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Villalba: Hispanics all about the future, not politics



Are Latinos in Texas shifting Republican? There have been noticeable local shifts, but one or two conservative cycles does not a trend make.
Sergio Flores / For The Washington Post

In Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," a character in the story is asked, "How do you go bankrupt?" The protagonist responds, "Gradually, and then suddenly."

Hemingway's point was that disruptive change is often inexorably slow, and even unnoticed, until the final act, when suddenly, it is not.

The same is true for shifts in our political and economic tectonics. The world that you and I have known and experienced for our entire lives is changing, and no longer at a gradual pace. We've reached the rapid, exponential rate, but hardly anyone is paying attention.

As Texans, we now live in a state where Hispanics comprise more than 35 percent of eligible voters. Despite what you may have heard on the evening news or read on social media, these voters are not beholden to one political party or the other. The conventional wisdom is that Texas Hispanics are more likely than not to vote for political candidates who identify as Democrats, and the historical data certainly bears out the presumption.

Some Hispanics, who are second- or third-generation, or who are evangelical in their religious affiliation, have politically acculturated in patterns similar to Anglo Texans. As a result, they often vote for candidates who identify as Republicans in the same percentages as non-Hispanic Texas voters.

Others, who are new to the country or who live primarily in urban communities such as Dallas, Houston or San Antonio, often maintain their historical predisposition toward more progressive political candidates.

With the unique political circumstances that materialized in the 2020 election cycle, Hispanics in cer-

tain regions around the county, and in the Rio Grande Valley, subtly shifted toward Republican candidates. Indeed, the national news media have been quick to conclude that Hispanics are trending toward Republican. They point to small shifts among Hispanics in isolated counties around the country, including the RGV, as a harbinger of a Republican swell that is surely coming.

According to the Pew Research Center, Joe Biden won 59 percent of the total U.S. Hispanic vote in 2020. But Donald Trump's 38 percent support was a significant gain over the level of Hispanic support for GOP House candidates in 2018, at 25 percent. Further, Pew reported that Trump won a larger portion of Hispanic voters without college degrees, 41 percent, than those with a college education, 30 percent.

The Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation, a nonpartisan, educational research group whose mission it is to study these emerging trends, has found that while these nascent trends are unquestionably occurring, the reasons for these shifts are more economic than political.

In the 2020 election cycle, Democrats ran on messages that extolled the virtues of eliminating fossil fuels and supported the esoteric concept of "defunding the police." As well, the progressive wing of the Democrats embraced self-identified socialists as the standard-bearers of the movement. The energy industry and law enforcement are major job providers for Texas Hispanics and Latinos all across the country. Likewise, among Cuban Americans and many others, the mere suggestion of support for socialist principals, much less socialist candidates, is a nonstarter.

The Republicans, on the other hand, were championing a once-in-a-generation candidate whose cult of personality was unmatched in politics since John F. Kennedy. Republicans vociferously embraced law enforcement and strongly supported the energy sector.

Coupled with the Republican willingness to walk door to door in the favelas and colonias of Texas and the Democratic fealty to social distancing and pandemic prudence, it was an unfair fight in the RGV. Republicans recognized a small but measurable advantage.

As a result, in 2020, Texas Hispanics moved toward Republicans in an unprecedented manner. But just as demographics is not destiny, as Texas progressives have been preaching for decades, one or two conservative cycles does not a trend make.

Texas today is made up of Hispanics from many different backgrounds. Some of us are doctors and lawyers. Others are bricklayers and manufacturers. We are educated in the finest universities in Texas and the country, but we are also proud recipients of GED diplomas or have no diplomas at all.

Many of us have been here for generations, but some of us are first-generation. Some of us speak Spanish, but more of us lost our native tongue generations ago.

We are just now beginning to vote in numbers that make a difference. But make no mistake, we are beginning to vote. Today, we are engaging in Texas politics in a way unlike any generation before us. As a result, we, Texas Hispanics, are the drivers of what will happen in Texas' future, politically and economically.

Texas Hispanics do not aspire to wear the red or blue of a political jersey. We are interested in kitchen-table issues that positively impact our families and our community. We seek brighter futures for our children through excellent public education, strong support for our families through high-wage jobs and universal health care. And we want to keep our families safe by supporting law enforcement.

Texas Hispanics want what all Texans want. Good jobs, opportunities for our children and safe streets for our families. Most of us don't care which political party is in charge, but we most definitely will hold politicians accountable for what they do to enhance our families' lives.

Hispanics will not only shape Texas' political future. We are the future.

Gradually, and then suddenly.

Jason Villalba is CEO of the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation.