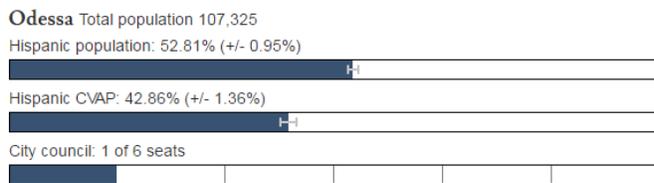
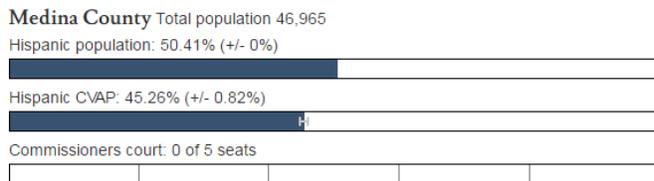
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Some worry that violations, especially in far-flung municipalities, will multiply without the federal oversight. “They are off the radar,” said voting rights attorney José Garza. “We won’t know about (a potential voting act violation) unless someone complains loud enough.”



Many areas in Texas in which Hispanics are underrepresented in public office have a history of low voter turnout, according to the Statesman's analysis. *Marlon Sorto / American-Statesman*

## Widespread underrepresentation



The most glaring disparities are clustered in a largely rural swath of West Texas, through the High Plains region and into the Panhandle.

Yet the Statesman’s analysis found similar patterns across the state.

Medina County, just outside of 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, the second-highest rate of underrepresentation for a city over 100,000, behind Grand Prairie.

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

Many locations had a shared history: a record of voting rights violations and Department of Justice orders to provide Spanish-language election materials or election clerks; low numbers of Hispanics appointed to local boards and commissions; and notably low levels of voter turnout.

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In Deaf Smith County, turnout in the 2012 general election was 8 percentage points lower than the state average. “There are times when you don’t want to vote because they won’t pay you any attention,” said Carmen García, who lives in San Jose. “You feel like it doesn’t matter.”

**Gonzales County** Total population 20,055

Hispanic population: 48.59% (+/- 0%)



Hispanic CVAP: 34.11% (+/- 2.31%)



Commissioners court: 0 of 5 seats



The most under-represented 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 ethnicity. “The county votes Republican and ... we generally have very few Democrats on the local ballot,” he said.

## ‘Squeeze him out of Floyd County’

In many parts of northwest Texas, even low levels of Hispanic representation came only after bitter battles.

On a bright Thursday morning in Floydada, Amado Morales pulled his pickup alongside an open-walled warehouse to check on rows of orange and yellow pumpkins. The lone Hispanic member of the commissioners court in Floyd County, where Hispanics make up 53 percent of the population, is a pumpkin farmer — and late summer is his busiest time.

Morales, 64, got involved in local politics 35 years ago after a tour in the U.S. Army. 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. Many sought to transform at-large systems — where an entire city or jurisdiction votes on candidates — to a system of individual districts. The so-called single-member district system is meant to give minority groups, often clustered geographically, a better shot at electing candidates of their choice.

But once elected, Morales recalled that the cotton processors who he did business with said his political ambitions were threatening to cost them customers in the conservative county. “I had hauled cotton for the gins for years, but one day they said, ‘We don’t need you anymore. We’ll lose our customers, our growers. You’re the problem, trying to stir shit up around here,’” he said. “They told me, ‘We need to get rid of this guy. We need to cut this twig right out. Because if it grows it’s gonna be a trunk and we won’t be able to deal with it. We have to make him suffer. Squeeze him out of Floyd County.’”

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,” Morales said. “It’s their way of life.”

Juan Chavez, 67, the sole Latino county commissioner in nearby Bailey County, said he has encountered similar pushback as he has tried to recruit local Hispanics to run for office. “I know people who were told by their boss: ‘You won’t have a job if you run,’” he said. “So you need independent people or people with an understanding boss.”

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In Odessa, Army veteran and community organizer Art Leal said that when he ran for mayor in 2008, his political opponents nearly succeeded in getting him fired from his job at a bank. He said anonymous callers accused him of misusing bank resources and violating internal rules and sent him intimidating messages warning him to “watch out.” Ultimately, Leal said his employer informed him he hadn’t received proper permission to run, and on the last week of the campaign he was told to drop out or lose his job.

“There was definitely fear that I would be able to get the Hispanic community engaged and to the polls,” he said. Leal lost badly and has not run again.

## Changing demographics

The Chihuahua Tortillería in downtown Hereford is busy on most afternoons. Customers crowd a small eating space, order carnitas and aguas frescas, or peruse aisles filled with Tio Nacho shampoo and packets of dried epazote.

On a recent afternoon, flyers for a concert by Los Palomares de Ojinaga, which was playing that weekend at local hot spot Acapulco Tropical, hung on the wall. “About once a month we get a local dance,” said cashier Nancy Nevarez, whose family opened the shop a decade ago after moving from Los Angeles. “But to go to a really good dance you have to go to Amarillo.”

Hereford, the self-titled Beef Capital of the World, whose school mascot, the Whitefaces, references the local cattle breed, has seen its demographics change drastically over the past half-century. The towering grain silos that dominate the city’s skyline testify to the history of crop harvesting. But today, corporate meatpacking plants dominate the economy.

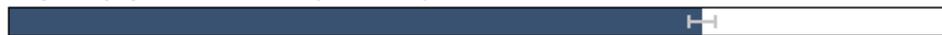
Both industries brought flows of migrant workers — mostly Hispanic, many from South Texas — beginning in the 1940s. In the 1990s, Hereford became a mostly Hispanic city. Today, at 73 percent, it is one of the most heavily Hispanic cities outside of South Texas.

But such numbers also can be deceiving. In Hereford, due to a large number of Hispanics under 18 and those who are not legal citizens, the percentage of eligible voters drops to 62 percent. Nearby Yoakum County’s 61 percent Hispanic majority falls to a 45 percent minority when ineligible voters are culled out.

Irene Favila, 61, a former city council member in Plainview, said that for decades she and her colleagues struggled to persuade longtime green-card holders to get naturalized. Many cited long distances to Lubbock, the closest city to offer citizenship services, or a sense that their vote wouldn’t change much. “All they worry about is just working,” Favila said. “That’s all they do.”

**Hereford** Total population 15,330

Hispanic population: 73.68% (+/- 1.58%)



Hispanic CVAP: 62.32% (+/- 3.36%)



City council: 3 of 7 seats



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## Fire in the belly

The Plains and Panhandle regions have seen occasional spikes in Hispanic involvement in local politics, but not much long-term momentum. Claudia Stravato, a West Texas A&M professor and former voting rights activist in Hereford, said such movements have often been in response to a local outrage.

In the late 1980s, Hereford saw a spasm of Hispanic political activity after the mass arrest of dozens of local Hispanics on drug charges in 1986. The bust — of mostly small-time marijuana users — galvanized the Hispanic community. With help from Texas Rural Legal Aid, two Hispanic women won seats to the Hereford City Council, a first in the city's history.

In the aftermath of the election, it appeared Hereford was headed for a fundamental change in its political representation. With court decisions, demographics and momentum pointing the way toward Hispanic political majorities, "It is possible that we are witnessing the creation of a new Hispanic homeland," historian/sociologist Terrence Haverluck wrote in 2009 in his book "Hispanic Spaces, Latino Places: Community and Cultural Diversity in Contemporary America."

Today, Hispanics remain the minority on local school, city and county governing boards.

"They were highly motivated because of the 83 people going to prison, and we were able to capture that anger and put it into action," Stravato said. "Now there is no big issue. You have to have that sometimes — some fire in the belly."

Seth McKee, a political science professor at Texas Tech University, said the history of the region undoubtedly is connected to low rates of Latino political participation. "In more rural areas you will have a culture of deference. ... Sparse rural areas are still very deferential to Anglo culture. It would take a lot to mobilize those voters. Just how many activists are you going to find in those settings?"

In nearby Dimmitt, population 5,000, Gloria Hernandez's pursuit of a city council seat capped a long journey from her arrival in town as a young girl.

Hernandez's family was part of a wave of agricultural workers who arrived on the South Plains over the last half-century. Her family migrated every year from Houston but decided to put down roots in Dimmitt, so she and her six siblings could attend school without disruptions.

"Back then, all the Hispanics were fieldworkers; you wouldn't see any Hispanics in town," she said. "On the school bus, Mexicans had to ride in the back. I thought, 'Why are they treating us like that?' I never saw that stuff 'til I came here."

Hernandez, 54, said she became active in politics because of constant flooding in her neighborhood. She began attending council meetings to urge city officials to find a solution, and the city finally got a grant to fix the drainage problems. She ran for city council in 1995 at the urging of another Hispanic city council member and won.

"Right is right and wrong is wrong, as my mom used to say," she said. "Sometimes, you've got to do something."

## New blood

While Latino officials who came of age during the Civil Rights Movement often bemoan the lack of new blood, there are signs of emerging dynamism in the Panhandle and West Texas.

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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 and has since won re-election twice. She said she never had political ambitions but was approached by a group of local activists, including Stravato, and asked to run.

“I am a first-generation college graduate, and I felt a responsibility to serve,” she said.

Since joining, 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.”

She found that about three-quarters of county election offices in the region lacked someone who could communicate with a Spanish-speaking resident looking for voting information.

Federal law requires Spanish-speaking election materials in areas with large Spanish-speaking populations, and lawsuits have forced many counties in the region to staff polling places with Spanish-speaking election clerks. But nothing requires regularly employed election office employees to speak Spanish.

Murguia said that in Potter County, at least, she’d like to change that.

“We’re trying to think outside of the box,” she said. “We can’t control things like Voter ID, but we can advocate for changes at the local level, where there are barriers that help further complicate the problem. You have to start at the very, very foundation.”

## Amarillo Total population 194,930

Hispanic population: 30.02% (+/- 0.34%)



Hispanic CVAP: 21.22% (+/- 0.64%)



City council: 0 of 5 seats



## Potter County Total population 122,055

Hispanic population: 36.38% (+/- 0%)



Hispanic CVAP: 25.35% (+/- 0.87%)



Commissioners court: 1 of 5 seats



Since joining the court, she has helped other Hispanics run for school board. “The little things — just finding out how to run for school board, where to get the forms (to declare candidacy) — was difficult. The process is kept very tightly — nontransparent. When you are starting from scratch, everything is such a mountain to climb.”

To help the new generation of aspiring Hispanic politicians catch up, Murguia is compiling a “digital toolkit” for potential first-time candidates: push cards, customizable yard signs and other campaign materials, all loaded on a flash drive and “packaged for someone, so it doesn’t feel so intimidating.”

Back in San Jose, Isabel Garcia said the county’s refusal to solve the flooding of her neighborhood may push her into public service. She is contemplating a run for the commissioners court in 2018.

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“My husband tells me: ‘You need to do it,’” she said.

Deaf Smith County Commissioner Jerry O’Connor said it hasn’t flooded in San Jose in several years and pointed to the county’s role in helping San Jose get grants for upgrades to the community’s water storage tank and sewer system. “I do not believe the lack of Hispanic representation is an issue concerning the San Jose community,” he said. “I feel that the people in San Jose are treated exactly like everyone else in Deaf Smith County.”

Still, Irene Favila, a former Plainview City Council member and former leader of the regional LULAC chapter, has encouraged Garcia to run.

Favila knows firsthand how powerful new, previously unrepresented voices can be in local government. When she was first elected in the 1990s, she organized a council trip to a Plainview neighborhood where Latino residents lacked running water and a sewer system.

“We boarded a bus to go out there and (the rest of the council) was just appalled,” she said. “They said they didn’t know there were still people without running water.” The council later pursued federal grants to remedy the situation.

She hopes Garcia can bring that same kind of change to San Jose. “At first I think she was kind of scared,” Favila said. “I told her, ‘I can show you how we did it.’ It just takes work. You have to be involved, be part of the system if you want to make a change.”



Isabel García, frustrated by the county's response to flooding in San Jose, says she's considering a run for commissioners court in 2018.

*Marlon Sorto / American-Statesman*