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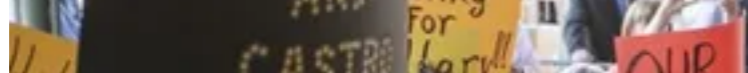
NEWS

Stekler: Until Democrats can reach Latinos, Texas can't turn "purple"

Paul Stekler

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Supporters hold signs at a Latino for Hillary campaign event for Hillary Clinton in San Antonio in 2015. Austin American-Statesman

It's been a constant refrain of Texas Democrats wandering in the electoral wilderness for 20 years: When the Hispanic electorate finally arrives at the polls in the numbers they make up in the state's population, everything will change. It's the dream of waking the sleeping giant of Texas politics and turning the state blue.

In our short film about Texas, part of the "Postcards from the Great Divide" series, former U.S. Rep. Pete Gallego remembers "a big poster that said 'the '80s were the decade of the Hispanic, and then the '90s were the decade of the Hispanic, and then the 2000s.'" In an election year that many expected to see an anti-Trump surge of Latinos, the surge never came. In a South Texas district that is more than 70 percent Hispanic, Gallego lost his bid to recapture his seat. For now, the sleeping giant still sleeps.

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Latinos will become the largest ethnic group in Texas by 2017, with more than 40 percent of the population, yet they make up less than 20 percent of the voters. The reasons given for this disconnect are familiar to political observers. The Latinos are disproportionately young, and young adults don't vote. In small towns and rural areas, there are social and sometimes economic pressures not to publicly participate.

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Gerrymandering, no longer under the review of the Voting Rights Act, also makes districts so uncompetitive that there's little incentive to vote. Finally, multiple research studies of voter ID laws find that they decrease the voter participation of minority communities.

The challenge in Texas, though, is deeper than that. If potential voters don't see the importance of voting, how it impacts their day-to-day lives, almost nothing can get them to register and vote.

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Pasadena, just outside of Houston — once a white, working-class town — is now nearly 65 percent Latino. In our film, we profile a successful small-business owner who had emigrated from Monterrey, Mexico, and run unsuccessfully for a City Council seat in a redrawn district that would never have been approved under the old Voting Rights Act supervision. Undeterred, he tirelessly worked to motivate potential voters, but many didn't feel any connection to politics. Others said that nobody has ever come to their door and asked them to vote. For some, voter ID laws created a fear of political participation.

Consider Nevada as an example of what could happen if and when the Latino electorate flexes its political muscle in Texas. In our Nevada film, it's clear that the state GOP was well aware that they had to make inroads with Latino voters. Their problem was that the Culinary Workers Union, allies of U.S. Sen. Harry Reid, was already organized and working on the ground. In an election result that was the reverse of what happened nationally, Democrats took back both houses of the state Legislature, captured two new congressional seats and held Reid's Senate seat by electing the first Latina to the U.S. Senate. Democrats did it with a wave of Latino votes.

Unlike Texas, Nevada's smaller population is mostly in one city: Las Vegas. Union and party organizers can literally go door to door and make the kind of personal appeals that are so much harder to logistically organize in our huge state. Texas has no comparable democratically allied organization, even in the large cities. Until Democrats can reach and motivate Latinos by whatever means, things will progress slowly.

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Political change is not always a linear progression. Pete Gallego more than doubled his vote from a previous 2014 loss, but his opponent, U.S. Rep. Will Hurd, increased his margin of victory. But in the Pasadena state house district, the Democrat who lost her seat by 152 votes two years ago won it back over the Hispanic Republican incumbent in more than a 60 percent landslide.

American politics is candidate-centric, and the best candidates have the ability to rebrand their party and to reshape and transform the electoral landscape. Without that knight on a white horse, though, if Democrats pin all their hopes on an expanded Latino vote without organizationally reaching them, it'll be a long time until Democrats to turn Texas purple, let alone blue.

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