Subject: RE: Public Information Request (TX-SOS-22-0092) PIR 22-0134 (2 of 2)
Date: Friday, July 22, 2022 at 11:27:07 AM Eastern Daylight Time
From: GeneralCounsel
To: AO Records
CC: GeneralCounsel
Attachments: 7.22.22 Documents Batch 2.zip

EXTERNAL SENDER

Good morning,

Please find the second batch attached.

As stated below, we appreciate your patience as we continue to process your request in accordance with the terms of the PIA. We require additional time to review our records and produce additional responsive documents. We will provide you additional responsive documents on a rolling basis—to the extent such information is not excepted from disclosure under state or federal law—with our next production by 5:00 p.m. on August 19, 2022. *See* Tex. Gov't Code § 552.221(d).

Kind regards,

Jennifer Williams
Legal Assistant to the General Counsel
Office of the Texas Secretary of State

From: GeneralCounsel <>
Sent: Friday, July 22, 2022 10:25 AM
To: 'AO Records' <records@americanoversight.org>
Cc: GeneralCounsel <GeneralCounsel@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Public Information Request (TX-SOS-22-0092) PIR 22-0134 (1 of 2)

Good morning,

Consistent with our July 8 email, please find the attached zipped folder containing documents responsive to your request for information under Chapter 552 of the Texas Government Code. Due to file size, an additional email will follow containing another zipped folder.

The responsive documents contain email addresses of the general public. An email address of a member of the public is confidential under section 552.137 of the Texas Government Code. The attorney general authorized all governmental bodies to withhold an email address of a member of the public without first requesting an attorney general opinion in Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009). Thus, this information has been redacted.

We appreciate your patience as we continue to process your request in accordance with the terms of the PIA. We require additional time to review our records and produce additional responsive documents. We will provide you additional responsive documents on a rolling basis—to the extent such information is not excepted from disclosure under state or federal law—with our next production by 5:00 p.m. on August 19, 2022. See Tex. Gov't Code § 552.221(d).

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Kind regards,

Jennifer Williams
Legal Assistant to the General Counsel
Office of the Texas Secretary of State

From: GeneralCounsel <GeneralCounsel@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, July 8, 2022 4:41 PM
To: 'AO Records' <records@americanoversight.org>
Cc: GeneralCounsel <GeneralCounsel@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Public Information Request (TX-SOS-22-0092) PIR 22-0134

Good afternoon,

Consistent with our June 17 email, please find the attached zipped folder containing documents responsive to your request for information under Chapter 552 of the Texas Government Code.

The responsive documents contain email addresses of the general public. An email address of a member of the public is confidential under section 552.137 of the Texas Government Code. The attorney general authorized all governmental bodies to withhold an email address of a member of the public without first requesting an attorney general opinion in Open Records Decision No. 684 (2009). Thus, this information has been redacted.

The information you requested contains a credit card, debit card, charge card, or access device number that is collected, assembled, or maintained by or for a governmental body. This information is confidential under section 552.136 of the Texas Government Code. Section 552.136 allows us to withhold this specific information without requesting a ruling from the attorney general. You have the right to appeal our decision to withhold this information from you. Instructions for appeal are attached. If you do not want to appeal, you do not need to do anything else.

We appreciate your patience as we continue to process your request in accordance with the terms of the PIA. We require additional time to review our records and produce additional responsive documents. We will provide you additional responsive documents on a rolling basis—to the extent such information is not excepted from disclosure under state or federal law—with our next production by 5:00 p.m. on July 22, 2022. See Tex. Gov't Code § 552.221(d).

Kind regards,

Jennifer Williams
Legal Assistant to the General Counsel
Office of the Texas Secretary of State

From: GeneralCounsel <GeneralCounsel@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, June 17, 2022 4:18 PM
To: 'AO Records' <records@americanoversight.org>
Cc: GeneralCounsel <GeneralCounsel@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Public Information Request (TX-SOS-22-0092) PIR 22-0134

Good afternoon,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Mark Haynes
To: Elections Internet
Subject: 2020
Date: Friday, November 26, 2021 6:01:59 PM

CAUTION: This email originated from OUTSIDE of the SOS organization. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you are expecting the email and know that the content is safe. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please send this email as an attachment to Informationsecurity@sos.texas.gov.

"We the people" would like a full forensic audit in at least four of our most populated cities.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	t c
To:	Elections Internet; info@gregabbott.com
Cc:	bryan.hughes@senate.texas.gov; brian.birdwell@senate.texas.gov; dade.phelan@house.texas.gov; donna.campbell@senate.texas.gov; john.smithee@house.texas.gov; john.kuempel@house.texas.gov; bob.hall@senate.texas.gov; brandon.creighton@senate.texas.gov; paul.bettencourt@senate.texas.gov
Subject:	Audit Plan 2020?: Let"s Have it
Date:	Tuesday, December 7, 2021 12:28:28 PM

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Dear Governor Abbott and Secretary of State

I understand that the Governor promoted and that the Legislature has supported a full forensic audit financially. I am unaware of progress, plans, locations and status of this effort and need to know. I am concerned about phantom voters, invalid or inaccurate voting rolls, the methods used for nursing home residents to cast ballots, and the validity of results obtained with ES&S machines.

I am reaching out to you to kindly demand that the Governor and Secretary of State's offices must present to Texas voters a status, a plan, and methodical approach to auditing the November 2020 election for local, state, and federal elections.

Kind regards,
Theodore Croy
San Antonio TX
912-655-8016
[redacted]

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	t c
To:	Elections Internet
Cc:	info@gregabbott.com; donna.campbell@senate.texas.gov; bryan.hughes@senate.texas.gov
Subject:	Election Audit Information:2020 Election
Date:	Tuesday, November 30, 2021 2:02:55 PM

CAUTION: This email originated from OUTSIDE of the SOS organization. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you are expecting the email and know that the content is safe. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please send this email as an attachment to Informationsecurity@sos.texas.gov.

Good afternoon;

I understand that Gov Abbott approved $4million to support an election audit in 4 counties. I would like information about how, when, where and whom will conduct these audits. Have they started yet? Please plan to inform Texans about the process, goals, and status—by county.

Thank you
Theodore Croy
San Antonio TX

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Vincent Houston
To: Kristi Hart
Subject: Election Audit
Date: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 12:15:09 PM
Sensitivity: Personal

Hello Kristi.

I just approved the Headset order PR 763. Are these for the Election Audit new staff or not? Could you all let us know if any Purchases are for Election Audit? We are working to track those items and keep separate from Elections.

Let me know if any questions.

Thanks Kristi.
Vince

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Carolyn Guinn
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Full Forensic Audit
Date: Wednesday, November 24, 2021 11:11:19 AM

CAUTION: This email originated from OUTSIDE of the SOS organization. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you are expecting the email and know that the content is safe. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please send this email as an attachment to Informationsecurity@sos.texas.gov.

Thank You! God bless You! Its my birthday, this is the best News!
Brought me too tears!
So grateful someone is looking out for the Citizens of Tx! Translates too our Country… America! God bless America
Sincerely, Carolyn Guinn

Sent from my iPhone

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	Keith Ingram
To:	Adam Bitter; Sam Taylor; Joe Esparza
Subject:	FW: Collin County Response to Secretary Scott"s Initial Audit Survey
Date:	Tuesday, December 21, 2021 2:21:47 PM
Attachments:	Initial Audit Survey 20211217.docx

From: Bruce Sherbet <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 12:17 PM
To: Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>; Keith Ingram <KIngram@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Collin County Response to Secretary Scott's Initial Audit Survey

CAUTION: This email originated from OUTSIDE of the SOS organization. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you are expecting the email and know that the content is safe. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please send this email as an attachment to Informationsecurity@sos.texas.gov.

CAUTION: This email originated from OUTSIDE of the SOS organization. Do not click on links or open attachments unless you are expecting the email and know that the content is safe. If you believe this to be a malicious or phishing email, please send this email as an attachment to Informationsecurity@sos.texas.gov.

Christina and Keith,

Attached is the Collin County response to Secretary Scott’s initial audit survey. Please let me know if I need to clarify or furnish additional information to my survey responses.

Thank you,

Bruce Sherbet
Elections Administrator
Collin County Elections
2010 Redbud Blvd., Ste 102
McKinney, TX 75069
972-547-1900

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Bruce Sherbet
Elections Administrator

2010 Redbud Blvd. Ste 102
McKinney, Texas 75069
972-547-1990 / 800-687-8546
972-424-1460 Ext 1990 Metro
Fax 972-547-1914

December 21, 2021

John B. Scott
Secretary of State
State of Texas
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, TX 78711-2060

RE: Initial Audit Survey

Dear Secretary Scott,

Thank you so much for reaching out to our office, and also for your kind words in regards to the transparency in the election process that we strive for here in Collin County. With every passing election we become more efficient and adept in what we are asked to do as an election department in the great State of Texas. It is our hope that through this audit process our hard work and dedication to transparency is evident in the findings and documentation that we are able to provide to you.

As requested in your previous letter (dated December 10, 2021), the following are the responses of the Collin County Election Department to the initial audit survey that was contained within said letter. We hope that the information provided below helps guide you into Phase 2 of this audit. The following are our responses:

- **A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.**

We had no locations that had a 1% discrepancy between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.

- **Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity**

We had no voting sites that were closed or added due to an emergency during the November 2020 General and Special Election.

- **Any known procedural or chain of custody defects**

Looking back on the November 2020 General and Special Election we can acknowledge some defects in our chain of custody process that was in play then. It is important to note that we are constantly enhancing our processes to become more efficient each election. An area of deficiency that we noticed from the November 2020 election was the tracking of full ballot boxes as they moved from a polling location to our office. We were able to indicate what location a full ballot box came from, however, there was some uncertainty about what specific tabulator the box was in at the location. Some of our larger locations had multiple DS200s, adding a level of difficulty in tracking this information. We have since changed how we track each piece of equipment that we have at each location by adding serialized barcodes to all hardware devices. These barcodes were also added to location tabulator USB/media sticks, which we noticed was another deficiency in our process. We now know specifically what USB/media stick went into each device pre-delivery and tabulation instead of the backend of the process. These changes have enhanced our security and chain of custody moving forward.

- **Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process**

There are no other issues that we have discovered that may be relevant to the Secretary of State's audit process.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Bruce Sherbet
Elections Administrator

2010 Redbud Blvd. Ste 102
McKinney, Texas 75069
972-547-1990 / 800-687-8546
972-424-1460 Ext 1990 Metro
Fax 972-547-1914

- **A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.**

Below is a list of complaints received by the Collin County Election Department during the November 2020 General and Special Elections. For more detailed information regarding these complaints, please refer to the attached PDF titled "November 2020 General and Special Election Complaints – Compiled", which is document containing the scanned images of these complaints, including some of the resolutions of the complaints.

- BBM Complaints
  - Dr. Elvira White-Lewis
  - Joseph Michael Phillips
  - Kennedy Pickering
  - Michael and Marsha Santarcangelo
  - Nate Fox
  - Rita and Carl Fischer
- Curbside Voting Complaint – David Spangler
- Election Complaint Filed with SOS - Alemtsehay Bayyan
- J. Springfield Response to B. Brown RE Alleged Voter Fraud-10-14-21
- Notice of Outcome to Provisional Voter-Brianna Jones
- Polling Place Complaints
  - McKinney Fire Station #5
  - Parr Library
  - Patrick Dalrymple
  - Richardson Office Complex
- Polling Place Procedure Complaint - Joy Bergmann
- Rejected Provisional-Ramiro Edgar Ojeda Garcia
- State of Texas vs. Fred Lusk - 11-3-20
- Voter Registration Complaint - Judy Cote
- Voting Concerns - Scot Bontrager
- Voting Machine Complaint - Joanne Summit
- Election results and voting equipment certification question

- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
  - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested**
    - 43,931 Early Voting Mail Ballots requested
  - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out**
    - 43,814 Early Voting Mail Ballots sent out
  - **Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA**
    - 3,581 Early Voting Mail Ballots requested by FPCA
  - **Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected**
    - 35,650 Early Voting Mail Ballots accepted
    - 27 Early Voting Mail Ballots rejected
  - **Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person**
    - 2,393 voters did not surrender their mail ballots and voted in person during Early Voting
    - 81 voters did not surrender their mail ballots and voted in person on Election Day
    - A total of 2,474 voters did not surrender their mail ballots and voted in person during the November 2020 General and Special Election

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Bruce Sherbet
Elections Administrator

2010 Redbud Blvd. Ste 102
McKinney, Texas 75069
972-547-1990 / 800-687-8546
972-424-1460 Ext 1990 Metro
Fax 972-547-1914

- **Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person**
  - 4,764 mail ballot voters surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person during Early Voting
  - 68 mail ballot voters surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person on Election Day
  - A total of 4,832 mail ballot voters surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person during the November 2020 General and Special Election

- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
  - **Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast**
    - 4,162 Provisional Ballots were cast during Early Voting
    - 2,087 Provisional Ballots were cast on Election Day
    - A total of 6,249 Provisional Ballots were cast during the November 2020 General and Special Election
  - **A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally**
    - A list and Provisional Ballot voters report in PDF and Excel formats titled "20201103_Provisional Ballot Tracking" have been included with this letter. Please review this document for more information.
  - **Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID**
    - 10 Provisional Ballots cast for voters lacking ID during Early Voting
    - 10 Provisional Ballots cast for voters lacking ID on Election Day
    - A total of 20 Provisional Ballots cast for voters lacking ID during the November 2020 General and Special Election
  - **Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected**
    - 2,725 Provisional Ballots cast during Early Voting were accepted
    - 1,437 Provisional Ballots cast during Early Voting were rejected
    - 225 Provisional Ballots cast on Election Day were accepted
    - 1,862 Provisional Ballots cast on Election Day were rejected
    - A total of 2,950 Provisional Ballots cast during the November 2020 General and Special Election were accepted
    - A total of 3,299 Provisional Ballots cast during the November 2020 General and Special Election were rejected

- **List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests**

There were no entities that conducted recounts are had election contests from the results of the November 2020 General and Special Election.

If you require any further explanation for any of the responses listed above, please feel to reach out to me or anyone in our office. We are happy to provide any assistance that we can as we all navigate our way through these difficult and trying times. We look forward to hearing from you and working with you all during this endeavor.

Sincerely,

Bruce Sherbet
Elections Administrator
Collin County Elections
(972) 547-1900

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 5:26 PM
To: Joe Esparza; Adam Bitter
Subject: FW: Election Audit Funds

FYI – see below:

From: Windy Johnson <[redacted]>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 4:09 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Election Audit Funds

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Good afternoon Sam,

Hope you are doing well. Can you please share how the additional funds will be used for election audits? I know my counties have a particular interest in how it will affect us. Thank you!

Windy Johnson
Program Manager
Texas Conference of Urban Counties
500 W 13th St. | Austin TX 78701
P: 512.476.6174 Cell: 512.731.3246
E: [redacted] | W: www.cuc.org



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 6:41 PM
To: Keith Ingram; Adam Bitter
Subject: FW: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

FYI -

-----Original Message-----
From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 6:37 PM
To: 'Randy Samuelson' <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Hi Randy,

Thanks so much for passing this along. The EAC certified the voting system in question before it was brought for certification before our office - and the Attorney General's office, which also certified the system. Texas requires the EAC certification number before they can even apply for Texas certification. The EAC has publicly clarified that Pro V&V was an accredited lab the whole time, including through the years 2017-2021:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fvoting-system-test-laboratories-vstl%2Fpro-vv&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=G%2B97fEV299SPkM64%2BuHHLmZld9f1mVB8qjfDUJLt%2FUY%3D&reserved=0

Furthermore, the EAC made clear that Pro V&V completed all requirements to remain in god standing with the EAC's Testing & Certification program:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_system_test_lab%2Ffiles%2FPro_VandV_Accreditation_Renewal_delay_memo012721.pdf&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=5MtVCGRMMEoyrcYBVlmYrr4MtewTfwYrCWzwfQRtnHw%3D&reserved=0

In other news - Collin County has responded to our initial audit survey (the first one to do so), as has Tarrant -- both counties are being extremely transparent and cooperative:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FTXsecofstate%2Fstatus%2F1473405167068397579&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=l869SqqPDzlaEyxBJ9WZ8nIMNqdVvIeLKuZ8shsYCUI%3D&reserved=0

Should the issue of ES&S machines or any issues relating to them arise in our on-site document examinations in Phase 2, that will certainly be included in the final report.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications Office of the Texas Secretary of State smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cell: 512-538-5293

-----Original Message-----
From: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 4:03 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

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Sam,

Mr. and Mrs. Lindstrom provided me some additional information on the ES&S certification. Here are portions of what they would like to have verified and reviewed in the audit of the certification of the ES&S vendor and equipment.

"From 2017 to 2021, the VSTL (Pro V&V) for ES&S (the vendor of Collin county's election machines) was not accredited. There has been no evidence of certification other than a note on the latest certificate with a note that says that the certificate of accreditation was not revoked and therefore it is still valid. The problem is that the HAVA Act is a Congressional Law that requires that the EAC follows certain procedures including expiration dates every two years and a process to renew the accreditation that was not followed. In addition, the State of Texas has laws that require Federal certification from an accredited VSTL.

Not only is there a federal requirement, but the state of Texas also has its own process for certification. The Texas Secretary of State (SoS) office went through its certification of ES&S 6.1.0.0, and in April of 2020, it "certified" the machines. But for an unknown reason, they missed the critical fact that Pro V&V (the certifying lab) was not accredited. They apparently took the EAC at its word, without verification, and certified the election systems for the state of Texas. This may have been intentional or just negligence - but the result is that Texas was violated by the EAC. Did the SOS miss this critical step in the certification or is the documentation available for the public to review?

The SOS then communicated to Collin County that our machines were certified for use."

--
Randy A. Samuelson
Chief of Staff, Senator Angela Paxton
512-463-0108

-----Original Message-----
From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 12:32 PM
To: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Thanks for passing along, Randy. These are the types of certifications (along with cybersecurity assessment) we'll be including in the Phase 1 progress report, which we're hoping to have ready for release before the holidays.

In order to be used in Texas elections, voting systems have to be both EAC certified and certified by the state -- for the EVS 6.1.0.0 system that Mrs. Lindstrom references in citation #6 below, that system was certified by the State of Texas on April 24, 2020, with the report available here:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Fforms%2Fsy

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

sexam%2FEVS-6100-certification-order.pdf&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=unlAbNwuLZAiYIXRHFlcA0LS29%2B9kAvY2ms1uaBUOVk%3D&reserved=0

You can also feel free to point constituents to our certification page, with all of the reports and findings for each round of certification, on our web site here: https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Flaws%2Fcertinfobyvendor.shtml&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=lfw7snvDbKwzm5QVYyrgNSTZtc7TxHAS5i3KFHHaI9g%3D&reserved=0

Note that Dominion systems are no longer in use in any Texas counties, and have been denied certification by the State of Texas: https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Flaws%2Fdominion.shtml&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=l1QQ%2FX9i6s7nfc5Y2TflclaNmyo39X0DKU1eEEIRZvs%3D&reserved=0

Hope this is helpful, and thanks again to you and the Senator for having the Secretary on for the town hall -- very positive feedback on the conversation from those who have seen it.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications Office of the Texas Secretary of State smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

-----Original Message-----
From: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 11:46 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: FW: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

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Sam,

I hope you had a good Thanksgiving.

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I am passing along a summary of an email from Mrs. Debbie Lindstrom who contacted our office by phone and followed up with an email this morning regarding the certification of the voting machines in Collin County. This has been an ongoing question/concern from some Collin County residents this year.

I let Mrs. Lindstrom know that the certification of the voting systems and machines, the cybersecurity of the machines, and accuracy of the voting machines is all going to be reviewed in phase 1 of the forensic audit in Collin County. Once we have audit findings, appropriate actions can then be taken by the Secretary of State and Collin County. If there is information I can update her (and other interested residents on), I'll be happy to pass it along.

--
Randy A. Samuelson
Chief of Staff, Senator Angela Paxton
512-463-0108

-----Original Message-----
From: [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 10:22 AM
To: District8 Paxton <District8.Paxton@senate.texas.gov>
Subject: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

First Name: Debbie
Middle Name:
Last Name: Lindstrom
Suffix:
Title:
Business:

Address line 1: 14055 RED WOOD CIR N
Address line 2:
City: MCKINNEY
State: TX
Zipcode: 75071-6138
Phone: 469-387-5560
E-mail: [redacted]

Subject:
Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Summary of Message:
I called this morning and left a message about the issue of a lack of certification of the ES&S voting machines used in Collin County and throughout the state of Texas.

The EAC machines have not been certified since 2017 and excuses were made for "critical failures."

Citations from Mrs. Lindstrom:

Link from the above video.

1. EAC website:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2F&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=abY4%2B9TIuNCUFDMkygwzmYyvmb4em5f4Wy8K8iwVCRQ%3D&reserved=0

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2. Testing and Certification Manual Version 2.0 (page 1, 19)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Feac_assets%2F1%2F28%2F&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=cM9S3dFSL3M8ufkGXQE98c0TXxpdBdkjHpWX2Wu%2FMX4%3D&reserved=0
Cert%20Manual%207%208%2015%20FINAL.pdf

3. State Requirements Manual (page 51)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FTestingCerti&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=TcwlnYPSgvLKgZNOffIBa9tpRwB%2FsZQ4jv8KX80bv9s%3D&reserved=0 fication/State_Requirements_for_Certification09042020.pd f

4. Voting System Test Laboratory Program Manual Version 2.0 (p 38- 39)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Feac_assets%2F1&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=8TvHAcuZ1eDMMN3A4iO1c5JVxtyE%2B9QBl5Wjx4AGR6k%3D&reserved=0 /28/VSTLManual%207%208%2015%20FINAL.pdf

5. VSTL Definition https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fvoting-system-test-
&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=8wF%2FX8dAg5%2F5Ya8ZhavZI1%2BTVNi8VvfCbAIdk5XUVNQ%3D&reserved=0 laboratories-vstl

6. Collin county used ES&S EVS 6.1.0.0 during the Nov 3, 2020 election.
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fevs-&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=d2WRzn%2B36xJCt0gltIF3Tk9T6LLb3BF72Iu9P6%2B4w8Y%3D&reserved=0 6100

7. Pro V&V Certificate of Accreditation 2015- 2017
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=rjZrYevIHzCxSI2cHPYQGpbIbNb0dO1Rv58s047UyZo%3D&reserved=0 em_test_lab/files/Pro_VandV_accreditation_certificate_20 15.pdf

8. Jerome Lovato Memo
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=rjZrYevIHzCxSI2cHPYQGpbIbNb0dO1Rv58s047UyZo%3D&reserved=0 em_test_lab/files/Pro_VandV_Accreditation_Renewal_delay_memo012721.pdf

9. Pro V&V Certificate of Accreditation Feb 1, 2021
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wL

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jAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=rjZrYevIHzCxSI2cHPYQGpbIbNb0dO1Rv58s047UyZo%3D&reserved=0 em_test_lab/files/Pro%20V%26V%20Accreditation%20Certificate.pdf

10. 52 USC § 20971
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.law.cornell.edu%2Fuscode%2Ftext%2F52%2F20971&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=jc4%2FnuIbMePwFBXFwAUT8ed1khQeWr6Y%2FcfJknJZrvs%3D&reserved=0

11. EAC Letter - Unsigned
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=LW%2F5moDwKmHR3calUJNSACcvTy4WzYo3QlMiPbKwMO8%3D&reserved=0
system_test_lab/files/VSTL%20Certificates%20and%20Accred itation.pdf

12. Texas Election Code § 122.001
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatutes.capitol.texas.gov%2FDocs%2FEL%2Fhtm%2FE&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=c6iqPKXpQluT0pOA2Aly7hEcfrr8xp9aSLUmQ7NBLRA%3D&reserved=0 L.122.htm

13. Texas Administration Code §81.60
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.law.cornell.edu%2Fregulations%2Ftexas%2F1-Tex-
&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=tvA2H5I98kH%2Bfk6zBkbGBe2YoWyCRVijC1g9ECtc4og%3D&reserved=0 Admin-Code-81-60

14. Texas Constitution Article 6 § 2(c) and Article 6 § 4
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatutes.capitol.texas.gov%2FDocs%2FCN%2Fhtm%2FCN.6.ht&data=04%7C01%7CABitter%40sos.texas.gov%7C7060a378d0e84ceb906608d9c4e3b967%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757304605307226%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=GcrueeZoQUCFhno1UzygaHSh3VCDJ6t9LOnlXTxUQ9o%3D&reserved=0 m

ComputerIP: 172.58.109.1

From:	Christina Adkins
To:	Harris - Beth Stevens (beth.stevens@vote.hctx.net)
Subject:	FW: Letter from Secretary Scott
Date:	Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32:17 PM
Attachments:	Texas Secretary of State Letter_Full Forensic Audit_Phase 2.pdf image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

FYI --

From: Christina Adkins
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32 PM
To: Collin - Bruce Sherbet (bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us) <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>; Dallas - Michael J. Scarpello (michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org) <michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org>; Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>; Harris - Isabel Longoria (Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Subject: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

Please see the attached correspondence from Secretary Scott.

Thank you,

Christina Worrell Adkins
Legal Director – Elections Division
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Rudder Building, 2nd Floor | Austin, Texas 78701
512-463-9859 (direct) | 1.800.252.VOTE (8683)
elections@sos.texas.gov | www.sos.texas.gov
For Voter Related Information, please visit:



The information contained in this email is intended to provide advice and assistance in election matters per §31.004 of the Texas Election Code. It is not intended to serve as a legal opinion for any matter. Please review the law yourself, and consult with an attorney when your legal rights are involved.

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The State of Texas

Elections Division
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, Texas 78711-2060
www.sos.texas.gov
www.votetexas.gov

Phone: 512-463-5650
Fax: 512-475-2811
Dial 7-1-1 For Relay Services
(800) 252-VOTE (8683)

John B. Scott
Secretary of State

December 10, 2021

Bruce Sherbet
Collin County Elections Administrator
2010 Redbud Blvd, Suite 102
McKinney, TX 75069

Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections Administrator
1001 Preston
Houston, TX 77002

Michael Scarpello
Dallas County Elections Administrator
1520 Round Table Drive
Dallas, TX 75247

Heider Garcia
Tarrant County Elections Administrator
100 E. Weatherford
Fort Worth, Texas 76196

Dear Bruce, Michael, Isabel and Heider:

Thank you for your service to Texas voters and for your commitment to transparency in our election process. As indicated in our office's previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State's office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the November 2020 General Election in your respective counties. The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward.

Enclosed, please find a comprehensive list of documents and records our office will be examining as part of Phase 2 of the Full Forensic Audit, as well as requests for information from your office that will be instrumental in completing the audit process. We request that your respective offices begin locating the documents listed to prepare for our Forensic Audit Division's on-site examinations, which will be coordinated at a mutually convenient time in January 2022.

In the near term, we request that you provide us the following information, in writing, to our office by **Tuesday, December 21st** in order to guide the next phase of the forensic audit process:

- **A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.**
- **Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity**
- **Any known procedural or chain of custody defects**
- **Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process**

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- **A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.**
- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA**
    - **Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected**
    - **Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person**
    - **Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person**
- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
    - **Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast**
    - **A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally**
    - **Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID**
    - **Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected**
- **List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests**

We thank you in advance for your responses to this initial audit survey and request that you begin preparing the enclosed list of documents and records for our agency's review.

Please feel free to reach out to our office directly if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



John B. Scott
Texas Secretary of State

Encl.: 2020 Forensic Election Audit – Phase 2: Comprehensive Records Examination

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2020 Forensic Election Audit

Phase 2: Comprehensive Records Examination

The purpose of this document is to outline the records and procedures that the Texas Secretary of State's office is reviewing for the forensic audit of the 2020 General Election in Collin, Dallas, Tarrant, and Harris counties. The specific review process for each category will be based on the county's response to the initial survey questions provided. Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category.

We recognize that some counties may use different terminology for certain forms and procedures. The terminology used in this document is based on commonly used terms in the Texas Election Code and based on industry standards. To the extent that counties use different terminologies to describe the election materials and procedures used in the November 2020 General Election, county election officials will have the opportunity to provide an explanation in their responses ahead of our office's on-site visits.

Election Security

The following questions pertain to each county's election security measures. Please elaborate to the fullest extent possible in your responses:

- Do you have badge-controlled access to your election office?
- Do you keep track of who enters into the office, especially sensitive areas?
- Are visitors escorted at all times?
- Do you keep track of who enters the ballot programming area? Are the number of people authorized to access the programming area limited?
- Did your county attend Texas Secretary of State webinars that discussed the Election Security Toolkit?
- Did your county create individual versions of all six documents that address the procedures in your county?
- If you did not complete all 6 documents, which of these did you complete?
    - Vendor Risk Management Policy (VRMP)
    - Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)
    - Incident Response Plan (IRP)
    - Election Information Security Policy (EISP)
    - Election System Security Plan (ESSP)
    - Election Security Best Practices
- Does your county have an offsite version of the Election Security Toolkit in a printed or electronically stored format?
- Does your county have a segmented election network?
- Does your county have a next generation firewall?

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- Does your county IT Department regularly patch and maintain the latest software version throughout the division?
- Does your county employ the Principle of Least Privilege?

Acceptance Testing Records if New Voting System was Used for the First Time

An examination of the following records will gauge the percentage of equipment that did not pass the acceptance testing and, therefore, was not operable during the November 2020 General Election:

- Logs for each device tested
- Logs that show if a device did not function properly or had to be returned for vendor review or service

L&A Testing Records

An examination of the following documents and records will determine if the voting system accurately recorded the test voters' choices and therefore demonstrated that the voting system accurately recorded voters' ballot choices:

- Public Notice of Logic and Accuracy (L&A) Test
- All test ballots voted in the election
- Tally Sheets
- Test Deck Records
- List of participants who voted test ballots
- Records showing test outcomes and if tests had to be repeated
- Testing media, including:
    - memory sticks
    - mobile ballot boxes (MBBs)
    - paper ballots used for L&A test voting and tabulation)
- All testing seals or other test materials

Election Preparation

An examination of the following documents and records will determine whether or not protocols to secure the voting system and ballot were followed to protect the integrity of the election:

- List of Presiding Judges and Alternate Judges by Precinct and Party
- Notification of Election Training Program
- Ballot Programming: Please indicate whether your vendor programmed your ballot or if the ballot was programmed by in-house staff.
- Electronic Poll Books (EPBs) programming: Please indicate how your EPBs were programmed and at what intervals was the Official List of Registered Voters on the EPB updated.

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Early Voting In Person

An examination of the following documents will provide a summary of all processes executed to conduct in-person Early Voting:

- **Election Workers**
  - List of Early Voting Deputies, Alternate Deputies and Early Voting Clerks
  - Lists of Early Voting Workers who dropped out of the election, the date they dropped out and the names of the replacement workers
    - Please indicate the training that any emergency replacement workers received.
  - List of "no show" Early Voting workers

- **Documentation related to Ordering and Providing Notice of the Election**
  - Order of November General Election for State and County Officers (GESCO)
  - Location of the Main Early Voting Polling Place as noted on the Order of Election
  - List of Early Voting Branch Polling Places as noted on the Order of Election
  - Notice of General Election (copy of posted notice and publication)
    - Record for Posting Notice of Election if posted in this manner

- **Documentation for Ballot Corrections, if applicable**
  - Notice of Ballot Correction, if applicable
  - Notice of Ballot Destruction, if applicable
  - Record of Ballot Destruction, if applicable
  - Notice of Ballot Reprint Order, if applicable

- **Documentation for Tracking Ballots**
  - Register of Official Ballots for Early Voting at the Main Location (if ballots are pre-serialized, if not the number of ballot cards delivered)
  - Register of Official Ballots for Early Voting at a Branch Location (if ballots are pre-serialized, if not the number of ballot cards delivered)

- **Polling Place Paperwork**
  - Combination Forms for each day of Early Voting OR a report generated by the general custodian to accurately create a summary of all processes that were required to be executed as noted on paper Combination Forms
  - Daily Balancing Envelope or Report (contain copy of daily returns for Early Voting, to the extent possible)
  - Ballot Styles of voters who were given a ballot vs. how many votes of each ballot style should have been cast, based on voter registration precinct (this identifies when a voter is given the wrong ballot style)
  - Results Tapes/Suspend Reports
  - List of Declared Write-In Candidates for posting in the voting booth
  - Reasonable Impediment Declarations, if applicable
  - Statements of Residence, if applicable
  - Standard Affidavits

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- Registration Omissions List

- **Other Information to be Reviewed**
  - List of Registered Voters that was used in the 2020 Presidential Election (electronic copy).
  - List of any Early Voting Site that had to be closed or changed according to county records
  - Signature Roster for Hand Delivery of a Ballot by Mail Forms (usually this process is only done only on Election Day, but the hand delivery period was extended only for the November 3, 2020 General Election)

- **Chain of Custody Paperwork**
  - Chain of Custody forms (Record of Early Voting Ballot Seals) that document the seals on the ballot boxes for each day of Early Voting
  - Chain of Custody delivery of equipment to voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who delivered equipment)
  - Chain of Custody of pickup of equipment from voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who picked up equipment)
  - Chain of Custody forms for when troubleshooters picked up completed forms from Early Voting sites for daily processing
  - List of Early Voting Daily seals for Provisional Secure Container

- **Voting System Equipment Management**
  - Trouble Logs and equipment replacement records
  - Troubleshooter visit logs
  - Equipment returned to vendor for technical support
  - Call Center Event/Complaint Logs

- **Poll Watcher Paperwork**
  - Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment

Ballot by Mail – Early Voting

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether Early Voting by Mail was conducted in accordance with state and federal law:

- Applications for Ballot by Mail (ABBMs)
- List of Annual ABBM Voters
- List of Declared Write-In Candidates
- Notices of Improper Delivery (and to whom they were sent)
- Emails from the county to voters regarding ABBM and Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) rejections
- Notices of Rejected ABBMs and reasons

- **Mail Ballot Cancellation Paperwork**
  - Request to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Polling Place

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- Request to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Early Voting Clerk's Office
- Notice of Denial of Request to Cancel Application for a Ballot by Mail
- Notice of ABBM or FPCA Cancellation (Formerly Notice to Presiding Judge)

- **Ballot By Mail Forms**
  - A sample of the November 3, 2020 Special Ballot Envelope to demonstrate that the correct version was used
  - A sample of the November 3, 2020 Special Carrier Envelope to demonstrate that the correct version was used
  - Special Carrier Insert for an ABBM voter for November 3, 2020 Election to demonstrate that the correct version was used

- **Other Information to be Reviewed**
  - List of FPCA ballots transmitted by email to the voter
  - List of FPCAs that were physically mailed to the voter
  - List of Voters Mailed a Corrected Ballot, if applicable
    - Statistics of how many uncorrected ballots were returned and counted as well as how many corrected ballots were returned and counted, if applicable.
  - List of Voters who were required to complete and return a Statement of Residence with their Ballot by Mail

- **Special Early Voting Forms**
  - Restricted Ballot Rosters for Chapter 112, 113 and 114 Ballots
  - Poll List of Voters Voting a Limited Ballot by Personal Appearance
  - Applications for a Limited Ballot
  - Notice to Voter Registrar of Application for a Presidential Ballot
  - Applications for an Emergency Early Voting Ballot Due to Sickness or Physical Disability
  - Applications for Emergency Ballot Due to Death in the Family
  - List of persons who voted on a space flight, if any

Election Day

An examination of the following documents and records from voting sites will determine if election officials followed proper chain of custody procedures, produce documentation of the chain of custody of ballots and election materials, and determine whether all state and federal laws were followed:

Election Workers

- Final List of Election Day Polling Places
- List of Presiding Judges and Alternate Judges by Precinct and Party
- Order of Appointment of Election Judges and Alternates
- Notifications of Appointment as Election Judge
- Writs of Election for the General Election for State and County Officers

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- List of emergency appointments for Election Day Workers
- Lists of Election Day Workers who dropped out of the election, the date they dropped out and the names of the replacement workers.
    - Please indicate the training that any emergency replacement workers received.
- List of “no show” workers on Election Day

Election Day Forms

- Combination Forms for election day OR a report generated by the general custodian to accurately create a summary of all processes that were required to be executed as noted on paper Combination Forms
- Ballot Styles of voters who were given a ballot vs. how many votes of each ballot style should have been cast based on voter registration precinct (this identifies when a voter is given the wrong ballot style)
- Results Tapes/Suspend Reports
- List of Declared Write-In Candidates for posting in the voting booth
- Reasonable Impediment Declarations, if needed
- Statements of Residence, if needed
- Standard Affidavits
- Registration Omissions List
- Envelope Containing Spoiled Ballots with the Register of Spoiled Ballots
- Defectively Printed Ballots
- Ballot by Mail Cancellation Requests attached to the surrendered ballots
- Register of Official Ballots for each Polling Place or the Combined Ballot and Seal Certificate and Official Ballot Register
- Ballot and Seal Certificates by Polling Location or the Combined Ballot and Seal Certificate and Official Ballot Register
- Applications to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Polling Place

Chain of Custody Paperwork

- Chain of Custody delivery of equipment to voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who delivered equipment)
- Chain of custody of pickup of equipment from voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who picked up equipment)
- Chain of custody forms for when troubleshooters picked up completed forms from Election Day sites for processing (if performed on Election Day)
- List of seals put on equipment for Election Day, including:
    - Those put on at elections office in the morning; and
    - Those put on by Presiding Judge at the polling place in the evening when voting has concluded

Election Day Notices

- Notices of Consolidated Precincts and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any

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- Record for Posting Notice of Election if posted in this manner
- Notices of Previous Precinct and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any
- Notices of Four Nearest Countywide Polling Places and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any

Additional Items for Consideration

- All sign-out sheets for those picking up supplies for Election Day.
    - Please indicate who picked up supplies for Election Day.
- List of any Election Day Site that had to be closed or changed and the reason for the closure or change
- Trouble Logs and equipment replacement records
- Names of individuals who returned supplies to the Receiving Substation/Central Receiving Station
- Names of individuals who received the supplies into his or her custody when the supplies were returned by election workers

Provisional Ballots

An examination of the Provisional Forms will determine if voters' provisional ballots were accepted or rejected according to the law, as well as determine the percentage of provisional ballots accepted vs. rejected:

- Affidavits of Provisional Voter
- Early Voting List of Provisional Voters
- Election Day List of Provisional Voters
- Summary of Provisional Ballots
- List of Seals for Provisional Secure Containers for Early Voting and chain of custody forms where they were documented
- List of Seals for Provisional Secure Containers for Election Day and chain of custody forms where they were documented
- Notice of Delivery of Provisional Ballots – To Voter Registrar on Election Night
- List of Rejected Provisional Ballots and reason
- Number of Provisional Ballots cured for lack of ID
- Verification of Provisional Ballots and Seal Numbers
- Review Notices of Outcome to Provisional Voter
    - Number of provisional ballots accepted
    - Number of provisional ballots rejected
- Breakdown of percentage of Provisional Ballots counted and rejected

Signature Verification Committee

An examination of the following documents related to the Signature Verification Committee (SVC) will determine whether there was party balance on the Committee and who was responsible for the processes of accepting and rejecting signatures:

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- Order Calling for Signature Verification Committee – date posted
- Notification of Appointed Members to SVC
- Notice of Appointment of SVC
- Chain of custody forms when ballots were transmitted to Central Counting Station from SVC
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment for SVC

Early Voting Ballot Board

An examination of the following documents related to the Early Voting Ballot Board (EVBB) will determine whether there was party balance and properly review adjudications, acceptances and rejections, as well as who was responsible for those processes:

- Order for EVBB
- Notice of Convening of EVBB
- Notification of members appointed to the EVBB
- Notice of appointment of the EVBB
- Notice of delivery of balloting materials to the EVBB (Receipt of Sealed Early Voting Ballot Boxes)
- Chain of Custody forms when ballots were delivered to the EVBB
- Samples of Notice of Rejected Ballot by Mail and reasons for rejection
- Samples of Notice of Rejected FPCAs Carriers and reasons for rejection
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment

Central Counting Station

An examination of these documents will determine whether the Central Counting Station (CCS) Plan was followed along with all applicable laws and procedures, and whether proper Chain of Custody procedures for voted ballots were followed:

- Central Counting Station Plan
    - Please indicate whether it posted 5 days before Election Day, as required by law.
- Public Notice of Test of Automatic Tabulating Equipment
- Certification of First Test of Automated Tabulating Equipment
- Oaths for Early Voting Ballot Board and Central Counting Station Personnel
- Chain of Custody documents related to the transmittal of ballots to the CCS from Election Day polling places, Early Voting Clerk's storage, or Early Voting Ballot Board.

Partial Manual Count Records

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether the Partial Manual Count was performed according to the law, as well as who performed the count:

- All records associated with the post-election Partial Manual Count
    - Please indicate who performed the partial manual count.
- Record of the Partial Manual Count results submitted to the Texas Secretary of State's office
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment, if any

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Post-Election and Canvass Records

An examination of these documents will determine whether certification of election results was conducted properly and whether proper documentation to support the official results was provided:

- Canvass of the General Election
- Summary of Precinct Returns
- Canvass reports by official in charge of certifying results
- Records of any recounts requested and performed after the election
- Records related to any election contests filed

Records Retention

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether Chain of Custody of records was maintained, and whether officials properly followed the 1st to 60th day rule and the 61st day to 22-month retention rule. If records must be opened, please supply a copy of the court order:

- Records of seal numbers put on and taken off records when the initial 60-day period for records retention ended
- Record of seals that were placed on the ballots and other materials on the 61st day for the remainder of the 22-month record retention period
    - Please indicate whether records were stored in a locked in a surveilled room.
- Please indicate whether county officials keep a log of anyone accessing the room where the records/ballots are stored.
- Please indicate whether any court order necessitated the unsealing of the records.
    - Provide a copy of any court order requesting opening of the records.

Central Counting Station Test Records

An examination of these records will validate the test procedures that were performed before and after counting on the automatic tabulating equipment:

- Central Counting Station (CCS) Plan
- Certification of 1st test of automated tabulating equipment
- Records from 2nd Logic and Accuracy (L&A) test before ballots are counted in the CCS
- Certification of the 3rd L&A test after ballots were counted at the Central Counting Station
- Records indicating whether there was a + or – 4 ballots tabulated that necessitated a recounting of ballots at the CCS
- Copy of final reports (unofficial results, precinct returns) signed by the presiding judge of the CCS

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Training Materials

An examination of these materials will determine whether poll workers were trained according to all state and federal laws and procedures. Examining the training materials allows auditors to know if the poll workers were instructed to perform their duties accurately:

- Manuals, PowerPoint presentations, materials that were used in poll worker training and sent to the field
- An example of the forms kit that was deployed to the field, if possible
- Training attendance records, including in-person and online training

General

Any video surveillance records that were recorded from the time the election was ordered until the canvass was completed.

Additional Audit Compliance Questions

1. Are any of your election materials that are required for the audit, stored at facility not under your control?
2. How quickly could you access the materials from the storage vendor?
3. Will it take longer than one month to locate and have your records ready for examination?
4. Do you still have the same voting systems as when your county conducted the 2020 Presidential Election?
5. Of the records listed in the Audit requirements, please specify which are electronically stored and which are physical copies.
6. Are there any records that you may not be able to produce? If so, why?
7. Are there any permanent staff members who have left your office since the Presidential Election? Please give names and job duties.

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From:	Christina Adkins
To:	Elec Legal
Subject:	FW: Letter from Secretary Scott
Date:	Friday, December 10, 2021 4:34:26 PM
Attachments:	Texas Secretary of State Letter_Full Forensic Audit_Phase 2.pdf image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

This was just sent out. There will be news release that goes out later today with a link to this document. I'll forward you the release as soon as I get it.

From: Christina Adkins
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32 PM
To: Collin - Bruce Sherbet (bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us) <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>; Dallas - Michael J. Scarpello (michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org) <michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org>; Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>; Harris - Isabel Longoria (Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Subject: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

Please see the attached correspondence from Secretary Scott.

Thank you,

Christina Worrell Adkins
Legal Director – Elections Division
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Rudder Building, 2nd Floor | Austin, Texas 78701
512-463-9859 (direct) | 1.800.252.VOTE (8683)
elections@sos.texas.gov | www.sos.texas.gov
For Voter Related Information, please visit:



The information contained in this email is intended to provide advice and assistance in election matters per §31.004 of the Texas Election Code. It is not intended to serve as a legal opinion for any matter. Please review the law yourself, and consult with an attorney when your legal rights are involved.

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The State of Texas

Elections Division
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, Texas 78711-2060
www.sos.texas.gov
www.votetexas.gov

Phone: 512-463-5650
Fax: 512-475-2811
Dial 7-1-1 For Relay Services
(800) 252-VOTE (8683)

John B. Scott
Secretary of State

December 10, 2021

Bruce Sherbet
Collin County Elections Administrator
2010 Redbud Blvd, Suite 102
McKinney, TX 75069

Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections Administrator
1001 Preston
Houston, TX 77002

Michael Scarpello
Dallas County Elections Administrator
1520 Round Table Drive
Dallas, TX 75247

Heider Garcia
Tarrant County Elections Administrator
100 E. Weatherford
Fort Worth, Texas 76196

Dear Bruce, Michael, Isabel and Heider:

Thank you for your service to Texas voters and for your commitment to transparency in our election process. As indicated in our office's previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State's office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the November 2020 General Election in your respective counties. The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward.

Enclosed, please find a comprehensive list of documents and records our office will be examining as part of Phase 2 of the Full Forensic Audit, as well as requests for information from your office that will be instrumental in completing the audit process. We request that your respective offices begin locating the documents listed to prepare for our Forensic Audit Division's on-site examinations, which will be coordinated at a mutually convenient time in January 2022.

In the near term, we request that you provide us the following information, in writing, to our office by **Tuesday, December 21st** in order to guide the next phase of the forensic audit process:

- **A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.**
- **Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity**
- **Any known procedural or chain of custody defects**
- **Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process**

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- **A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.**
- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out**
    - **Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA**
    - **Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected**
    - **Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person**
    - **Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person**
- **A detailed accounting of the following:**
    - **Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast**
    - **A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally**
    - **Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID**
    - **Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected**
- **List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests**

We thank you in advance for your responses to this initial audit survey and request that you begin preparing the enclosed list of documents and records for our agency's review.

Please feel free to reach out to our office directly if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,



John B. Scott
Texas Secretary of State

Encl.: 2020 Forensic Election Audit – Phase 2: Comprehensive Records Examination

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2020 Forensic Election Audit

Phase 2: Comprehensive Records Examination

The purpose of this document is to outline the records and procedures that the Texas Secretary of State's office is reviewing for the forensic audit of the 2020 General Election in Collin, Dallas, Tarrant, and Harris counties. The specific review process for each category will be based on the county's response to the initial survey questions provided. Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category.

We recognize that some counties may use different terminology for certain forms and procedures. The terminology used in this document is based on commonly used terms in the Texas Election Code and based on industry standards. To the extent that counties use different terminologies to describe the election materials and procedures used in the November 2020 General Election, county election officials will have the opportunity to provide an explanation in their responses ahead of our office's on-site visits.

Election Security

The following questions pertain to each county's election security measures. Please elaborate to the fullest extent possible in your responses:

- Do you have badge-controlled access to your election office?
- Do you keep track of who enters into the office, especially sensitive areas?
- Are visitors escorted at all times?
- Do you keep track of who enters the ballot programming area? Are the number of people authorized to access the programming area limited?
- Did your county attend Texas Secretary of State webinars that discussed the Election Security Toolkit?
- Did your county create individual versions of all six documents that address the procedures in your county?
- If you did not complete all 6 documents, which of these did you complete?
    - Vendor Risk Management Policy (VRMP)
    - Continuity of Operations Plan (COOP)
    - Incident Response Plan (IRP)
    - Election Information Security Policy (EISP)
    - Election System Security Plan (ESSP)
    - Election Security Best Practices
- Does your county have an offsite version of the Election Security Toolkit in a printed or electronically stored format?
- Does your county have a segmented election network?
- Does your county have a next generation firewall?

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- Does your county IT Department regularly patch and maintain the latest software version throughout the division?
- Does your county employ the Principle of Least Privilege?

Acceptance Testing Records if New Voting System was Used for the First Time

An examination of the following records will gauge the percentage of equipment that did not pass the acceptance testing and, therefore, was not operable during the November 2020 General Election:

- Logs for each device tested
- Logs that show if a device did not function properly or had to be returned for vendor review or service

L&A Testing Records

An examination of the following documents and records will determine if the voting system accurately recorded the test voters' choices and therefore demonstrated that the voting system accurately recorded voters' ballot choices:

- Public Notice of Logic and Accuracy (L&A) Test
- All test ballots voted in the election
- Tally Sheets
- Test Deck Records
- List of participants who voted test ballots
- Records showing test outcomes and if tests had to be repeated
- Testing media, including:
    - memory sticks
    - mobile ballot boxes (MBBs)
    - paper ballots used for L&A test voting and tabulation)
- All testing seals or other test materials

Election Preparation

An examination of the following documents and records will determine whether or not protocols to secure the voting system and ballot were followed to protect the integrity of the election:

- List of Presiding Judges and Alternate Judges by Precinct and Party
- Notification of Election Training Program
- Ballot Programming: Please indicate whether your vendor programmed your ballot or if the ballot was programmed by in-house staff.
- Electronic Poll Books (EPBs) programming: Please indicate how your EPBs were programmed and at what intervals was the Official List of Registered Voters on the EPB updated.

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Early Voting In Person

An examination of the following documents will provide a summary of all processes executed to conduct in-person Early Voting:

- **Election Workers**
  - List of Early Voting Deputies, Alternate Deputies and Early Voting Clerks
  - Lists of Early Voting Workers who dropped out of the election, the date they dropped out and the names of the replacement workers
    - Please indicate the training that any emergency replacement workers received.
  - List of "no show" Early Voting workers

- **Documentation related to Ordering and Providing Notice of the Election**
  - Order of November General Election for State and County Officers (GESCO)
  - Location of the Main Early Voting Polling Place as noted on the Order of Election
  - List of Early Voting Branch Polling Places as noted on the Order of Election
  - Notice of General Election (copy of posted notice and publication)
    - Record for Posting Notice of Election if posted in this manner

- **Documentation for Ballot Corrections, if applicable**
  - Notice of Ballot Correction, if applicable
  - Notice of Ballot Destruction, if applicable
  - Record of Ballot Destruction, if applicable
  - Notice of Ballot Reprint Order, if applicable

- **Documentation for Tracking Ballots**
  - Register of Official Ballots for Early Voting at the Main Location (if ballots are pre-serialized, if not the number of ballot cards delivered)
  - Register of Official Ballots for Early Voting at a Branch Location (if ballots are pre-serialized, if not the number of ballot cards delivered)

- **Polling Place Paperwork**
  - Combination Forms for each day of Early Voting OR a report generated by the general custodian to accurately create a summary of all processes that were required to be executed as noted on paper Combination Forms
  - Daily Balancing Envelope or Report (contain copy of daily returns for Early Voting, to the extent possible)
  - Ballot Styles of voters who were given a ballot vs. how many votes of each ballot style should have been cast, based on voter registration precinct (this identifies when a voter is given the wrong ballot style)
  - Results Tapes/Suspend Reports
  - List of Declared Write-In Candidates for posting in the voting booth
  - Reasonable Impediment Declarations, if applicable
  - Statements of Residence, if applicable
  - Standard Affidavits

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- Registration Omissions List

- **Other Information to be Reviewed**
  - List of Registered Voters that was used in the 2020 Presidential Election (electronic copy).
  - List of any Early Voting Site that had to be closed or changed according to county records
  - Signature Roster for Hand Delivery of a Ballot by Mail Forms (usually this process is only done only on Election Day, but the hand delivery period was extended only for the November 3, 2020 General Election)

- **Chain of Custody Paperwork**
  - Chain of Custody forms (Record of Early Voting Ballot Seals) that document the seals on the ballot boxes for each day of Early Voting
  - Chain of Custody delivery of equipment to voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who delivered equipment)
  - Chain of Custody of pickup of equipment from voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who picked up equipment)
  - Chain of Custody forms for when troubleshooters picked up completed forms from Early Voting sites for daily processing
  - List of Early Voting Daily seals for Provisional Secure Container

- **Voting System Equipment Management**
  - Trouble Logs and equipment replacement records
  - Troubleshooter visit logs
  - Equipment returned to vendor for technical support
  - Call Center Event/Complaint Logs

- **Poll Watcher Paperwork**
  - Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment

Ballot by Mail – Early Voting

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether Early Voting by Mail was conducted in accordance with state and federal law:

- Applications for Ballot by Mail (ABBMs)
- List of Annual ABBM Voters
- List of Declared Write-In Candidates
- Notices of Improper Delivery (and to whom they were sent)
- Emails from the county to voters regarding ABBM and Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) rejections
- Notices of Rejected ABBMs and reasons

- **Mail Ballot Cancellation Paperwork**
  - Request to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Polling Place

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- Request to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Early Voting Clerk's Office
- Notice of Denial of Request to Cancel Application for a Ballot by Mail
- Notice of ABBM or FPCA Cancellation (Formerly Notice to Presiding Judge)

- **Ballot By Mail Forms**
  - A sample of the November 3, 2020 Special Ballot Envelope to demonstrate that the correct version was used
  - A sample of the November 3, 2020 Special Carrier Envelope to demonstrate that the correct version was used
  - Special Carrier Insert for an ABBM voter for November 3, 2020 Election to demonstrate that the correct version was used

- **Other Information to be Reviewed**
  - List of FPCA ballots transmitted by email to the voter
  - List of FPCAs that were physically mailed to the voter
  - List of Voters Mailed a Corrected Ballot, if applicable
    - Statistics of how many uncorrected ballots were returned and counted as well as how many corrected ballots were returned and counted, if applicable.
  - List of Voters who were required to complete and return a Statement of Residence with their Ballot by Mail

- **Special Early Voting Forms**
  - Restricted Ballot Rosters for Chapter 112, 113 and 114 Ballots
  - Poll List of Voters Voting a Limited Ballot by Personal Appearance
  - Applications for a Limited Ballot
  - Notice to Voter Registrar of Application for a Presidential Ballot
  - Applications for an Emergency Early Voting Ballot Due to Sickness or Physical Disability
  - Applications for Emergency Ballot Due to Death in the Family
  - List of persons who voted on a space flight, if any

Election Day

An examination of the following documents and records from voting sites will determine if election officials followed proper chain of custody procedures, produce documentation of the chain of custody of ballots and election materials, and determine whether all state and federal laws were followed:

Election Workers

- Final List of Election Day Polling Places
- List of Presiding Judges and Alternate Judges by Precinct and Party
- Order of Appointment of Election Judges and Alternates
- Notifications of Appointment as Election Judge
- Writs of Election for the General Election for State and County Officers

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- List of emergency appointments for Election Day Workers
- Lists of Election Day Workers who dropped out of the election, the date they dropped out and the names of the replacement workers.
    - Please indicate the training that any emergency replacement workers received.
- List of “no show” workers on Election Day

Election Day Forms

- Combination Forms for election day OR a report generated by the general custodian to accurately create a summary of all processes that were required to be executed as noted on paper Combination Forms
- Ballot Styles of voters who were given a ballot vs. how many votes of each ballot style should have been cast based on voter registration precinct (this identifies when a voter is given the wrong ballot style)
- Results Tapes/Suspend Reports
- List of Declared Write-In Candidates for posting in the voting booth
- Reasonable Impediment Declarations, if needed
- Statements of Residence, if needed
- Standard Affidavits
- Registration Omissions List
- Envelope Containing Spoiled Ballots with the Register of Spoiled Ballots
- Defectively Printed Ballots
- Ballot by Mail Cancellation Requests attached to the surrendered ballots
- Register of Official Ballots for each Polling Place or the Combined Ballot and Seal Certificate and Official Ballot Register
- Ballot and Seal Certificates by Polling Location or the Combined Ballot and Seal Certificate and Official Ballot Register
- Applications to Cancel a Ballot by Mail for Use in the Polling Place

Chain of Custody Paperwork

- Chain of Custody delivery of equipment to voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who delivered equipment)
- Chain of custody of pickup of equipment from voting sites (with seal numbers and equipment serial numbers noted) (signatures of persons who picked up equipment)
- Chain of custody forms for when troubleshooters picked up completed forms from Election Day sites for processing (if performed on Election Day)
- List of seals put on equipment for Election Day, including:
    - Those put on at elections office in the morning; and
    - Those put on by Presiding Judge at the polling place in the evening when voting has concluded

Election Day Notices

- Notices of Consolidated Precincts and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any

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- Record for Posting Notice of Election if posted in this manner
- Notices of Previous Precinct and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any
- Notices of Four Nearest Countywide Polling Places and records of which staff member posted the notices at the various sites, if any

Additional Items for Consideration

- All sign-out sheets for those picking up supplies for Election Day.
    - Please indicate who picked up supplies for Election Day.
- List of any Election Day Site that had to be closed or changed and the reason for the closure or change
- Trouble Logs and equipment replacement records
- Names of individuals who returned supplies to the Receiving Substation/Central Receiving Station
- Names of individuals who received the supplies into his or her custody when the supplies were returned by election workers

Provisional Ballots

An examination of the Provisional Forms will determine if voters' provisional ballots were accepted or rejected according to the law, as well as determine the percentage of provisional ballots accepted vs. rejected:

- Affidavits of Provisional Voter
- Early Voting List of Provisional Voters
- Election Day List of Provisional Voters
- Summary of Provisional Ballots
- List of Seals for Provisional Secure Containers for Early Voting and chain of custody forms where they were documented
- List of Seals for Provisional Secure Containers for Election Day and chain of custody forms where they were documented
- Notice of Delivery of Provisional Ballots – To Voter Registrar on Election Night
- List of Rejected Provisional Ballots and reason
- Number of Provisional Ballots cured for lack of ID
- Verification of Provisional Ballots and Seal Numbers
- Review Notices of Outcome to Provisional Voter
    - Number of provisional ballots accepted
    - Number of provisional ballots rejected
- Breakdown of percentage of Provisional Ballots counted and rejected

Signature Verification Committee

An examination of the following documents related to the Signature Verification Committee (SVC) will determine whether there was party balance on the Committee and who was responsible for the processes of accepting and rejecting signatures:

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- Order Calling for Signature Verification Committee – date posted
- Notification of Appointed Members to SVC
- Notice of Appointment of SVC
- Chain of custody forms when ballots were transmitted to Central Counting Station from SVC
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment for SVC

Early Voting Ballot Board

An examination of the following documents related to the Early Voting Ballot Board (EVBB) will determine whether there was party balance and properly review adjudications, acceptances and rejections, as well as who was responsible for those processes:

- Order for EVBB
- Notice of Convening of EVBB
- Notification of members appointed to the EVBB
- Notice of appointment of the EVBB
- Notice of delivery of balloting materials to the EVBB (Receipt of Sealed Early Voting Ballot Boxes)
- Chain of Custody forms when ballots were delivered to the EVBB
- Samples of Notice of Rejected Ballot by Mail and reasons for rejection
- Samples of Notice of Rejected FPCAs Carriers and reasons for rejection
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment

Central Counting Station

An examination of these documents will determine whether the Central Counting Station (CCS) Plan was followed along with all applicable laws and procedures, and whether proper Chain of Custody procedures for voted ballots were followed:

- Central Counting Station Plan
    - Please indicate whether it posted 5 days before Election Day, as required by law.
- Public Notice of Test of Automatic Tabulating Equipment
- Certification of First Test of Automated Tabulating Equipment
- Oaths for Early Voting Ballot Board and Central Counting Station Personnel
- Chain of Custody documents related to the transmittal of ballots to the CCS from Election Day polling places, Early Voting Clerk's storage, or Early Voting Ballot Board.

Partial Manual Count Records

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether the Partial Manual Count was performed according to the law, as well as who performed the count:

- All records associated with the post-election Partial Manual Count
    - Please indicate who performed the partial manual count.
- Record of the Partial Manual Count results submitted to the Texas Secretary of State's office
- Poll Watcher Certificates of Appointment, if any

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Post-Election and Canvass Records

An examination of these documents will determine whether certification of election results was conducted properly and whether proper documentation to support the official results was provided:

- Canvass of the General Election
- Summary of Precinct Returns
- Canvass reports by official in charge of certifying results
- Records of any recounts requested and performed after the election
- Records related to any election contests filed

Records Retention

An examination of these documents and records will determine whether Chain of Custody of records was maintained, and whether officials properly followed the 1st to 60th day rule and the 61st day to 22-month retention rule. If records must be opened, please supply a copy of the court order:

- Records of seal numbers put on and taken off records when the initial 60-day period for records retention ended
- Record of seals that were placed on the ballots and other materials on the 61st day for the remainder of the 22-month record retention period
    - Please indicate whether records were stored in a locked in a surveilled room.
- Please indicate whether county officials keep a log of anyone accessing the room where the records/ballots are stored.
- Please indicate whether any court order necessitated the unsealing of the records.
    - Provide a copy of any court order requesting opening of the records.

Central Counting Station Test Records

An examination of these records will validate the test procedures that were performed before and after counting on the automatic tabulating equipment:

- Central Counting Station (CCS) Plan
- Certification of 1st test of automated tabulating equipment
- Records from 2nd Logic and Accuracy (L&A) test before ballots are counted in the CCS
- Certification of the 3rd L&A test after ballots were counted at the Central Counting Station
- Records indicating whether there was a + or – 4 ballots tabulated that necessitated a recounting of ballots at the CCS
- Copy of final reports (unofficial results, precinct returns) signed by the presiding judge of the CCS

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Training Materials

An examination of these materials will determine whether poll workers were trained according to all state and federal laws and procedures. Examining the training materials allows auditors to know if the poll workers were instructed to perform their duties accurately:

- Manuals, PowerPoint presentations, materials that were used in poll worker training and sent to the field
- An example of the forms kit that was deployed to the field, if possible
- Training attendance records, including in-person and online training

General

Any video surveillance records that were recorded from the time the election was ordered until the canvass was completed.

Additional Audit Compliance Questions

1. Are any of your election materials that are required for the audit, stored at facility not under your control?
2. How quickly could you access the materials from the storage vendor?
3. Will it take longer than one month to locate and have your records ready for examination?
4. Do you still have the same voting systems as when your county conducted the 2020 Presidential Election?
5. Of the records listed in the Audit requirements, please specify which are electronically stored and which are physical copies.
6. Are there any records that you may not be able to produce? If so, why?
7. Are there any permanent staff members who have left your office since the Presidential Election? Please give names and job duties.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	Keith Ingram
To:	Adam Bitter; Sam Taylor; Joe Esparza
Subject:	FW: Letter from Secretary Scott
Date:	Wednesday, December 22, 2021 8:20:41 AM
Attachments:	image004.png Harris County 12.21.2021 Response to Texas SOS.pdf Harris County 12.21.2021 Response to Texas SOS Attachment.pdf image002.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

From: Longoria, Isabel (Elections) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 9:38 PM
To: John Scott <JScott@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Keith Ingram <KIngram@sos.texas.gov>; Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

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Please see the attached response.

Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections
Administrator
Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net
832.584.1757
she/hers

From: Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32 PM
To: Collin - Bruce Sherbet (bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us) <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>; Dallas - Michael J. Scarpello (michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org) <michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org>; Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>; Longoria, Isabel (EAD) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Subject: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

Please see the attached correspondence from Secretary Scott.

Thank you,

Christina Worrell Adkins

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Legal Director – Elections Division
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Rudder Building, 2nd Floor | Austin, Texas 78701
512-463-9859 (direct) | 1.800.252.VOTE (8683)
elections@sos.texas.gov | www.sos.texas.gov
For Voter Related Information, please visit:



The information contained in this email is intended to provide advice and assistance in election matters per §31.004 of the Texas Election Code. It is not intended to serve as a legal opinion for any matter. Please review the law yourself, and consult with an attorney when your legal rights are involved.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

OFFICE OF ISABEL LONGORIA
ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATOR
HARRIS COUNTY ★ STATE OF TEXAS

December 21, 2021

John B. Scott
Texas Secretary of State
Elections Division
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, Texas 78711-2060

Dear Secretary Scott:

I write in response to your letter dated December 10, 2021, regarding "Phase 2 of the Full Forensic Audit," in which you asked my office to compile a list of responses by December 21, and you provided an almost 8-page list of documents indicating you would like our office to "begin locating the documents listed to prepare for our Forensic Audit Division's on-site examinations, which will be coordinated at a mutually convenient time in January 2022." That is an impossible timeline by which to complete the tasks requested.

Our office is in the process of preparing to hold six elections over the course of the next six months, four of which are countywide elections, some even ordered by the state legislature: a special election in January, the Primary elections in March, a likely runoff for the special election, the May 7 uniform election, the May 24 Primary election runoff and the election for Precinct Chairs, and the likely runoff for the May 7 uniform election. Every day from now until June 2022 there is either voting actively occurring or a critical deadline our office must complete for at least one of those six elections. Thus, it would be cumbersome and potentially irresponsible for us to divert staff and resources away from active elections to host an "audit" of a past, certified election.

Additionally, the extensive requirements of Senate Bill 1 will be in effect, for the first time, for the Republican and Democratic Primary Elections. Planning and executing the implementation of such a wide sweeping legislation is a massive undertaking and requires my staff's full time and attention. Because your office has released little guidance on how to implement these important new provisions, we are left to sort through the logistics on our own in hopes that they meet the undisclosed SOS standards.

In short, taking hundreds of hours from staff time to pull documents listed in your prior letter instead of working toward implementation of SB1, nor preparing for the massive election calendar over the next six months, would be asking us to put the 2022 Primaries and compliance with Senate Bill 1 in jeopardy.

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Since I was sworn into office on November 18, 2020, 15 days after the November 2020 Presidential Election concluded, the Elections Administrator's Office has endeavored to run elections fairly, equitably, accurately, and smoothly. That is why we are doing everything in our power to fully prepare for the upcoming 2022 elections for the sake of Harris County voters.

We attach responses to the questions in your December 10, 2021 letter. For the remainder of your requests, we await your call to discuss the time and resources it would take to go through the documents.

Sincerely,



Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections Administrator

Attachments:
Attachment 1: Response to Texas SOS December 10 Initial Requests

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Harris County Elections Administrator
Attachment 1: Response to Texas SOS December 10 Initial Requests

1. **A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.**
   Our office has gathered information and is in the process of comparing for any percentage discrepancies.

2. **Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity.**
   Yes, three locations were closed for the remainder of a day due to weather-related issues.

3. **Any known procedural or chain of custody defects.**
   Procedural and Chain of Custody documents from the November 2020 Election have been maintained and are available for review to ascertain the existence and nature of any defects.

4. **Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process.**
   Please see response to no. 3.

5. **A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.**
   Our office is in the process of gathering the ADA complaints from Nov 2020.

6. **A detailed accounting of the following:**
   a. **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested** 194,566 (does not include FPCA or Emergency ballot applications)
   b. **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out** 206,020
   c. **Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA** 12,895
   d. Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected
      i. Total received: 180,007
      ii. Accepted: 179,174
      iii. Rejected: 224
      iv. Late ballots: 609
   e. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person

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i. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted provisionally in person: 8,337
ii. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted regularly in person: 57

f. **Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person:** 45,225

7. **A detailed accounting of the following:**
   a. **Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast:** 13,835
   b. A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally: A comprehensive list does not exist. While our office does not currently have the capacity to go through the nearly 14,000 provisional ballot affidavits from the November 2020 election, the provisional ballot affidavits and additional provisional ballot documentation are available for review and our office will provide them to you at a mutually agreed upon time.
   c. **Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID:** 8,528
   d. **Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected:** 5,307

8. **List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests:**
   Harris County MUD 24 conducted a recount of their November 2020 election.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	Keith Ingram
To:	Sam Taylor; Adam Bitter; Joe Esparza
Subject:	Fw: Letter from Secretary Scott
Date:	Tuesday, December 21, 2021 4:20:49 PM
Attachments:	image002.jpg image003.jpg image004.jpg image007.png image001.jpg SOS response - 20211221 V2.pdf
Sensitivity:	Personal

From: Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 4:19 PM
To: Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>; Keith Ingram <KIngram@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Troy C. Havard <TCHavard@tarrantcounty.com>
Subject: RE: Letter from Secretary Scott

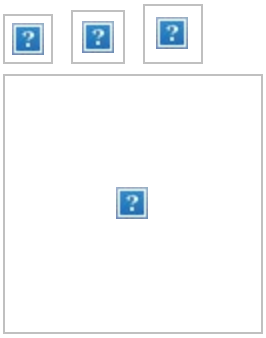
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Good afternoon Christina and Keith.

Attached to this email is the response to the letter received. I ask that you please forward my response letter to the Secretary. Would you like a hard copy to follow in the mail or will the electronic version suffice?

Thanks,

Heider Garcia, PMP, CERA
Tarrant County Elections Administrator
2700 Premier Street
Fort Worth, Texas 76111
(817) 831-8683



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32 PM
To: Collin - Bruce Sherbet (bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us) <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>; Dallas - Michael J. Scarpello (michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org) <michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org>; Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>; Harris - Isabel Longoria (Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Subject: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

EXTERNAL EMAIL ALERT! Think Before You Click!

Please see the attached correspondence from Secretary Scott.

Thank you,

Christina Worrell Adkins
Legal Director – Elections Division
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Rudder Building, 2nd Floor | Austin, Texas 78701
512-463-9859 (direct) | 1.800.252.VOTE (8683)
elections@sos.texas.gov | www.sos.texas.gov
For Voter Related Information, please visit:

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

HEIDER GARCIA
Elections Administrator

TROY HAVARD
Assistant Elections Administrator

TARRANT COUNTY
ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATION

December 21, 2021

Honorable John Scott
Texas Secretary of State
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, TX 78711-2060

Mr. Secretary,

I am in receipt of your letter dated December 10, 2021. I sincerely appreciate the work being done by your office to provide clarity and confidence to all Texas voters about the 2020 Election and, as we have said from the day the audit was announced, Tarrant County stands ready to assist your office in the process. I am 100% confident that the outcome will show, once again, what has been clear from the beginning: that Texas has safe and secure elections, and that the 2020 Presidential Election was not an exception.

The list below is our response to the information you requested us to provide in writing by today:

- *A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.*

  Official results are not generated per location, but rather per election precinct as required in Chapter 67 of the Texas Election Code. To produce the numbers per location as requested, we have turned to other documentation we use to check on the progress of the election activities.

  During Early Voting, Lead Clerks are required to call in to our office and report, at the end of every day, the number of voters checked into the electronic poll book and the number of ballots cast in the ballot scanner. While the number of voters checked in is accessible from our offices, the fact that the voting system is air-gapped leaves no choice but to obtain this information through a phone call. Using that daily phone report, we have verified that while there are minor discrepancies, all of them are below the 1% threshold you have inquired about.

  For Election Day, we compared the number of voters who signed in on the electronic poll book to the numbers of ballots cast as reported by the ballot scanners on election night. As a regular practice, Tarrant County does a comparison of these two numbers on election night, which allows us to detect any potential problems and address them immediately, and we keep a record of what was done that night (we call it the Election-night audit). That report, however, ***does not include the provisional ballots that are approved by the ballot board after election day***, hence there are minor variations that are not considered red flags. The table below summarizes the 16 sites (out of 323) that fall within the specified range:

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TX-SOS-22-0092-E-000051

eScan	Location	Key Pct.	ePoll Book Checked in A	Provisional Checked in B	Ballots in scanner C	EPB - Scanner (A - C) D	% of discrepancy (D / C)
122	Atwood McDonald Elementary School	1279	179	10	177	2	1.13%
165	Western Hills Church of Christ	4135	423	16	432	-9	-2.08%
210	St. Matthew's Lutheran Church	1022	117	9	112	5	4.46%
230	Carter Park Elementary School	1154	172	29	170	2	1.18%
281	Ruby Ray Swift Elementary School	2052	282	14	279	3	1.08%
297	Jones Academy	2281	153	38	147	6	4.08%
32	Pantego Town Hall Council Chambers	2112	170	7	166	4	2.41%
40	Edify Community Fellowship Church	2229	158	2	155	3	1.94%
405	St. Martin in-the-Fields Episcopal	3626	315	9	307	8	2.61%
423	Independence Elementary School	3486	247	38	244	3	1.23%
516	Benbrook YMCA	1208	339	33	335	4	1.19%
519	Crouch Event Center at Bicentennial	1717	669	44	662	7	1.06%
555	Northeast Courthouse	3196	457	30	450	7	1.56%
583	R. L. Paschal High School	1108	336	33	340	-4	-1.18%
96	Van Zandt-Guinn Elementary School	1005	63	3	62	1	1.61%
97	Versia L. Williams Elementary	1008	59	5	60	-1	-1.67%

Table 1 - Election Day sites that have a 1% or greater discrepancy between the number of voters checked in the number of ballots cast

- *Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity*

  The list below are the Early Voting locations that had to be closed due to COVID-19 cases:

  - Monday 10/12: Keller Town Hall, Villages of Woodland Springs and Euless Family Life Senior Center had staff affected by a COVID-19 case in a training class. The Keller Town Hall and Villages of Woodland Springs locations opened by 9:00 a.m., and the Euless location opened by 10:00 a.m.
  - Friday 10/22: The Lead Clerk for the Brookside Community Center tested positive for COVID-19 and the site had to close for the day.
  - Monday 10/26: JPS Como closed for the day due to a poll worker testing positive for COVID-19.

  There were no Election Day polling locations closed.

- *Any known procedural or chain of custody defects*

  There are no known procedural or chain of custody issues to report.

- *Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process*

  There are no known issues to report.

- *A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.*

  Complaints received from voters are handled via emails. These emails are over a year old, and as such have been archived by our IT Department. We are in the process of retrieving and sorting them, so that they are available in January when the audit team arrives on site. I apologize for not having them attached to this response, but on such short notice, and so close to the holidays, it was just not possible to complete this request.

- *A detailed accounting of the following:*
  - *Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested*: 89,305.

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TX-SOS-22-0092-E-000052

- *Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out*: 89,305.
- *Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA*: 4,983.
- *Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected*: 65,995 accepted/311 rejected.
- *Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person*: 11,735 voters cancelled an absentee ballot and voted in person. The system does not record whether the voter surrendered the ballot or not.
- *Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person*: 11,735 voters cancelled an absentee ballot and voted in person. The system does not record whether the voter surrendered the ballot or not.

- *A detailed accounting of the following:*
  - *Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast*: 10,845.
  - *A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally*: Please refer to the report attached "1120 Provisionals".
  - *Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID*: 96.
  - *Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected*:
    - *Accepted*: 4,385.
    - *Rejected*: 6,460.
- *List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests*

  There were no recounts or election contests requested.

Please note Tarrant County is currently engaged in litigation which may impact the ability of the Tarrant County Elections Administration to retrieve some of the data sought by the Secretary of State's Office. Specifically, an individual sought and received a Temporary Restraining Order and then an Agreed Temporary Injunction which has led to the powering down and secure storage of various servers and hard drives used in the November 2020 election. This lawsuit seeks to allow the plaintiff to access some data and information on these devices pursuant to the Texas Public Information Act. Should the Secretary of State wish to consider having Tarrant County approach the District Court with jurisdiction over the information to seek permission to access the information to aid your audit, please contact us so that we may explore that possibility.

Finally, the Tarrant County Elections Administration will assist the Secretary of State in procuring a secure space for the performance of this audit in January 2022. However, because the Elections Administration will be in the midst of preparing for the March 2022 primary elections, it is highly likely such a work area for the Secretary of State would be in a building separate from the main Elections Administration office. The Elections Administration will also assist in finding a way to transport the data, documents, and other information sought by the Secretary of State to this secure location.

In closing, Mr. Secretary, I want to reiterate once again that we are here to assist your office and fully cooperate in this process. I know you and your staff will understand the need to balance out the workload of this project with the conduct of the Primary and Municipal elections happening in the first half of 2022. The successful completion of both projects will be our utmost priority for the new year.

Sincerely,



Heider Garcia
Elections Administrator

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT
TX-SOS-22-0092-E-000053

From: Sam Taylor
To: Joe Esparza; Adam Bitter; Keith Ingram; Christina Adkins
Subject: FW: Message from MARY REHORST (8324723279)
Date: Wednesday, November 24, 2021 8:45:56 AM
Attachments: Message from MARY REHORST (8324723279).msg

Another volunteer for the forensic audit...GOP precinct chair in Harris Co.

-----Original Message-----
From: Cisco Unity Connection Messaging System <unityconnection@voip.dir.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, November 24, 2021 8:44 AM
To: 36116@voip.dir.texas.gov
Subject: Message from MARY REHORST (8324723279)

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From: Kim Bergmann
To: Joe Esparza (JEsparza@sos.texas.gov)
Subject: FW: Opportunity to meet new Secretary of State John Scott
Date: Monday, November 22, 2021 4:04:00 PM

From: Lesli Fitzpatrick [redacted]>
Sent: Monday, November 22, 2021 12:03 PM
To: Kim Bergmann <KBergmann@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Re: Opportunity to meet new Secretary of State John Scott

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Dear Ms. Bergmann,

After we spoke on Friday, I learned that Governor Abbott transferred money from the Texas budget to the Secretary of State's Office to set up an Election Audit Division. I am VERY interested in talking to our new Secretary of State John Scott about working with him in this newly created division. I am hoping we can schedule something very soon for this discussion to occur. Please let me know and thank you again.

Best regards,

Lesli R. Fitzpatrick
Attorney at Law
512-426-5993

On Friday, November 19, 2021, 02:34:42 PM CST, Lesli Fitzpatrick [redacted]> wrote:

Dear Ms. Bergmann,

Thank you for the opportunity to schedule an appointment to meet the new Secretary of State John Scott. I am passionate about Election Integrity in the State of Texas and would love to visit with Mr. Scott along these lines. I have attached my resume for his review. I know next week is a short week with Thanksgiving and all so maybe we can meet some time at the beginning of December. Please let me know if this is possible. Thank you again for your time today.

Best regards,

Lesli R. Fitzpatrick
Attorney at Law
512-426-5993

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 11/29/21
Date: Monday, November 29, 2021 10:06:29 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Monday, November 29, 2021 9:21 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 11/29/21
Sensitivity: Personal



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
November 29, 2021

Matthew McConaughey says he won't run for Texas governor, *Texas Tribune*, November 28, 2021

Commissioners court to take up Britton's 'holdover' county attorney status, *Brownwood Bulletin*, November 24, 2021

Judge: District Attorney's Office may prosecute Edinburg mayor for voter fraud, *Progress Times*, November 26, 2021

Abbott makes it official, files to run for 3rd term as Texas governor, *San Antonio Express-News*, November 24, 2021

Texas' new district maps under fire as 2022 candidate deadline looms, *KAMR-TV*, November 24, 2021

Galveston Republicans gut precinct represented by county's lone Black, Democratic county commissioner, *Houston Chronicle*, November 29, 2021

Early voting begins this week in Mesquite city council runoff, *Dallas Morning News*, November 24, 2021

Burnet County might keep additional early voting sites, *Daily Trib*, November 24, 2021

Democratic frustration growing over stagnating voting rights bills, *The Hill*, November 28, 2021

Absentee request deadline trips voters under new Georgia law, *Associated*

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Press, November 28, 2021

Inside the 'big wave' of misinformation targeted at Latinos, *Associated Press*, November 28, 2021

Family, police say couple orchestrated scheme to deed 8 homes from man who died to their nonprofit, *WFAA-TV*, November 23, 2021

Governor Greg Abbott: Thousands of new jobs coming to Texas, billions in investments, *KTSM-TV*, November 28, 2021

U.S. to require vaccines for all border crossers, starting in January, *Associated Press*, November 24, 2021

Border: New customs requirements for Mexico shipments begin Wednesday, *FreightWaves*, November 28, 2021

Human shields, drones, gunships aid Mexico's drug war, *Associated Press*, November 27, 2021

Mexico lays out conditions for restart of 'Remain in Mexico' program, *The Hill*, November 26, 2021

Texas border landowners ask for federal funding for damage incurred during migrant crisis, *KXAN-TV*, November 24, 2021

7 former McAllen Chamber chairs say organization is in 'turmoil'; ask Mayor Villalobos to intervene, *Rio Grande Guardian*, November 26, 2021

Column: Texas state senators draw for term lengths, *Huntsville Item*, November 25, 2021

Editorial: Unnecessary election audit supports baseless claims of extensive voter fraud, *Beaumont Enterprise*, November 27, 2021

Matthew McConaughey says he won't run for Texas governor
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 28, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/28/matthew-mcconaughey-texas-governor-2022/

Actor Matthew McConaughey on Sunday removed himself from consideration as a potential candidate for governor after months of toying with a campaign.

In a video posted to his Twitter account, McConaughey, who lives in Austin, said he was honored to be considered for "political leadership."

"It's a humbling and inspiring path to ponder," McConaughey said. "It is also a path that I'm choosing not to take at this moment."

McConaughey's video came just over two weeks before the candidate filing deadline for the Texas primary.

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Since earlier this year, McConaughey said he was mulling a run for governor, though he did not specify whether he would run in the Democratic primary, in the Republican primary or as an independent. He has previously described himself as "aggressively centrist."

GOP Gov. Greg Abbott is seeking a third term next year. He has drawn at least three primary challengers, while Democrats got their strongest candidate yet earlier this month when Beto O'Rourke launched his campaign against Abbott.

Instead of running for office, McConaughey said he would continue to support “entrepreneurs, businesses and foundations that I believe are leaders” and “creating pathways for people to succeed in life.”

The prospect of a McConaughey candidacy had intrigued the Texas and national political world for months. Some polling showed he would have been a force to be reckoned with, leading Abbott in a head-to-head matchup.

But McConaughey never did much to elaborate on how he would have run, and he did not seem particularly attuned to political events in Texas. During an October podcast, he displayed a lack of familiarity with the Republicans' priority elections bill that prompted Democrats in the Texas House to flee to Washington, D.C, in protest this summer.

He more recently courted controversy for coming out against mandating COVID-19 vaccine requirements for "the younger kids." He later clarified he was specifically referring to mandates for 5- to 11-year-olds.

While some surveys suggested McConaughey could be a real contender, some in politics theorized that he was benefiting from being a political blank canvas to most Texans. That group included O'Rourke, who has crossed paths with McConaughey over the years.

"He’s a really popular figure whose political views have not in any way been fixed," O’Rourke said in September. “I don’t know, for example, who he voted for in the most consequential election since 1864 in this country. I don’t know how he feels about any of the issues that we’ve brought up. … So I think that might explain part of [the polling]."

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Commissioners court to take up Britton's 'holdover' county attorney status
Steve Nash
Brownwood Bulletin
November 24, 2021
https://www.brownwoodtx.com/story/news/2021/11/24/commissioners-court-take-up-brittons-holdover-county-attorney-status/8756177002/

Shane Britton will know a little more about his political future after Monday's meeting of the Brown County Commissioners Court, where two items are on the agenda pertaining to Britton:

* Consideration and possible approval of action to declare a special election for the county attorney position.

* Consideration and possible action to appoint someone to the county attorney position until after the March primary. Commissioners meet at 9 a.m.

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Britton, 55, has been the Brown County attorney since 2001. Last week, Britton announced he is a candidate for Brown County judge in the Republican Party primary elections in March. Britton's announcement created a three-way race for Brown County judge. In addition to Britton, candidates are:

* Incumbent Paul Lilly, 52, who has been Brown County judge since 2019.

* Molly Smith, 44, who ranches and farms.

Britton's announcement of his Brown County judge candidacy triggered what's known as "Resign to Run" under the Texas constitution. And that means it's an automatic resignation for a county attorney and other elected officials who announce their candidacies for a different office.

But the Texas Constitution also provides that "an elected public official continues to perform the duties of office (or 'hold over') until his or her successor takes office," the Texas Association of Counties (TAC) states in a document called "Short Answers to Common Questions. The purpose of the holdover provision is to "maintain the functioning of government," TAC said.

Britton said earlier via text that his announcement "serves as automatic resignation but I remain in office until my successor takes office. Commissioners will call a special election for my job."

The way Lilly sees it, the commissioners court should appoint someone who's qualified for the job as county attorney in place of Britton. Lilly said he'll ask commissioners to appoint Terri Moore, who works in Britton's office as assistant county attorney, to the office during Monday's meeting. Lilly also said he knows of a couple of other attorneys who are willing to be appointed. He declined to name them.

Lilly said he spoke with Caroline Griggs, government relations manager in the Texas Attorney General's Office, for clarification of Britton's status under "Resign to Run."

"She said 'you always try and follow the intent of the law, and the intent of the Resign to Run was that the elected official resigns immediately, but they do hold that office over because they're elected until someone new is appointed,'" Lilly said.

Lilly told Griggs that he had heard from Precinct 1 Commissioner Gary Worley that commissioners were probably going to leave Britton in office as a holdover.

"She said 'it's legal but it's not what they intended when they passed the law,'" Lilly said.

He said Griggs referred him to Keith Ingram, director of elections in the Texas Secretary of State's office. "So I talked to Keith Ingram," Lilly said. "I told him what was brewing here and he said 'no, hold the phone. He said you can only hold a candidate over when there is no one else qualified to be appointed for the job.'"

Lilly said Ingram told him, "when our legislature created that statue, they always assumed candidates would do the honorable and right thing. In his words, they never dreamed that somebody would try and stay in office absent there not being anybody else that could do the job.

"He said they've never encountered a commissioners court that didn't accept the resignation and appoint someone new as the statute says they're supposed to do. Is it

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technically illegal to leave him in there? No, it's not. But it's sure, in my opinion, the unethical and dishonorable thing to do. It's very clear what the intent of the resign to run law is. It's very clear so that you can't use your current office as a springboard to get to the next.

"There's a thing called the smell test. You could do it but if it doesn't smell good, the public's going to see that. If it doesn't pass the smell test, then that means the public clearly sees that while technically it may be legal -- and I'm not implying that they're not going to follow the spirit of the law. All I'm saying is, based on a conversation with commissioner Worley, it was my impression that they have the intention to leave Mr. Britton in office."

Lilly said Ingram toll him he's 'never encountered a commissioners court that would do something like that and he's praying that we're not the first, and I'm praying we're not the first either. If it were anybody else, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation, in my opinion."

Worley countered that commissioners "do not have to appoint someone immediately. It never mentions any timeline. An elected official who resigns, under the Texas constitution, remains in office as a holdover until his successor qualifies for office. The commissioners court is the only one that can make the appointment, not a county judge."

"I'm for having Shane serve until after the March primary just to keep the continuity in the office, to keep things progressing. I think Shane needs to serve as a holdover."

Worley proposed a timeline for events following Britton's announcement of his candidacy:

* Monday, Nov. 29 -- the commissioners court calls a special election for county attorney to be held at the time of the general election in November 2022.

* After Nov. 29 -- candidates for county attorney will file for a place on the March primary ballot.

* Between Nov. 29 and the March 2022 primary -- Britton will continue as holdover county attorney.

* If no one runs in the Democratic Primary -- once the primary votes are canvassed, the winner of the Publican Primary will be appointed as county attorney effective April 1, 2022.

Precinct 2 Commissioner Joel Kelton said, "As far as what to do with Shane, there are several options. You can appoint someone to fill that position. You can take no action and remains in that position and draws his salary."

Kelton said he was inclined to vote for Britton to remain as a holdover county attorney until the primary elections.

"They're already behind up there already," Kelton said of the county attorney's office. "If you pull him out, you're going to be even more shorthanded up there. My recommendation, from my understanding at the moment -- and I'm still learning about this -- is probably to let him stay in that position. It looks to me like the most commonsense thing to do is don't vacate that spot because they need that help."

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Judge: District Attorney's Office may prosecute Edinburg mayor for voter fraud
Dave Hendricks
Progress Times
November 26, 2021
https://www.progresstimes.net/2021/11/26/judge-district-attorneys-office-may-prosecute-edinburg-mayor-for-voter-fraud/

A judge on Tuesday denied Edinburg Mayor Richard Molina's request to disqualify the Hidalgo County District Attorney's Office from handling the voter fraud case against him.

Attorney Carlos A. Garcia of Mission, who represents Molina, argued that Hidalgo County District Attorney Ricardo Rodriguez and his family cooked up the voter fraud case against Molina when they couldn't beat him at the polls.

State District Judge Carlos Valdez of Corpus Christi didn't buy it.

"After considering the testimony of witnesses, the evidence admitted, the legal authorities submitted and the arguments of counsel, the Court is of the opinion that said motion should be denied," Valdez ruled on Tuesday morning.

Rodriguez's aunt, former Hidalgo County Justice of the Peace Mary Alice Palacios, filed a complaint against Molina in December 2017 — a month after he won the mayoral election.

The complaint alleged that voters who didn't live in Edinburg changed their addresses to cast ballots during the election.

In perhaps the most infamous example, the complaint alleged that 11 adults had registered to vote from a tiny house on the 400 block of East Fay Street.

"The work required to prepare the information thus far is not with the singular intent to change the results of the election," according to the complaint, which Mary Alice Palacios sent to the Texas Secretary of State's Office on Dec. 12, 2017, "rather, it is intended to highlight a much greater problem that will inevitably affect all future elections in Hidalgo County."

The Secretary of State's Office referred the complaint to the Texas Attorney General's Office. After an investigation, Molina was arrested in April 2019.

Molina is charged with one count of engaging in organized election fraud, a first-degree felony; and 11 counts of illegal voting, a second-degree felony.

He pleaded not guilty.

The pandemic, which prevented Hidalgo County judges from holding jury trials, left the case in limbo. More than a year went by without a hearing.

The District Attorney's Office revived the case in mid-October, when prosecutors asked the judge to set a trial date.

"Given the nature of the charges, the position of the defendant as a public servant and the length of time this case has been pending, the State also requests the court consider setting this case as soon as practicable," according to the motion filed by the

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District Attorney's Office, "as the State believes there is a societal interest in providing a speedy trial."

Molina found the motion suspicious.

The District Attorney's Office had filed the motion Oct. 12 — just six days before early voting started in Molina's re-election campaign. At roughly the same time, someone mailed a flier to voters that showed Molina in handcuffs and warned he could be sent to jail.

"This is a coordinated effort between the district attorney, his family and other power players within this county," Garcia said. "Your honor, it's no accident or mistake that you've been asked to come from Corpus — from another county — to come and sit in judgment. To call the balls and the strikes."

Garcia asked the court to disqualify the District Attorney's Office from handling the case.

First Assistant District Attorney Michael J. Garza called that argument nonsense.

"We've had the cooperation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other state agencies," Michael J. Garza said. "And to suggest that Ricardo Rodriguez and the Palacios family controls the Attorney General, the FBI and the Texas Rangers is a ridiculous proposition."

Valdez weighed the arguments during a daylong hearing on Monday, when Molina attempted to put the Palacios family on trial.

At one point, Garcia showed the judge a chart titled "The Power of the Palacios."

It noted that former Edinburg Mayor Richard Garcia is a partner in a law firm with Rodriguez's uncle, Edinburg Municipal Judge Toribio "Terry" Palacios. It noted that Rodriguez's cousin, Ricardo "Rick" Palacios, is the former city attorney. And it noted that his aunt, Mary Alice Palacios, sought insurance contracts with the city.

Garcia questioned why the District Attorney's Office had prioritized Molina's case for trial when Hidalgo County had nearly 1,700 people in custody.

He called Hidalgo County District Clerk Laura Hinojosa, who testified that more than 9,200 cases are pending in local district courts.

With so many people in jail and so many cases pending, Garcia argued the District Attorney's Office had another motivation for requesting a trial date: politics.

Miguel Angel Garza, a politiquero aligned with Molina, testified about how the Palacios family views politics.

"If you don't support the Palacios, you're against them," Miguel Angel Garza said. "And they attack you. That's pretty much what it is."

Michael J. Garza eviscerated Miguel Angel Garza on cross examination.

In response to questions, Miguel Angel Garza admitted the FBI had questioned him about Molina.

"About your relationship and taking money for Richard Molina on pay-to-play

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schemes?" Michael J. Garza asked.

Miguel Angel Garza acknowledged meeting with the FBI but denied he'd cooperated with the government.

"You like to drink?" Michael J. Garza asked. "And drive while intoxicated?"

Miguel Angel Garza admitted he'd been convicted on several drunken driving charges.

"And you've done that on more than three occasions?" Michael J. Garza said. "And been arrested?"

Throughout his testimony, Miguel Angel Garza appeared very nervous and frequently veered off topic.

When he finished testifying, Miguel Angel Garza was in such a hurry to leave the courtroom that he tripped over a cord and nearly fell.

Garcia also quizzed Rodriguez and his aunt, Mary Alice Palacios, about the voter fraud complaint.

Rodriguez said he didn't talk with Mary Alice Palacios about the complaint before or after she filed it. Mary Alice Palacios, who testified separately, backed up his story.

"How credible is it that she never spoke to her own nephew about it? This has been the talk of the county for the last three years," Garcia said. "And yet she testified, under oath, before your honor, that she never spoke to him before, during or after. I think that credibility is questionable, judge."

Michael J. Garza, who could barely contain his contempt for the allegations, pushed back hard.

"I cited a case that talked about society's interest. And the citizens of the city of Edinburg had an interest. They have a mayor who's supposed to represent that interest but instead is more concerned with his own," Michael J. Garza said. "And that interest is to have a government that is elected free of fraud."

The facts just don't meet the standard to disqualify the District Attorney's Office, Michael J. Garza said, adding that Molina couldn't muster credible witnesses.

"Nothing in any of the testimony comes remotely close to suggesting that there's a conflict of interest," Michael J. Garza said. "And that somehow Mr. Molina's rights are infringed upon because of this imaginary statement that they want to impute some kind of a bias from some kind of made up political war on the district attorney."

Valdez sided with the District Attorney's Office. The case may head to trial in the spring.

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Abbott makes it official, files to run for 3rd term as Texas governor
Edward McKinley
San Antonio Express-News
November 24, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/politics/texas/article/Abbott-makes-it-official-files-to-

run-for-3rd-16649026.php

Gov. Greg Abbott is officially running for reelection after filing paperwork Tuesday with the Texas Secretary of State's office.

Abbott's filing comes as no surprise. The 64-year-old Republican has hosted political events and been fundraising aggressively throughout much of the year, and his campaign had $55 million in its warchest at the end of June as Abbott prepared to face challengers from within his own party in the March 2022 primary election.

"I am running for re-election so that we can continue to secure the border, support our police, and keep Texas the best state for business," the two-term governor wrote in a Tuesday news release.

Other Republican contenders for governor include Don Huffines, a former state senator, and Allen West, an ex-Florida congressman and former chair of the Texas GOP. West and Huffines have been quick to critique Abbott as insufficiently conservative on a number of issues, often pushing the governor to the right.

Polls have shown Abbott with a significant lead over his primary challengers. If he overcomes them, he would likely face former Democratic congressman Beto O'Rourke, himself a prolific fundraiser, who began his campaign last week.

Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick also filed for reelection this week, writing: "Like Travis at the Alamo, I am drawing a line in the sand. I will not yield, I will not waiver. I am resolved to continue the fight for the safety and security of Texas."

Democratic candidates vying to run against Patrick include Mike Collier, who ran unsuccessfully for the seat in 2018, state Rep. Michelle Beckley, and Matthew Dowd, a political commentator and former Republican strategist.

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Texas' new district maps under fire as 2022 candidate deadline looms
Cat Keenan
KAMR-TV
November 24, 2021
https://www.myhighplains.com/news/your-local-election-hq/texas-new-district-maps-under-fire-as-2022-candidate-deadline-looms/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT) – While the restructuring of Texas' district maps was inevitable after the 2020 census was completed, a growing list of lawsuits against how the state government grouped together land and voters could impact the 2022 elections in ways voters may not expect. Here's a look at the current state of Texas' congressional and senate districts, and how the High Plains could be impacted in the near future.

The 2020 census and the Texas Legislature

Florida, Texas, and the Carolinas were among states that, according to 2020 census data, benefitted the most from population growth. Amarillo saw an increase in the population of about 1.6%, and Texas overall saw an increase of 16% from the 2010 census. The South, according to the data, and the West have been overtaking the Northeast and Midwest in having the majority of the country's population.

Because of results from the census, not only did Texas gain two new seats in the US

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House of Representatives, but population distribution throughout the state led to district lines needing to be reset to adhere to federal law.

Texas Tech University Political Science Professor Mark McKenzie explained to NPR in September that while provisions to protect voters of color from discrimination were removed in 2013, state governments are required to have equal populations in each district. Specific demographics, economic, and geographic interests across those districts don't need to coordinate.

West Texas A&M University Assistant Professor Christopher Macaulay, Ph.D., said that each Texas US Congressional District needed to have around 766,000 people – which led to the expansion of territory such as District 13, containing Amarillo, which was already the second-largest geographical district in the state.

In September 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called a third special legislative session for the state legislature to focus on redistricting. Using the released data from the 2020 census, which came months later than the initial census bureau plan of delivering data by the end of March, the Texas State House and Senate went back and forth until Abbott signed the newly created maps into law on Oct. 25.

Local representatives, school size and funding, early childhood programs, where grocery stores are built, and which roads are repaired are only a few aspects of day-to-day impacts the census count and redistricting are expected to have on Texas communities.

The Texas Legislature and a list of lawsuits

Millions of Texas residents have been noted by census experts as among those most difficult to count – immigrants, poor Texans, non-English speakers being a few. However, despite that difficulty, census data showed that 95% of the population growth in Texas since 2010 was through people of color, and half of the total gains were through Hispanic people. Despite that, the new Texas House map drops the number of districts in which Hispanic people make up the majority of eligible voters from 33 to 30, and the congressional map reduced the number of districts with a Hispanic voting majority from eight to seven.

Often with this disparity cited as one of the causes, as well as the constitutionality of the entire redistricting process, the census and redistricting efforts in Texas have been dotted with lawsuits against the state legislature from communities and colleagues alike.

September saw two Texas state senators file lawsuits that contended district maps could not be legally redrawn during a special session, which ended up the process after months of census data delays.
In October, two federal lawsuits were filed against the redistricting efforts' constitutionality, and the Latino civil rights group Voto Latino alongside 13 Texas voters sued to ask a Texas US District Court to overturn the new maps.

In November, three separate lawsuits were filed by Texas lawmakers that also sought to overturn the maps, and several civil rights groups filed suit against Governor Abbott and Texas Secretary of State John Scott with the argument that the new maps were racially discriminatory.

While the exact dates in which these cases will be heard in court have remained unclear, and their verdicts not yet settled, these lawsuits carry the potential to further delay or even upend Texas' 2022 elections. After census data delays already led to

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the candidate filing deadline for the election to be set to Dec. 13, the primary elections were set for early May and the general election for November. However, depending on the actions of the courts, those dates could see further changes.

For a number of decades, including at recently as 2017, legislators have been sued on similar bases and higher courts have found that Texas lawmakers intentionally discriminated against Hispanic and Black voters during mapmaking.

The day-to-day thoughts from communities

It has not been only some lawmakers and civil rights organizations that have spoken out in objection or confusion regarding the newly drawn districts. Both rural and urban voters have either protested the maps or pleaded with lawmakers for consideration while they were being made.

Angela Arthur from Ralls, outside of Lubbock, asked lawmakers during a Texas House redistricting committee hearing to consider keeping communities with similar interests together. She worried that merging agricultural communities with more urban big-city centers would impact the quality of representation citizens like her and her neighbors would get at state and federal levels of government.

“It may seem like our county is not concerned about this issue or where or what we’ll be paired with. This is not the case,” Arthur said, “I don’t want our county needs to be overlooked and underserved because of our size and population.”

However, despite that sort of plea from rural and urban citizens alike, the new Texas maps have resulted in sometimes strangely-shaped districts that can group populations hours away from one another together while splitting up neighbors a few houses down the road.

Macaulay further noted that rural districts like 13 and 19 could see their representation even more diluted than in the past. Altogether, the watering down of voter demographics and day-to-day priorities across urban centers and the large swaths of rural communities across the state has appeared to be a concern many Texans share as common ground.

Although changes could arise before incoming election days, current candidates can be tracked here alongside other coverage from Your Local Election Headquarters.

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Galveston Republicans gut precinct represented by county’s lone Black, Democratic county commissioner
Jasper Scherer
Houston Chronicle
November 29, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Galveston-Republicans-gut-precinct-represented-by-16654380.php

During the last moments his political precinct was still intact, the lone Black member of the Galveston County Commissioners Court delivered a closing message to his all-Republican colleagues, as they prepared to approve a map that would effectively doom his re-election chances.

“We are not going to go quietly in the night,” Commissioner Stephen Holmes said, half turning to address the other members at a Nov. 12 meeting. “We are going to

rage, rage, rage until justice is done."

The new map, approved seconds later, dramatically reshapes Holmes' Precinct 3, uprooting it from areas that he had represented since being appointed to the court in 1999. While the precinct had previously cut through the middle of Galveston County, covering an area where the majority of eligible voters were Black and Hispanic, it is now consolidated in the largely white and Republican northwest corner of the county, taking in Friendswood and League City.

Under the freshly drawn boundaries, Galveston County Republicans have laid the groundwork for winning a 5-0 majority on Commissioners Court in a county where 38 percent of voters cast their ballots for President Joe Biden last year. Holmes, the court's only Democrat, is up for re-election in 2024.

The dismantling of Holmes' precinct mirrors the aggressive redistricting efforts seen across the country in recent months, with members of both parties using data from the 2020 Census to draw new political boundaries that expand or preserve their majorities — often at the expense of their fellow elected officials.

No longer bound by strict federal supervision, Texas and other Republican-led southern states have crafted new maps in which minority voters are drawn into predominantly white districts. They've also enacted voting restrictions that critics say are aimed at suppressing turnout of minority communities.

Holmes said he expects to be replaced by a white candidate, given that only about a quarter of the eligible voters in his new precinct are minorities.

"Even though Galveston County is 45 percent minority, every single member of the Galveston County Commissioners Court, under the new map, is going to be Anglo," Holmes said in an interview. "Minorities would not be represented by, or have the opportunity to elect, the candidate of their choice."

The map will likely give Republicans all but unchecked power to enact conservative policies on the court, which adopts the county's annual tax rate and budget, approves its spending and maintains its infrastructure, such as county buildings, roads and bridges.

County Judge Mark Henry, who was elected in 2010, has brought a conservative posture to his role, which includes presiding over the court. He refused to enforce some of Gov. Greg Abbott's COVID-19 restrictions last year and more recently issued an executive order that sent local authorities to the border, citing what he called an ongoing crisis there.

A spokesperson for Henry — who was joined by Commissioners Darrell Apffel and Joe Giusti in adopting the maps — said he was not available for comment.

Apffel said he supported the new map because it brings Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula into a single precinct, replacing the prior layout that split those areas among three commissioners, the Galveston County Daily News reported.

'Diluting their power'

This is not the first time that redistricting, the decennial process of redrawing political maps to ensure each commissioner precinct has roughly the same number of residents, has threatened Holmes' political career.

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In 2012, the U.S. Department of Justice struck down Galveston County's maps, finding that the plan — which had been drawn up by a Republican consultant — diluted the strength of minority voters in commissioner, constable and justice-of-the-peace precincts. Federal officials also concluded that Holmes was deliberately excluded from "meaningful involvement" in the map-drawing process, which had resulted in a proposal to fold the bright red Bolivar Peninsula into his precinct.

This time, Galveston County's maps are no longer subject to Justice Department review. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the so-called "preclearance" requirement of the Voting Rights Act that forced Texas and other states with a history of racial discrimination to obtain DOJ approval for changes to political maps and election laws.

"There is no longer an incentive not to be aggressive," said Michael Li, a redistricting expert and senior counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University. "In other words, you can be aggressive in drawing maps knowing that those maps ultimately may get struck down, but that getting them struck down will take time — and in the meantime, you get to use them in one or multiple election cycles."

Holmes did not say whether he planned to challenge the new map in court, though he has called on the Justice Department to do so, arguing that the redrawn boundaries violate Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. The section broadly bars racially discriminatory voting practices, including those that minimize the voting strength of racial minority groups.

As GOP-led legislatures across the South enact new maps that consolidate their power, Li said it has become clear that Republicans are preparing to argue that the Voting Rights Act only protects districts where a single minority group forms a majority — unlike Holmes' former precinct, where Black and Hispanic voters combined to form a majority. That question has never been decided by the high court.

In recent weeks, other commissioners courts in the Houston area have also reconfigured their boundaries to protect or bolster the majority party, including courts in Democrat-controlled Harris and Fort Bend counties, where longtime Republican commissioners are now in jeopardy of losing re-election.

But those new maps were not drawn up "at the expense of communities of color," Li said, drawing a distinction with the Galveston County map.

"Here, people of color are being used sort of as the tool by which you accomplish this partisan power grab," Li said. "You're diluting their power, and you're depriving them of a seat at the table."

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Early voting begins this week in Mesquite city council runoff
Leah Waters
Dallas Morning News
November 24, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2021/11/24/early-voting-begins-this-week-in-mesquite-city-council-runoff/

Mesquite voters in Districts 1 and 3 can cast ballots this week as early voting begins in a runoff for two city council seats.

Jeff Casper and David Burris are vying for the District 1 seat, and Jennifer Vidler and

Elizabeth Rodriguez-Ross will face off for District 3.

Casper and Burris both won 42% of 1,156 votes; Vidler claimed 47% and Rodriguez-Ross secured 36% of 1,008 votes.

Jeff Casper, a teacher and 30-year Mesquite resident, served as District 2 council member on the city council between 2015 and 2019. Casper serves on various boards and commissions for the city of Mesquite and Mesquite ISD.

David Burris, a retired 64-year resident of Mesquite, is running in his first city election. He is a mentor for Poteet High School football players, an umpire for Mesquite Baseball Inc. and a member of the local American Business Clubs (AMBUCS) chapter. He has also mentored youths at First United Methodist Church, Mesquite.

Elizabeth Rodriguez-Ross — a homemaker, senior hostess at E Bar Tex Mex and 35-year Mesquite resident — is running in her first city council election. She has been involved with community groups such as the Mesquite Pee Wee Football Association, Mesquite Soccer Association, NMHS Booster Club and LULAC-Mesquite.

Jennifer Vidler, a small business owner and 47-year Mesquite resident, is running in her second city council election, after losing a bid for Place 3 to Robert Miklos in 2019. She served on the Board of Adjustments and Traffic Advisory Board, and as the Planning and Zoning commissioner from 2014-19. Vidler sits on various community boards, including Old Town Mesquite/Community Heart, which focuses on the revitalization of downtown.

The runoff election day is Dec. 7.

Early voting times and location
Early voting will be at Florence Recreation Center at 2501 Whitson Way.

- Monday, Nov. 22, and Wednesday, Nov. 24, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- No voting on Nov. 25-26 because of the Thanksgiving holiday.
- Saturday, Nov. 27, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Sunday, Nov. 28, from 1 to 6 p.m.
- Monday, Nov. 29, and Wednesday, Dec. 1, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Thursday, Dec. 2, and Friday, Dec. 3, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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Burnet County might keep additional early voting sites
Suzanne Freeman
Daily Trib
November 24, 2021
https://www.dailytrib.com/2021/11/24/county-might-keep-4-early-voting-sites/

Having four polling sites open for early voting in primary elections should become the new norm, Burnet County commissioners informally agreed at a regular meeting Tuesday, Nov. 23. Burnet County Elections Administrator Doug Ferguson recommended keeping polling locations in Bertram and Granite Shoals for a total of four during the two weeks of early voting for the March 1, 2022, Republican and Democratic primaries.

“Having four locations for early voting last fall was very helpful,” Ferguson said. “Especially, since traditionally in the primary, we have the same amount (of voters) in early voting as on Election Day. In fact, we’ve grown a little in early voting.”

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Providing more access to early voting, which is Feb. 14-25, 2022, keeps Election Day lines from growing too long, especially in the Burnet County Courthouse South Annex in Marble Falls, he continued.

“My recommendation is to prepare for the worst and have those two additional locations open,” Ferguson said. “Let’s let that be the new standard.”

The two additional locations are in the Bertram Library, 170 S. Gabriel St., and the Granite Shoals Community Center, 1208 N. Phillips Ranch Road. The other two locations are in the Burnet County AgriLife Extension building, 607 N. Vandeveer in Burnet, and the South Annex, 810 Steve Hawkins Parkway in Marble Falls.

No vote was taken on the issue, but all seemed in general agreement with Ferguson’s recommendation.

“That’s the responsible thing to do,” County Judge James Oakley said.

Polling locations will be finalized at a later Commissioners Court meeting.

Commissioners did vote to approve all contracts pertaining to the primary elections this coming March.

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Democratic frustration growing over stagnating voting rights bills
Tal Axelrod
The Hill
November 28, 2021
https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/583077-democratic-frustration-growing-over-stagnating-voting-rights-bills

Frustration among Democrats and activists is growing over stagnating legislation on Capitol Hill meant to expand voting rights, an issue the party has said is a priority but has been unable to clinch a victory on in Congress.

The dissatisfaction is mushrooming as Democrats repeatedly try and fail to muscle two bills – the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act – through a 50-50 Senate after both pieces of legislation passed through the narrowly divided House.

Republicans in Washington remain almost unanimously opposed to the voting rights expansions, leaving Democrats forced to confront their dwindling options and activists calling for bold reforms to Senate rules.

“If the Senate can pass the two bills that it has before it, we could be at a turning point heading in a new direction on this issue. Until that happens, and if that doesn't happen, then I think we have a lot to be concerned about right now,” said Sean Morales-Doyle, the acting director of the voting rights and elections program at the Brennan Center. “There have been a lot of states taking action to restrict access to voting in the last year.”

Democrats have insisted that voting rights is a priority, casting expanded access to the ballot box as a necessity as Republicans, led by former President Trump, decry unsubstantiated allegations of fraud in the 2020 presidential race and look to implement restrictions in key swing states that President Biden flipped last year.

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Most recently, Senate Republicans on Nov. 3 blocked the chamber from debating the voting rights legislation named after the late Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights icon.

The bill would strengthen sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that required Justice Department preclearance before some states could change voting laws and dropped a requirement for localities with growing minority populations to get preclearance for changes on offering food or drinks to people waiting in line to vote.

Democrats were able to win over Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), but no other Republicans voted to start debate, and Democrats fell short of the 60 votes needed to break a filibuster and move the bill forward, sparking another round of lamentations from lawmakers over the lack of progress on the issue.

“At virtually every turn, we have been met with resistance. What has happened to the Party of Lincoln? What has happened to that noble, noble view that voting rights is important on both sides of the aisle?” Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said the day after the vote. “The Senate is capable of far more than what we have seen from our Republican colleagues on voting rights.”

Besides the bill named after Lewis, Democrats have also been stymied in their attempts to proceed with debate on the Freedom to Vote Act. That legislation would, among other things, give all voters access to a minimum of 15 early voting days and same-day registration, make Election Day a federal holiday and expand the ability to vote by mail.

Amid the gridlock in Washington, Democrats have seen states pass laws that they liken to voter suppression.

In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott (R) signed into law legislation that prohibits round-the-clock polling stations, implements new restrictions on drive-thru voting and voting by mail, empowers partisan poll watchers who can observe an election, increases the requirements for identification voters must show when they cast a ballot and prevents elections officials from distributing vote-by-mail applications to voters who have not specifically requested them.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R) also signed a law requiring a photo ID to vote by mail, limiting the time people have to request an absentee ballot and restricting where ballot drop boxes can be located.

And Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) also issued new restrictions, including curtailing voter access to absentee ballot drop boxes used by most Florida counties and mandating voters who want to cast absentee ballots to submit new requests every election cycle instead of every four years.

All told, 19 states ratified 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote, according to the Brennan Center.

Lawmakers say those restrictions up the ante for Democrats to pass a federal bill.

“Mostly from a national perspective, I think that's where we should have the most hope. I think to have the greatest impact is first to have a national standard when it comes to voting rights in this country. These proposals are kind of sitting on third base, if you will,” said state Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer (D-Texas), who fled to Washington earlier this year to deny the state legislature a quorum to pass Texas’s

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voter restrictions, a gambit that only temporarily worked.

However, activists say the stumbling blocks to passing legislation in Congress are blocking off any path to passing laws at the federal level – absent a change in the Senate's rules.

Progressive lawmakers and outside proponents of implementing sweeping elections reforms have made the filibuster public enemy No. 1, saying the 60-vote hurdle to pass most legislation in the Senate must go or at least be altered to include a carve out for certain issues like voting rights.

"I think that they should get rid of the filibuster," said Nsé Ufot, the CEO of the New Georgia Project. "Stop playing, get rid of the filibuster, do whatever carve out you need to do to make you feel like you are playing well with others, but we need to stop lying and stop pretending like we are not seeing what is happening right now with American democracy."

But changing the rules is no easy feat.

In a 50-50 Senate Democrats would need all 50 of their members to agree to a change, and Sens. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) have said they don't support any adjustments.

Manchin, one of the most vocal opponents of altering the filibuster, has said he wants to move voting rights legislation forward in a bipartisan fashion. But activists are growing tired of that effort given the West Virginian's inability to bring the requisite number of Republicans over to his side.

"It seems like there's the desire to allow these attacks on our democracy to continue so that folks can continue to worship at the temple of bipartisanship," Ufot said. "And unfortunately, I don't think that that is an aim, a goal that's worthy of our time, attention, frustration or resources in this moment. Bipartisanship should not come at the expense of being able to participate in our democracy."

"I'm gonna let him do his thing," she added of Manchin. "But at some point, we need to stop pretending and just acknowledge that someone farted in the room, and it stinks."

Biden, for his part, has expressed openness to altering the filibuster, providing a jolt to progressives after saying in October he thinks "we're going to have to move to the point where we fundamentally alter the filibuster."

However, he has not pressured senators to get behind any specific changes, which, combined with his focus on passing sprawling infrastructure and social spending bills, have led activists to accuse Biden of not actively prioritizing voting rights in line with the way he speaks about the issue in public.

"It's definitely not a priority," Cliff Albright, the co-founder and executive director of Black Voters Matter, told The Hill. "Anytime you say, 'we're going to get to this after A, B and C,' then by definition this is not a priority."

When asked for comment on the criticism, the White House did not directly respond but pointed The Hill to comments by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre at a briefing earlier this month in which she maintained Biden "is committed to making sure that the fundamental right to vote … still exists."

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Absentee request deadline trips voters under new Georgia law
Associated Press
November 28, 2021
http://www.elpasoinc.com/news/texas/absentee-request-deadline-trips-voters-under-new-georgia-law/article_f7e1dec2-bcf5-5a36-8de0-aac2fa35e62e.html

ATLANTA (AP) — More than half of absentee ballot applications rejected in Georgia in advance of the Nov. 2 elections were turned down because they came in after a deadline created in Georgia's new voting law.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports 52% of applications were rejected because voters asked for an absentee ballot within the last 11 days before the election, too late to meet the requirements of a voting law passed in March.

The deadline was created in Senate Bill 202, which also limited absentee voting by restricting drop boxes and requiring voters to prove they had a driver's license or other state identification when applying.

The top reason Georgia election officials rejected absentee ballot applications this fall was that they were submitted too close to Election Day, missing a deadline imposed by the state's new voting law.

Republicans in the General Assembly pushed through the new law after a record 1.3 million Georgians mailed in or dropped off ballots in the 2020 presidential election.

The newspaper reports about 26% of those who made absentee ballot requests after the deadline later cast ballots in person on Election Day.

Some voting groups supported an earlier request deadline, saying it ensures voters have enough time to return their ballots by mail before Election Day. In past elections, voters could request absentee ballots until the Friday before an election, and many mail-in ballots were never returned.

"The way it was before, you almost were setting voters up to fail," said Amber McReynolds, the founding CEO for the National Vote at Home Institute, which advocates for voting access outside polling places. "That's actually a best practice to cut it off so that voters are actually receiving the ballot with enough time to get it back."

Critics of the absentee request deadline said it's too early and hinders voters from being able to cast ballots.

State Election Board member Sara Tindall Ghazal, appointed by the Democrats Party of Georgia, said the deadline should be five to seven days before Election Day.

"Far too many voters end up being disenfranchised," Ghazal said. "It leads to many voters getting their applications rejected and not able to access their ballot otherwise."

Overall, election officials rejected 4% of absentee ballot requests for municipal elections on Nov. 2, according to records analyzed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. There were 1,362 rejected absentee ballot applications out of 35,312 submitted.

That's an increase from fewer than 1% of absentee ballot applications rejected in

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2020's general election.

The second-largest cause of absentee application rejections also stemmed from Georgia's voting law. Missing or incorrect ID information accounted for 15% of denied ballot requests.

The voting law requires a driver's license number, state ID number or a photocopy of another form of ID for absentee voting. Previously, election officials verified absentee voters by a system of signature matching and registration information verification.

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Inside the 'big wave' of misinformation targeted at Latinos
Amanda Seitz and Will Weissert
Associated Press
November 28, 2021
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/inside-big-wave-misinformation-targeted-latinos-81440503

WASHINGTON -- Before last year's presidential election, Facebook ads targeting Latino voters described Joe Biden as a communist. During his inauguration, another conspiracy theory spread online and on Spanish-language radio warning that a brooch worn by Lady Gaga signaled Biden was working with shadowy, leftist figures abroad.

And in the final stretch of Virginia's election for governor, stories written in Spanish accused Biden of ordering the arrest of a man during a school board meeting.

None of that was true. But such misinformation represents a growing threat to Democrats, who are anxious about their standing with Latino voters after surprise losses last year in places like South Florida and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas.

Heading into a midterm election in which control of Congress is at stake, lawmakers, researchers and activists are preparing for another onslaught of falsehoods targeted at Spanish-speaking voters. And they say social media platforms that often host those mistruths aren't prepared.

"For a lot of people, there's a lot of concern that 2022 will be another big wave," said Guy Mentel, executive director of Global Americans, a think tank that provides analysis of key issues throughout the Americas.

This month's elections may be a preview of what's to come.

After Democratic incumbent Phil Murphy won New Jersey's close governor's race, Spanish-language videos falsely claimed the vote was rigged, despite no evidence of widespread voter fraud — a fact the Republican candidate acknowledged, calling the results "legal and fair."

In Virginia, where Republican Glenn Youngkin campaigned successfully on promises to defend "parental rights" in classrooms, false headlines around a controversial school board meeting emerged.

"Biden ordenó arrestar a padre de una joven violada por un trans," read one of several misleading articles, translating to "Biden ordered the arrest of a father whose daughter was raped by a trans."

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The mistruth was spun from an altercation during a chaotic school board meeting months earlier in Loudoun County that resulted in the arrest of a father whose daughter was sexually assaulted in a bathroom by another student. The father claimed the suspect was “gender fluid,” which sparked outcry over the school’s policy allowing transgender students to use bathrooms matching their gender identity.

In reality, the White House wasn't involved with the meeting. The man was arrested by the local sheriff’s department. It’s also unclear how the suspect identifies.

Loudoun County was already the epicenter of a heated political debate over how the history of racism is taught in schools — another issue that became fodder for misinformation and political attacks on Spanish-language websites this summer, said Maria Teresa Kumar, president and CEO of Voto Latino, a nonprofit that mobilizes Hispanics to become politically engaged.

“It has everything to do with trust in institutions. Trust in government,” said Kumar, whose group works to combat the misinformation. “Eroding that trust will transfer not just to voting in the midterms, but just overall disengagement from your government."

Stretched truths accusing some Democrats of being socialists or communists could also dominate the online narrative, said Diego Groisman, a research analyst at New York University’s Cybersecurity for Democracy project.

During the 2020 election, Groisman flagged Facebook ads targeting Latino voters in Texas and Florida that described Biden as a “communist." The ads in Florida — where a majority of the country's Venezuelan population is concentrated — compared Biden to that country's socialist President Nicolás Maduro.

“There were clearly specific Spanish-speaking communities that were being targeted,” said Laura Edelson, the lead researcher for NYU’s program.

Evelyn Pérez-Verdía, a Florida Democratic strategist who watches Spanish misinformation patterns, says many online narratives intentionally stoke “fear in the Spanish-speaking communities."

One conspiracy theory mentioned on talk radio grew out of Lady Gaga's golden bird brooch at Biden’s inauguration. Some spreading the claim noted a similar brooch once worn by Claudia López Hernandez, the first openly gay mayor of Bogota, Colombia, signaled the new president was working with foreign leftists.

“They’re not going to stop. They’re going to double down on it,” Pérez-Verdía said of the misinformation.

Critics argue that social media companies like Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, have placed outsize attention on removing or fact-checking misinformation in English over other languages like Spanish.

Facebook’s own documents, leaked by ex-Facebook employee turned whistleblower Frances Haugen earlier this year, echo those concerns. Haugen said the company spends 87% of its misinformation budget on U.S. content — a figure that Meta spokesperson Kevin McAllister said is “out of context.”

An internal Facebook memo, written in March, revealed the company's ability to detect anti-vaccine rhetoric and misinformation was “basically non-existent” in non-English comments.

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Last year, for example, Instagram and Facebook banned “#plandemic,” a hashtag associated with a video full of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Yet users were spreading misinformation on the platforms using “#plandemia,” the Spanish version of the hashtag, until just last month.

An analysis last year by Avaaz, a left-leaning advocacy group that tracks online misinformation, also found Facebook failed to flag 70% of Spanish-language misinformation surrounding COVID-19 compared to just 29% of such information in English.

McAllister said the company removes false Spanish-language claims about voter fraud, COVID-19 and vaccines. Four news outlets, including The Associated Press, also fact-check Spanish-language falsehoods circulating around U.S. content on Instagram and Facebook.

Meanwhile, researchers at the nonpartisan Global Disinformation Index estimated that Google will make $12 million this year off ads on websites that peddled COVID-19 disinformation in Spanish. Google has “stopped serving ads on a majority of the pages shared in the report," company spokesperson Michael Aciman said in an email.

“Spanish-language misinformation campaigns are absolutely exploding on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.,” New York Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the party’s top progressive voices, tweeted after the Nov. 2 election.

That explosion is fueled in part by a U.S.-Latin America feedback loop that allows falsehoods to fester.

Misinformation that starts on U.S. websites is sometimes translated by social media pages in Latin American countries like Colombia and Venezuela. The inaccuracies are shared back through YouTube videos or messaging apps with Spanish speakers in expatriate communities like those in Miami and Houston.

Those falsehoods are more likely to reach U.S. Latinos because they tend to spend more time on sites such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram, according to an October Nielsen report.

“We see YouTube accounts or radio stations churning out mis- or disinformation regarding a whole range of things that they pick up from fringe U.S. outlets,” Mentel said.

Some are working to fill the void of reliable information in those communities.

The Oakland, California, news service El Timpano delivers a text message of local news in Spanish to roughly 2,000 subscribers every week. Subscribers can text back with questions that staffers work to answer, said Madeleine Blair, who launched El Timpano.

The news service has fielded more than 1,500 questions over the past year, including ones about hoax COVID-19 cures.

“We really ramped up because it was clear that the communities we were serving were most in need of basic public health information,” Blair said, “and that information wasn’t reaching them.”

Others have urged the government to take on a watchdog role. Federal Trade

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Commission commissioner Rebecca Kelly Slaughter, a Democrat, said the regulator may look at disparities in how Big Tech monitors English-language disinformation compared to other languages.

“The first thing I think we need to do is investigate,” Slaughter said during a November panel with lawmakers.

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Family, police say couple orchestrated scheme to deed 8 homes from man who died to their nonprofit
Tanya Eiserer and Mark Smith
WFAA-TV
November 23, 2021
https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/investigates/dirty-deeds-family-couple-scheme-deed-8-homes/287-cf7ba507-0320-4557-8bf7-0890b5283e29

DALLAS — Arnold Young never married, never had children and served in the Army. He taught elementary school in Dallas.

Over the course of his 82 years, he amassed a small real estate empire: nine homes in Dallas County, part ownership in a funeral home, and land in East Texas.

“He was about family and he was just a hard-working man,” his niece, Audrey Hogg said.

So, his family was heartbroken when he fell ill of prostate cancer last fall. His decline was rapid. Surrounded by family, he passed away in February.

Young’s family thought settling his estate would be a simple matter. Young meticulously listed the relatives who would inherit his properties in a 2014 will. He designated Hogg and his sister as executors.

But within weeks of his death, family members discovered deeds, which transferred ownership of nine of Young’s houses, had been filed with the Dallas County Clerk’s office.

The houses had a value of more than a million dollars. The deeds transferring titles had allegedly been signed by Arnold Young.

One deed transferred ownership to a tenant. The other eight deeds transferred ownership to a nonprofit called Mutual Freedom, registered to a mailbox at a UPS store in Dallas.

The deeds were dated July 8, 2020 – seven months before Arnold Young’s death.

Young’s niece told WFAA that she knew immediately that the signatures on the deeds were not her uncle’s.

The notary on the deeds: Belinda Tucker.

Tucker and her husband Anthony are the founders of Mutual Freedom, the nonprofit now claiming ownership of eight of the homes. One of the properties deeded to Tucker’s nonprofit was Arnold Young’s personal residence.

“He would not have done that,” Hogg said. “In all my 52 years of living, he never said

anything about the Tuckers."

Young's family and their attorney, Alisha Melvin, question how Belinda Tucker could notarize deeds giving control of the properties to herself.

According to the Texas Secretary State's rules for notaries, a notary is a "third party who has no personal interest in the transaction."

"You are not supposed to notarize anything that you have an interest in," Melvin said.

Tucker and her husband both face one felony count for theft in connection with the alleged deed fraud scheme. Belinda Tucker also has been arrested on a separate charge, accusing her of fraudulently selling one of the houses to an unsuspecting buyer.

Since 2019, WFAA has detailed how easy it is to forge people's signatures on property deeds – even the signatures of dead people. Once those deeds are filed with the county clerk, scammers can take control of properties they don't own.

Belinda Tucker declined to answer WFAA's questions. However, she did provide a six-page statement denying that any deed fraud occurred. Tucker also alleged that she and her husband were victims of a conspiracy involving Young's family, the police and city officials.

"My husband and I are merely the victims of false allegations by a disgruntled family member," she wrote.

Tucker, a former Lancaster mayoral candidate, said that after she was shot by a neighbor in 2019, Young reached out to console her. She said he later asked her to notarize some documents.

"As we talked, I noticed there were several deeds that were transferred to my nonprofit organization," Tucker said. "It was hard to say no to someone who was being so generous to me."

She said he also showed her a copy of his will, which named her charity as the beneficiary of those properties.

"Still struggling with bouts of depression, I did nothing with the properties that were transferred to my organization," she said.

She also provided WFAA a handwritten note that she claimed Young sent her around that time. WFAA could not make out the signature on the note.

After learning of Young's death, Tucker filed the deeds with the Dallas County Clerk's office which transferred the title for eight of the properties to her nonprofit. She said she soon contacted tenants to schedule inspections and to determine if she could offer them a new lease under her nonprofit housing.

Young's niece said the first sign of trouble began when one of the tenants refused to pay rent on his Lancaster home. During an April 5 eviction hearing, the tenant presented a deed to a justice of the peace.

Hogg said she looked at the deed and told the judge that it was not her uncle's signature. Hogg called Melvin, who found eight other of Young's properties had been transferred to Mutual Freedom without the family's knowledge.

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Hogg filed a report with the Lancaster Police Department the next day.

Around that same time, the Tuckers sent out 30-day vacate notices to the tenants living in Young's houses. Hogg provided WFAA video of Belinda Tucker placing a vacate notice on Arnold Young's personal residence.

Bennie Williams received one of the vacate notices. She and her family have lived in the house for 40 years. Williams said Young never had her sign a lease.

"He was a person that kept his word," Williams said.

Meanwhile, Belinda Tucker was in contact with real estate investor Andrew Howard. He runs ads on a Dallas radio station, offering to buy properties from owners seeking to sell quickly.

Howard maintains an electronic record-keeping system for his real estate business. He kept records of all his contacts with Belinda Tucker. According to his notes, the first time he heard from Tucker was on April 7.

"Belinda called in from radio," his notes say. "Says she loved the AD and it really caught her attention."

His notes say they reached an agreement for him to buy the house Williams was living in that same day. He agreed to pay $68,000. Two days later, Howard's notes say Belinda told him the tenants have been "unresponsive since they sent notice to vacate."

A few weeks later, Bennie Williams received an eviction notice. Williams said she was shocked when Belinda Tucker and a locksmith showed up to change the locks a few days before the hearing.

"I spoke to Miss Tucker on the phone, and she told me she was coming in," Williams said. "I told her you cannot go in my house, and if you go in my house, I'm going to have you arrested."

A judge dismissed the eviction case, allowing Williams to stay in the home.

On May 19, the Tuckers filed a contest to Young's 2014 will, contending that their nonprofit was the rightful owner of the eight houses.

That same day, according to Howard's notes, Belinda Tucker agreed to sell the house to him for a reduced price of $63,000, once he agreed to buy the house with Williams still living there.

On May 21, Howard closed on the property. The next day, he went to see Williams.

"That didn't go well at all," Howard said. "She met me at the door and told me that this whole thing was a Ponzi scheme, that Belinda didn't own the property so I couldn't possibly own it."

Melvin, the Young family's attorney, had filed paperwork with the county clerk's office to block the sale or transfer of the houses. But the title company missed it, allowing the sale to the Howards to go through.

That left Howard and his wife on the hook for a loan on a house that they lacked clear

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title.

“What we would like to happen is for it to not be so easy for people to steal property,” Howard told WFAA. “We want to buy it, but we want to buy it from the rightful owners.”

After Hogg filed a police report, Lancaster Detective Senad Deranjic was assigned to the case.

Deranjic says he investigated the deed transferring ownership to a tenant. The tenant initially denied knowing the Tuckers, Deranjic told WFAA.

Deranjic said the tenant eventually admitted that Anthony Tucker had been his caretaker. The tenant told police that Anthony Tucker came up with the idea to put the house in the tenant’s name and gave him the forged warranty deed.

“He said that he fired Anthony after he discovered that Anthony Tucker forged all of the deeds, and not just the deed to his house,” Deranjic told WFAA.

Deranjic said he spoke to Belinda Tucker on May 25. He said she denied wanting to sell any of the homes. The detective said Belinda Tucker told him she met Young at a 2015 fundraiser. She denied knowing the tenant, the detective said. Anthony Tucker also denied knowing the tenant, according to police records. But police obtained documents showing Anthony Tucker had been the tenant’s caretaker.

Deranjic told WFAA that Belinda Tucker would not provide any evidence – no phone records, no emails, nor text messages – indicating that she knew Arnold Young.

In late October, a justice of the peace ordered the $55,000 check paid to the Tuckers’ nonprofit be returned to the Howards’ lender.

Belinda Tucker remains adamant that she and her husband have done nothing wrong, but the legal fight between the Tuckers and Young family is far from over.

In late January 2022, Young’s family and the Tuckers will face off in court over the Tucker’s effort to overturn his 2014 will.

“For them to come in and just take what he built for his family, his legacy, without a thought is painful,” Hogg said. “It makes you angry.

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Governor Greg Abbott: Thousands of new jobs coming to Texas, billions in investments
Christina Aguayo
KTSM-TV
November 28, 2021
https://www.krqe.com/news/national/governor-greg-abbott-thousands-of-new-jobs-coming-to-texas-billions-in-investments/

EL PASO, Texas (KTSM) – Gov. Greg Abbott announced that the world’s largest commercial real estate services investment firm, CBRE Group, will bring more than 1,000 jobs to two Texas cities.

CBRE Group will invest nearly 30 million dollars in its Dallas headquarters, creating 460 new jobs. With more than a 13 million dollar capital investment going towards an

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operations center in Richardson, Texas, the group aims to create 550 new jobs.

“Exceptional companies like CBRE are attracted to Texas because of our dynamic workforce and unrivaled business climate. CBRE’s expansion in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex will bring over one thousand high-paying jobs and greater opportunities for the hardworking people of North Texas, and I look forward to a strong relationship with the company as we work together to keep Texas the national model for economic prosperity.” -GOV. GREG ABBOTT

Abbott also announced the construction of a Samsung facility, a 17 billion dollar investment, being made in Taylor, Texas.

“Samsung had many other options for this project…this is the largest foreign investment in the state of Texas ever.”-GOV GREG ABBOTT

The Samsung facility will produce advanced microchips for mobile devices, 5G, high-performance computing (HPC), and artificial intelligence (AI).

It is predicted that the creation of the Samsung facility in Taylor will create more than 2,000 technical jobs, thousands of indirect jobs, and at least 6,500 construction jobs. Construction of the facility will start early next year and production will start in 2024.

“Companies like Samsung continue to invest in Texas because of our world-class business climate and exceptional workforce. Samsung’s new semiconductor manufacturing facility in Taylor will bring countless opportunities for hardworking Central Texans and their families and will play a major role in our state’s continued exceptionalism in the semiconductor industry. I look forward to expanding our partnership to keep the Lone Star State a leader in advanced technology and a dynamic economic powerhouse.” -GOV. GREG ABBOTT

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U.S. to require vaccines for all border crossers, starting in January
Zeke Miller
Associated Press
November 24, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/coronavirus/article/us-vaccine-requirement-texas-mexico-border-16648444.php

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will require essential, nonresident travelers crossing U.S. land borders, such as truck drivers, government and emergency response officials, to be fully vaccinated beginning on Jan. 22, the administration planned to announce.

A senior administration official said the requirement, which the White House previewed in October, brings the rules for essential travelers in line with those that took effect earlier this month for leisure travelers, when the U.S. reopened its borders to fully vaccinated individuals.

Essential travelers entering by ferry will also be required to be fully vaccinated by the same date, the official said. The official spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement.

The rules pertain to non-U.S. nationals. American citizens and permanent residents may still enter the U.S. regardless of their vaccination status, but face additional testing hurdles because officials believe they more easily contract and spread

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COVID-19 and in order to encourage them to get a shot.

The Biden administration pushed back the requirement for essential travelers by more than two months from when it went into effect on Nov. 8 for non-essential visitors to prevent disruptions, particularly among truck drivers who are vital to North American trade. While most cross-border traffic was shut down in the earliest days of the pandemic, essential travelers have been able to transit unimpeded.

Even with the delay, though, Norita Taylor, spokeswoman for the trucking group Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, criticized the vaccination requirement, calling it an example of "how unnecessary government mandates can force experienced owner-operators and independent truckers out of business."

"These requirements are another example of how impractical regulations will send safe drivers off the road," she said.

The latest deadline is beyond the point by which the Biden administration hopes to have large businesses require their employees to be vaccinated or tested weekly under an emergency regulation issued by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration. That rule is now delayed by litigation, but the White House has encouraged businesses to implement their own mandates regardless of the federal requirement with the aim of boosting vaccination.

About 47 million adults in the U.S. remain unvaccinated, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Border: New customs requirements for Mexico shipments begin Wednesday
Noi Mahoney
FreightWaves
November 28, 2021
https://www.freightwaves.com/news/new-customs-requirements-for-mexico-shipments-begin-wednesday

New customs requirements for Mexico shipments begin Wednesday

Hoping to quell a rising tide of smuggled goods and lost tax revenue, Mexico's controversial new waybill regulations — known as the Carta Porte supplement — is scheduled to go into effect Wednesday.

The regulations from the Mexican Tax Authority (SAT) aim to reduce cargo theft and the movement of contraband throughout the country. The SAT also estimates that Mexican authorities are losing as much as $7 billion a year on uncollected taxes from smuggled goods.

Trade officials in Mexico said they support the new regulations but that cross-border operators should be given more time to prepare for the changes.

"We are convinced of how important it is to fight the smuggling that affects the industry so much, and how essential it is to strengthen formal trade in our country," José Abugaber, president of the Confederation of Industrial Chambers of Mexico (CONCAMIN), said during a recent video posted on Facebook.

CONCAMIN represents more than 50 industrial chambers across different sectors and advocates for policy initiatives, while providing economic and legal advice to

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members.

Abugaber said the organization is concerned about the short time remaining for the start of the new regulation.

It's expected that on Wednesday, the SAT will begin trial enforcement without liability of the waybill information, and on Jan. 1, it will begin full enforcement.

"We have full confidence that the private sector can participate in an important way in the necessary and urgent training and dissemination of [Carta Porte] to a large percentage of service providers and users of all modes of transportation, including SMEs, which require regulatory and technological preparation," Abugaber said.

"We are concerned about the short time remaining for the mandatory start of this provision. We make a call to consider the extension of the deadline for the entry into force of this complement only for the time strictly necessary to resolve some pending technical aspects."

The SAT will require any entities sending goods through Mexico to modify their electronic invoices — known as CFDI in Spanish — with the Carta Porte supplement.

All freight of any size traveling by road, rail, air or sea through Mexico and all types of commodities will be required to have the supplement.

One of the forms that parties need to fill out for the supplement has up to about 160 questions. Providing the information will be the responsibility of the shipper, carrier and also suppliers involved in the shipment.

The SAT could fine shippers, carriers or other parties up to $4,500 for not having correct documentation.

Anaid Chacon, Nuvocargo's head of product, said the company hosted a customer event a few weeks ago during which many were asking about Carte Porte.

New York-based Nuvocargo is a digital logistics platform for cross-border trade between the U.S. and Mexico.

"I think we broke all of our records of assistance during the event because a lot of people really want to know about the subject," Chacon told FreightWaves.

The new requirements make it more important to vet potential suppliers and vendors to make sure they have the technological capability to handle the new rules, Chacon said.

"One of the things that we've seen a shift from, especially more even recently with the Carte Porte regulations changes, is that a lot of the vetting initially was very focused on price. This has now expanded also to include compliance," Chacon said.

Shippers should be thinking about their suppliers, not only as a cost center and something that they need to spend money on, but as something that can give them a strategic advantage.

"When you're thinking about the vendors or carriers to work with, it's thinking about what is their technological aptitude? What tools do they use to manage their internal teams? What kind of visibility do they have in terms of KPIs for metrics that they care about internally as a company; are they able to produce those reports?" Chacon said.

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“There’s a lot of changes happening very quickly, as results of regulations or as results of also things that happened with COVID, that you need to be able to respond quickly to and asking those questions [is] super valuable.”

Samsung announces $17B semiconductor plant in Texas

Samsung plans to build a $17 billion semiconductor manufacturing facility in Texas to tackle a global shortage of chips, officials said.

“With greater manufacturing capacity, we will be able to better serve the needs of our customers and contribute to the stability of the global semiconductor supply chain,” Kinam Kim, Samsung’s vice chairman and CEO, said in a statement Tuesday.

The South Korea-based company’s newest factory could create 2,000 high-tech jobs directly and is scheduled to open by the end of 2024.

A global semiconductor chip shortage has affected different manufacturing sectors around the world. Short supplies of semiconductors have hampered production of new vehicles and electronic devices over the past year.

“Increasing domestic production of semiconductor chips is critical for our national and economic security,” said U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo in a statement.

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock secures $92.5M contract for Houston Ship Channel

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Corp. has signed a $92.5 million dredging contract for the Houston Ship Channel Widening and Improvement, known as Project 11.

It represents the first phase of the Houston Ship Channel expansion and deepening program. Dredging is expected to begin in early 2022.

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock will dredge 11.5 miles of the channel to widen a portion of the bay from 530 feet to 700 feet, according to a release. It will pump 1.6 million cubic yards of dredged material to construct an island for a bird habitat and oyster reef.

The project will allow for larger container and petrochemical ships to navigate the Houston Ship Channel to access the Port of Houston.

Truck driver charged in record-breaking border drug seizure

A truck driver from Mexico faces federal drug charges after he was caught with record-breaking amounts of methamphetamine and fentanyl while trying to cross into the U.S., authorities said.

Carlos Martin-Quintana-Arias was arrested on Nov. 18 after 17,584 pounds of methamphetamine and 389 pounds of fentanyl were seized from a tractor-trailer he was driving at the U.S.-Mexico port of entry in Otay Mesa, California, just south of San Diego.

Authorities said the truck manifest listed automotive parts as the load being transported. Martin-Quintana-Arias was arraigned in San Diego federal court on Nov. 19 on two counts of importation of a controlled substance.

Authorities did not provide an estimated street value for the drugs seized from the

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truck.

Noi Mahoney is a Texas-based journalist who covers cross-border trade, logistics and supply chains for FreightWaves. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in English in 1999. Mahoney has more than 20 years experience as journalist, working for newspapers in Florida, Maryland and Texas. Contact nmahoney@freightwaves.com

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Human shields, drones, gunships aid Mexico's drug war
Mark Stevenson
Associated Press
November 27, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/regions/mexico/human-shields-drones-gunships-aid-mexicos-drug-war/

AGUILILLA, Mexico (AP) — The Mexican government is rapidly running out of tools to control the expansion of the feared Jalisco cartel on the front lines of Mexico's narco war in the western state of Michoacan and the stalled ground effort is being supplemented by an increasingly sophisticated aerial conflict.

Jalisco, Mexico's most militarily powerful drug gang, has begun organizing townspeople to act as human shields against army troops, which now just try to keep rival cartels apart.

"If they try to come in here again, we'll put 2,000 people out here to stop them," said Habacuc Solorzano, a 39-year-old farmer who leads the civilian movement associated with the cartel. His statement, like most of what comes out of the Jalisco side, is not mere boasting: He already had about 500 local residents marching last week— then wading across a river — to confront an army squad blocking a dirt road leading out of Jalisco territory.

Residents of Aguililla are fed up with the army's strategy of simply separating the Jalisco and the Michoacan-based Viagras gang. The army policy effectively allows the Viagras — best known for kidnapping and extorting money — to set up roadblocks and checkpoints that have choked off all commerce with Aguililla. Limes and cattle heading out, or supplies heading in, must pay a war tax to the Viagras.

"We'd rather be killed by you than killed by those criminals!" one demonstrator shouted at soldiers during a tense, hour-long confrontation between demonstrators and a squad of a dozen troops who took cover behind a barricade of car tires. Many of the demonstrators carried rocks and powerful slingshots, but did not use them.

The residents want the army to either fight both cartels, or at least let the two gangs battle.

"Let the two cartels fight it out and kill each other," another demonstrator shouted. "Jalisco is going to beat everybody!"

That view is widespread. "What we need is for one cartel to take control, stop the fighting and impose some semblance of calm," said a local priest. "Everything indicates that group is the Jalisco cartel."

Above all, what residents want is for the Viagras' checkpoints to be cleared and the road opened again. Because they must occasionally pass through those roadblocks,

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none of the residents wanted to give their names for fear of reprisals.

But one explained it this way to the army squad: “The only road into Aguililla is blocked and controlled by a cartel that is only 500 yards away from you, and you (the army) are not doing anything to protect our right to travel freely,” he said. “You don’t know how hard it is to be paying a war tax that is being used to kill us.”

That is actually a fairly accurate description of government policy: preserving the status quo, and making each cartel stay in its own territory.

But Jalisco won’t accept the government as the arbiter of drug cartel territorial divisions; the local Jalisco cartel leader says the army is only trying to protect the weaker of the two gangs, the Viagras, for reasons of corruption.

Jalisco is everywhere in Aguililla, from pickups and homemade armored cars bearing the cartel’s initials to the small trampolines the gang installed for children in every village.

Some residents say they are strongly pressured to participate in the protests, fearing their water or electricity might be cut off if they don’t. Others are just tired of paying the Viagras’ war taxes and being cut off from the outside world. One female protester described how her father died in early 2020 because the Viagras wouldn’t allow them past to get to a hospital.

Dozens of cartel gunmen openly wear bulletproof vests emblazoned with the group’s Spanish initials, “CJNG” — Jalisco New Generation Cartel — on the back, and on the front, “FEM” — “Mencho’s Special Forces,” a reference to the nickname of the cartel’s leader, Nemesio Oseguera.

Jalisco is the one cartel in Mexico that doesn’t hide what it is, and doesn’t play to the politics of press relations or restraint.

“We’re narcos,” said the local Jalisco leader, who did not give his name. “Everybody should mind his own business.” His beef with the Viagras and other local gangs he’s fighting is that “they want everything for themselves.”

Jalisco keeps its sizeable army of troops running with a potent mixture of money — the cartel has a lot, from trafficking fentanyl and meth into the United States — and cocaine, which it flies in from Costa Rica.

As the local boss stands at an impromptu street-side command post, a pickup full of Jalisco gunmen with AR15 assault rifles pulls up. The driver says, “The Scorpion said he needs some stuff,” and the boss reaches into his own truck and hands the co-pilot a plastic bag with what appears to be a kilogram brick of cocaine, apparently for ”the troops.”

Jalisco understands brute force; for the moment, it doesn’t bother Aguililla residents much, because it doesn’t have to. But if it suspects a resident of actively working for or passing information to the Viagras, that person’s life expectancy is likely to be very short.

The local boss shrugs off the government’s assertions that cartels like Jalisco are having trouble finding young recruits, due to the current administration’s youth employment and training programs.

“It depends on the kind of youth,” he says. “Those that sleep under bridges, they

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come here and they think they're in Paris. There's food here."

"I make it clear to my people that they come here to fight," he adds.

Beyond food, regular pay and unlimited drugs, the Jalisco cartel also offers its young foot soldiers a kind of family structure. Everyone, even the local boss, refers to their immediate superior as "Apa," the way a child would say "Papa."

Both cartels have developed bomb-carrying drones, and the most feared warrior on these battlefields is the "dronero," or drone operator. While initially crude and dangerous to load and operate — and still worrisomely indiscriminate — drone warfare has improved, and it's not unusual to see metal barn or shed roofs opened like tin cans from the impact of drone explosions.

Locals also claim — though there is little evidence beyond a few craters in roads — that the cartels are starting to use land mines.

To handle the increasing firepower in the conflict, the Mexican government has resorted to playing a powerful card to outgun the Jalisco cartel: Blackhawk helicopter gunships equipped with rotating-barrel electric machine guns that can fire 6,000 rounds per minute.

It is a weapon that almost defines ''indiscriminate blanket fire" and is banned in most countries in civil conflicts. It is the kind of weapon President Andrés Manuel López Obrador says he no longer wants.

But for the moment, such massive firepower is the only thing holding Jalisco back.

"They shot up and burned two of our trucks," the local gang boss said of the gunships. "When the soldiers arrive with a helicopter, there's nothing you can do, you just get out of the way."

It's not clear that is going to be the case for long. Jalisco is known for two things: being the most heavily armed cartel in Mexico, and the only one to have ever shot down a military helicopter.

In 2015, Jalisco cartel gunmen brought down a Eurocopter transport helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade, killing eight soldiers and a police officer. While the choppers Jalisco faces now are Blackhawks, there is little doubt the cartel can come up with something punchier.

The newspaper El Universal published transcripts of intercepted cartel communications where a leader can be heard coaching a sniper with a .50-caliber rifle to put armor-piercing rounds through the door of a helicopter. The Mexican army did not respond to request for comment on this, or other issues.

In the past, Jalisco has obtained squad machine guns, .50-caliber sniper rifles and 40mm grenades and launchers.

The government, afraid of the kind of bloodbath that started in 2018 when the Jalisco cartel moved into the neighboring state of Guanajuato, is now left with an unworkable policy of defending gang territorial divisions, and an increasingly narrow military advantage.

An unnamed army captain who tried to talk with the Aguililla protesters expressed the predicament.

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“How can it be that Mexicans are killing other Mexicans?” the captain said. “This just can’t be.”

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Mexico lays out conditions for restart of 'Remain in Mexico' program
Monique Beals
The Hill
November 26, 2021
https://thehill.com/policy/international/583227-mexico-lays-out-conditions-for-restart-of-remain-in-mexico-program

The Mexican government has laid out various requests it wants met before the Trump-era "Remain in Mexico" program is reinstated after a federal judge ordered the Biden administration to restart it.

"The government of Mexico ... has raised various concerns of a humanitarian nature regarding the asylum procedure in the United States," the Mexican Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday, per Reuters.

Biden and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador have yet to agree to restart the program, formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, which requires asylum-seekers to live in Mexico as they await determination of their applications in the U.S.

Mexico is asking that development programs for southern Mexico and Central America be accelerated in an effort to address the root causes of migration. Additionally, Mexico asked that migrants get medical attention and COVID-19 vaccines and requested "additional resources" for shelters and assistance with legal advice, the news service added.

"The Government of Mexico emphasizes that ... it requires the Government of the United States to promptly address these humanitarian measures," the Foreign Ministry also said, adding that it "awaits a formal response from the United States government," according to Reuters.

Last month, the Biden administration said it was prepared to reimplement the program in mid-November if it could get agreement from the neighboring government.

Axios reported on Wednesday that the White House plans to offer COVID-19 vaccines to asylum-seekers under the program, which sources said could restart within a week, though the administration said that would depend on Mexico.

The moves to restart the Trump-era program, which led to 70,000 asylum-seekers being sent back to Mexico, was prompted by Texas and Missouri winning legal battles that claimed the Biden administration was too quick to retract the policy.

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Texas border landowners ask for federal funding for damage incurred during migrant crisis
Maggie Glynn
Nexstar/KXAN-TV
November 24, 2021
https://www.krqe.com/news/national/texas-border-landowners-ask-for-federal-

funding-for-damage-incurred-during-migrant-crisis/

DEL RIO, Texas (Nexstar) — This week, U.S. Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas) met with local leaders in Del Rio to discuss how the current crisis at Texas' southern border is affecting the community.

While local law enforcement and city officials asked for more funding, border communities have already secured $30 million from the federal government to reimburse local communities and non-governmental organizations who had spent significant resources on migrant care.

Landowners, however, said they have been overlooked. The South Texans' Property Rights Association said landowners have experienced property damage and worker shortages due to the migrant crisis.

"We don't want to compete with law enforcement monies because of stolen vehicles and that sort of thing. So where does that come from? That leaves the landowner high and dry," Susan Kibbe, the association's executive director, told Cornyn on Monday.

"There's people that are leaving, employers are losing employees on their property. They don't want to stay anymore," Kibbe said, explaining the employees feel unsafe.

Senator Cornyn said he would take the stories he heard at the roundtable discussion to try to garner attention in D.C.

"We've been doing what we can to bring attention to the issue in a public way. We openly support the state and their efforts. And we're working with them to try to with processing centers and trying to work with all county officials to make it happen. But we need federal help, and we need a mindset change," Kibbe said.

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7 former McAllen Chamber chairs say organization is in 'turmoil'; ask Mayor Villalobos to intervene
Steve Taylor
Rio Grande Guardian
November 26, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/7-former-mcallen-chamber-chairs-say-organization-is-in-turmoil-ask-mayor-villalobos-to-intervene/

MCALLEN, Texas – Seven former chairs of McAllen Chamber of Commerce have written to McAllen Mayor Javier Villalobos to express concern over the current leadership of the chamber's board of directors.

In a joint letter, Dora Brown, Joe Brown, Bob McCreery, Karen Valdez, Charles Marina, Maurice Welton, and Larry Delgado claim the McAllen Chamber is currently in "turmoil."

Without naming her directly, the former chairs are clearly unhappy with performance of the current Board Chair Annette Franz.

"Never have we seen the actions of one Chair cause so much unrest within the Chamber, among our Chamber staff and within the Business community of McAllen," the former chairs wrote.

The former chairs say the McAllen Chamber had a great reputation under the leadership of its former president, Steve Ahlenius. He left abruptly last month.

“We wish to express our disappointment in the actions of the current board of directors and plead for your intervention in securing a change of leadership on the Board of Directors,” the seven former chairs wrote, in their letter to Villalobos.

The letter ends: “Our request is that you restore order to our beloved Chamber before irreparable damage is done to it or our Great City.”

Villalobos received the letter as an attachment to an email from Delgado (pictured above), a master chef and restaurant owner in McAllen. The subject line was marked “Confidential.” The Rio Grande Guardian received the email and the letter via an open records request to the City of McAllen.

Here is what Delgado wrote:

Good evening Mayor,

The attached letter represents the sentiment of some of your past Chairman of the Board of Directors of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. While we concede that Steve Ahlenius may not be salvageable, we all agree that the Chamber of Commerce is. Thank you for your time.

Larry Delgado

Chef/Owner

Delgado Collective

Here is the letter Delgado and the six other former McAllen Chamber chairs sent Mayor Villalobos:

November 5, 2021

Dear Mayor Villalobos,

We write you in response to the turmoil currently disrupting the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. We wish to express our disappointment in the actions of the current board of directors and plead for your intervention in securing a change in leadership on the Board of Directors.

As former Chair of the board and having served many years on the Board of Directors, we are no strangers to conflict, hardship, or difference of opinion. We are, however, shocked at how quickly and utterly devastating current matters have negatively impacted the reputation and the future of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. Never have we seen the actions of one Chair cause so much unrest within the Chamber, among the Chamber staff, and within the Business community of McAllen.

Throughout the years we have held our heads high with honor and a great sense of pride for all that the McAllen Chamber of Commerce has stood for and accomplished. This Chamber has stood head and should above any in our region and perhaps the Great State of Texas and has set the standard of excellence for over 20 years culminating in National recognition for their work. The Chamber staff, under the leadership of Steve Ahlenius have worked tirelessly to fulfill the mission of the

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Chamber to help McAllen businesses be successful and make money, accelerate connections, create economic momentum, and enhance the image and quality of place of McAllen. Our request is that you restore order to our beloved Chamber before irreparable damage is done to it or our Great City.

Respectfully,

Dora Brown,

Chairman of the Board 2005

Joe Brown

Chairman of the Board 2010

Bob McCreery

Chairman of the Board 2011

Karen Valdez

Chairman fo the Board 2012

Charles Marina

Chairman of the Board 2016

Maurice Welton

Chairman of the Board 2017

Larry Delgado

Chairman of the Board 2019

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Column: Texas state senators draw for term lengths
Dave McNeely
Huntsville Item
November 25, 2021
https://www.itemonline.com/opinion/texas-state-senators-draw-for-term-lengths/article_38392a5f-6980-5e12-a9c4-58f8094c1362.html

Unless you are a relatively close follower of Texas politics and government, you may not know this.

The Texas House of Representatives has 150 members, who have two-year terms. All the seats are up for election every two years. No problem.

But the 31 members of the Texas Senate serve staggered four-year terms. That means 15 seats are up for election in one even-numbered election year, and two years later, the other 16 seats are up.

But once a decade, after the decennial census, the Senate adjusts its districts, to accommodate population shifts -- and, to be blunt, to see the party in power

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gerrymander the districts as much as possible to help their side for elections for the next 10 years.

In the election year following the census – in this case, 2022, after the 2021 redistricting, based on the 2020 census – all 31 senate districts are up for election.

Then, to restore the senate to staggered four- year terms -- roughly half of the senators chosen every two years – all 31 senators elected in 2022 will draw lots early in the regular 140-day legislative session beginning in January of 2023 following the elections of all 31 senators – this time in 2023 – the senators will draw lots to see which 16 get four-year terms, and which 15 will get two-year terms.

And barring successful lawsuits challenging the redistricting, the districts, with the staggered four-year terms will be in place until the 2030 census starts the shuffle once again.

This ritual to restore the staggered terms every ten years can have a major effect on the political choices of senators.

If they draw a two-year term initially, then they will come up for election in presidential election years for the rest of the decade. If they draw a four-year term, their seat will come up for election in non-presidential election years – the years that statewide officials are chosen.

For instance, if a senator wants to run for attorney general, if they initially drew a two-year term, their district would be up for election in the same election years as the attorney general's four-year term.

That means their choice would be "Up or Out." Since you can't be on the ballot for more than one office in an election (except for president or vice-president), you'd have to give up your senate seat to run for attorney general.

An example of the "Up Or Out" race for a state senator was when Democratic state Sen. Wendy Davis was catapulted into national prominence by her filibuster to block an anti-abortion bill in 2013.

She ran in 2014 for governor, rather than for re-election. But she lost the general election to Republican then-Atty. Gen. Greg Abbott. And had sacrificed her senate seat in the process.

If she had drawn a four-year initial term, she could have made a "free-ride race," where a senator could seek statewide office, and if they lost, would still be a senator for another two years.

An example is State Sen. Royce West, the long-time Dallas Democrat, who ran in 2020 for the U.S. Senate seat held by Republican U.S. Sen. John Cornyn.

West lost the Democratic primary runoff to M.J. Hegar and was out of the U.S. Senate contest. But he was still a state senator.

So, the drawing for terms in 2023 among the 31 senators elected in November of 2022 ought to be really interesting – at least to the 31 senators.

Some senators bowing out

Three of the most senior members of the Texas Senate have announced they won't

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run for re-election in 2022 – leaving their seats up for grabs, which is already going on.

The three are:

— Eddie Lucio, Jr., D - Brownsville 75 – third in seniority, senator since 1991, after two House terms. A surprise, because he had earlier announced he would run again.

His anti-abortion stance distanced him from other Democrats, but endeared him to Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

His son, State Rep. Eddie Lucio III, was considered a potential successor, but announced he also will not run for re-election in 2022.

— Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, 70, senator since 1993, is the most senior Republican. Chair of the budget-writing Senate Finance Committee for the last four sessions.

— Kel Seliger, Republican, 68, former longtime Amarillo Mayor, joined the Senate in 2005.

— Dawn Buckingham, R-Lakeway, 53, senator since 2017, is leaving to run for Land Commissioner.

— Senate Dean John Whitmire, D-Houston, 72, a House member for 10 years before joining the Senate in 1983, plans to run for re-election in 2022, but after the regular legislative session ends May 29, 2023, he says he's running for mayor of Houston in November 2023.

—

Dave McNeely is a statewide political columnist. He can be reached via email at davemcneely111@gmail.com

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Unnecessary election audit supports baseless claims of extensive voter fraud
Editorial Board
Beaumont Enterprise
November 27, 2021
https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/opinions/editorials/article/OPINION-Unnecessary-election-audit-supports-16655703.php

John B. Scott, the new Texas secretary of state, believes that a "full forensic audit (of last year's elections) will restore faith in Texas voting." Someone should tell him that most Texans already have faith in Texas voting. That group should include most Texas Republicans, because their party did very well in the 2020 elections. Former president Trump carried the state easily, the GOP won all statewide races and maintained its control of the state House and Senate.

It's hard to see what they are concerned with — maybe not winning by large enough margins? — and what "problem" has to be fixed. Apparently they don't realize how disappointed Texas Democrats were with the 2020 results. Members of that party truly thought they would break through last year; if any party should be questioning the results, it would be them.

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Instead, in Texas and across the nation, it is some Republicans pushing the baseless theory that last year's elections were riddled with fraud and somehow the shenanigans must finally be uncovered and exposed. That is why Scott is boasting about the ongoing "top-to-bottom examination of election records in the two largest counties with Democratic Commissioners Courts — Harris and Dallas — as well as the two largest counties with Republican Commissioners Courts — Tarrant and Collin" by his office.

Again, it's not clear what this expensive and unnecessary exercise is supposed to prove. Scott cited one poll which said that 79 percent of Americans in both parties believe there sometimes is cheating in elections. That may be true, but the word "sometimes" is important there. Nothing in life is absolutely perfect, and that includes elections where millions of people vote. And to the extent that some Americans believe larger fraud exists, it's because Republican officials like Scott and Gov. Greg Abbott have been promoting this baseless theory for months. It all comes from President Trump, of course, and too many Republicans are publicly going along with his fantasy when they privately admit it's bonkers.

Scott and Abbott should have noticed similar claims in Arizona, where not one but two official audits of the 2020 election were held, finding no fraud. State officials then contracted with a sketchy company with no relevant experience to conduct a third audit, and the results were the same. Well, except for a few more votes added for President Biden, which certainly wasn't the goal. Oh, and no evidence of phony paper ballots imported from China with telltale bamboo fibers.

Whenever and wherever it occurs, voter fraud is serious. Any perpetrators should get serious punishment. But when large numbers of votes are cast in large counties or a huge state like Texas, some small counting mistakes are likely, if not inevitable. That's not widescale fraud, however, which is what Scott and Abbott are talking about.

Scott hopes that this audit will that show Texans that "voting in our state is fair and secure, and that only legal votes are cast and counted." We hope so too; in fact, there's no reason to think otherwise.

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From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 12/13/21
Date: Monday, December 13, 2021 11:00:56 AM
Attachments: image001.png

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Monday, December 13, 2021 9:51 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/13/21



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 13, 2021

Texas secretary of state sends 'exhaustive' election audit ask to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin counties, *Dallas Morning News*, December 10, 2021

2nd phase of 2020 election audit in 4 Texas counties underway, *KXAN-TV*, December 10, 2021

Republicans in Texas County, in Unusual Move, Upend Primary System, *New York Times*, December 10, 2021

Emails: Texas' Election Audit Caught Collin and Tarrant County Officials Flat-Footed, *Dallas Observer*, December 13, 2021

Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election, *KAMR-TV*, December 13, 2021

State of Texas: Federal lawsuit over redistricting might delay Texas primary

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election, *KXAN-TV*, December 12, 2021

Montgomery County to conduct Conroe's May election to boost polling locations, *Houston Chronicle*, December 10, 2021

Opportunity was snatched away from Dallas County Latino communities when Texas Republicans redrew congressional maps, *Texas Tribune*, December 13, 2021

Campbell draws GOP opponent in District 25, *New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung*, December 10, 2021

Conservative wins show power of politics in HISD board races, *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 2021

U.S. to Coordinate With Mexico, Regional Countries for Crackdown on People Smuggling, *Reuters*, December 11, 2021

USMCA neighbors Canada, Mexico cry foul over Biden's electric car subsidies, *Washington Times*, December 12, 2021

Mexican peso is on a skid; Buying power decreases with value, *Brownsville Herald*, December 12, 2021

Port Houston's trade jumps 51% to nearly $17B, *FreightWaves*, December 12, 2021

Is it time to get tougher with AMLO as energy policies threaten U.S. companies?, *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 2021

Analysis: From homegrown culture warriors to tomorrow's Texas leaders,

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Texas Tribune, December 13, 2021

Texas secretary of state sends 'exhaustive' election audit ask to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin counties

Philip Jankowski

Dallas Morning News

December 10, 2021

https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/10/texas-secretary-of-state-sends-exhaustive-request-to-dallas-tarrant-counties-in-election-audit/

AUSTIN — Texas Secretary of State John Scott announced late Friday that his office has presented an "exhaustive" document request to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris counties as part of an audit of 2020′s election.

Scott's office also announced that phase one of the audit is nearing completion, with a summary of findings expected to be made public by the end of December. The document request marks the beginning of the second phase of the audit, according to a news release from the secretary of state's office.

The request, sent to election administrators at each of the counties, asks for the counties to provide information including a full accounting of mail-in votes and provisional votes, any reported chain of custody issues as well as complaints that those offices might have received regarding the 2020 presidential election.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Scott said in the news release.

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The ongoing audit comes amid unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud in 2020 pushed forward by former President Donald Trump. In September, Trump called for Texas to perform a full audit of the 2020 election results, despite winning the state by 5.5 percentage points.

The secretary of state's office announced the ongoing audit just hours after Trump made his demand. Trump later called the audit "weak" and pressured Gov. Greg Abbott to add an election audit to the special legislative session that was ongoing at the time. Abbott declined.

Following Friday's announcement, James Slattery, a senior counsel at the Texas Civil Rights Project, called the document request from the secretary of state's office a "fishing expedition."

"No other words to describe these unbelievably wide ranging document requests than 'fishing expedition,' " Slattery said on Twitter. "It'll tie these offices up in knots just as the primary season begins, diverting crucial resources from helping voters navigate all of 2021's election law changes."

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2nd phase of 2020 election audit in 4 Texas counties underway

Jaclyn Ramkissoon

KXAN-TV

December 10, 2021

https://www.kxan.com/news/texas-politics/2nd-phase-of-2020-election-audit-in-4-texas-counties-underway/

AUSTIN (KXAN) — The Texas Secretary of State's Office announced Friday it's beginning Phase 2 of its forensic audit of the 2020 general election results in four

counties.

The office first announced the forensic audit for Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties in September and explained the process would be carried out in two phases.

The office spent a little over two months in Phase 1 of the audit, which focused on voting machine accuracy, cybersecurity assessments and identifying and removing any ineligible voters who may have casted ballots during the election. Any potential instances of illegal voting were to be sent to the Texas Attorney General's Office to be investigated.

A summary of findings from Phase 1 of the audit will be available to the public by the end of this month, the SOS' office said.

Phase 2 of the audit began with an "exhaustive document request" from the four counties, the SOS' office said on Friday. The office claims the request "covers more election materials than any other election audit in the United States to date," and the audit of those four counties will cover about 35% of all votes cast in the state during the 2020 election.

The office is asking for all documents county election officials are required to maintain for 22 months after each election under federal and state law.

According to a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott addressed to the four counties' elections administrators, the counties are being asked to locate the documents in preparation for an on-site examination, tentatively scheduled for some time in January.

Also in the letter, Scott asks the elections administrators several questions about election security, including the following:

- Do you have badge-controlled access to your election office?
- Do you keep track of who enters into the office, especially sensitive areas?

- Are visitors escorted at all times?
- Do you keep track of who enters the ballot programming area?
- Are the number of people authorized to access the programming area limited?

Click here to read the full letter outlining all the documents the Texas Secretary of State's Office requested.

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Republicans in Texas County, in Unusual Move, Upend Primary System

Jennifer Medina

New York Times

December 10, 2021

https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/politics/republicans-amarillo-potter-county-primary.html

The Republican Party in the second-largest county in the Texas Panhandle is planning to conduct its own election during the state primary in March, breaking away from a nonpartisan county election board in a highly unusual move.

The G.O.P. in Potter County, which includes Amarillo, plans to use ballots that will be marked and counted by hand, rather than employ the electronic systems that the county has relied on for decades. Election experts said the changes would confuse voters and create more potential for fraud.

Under Texas law, county parties are allowed to run their own primary elections, but the vast majority have contracted with local boards of election for decades. The decision, which was reported by Votebeat, an election news website, comes as Republicans nationally have continued to push baseless claims of fraud in the 2020 election and sow doubts about the reliability of election machinery.

Daniel L. Rogers, the chairman of the Potter County Republicans, said that he made the decision this week because “a lot of voters have concerns” with the electronic counters and “don’t feel comfortable with them.” He did not cite evidence of any problems arising under the current system, and studies have shown that hand counting leads to more inaccuracies. He argued that paper ballots would be more secure.

“The parties have become lazy and complacent, but the primaries are actually the party’s responsibility,” said Mr. Rogers, a real estate broker whose office was decorated with red Make America Great Again hats when a New York Times reporter interviewed him last year. “The counties are spending millions of dollars on electronic systems, but this way it’s a true secret ballot.”

He said that “the voters are smarter than our elected officials, than administrators — they don’t trust the voters. I do.”

Mark P. Jones, a professor of political science at Rice University in Houston, said the move “removes the Republican Party one more step away from the standard electoral procedure.”

He added: “The integrity of our electoral system depends on institutionalizing and professionalizing election boards. There will be more doubts about the overall outcome, or it will lead to more slip-ups and more potential flaws and problems than if the professionals ran it.”

Potter County has about 57,000 registered voters, and they are overwhelmingly Republican: Roughly 70 percent cast their ballots for Donald J. Trump in 2020.

Mr. Rogers, when asked if the election results nationally were valid, responded, “I don’t have any idea and that’s the problem — I don’t know if it was accurate or not.”

Under state law, the county elections board will still be responsible for absentee and early voting, which a majority of voters in Texas use to cast their ballots. But the two systems, experts said, could complicate the process and make it easier for voters to cast ballots twice.

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“It opens the door wide to fraud,” Dr. Jones said. “It doesn’t close the door to fraud.”

The legal office of the Texas secretary of state, who oversees elections in the state and who was appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, raised several concerns about the move.

“Any time that a party conducts their own election rather than contracting with a county, it is more confusing to voters,” said Sam Taylor, the assistant secretary of state for communications. Still, he added that “ultimately it’s their decision to go at it alone.”

One risk, Mr. Taylor said, is that candidates in contested races could file election challenges to prompt a court to order a new primary election. “It’s not unprecedented,” he said. “But county parties usually do not invite that opportunity upon themselves.”

“They have every legal right to do so,” he added. “We can’t really intervene.”

Melynn Huntley, the Potter County elections administrator, said that she had been taken aback by Mr. Rogers’s decision and that she was most worried about the potential to make it easier to vote twice.

“The biggest worry I have is that those two systems will not talk with each other,” Ms. Huntley said. “His desire is to eliminate fraud, but there is a vulnerability in the plan. I am concerned whether this can function with high integrity.”

Ms. Huntley, who has served as elections administrator for eight years, said that when she took on the job, she pledged not to vote in either party’s primary so that she could maintain her role as a nonpartisan overseer.

“I am truly trying to figure out how this is going to work,” she said.

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Emails: Texas' Election Audit Caught Collin and Tarrant County Officials Flat-Footed

Patrick Strickland

Dallas Observer

December 13, 2021

https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/emails-texas-election-audit-caught-collin-and-tarrant-county-officials-flatfooted-13000167

Back in September, Texas state officials announced that they had “already begun” what was dubbed a “full forensic audit” into the November 2020 presidential elections that saw Joe Biden defeat former President Donald Trump.

Now, an investigation by the watchdog American Oversight has brought back communication records and documents that show election officials in Collin and Tarrant counties were caught on their heels when the audit was announced, and that they apparently had no idea what the process meant.

In one of the emails American Oversight obtained, Collin County Election Administrator Bruce Sherbet informed employees that the audit would kick off in November.

(Does the timing feel a bit funny to you? Well: “Governor Abbott, we need a ‘Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election,’” Trump wrote in an open letter to Abbott. “Texans know voting fraud occurred in some of their counties.” A little more than eight hours later, boom: an audit is born.)

Texas Director of Elections Keith Ingram had informed Sherbet of the upcoming probe, despite having previously told the Collin County elections administrator that

the vote had been both “smooth and secure.”

On Sept. 24, Collin County Commissioner Darrell Hale wrote back to Sherbet and Collin County Administrator Bill Bilyeu. "What is the story?" he asked. "What’s going on?"

"Just heard about it last night," Sherbet replied. "Not sure of any details."

Later, Hale confessed to an inquisitive constituent by email, "We are curious on the details ourselves."

Trump brought home 51% of the votes in Collin County, while Biden took 46%, nearly the same margin by which the former Republican president won Texas as a whole. Not only has there been no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Texas, Attorney General Ken Paxton has only closed a whopping total of 16 minor fraud cases, all of which were investigated in Harris County.

Biden narrowly bested Trump in Tarrant County, where voters hadn’t gone for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964.

After the Texas Secretary of State’s Office announced the audit, Tarrant County Elections Administrator Heider Garcia urged election officials not to comment publicly until they figured out what exactly was going on and knew “what they need from us,” the email communications American Oversight obtained show. Garcia urged the officials to forward any media inquiries to him.

But the lack of clarity about what such an audit actually means and what it involves hasn’t stopped Texas Republicans from finding a way to spend Texans’ money on the process. (By the time it would be said and done, one economic analysis firm predicts a statewide audit would cost up to some $250 million in taxpayer bucks.)

For now, the audit focuses on Dallas, Harris, Collin and Tarrant counties, and in

November, Abbott and leading GOP legislators have already moved $4 million from the state prison coffers to help bankroll the probe. The funds will go toward hiring, training and sending out election auditors to — again — doublecheck the results of an election Republicans handily won.

Even Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, a Republican, has blasted the audit as a waste of time and resources. “The conspiracy theorists who want to come up with all these ways or reasons why this election wasn’t right — they might very well find something else,” he told the Texas Tribune last month. “It’s time to move on.”

After Trump got voted out, Attorney General Paxton caught flak for spending taxpayer money on lawsuits asking the Supreme Court to throw out results in four battleground states that picked Biden over Trump: Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. "There is no reason not to do an audit," Paxton said earlier this year. "There is no reason not to know the truth of every election."

Last month, Abbott defended the audit while appearing on Fox News. "Why do we audit everything in this world, but people raise their hands in concern when we audit elections, which is fundamental to our democracy?" the governor said.

Meanwhile, here at the Observer, no one has thought to "raise their hands in concern" over auditing an election in a state everyone agrees Republicans won. Instead, we're sitting around scratching our heads, entirely clueless as to how Texas produced so many U.S. Capitol rioters last January.

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Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election

Judd Baker

KAMR-TV

December 13, 2021

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https://www.valleycentral.com/news/potter-county-republican-party-making-move-to-hand-marked-hand-counted-ballots-in-primary-election/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT)— The Potter County Republican Party said it is changing the way it holds primary elections, making a move to hand-marked and counted ballots.

“This is the way we did it, and it worked for over 200 years,” said Republican Party Chairman, Dan Rogers.

“They vote to not go with electronic voting machines, that we go back to the way we used to do things where we vote in our precincts, and marked and counted manual poll books countywide,” said Rogers.

So how does this change the way you vote?

Potter County Elections Administrator Melynn Huntley said if you are voting in the Republican Primary during early voting, you can still go to a voting center and cast your ballot on an electronic voting machine as normal, for now. The same applies to absentee voting. Voters will still mail in their ballots and have them tabulated by Huntley’s office.

However, if you are going to vote as a Republican in the primary on Election Day, in Potter County, you will have to vote in a precinct, not a voting center, on the hand-marked paper ballots.

“I look up your name, you sign, we look at your ID make sure it matches what’s on there, you sign, we give you a ballot, and you fill it out, and then you drop it in a box, and you leave,” said Rogers.

Rogers said he would like to see the Potter County Democratic Party adopt the same voting style.

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We reached out to the Potter County Democratic Chair, Amy Taylor, for comment. Said in a statement:

“The system of voting that’s been in place for the last fifteen years in Potter County is watertight. Voter fraud under the current system is not possible. Therefore, I see no need to change to a system of all paper ballots. It’s the Republican Party’s right to run the Primary Election as they see fit, but the Potter County Democratic Party will not be following suit.” - AMY TAYLOR | POTTER COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CHAIR

“I want the Democrats’ vote counted, as well as the Republicans without any question. And I’m not saying there’s fraud. I’m not accusing anybody of doing anything wrong,” said Rogers. “You know, we have a phenomenal election administrator here that does a wonderful job. But it’s not about that. It’s about doing what’s right for the voters.”

Rogers said he has contacted other Republican County Chairs to let them know what they are doing, and what he thinks every Republican county chair should follow suit.

We asked Randall County Elections Administrator Shannon Lackey if she anticipated any changes to their primary election. She said, “I don’t anticipate any changes for Randall County. A joint primary has already been decided upon by both Party Chairs and the resolution will be adopted in Commissioner’s Court on Tuesday.”

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State of Texas: Federal lawsuit over redistricting might delay Texas primary election

Tahera Rahman

KXAN-TV

December 12, 2021

https://www.kxan.com/state-of-texas/state-of-texas-federal-lawsuit-over-redistricting-might-delay-texas-primary-election/

AUSTIN (KXAN) – The U.S. Department of Justice is suing the state of Texas, saying the state's new redistricting maps deny and dilute votes from people of color.

The DOJ says Texas' new maps purposely violate Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act based on certain voters' race and/or minority group — also known as "vote dilution."

In a press conference Monday, U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta pointed to Texas' two new congressional districts specifically. The state gained two seats due to its population growth from the 2010 to 2020 U.S. Census. Texas grew by nearly 4 million residents, with an estimated 95% of that growth due to Latino and Black residents.

"…Texas has designed both of those new seats to have white voting majorities," she said. "The congressional plan also deliberately reconfigured a west Texas district to eliminate the opportunity for Latino voters to elect a representative of their choice."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton took to Twitter to criticize the lawsuit, calling it a "preposterous attempt to sway democracy."

The Texas primary election is scheduled for March 1, but some say it could be put on hold because of the federal lawsuit.

U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, said he's fought against Texas redistricting before and supports the DOJ's challenge.

He doesn't believe any map changes would dramatically affect the newly-created district he is running for, Congressional District 37.

"This district is mainly the city of Austin, Westlake and Rollingwood," Doggett said.

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He said CD 37 is the area he represented before previous redistricting-related legislative and court actions changed his boundaries.

“And now, the district I serve today stretches from north of 183 and I-35, to the very south side of San Antonio. So often, I find myself needing to be at events in both San Antonio and Austin at the same time,” Doggett said of CD 35, which also now has new boundaries under Texas’ new maps.

He said one change he’s concerned about that might come out of the legal battle is pausing the March primary.

“I hope that doesn’t happen, because it moves us off the traditional day, and it usually means fewer people participate,” Doggett said.

The lawsuit asks the court to stop Texas from holding elections under these maps and to make new redistricting plans.

Richard Pineda, University of Texas at El Paso political science professor, said it’s one of the few things the DOJ can try to do right now: delay the primaries or use existing district maps.

“This is one of the important questions when it comes to these kinds of lawsuits, which is the timeliness of how quickly you can get a federal judge to intervene,” Pineda explained.

Pineda said changing maps will be a lot trickier once the primaries start.

“The state is making these changes that’s affected the U.S. congressional districts, but this has also affected municipalities that have redrawn lines for municipal seats like county commissioner districts and also city council seats,” he said. “So it throws a huge wrench into the works to try to stop all these things or try to move against them.”

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“But if there’s any entity that has the power to — the Department of Justice,” Pineda added.

Pineda said the next legal steps are to wait for additional filings and for the court to decide a venue and assign a judge to the case.

KXAN reached out to a few of the state lawmakers who supported Texas’ newly redistricted maps. They either did not respond or were not available for an interview.

In October, state Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, defended the new maps during a debate on the Senate floor.

Huffman led the redistricting process in the Senate and said she took the Voting Rights Act into consideration, which is now one of the bases of the Justice Department’s new lawsuit.

“While these maps were drafted blind to race, it is wrong to say that race was wholly ignored in my end-to-end process. I’m committed to giving due regard to all factors relevant to legal compliance, including compliance with section two of the Voting Rights Act,” she said.

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Montgomery County to conduct Conroe’s May election to boost polling locations

Catherine Dominguez

Houston Chronicle

December 10, 2021

https://www.houstonchronicle.com/neighborhood/moco/news/article/Montgomery-County-to-conduct-Conroe-s-May-16690579.php

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The Conroe City Council agreed to have Montgomery County Elections conduct the city's May 2022 elections to help save money and offer more polling locations.

The council made the decision during its Thursday meeting.

"If we decide to conduct the election ourselves, I need to go out and buy the equipment," said City Secretary Soco Gorjon. "The equipment we have now is over 10 years old and some is not working and is not in compliance with new laws."

The cost for new equipment, she added, would be about $200,000. The cost to have the county handle the city election would be about $80,000 to $100,000 with 10 to 12 polling locations.

Councilwoman Marsha Porter asked if the city needed that many polling locations. In the past, the city has only offered municipal voting at city hall and at April Sound.

Gorjon said it would likely increase voter turnout and recommended the city allow the county to hold the election.

"The main reason is one big complaint our judges and I received is why is the city making the voters go to two separate elections and why isn't the city saving money by having the county run the city election," Gorjon said.

Councilman Curt Maddux noted Montgomery County commissioners in September approved the $8.1 million purchase of over 1,900 voting machines to replace the county's aging voting machines. The machines will be used in the upcoming March primaries.

While the commissioners had some discussion regarding the integrity of the machines, County Judge Mark Keough's Chief of Staff Jason Millsaps said the Verity Voting 2.5 by Hart Intercivic Inc. was approved by the Texas Secretary of the State's Office and Texas Attorney General's Office in January.

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“They review the equipment in person and followed a checklist required to certify the equipment,” Millsaps said. “This system replaces the current electric voting system and has a paper back up element to it is not hackable and is verifiable by not only the voter but something we can look back to later to do a recount or any type audit required.”

Millsaps added the machines are not connected to the internet via a WiFi signal or ethernet cable making it impossible to tamper with.

“So less expense and more polling locations, sounds like a win-win,” said Mayor Jody Czajkoski.

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Opportunity was snatched away from Dallas County Latino communities when Texas Republicans redrew congressional maps

Alexa Ura

Texas Tribune

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https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/latinos-texas-redistricting-dallas/

DALLAS — When Henry R. Martinez Jr.'s cellphone rings, it usually means his community is in need. A surprise shipment of food must be distributed, a collapsed roof repaired, a vaccination clinic set up at the community center.

His neighbors turn to him in times of want and crisis because he knows them, respects them and will do his best to help. He wishes their government would do the same.

Martinez endeavors to fulfill the needs of the mostly Latino residents of the Ledbetter

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Eagle Ford community in West Dallas because the broader social and political structures don’t — and haven’t since his late father first took up this work decades ago.

Change seemed possible when Texas lawmakers met in Austin this year to redraw the state's political maps. The 2020 census showed that the Latino population in the Dallas-Fort Worth area had grown large enough that it seemed possible to cluster their communities, including Ledbetter Eagle Ford, together into a congressional district that would allow them to elect someone more connected to their daily lives.

Perhaps they could finally be represented by a Latino or Latina member of Congress from Dallas. Residents, legal experts and local leaders all pleaded with state lawmakers to acknowledge their constituency in the new district boundaries being drawn up.

Instead, Republicans — who entirely controlled the process — carved up predominantly Latino neighborhoods, leaving many voters of color with even less of a say in who represents them. In a bid to entrench partisan advantage in a rapidly changing state, GOP mapmakers awarded increased representation and control to white voters in rural areas, Austin and Houston.

For Martinez, it was the latest indignity for a community long denied an equal role in the democratic process.

“They’re focused more on others than the Latino people, and that’s unfortunate and that’s sad,” Martinez said. “We waited 10 years.”

Rather than honoring how representation can be built, Martinez said, “they make us real small.”

Generations of community

On a recent weekday, Martinez’s phone buzzed late in the evening with an alert of an unexpected donation of fresh fruits and vegetables. It was too last-minute to call on

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other volunteers that help him run a community-based food pantry, so as a November evening chill set in, Martinez and his wife, Isabel, found themselves unloading a truckload of produce onto the uneven parking lot of a small church.

The following morning, Martinez joined three other volunteers in distributing the donations. Some were sorted into black plastic bags offering a good mix of produce, but most of it was loaded straight into car trunks and back seats of grateful residents as the volunteers pulled from clumsily stacked cartons of grapes, pears, berries and a selection of squash, lettuce, tomatoes and bell peppers. There hadn't been enough time to organize.

Yet the demand was so extraordinary. Even with the distribution's impromptu nature, the volunteers faced a long line of cars stretching for blocks in an area where one in four people live below the poverty line.

Ledbetter Eagle Ford sits just west of downtown Dallas, crammed between the Trinity River and Interstate 30. The busy boulevard running through its middle is lined by warehouses, industrial businesses, trucking companies and a few of what Martinez calls historical staples, including an old diner and a barber shop. Behind are rows of single-family homes, some 70 to 80 years old, tucked behind chain link or iron post fences.

It's an old neighborhood, so power lines overhang the streets. But like other historic Latino and Black enclaves in urban centers, its residents have watched warily as redevelopment swallows up areas around them. The homes for sale in Ledbetter Eagle Ford are marketed as "investor opportunities" and for their proximity to nearby trendy areas.

To Martinez, community service is an inheritance from his father. The 62-year-old is the executive director of the Ledbetter Eagle Ford Community Organization, an organization run entirely on donations.

Beyond the food pantry, the organization has helped set up a senior program for older residents at a community center, where they regularly gather to share meals, crossword puzzles and, on a recent weekday, dance moves as some shimmied and twirled over polished wood floors. Months before, the room had been lined with health care workers in masks and face shields for a COVID-19 vaccination clinic Martinez

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helped organize.

He also leads the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association, founded by his father to represent the area's residents, through which he helps maintain the community by helping neighbors whose homes are in need of repair, among other tasks.

Martinez himself is from and of Ledbetter Eagle Ford, born and raised in the area; his elementary school sits at the end of the road from where he was distributing the donated produce. He splits his time between his day job as a transportation specialist for a chiropractic business, his grown children and a handful of grandchildren, and his service to the community. He is so well known that some of the police officers who regularly patrol the area refer to him as the "mayor of Eagle Ford" when they run into him.

His family ties to the area date back to the early 1900s when immigrants fleeing the violence of revolution in Mexico, including his grandfather, settled in Eagle Ford, drawn in by work at a local cement company. By the late 1980s, a federal judge would refer to the area as the "largest Hispanic neighborhood in Dallas." Also born and raised there, Martinez's father served in the military before throwing himself into community work and going on to form the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association.

Under his father's tenure, the organization's agenda ranged from overseeing a small cemetery to helping expand main thoroughfares to pushing back as development began encroaching on the area — all in service of preserving the community's historical narrative.

Always the group found itself fighting for recognition.

One of its most significant contributions came in the late '80s when the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association joined two local Black leaders, Roy Williams and Marvin Crenshaw, to sue the city of Dallas, claiming its hybrid system for electing some city council members at large violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the votes of African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Black and Latino residents had been pushing for change for decades, looking to the courts to force Dallas to move from a system in which city council members were

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elected citywide to a mixed system with some elected from smaller single-member districts. But that hybrid system still drew objections as Black and Hispanic candidates struggled to be elected to any of the three at-large seats that existed at the time.

Ultimately, a federal district judge knocked down the system, finding it discriminated against Black and Hispanic voters, and ordered the city to fix it.

“The history of minority participation in the political process of Dallas is not one of choice; it is a record of what blacks and Hispanics have been permitted to do by the white majority,” U.S. District Judge Jerry Buchmeyer wrote in a March 1990 opinion.

After the first election under a newly created system of 14 single-member districts, the city council was made up of nine white members, four Black members and two Latino members. This doubled the number of Black representatives; no Latino candidates had even run in the election before.

The elder Martinez would continue his service until retiring in 2010, passing the baton — and an overstuffed Rolodex of phone numbers — to his son. The younger Martinez remembers how his father kept his community in mind until just before his death in 2019, imploring him to carry on his work.

“He said, ‘Son, I want you to keep up this community. I was born and raised here. My parents came here.’ He told me, ‘You gotta take care of and keep up this community, no matter what happens,’” Martinez said. “If there’s people that need help, help them.”

His father’s fight helped the community gain more voice in the halls of power. But in the denial of a new district anchored in the community, Martinez sees a contraction of Latinos’ political equality. It makes the progress they’ve made feel tenuous, Martinez said.

“We need more representation,” Martinez said. “It’s like they’re taking it and grabbing it and taking it away after we worked so hard for it.”

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Opportunity lost

Martinez and other community leaders don't complain about their current, Democratic representatives. Their frustration lies with Republicans' rejection of a new district commensurate with their growing numbers. The work Martinez does relies on relationships he's built locally to bring resources and attention to people for whom they aren't always afforded.

A new district would have granted them an additional voice in the halls of power on policy changes that could improve the lives of their neighbors. That includes issues like raising the minimum wage, access to affordable health care and a safety net that includes paid sick leave.

"Whenever I think of what an additional Latino district would mean, I think about the issues that are important to our members like immigration and safe, good-paying jobs," said Diana Ramirez, the civic engagement director for the Workers Defense Action Fund, which advocates on behalf of low-wage and immigrant workers in Dallas and other areas. "I think about the area of Pleasant Grove where I grew up and knocking on doors in that area and seeing so many pickup trucks with what look like [construction and contractor] materials."

She imagines a political reality in which those working in construction, one of the deadliest industries, would have "direct access to a representative that could hear what their day-to-day is like."

That opportunity existed, at least in theory, with this year's redistricting process. Federal law, in fact, provides for the creation of "opportunity districts" for traditionally marginalized voters, and Texas has a long history of depressing the political influence of Hispanic and Black voters.

Those sorts of districts are supposed to boost representation for voters of color, giving voters of a traditional minority group the ability to harness their numbers into real political power and elect their preferred candidates. Often, but not always, those candidates are of the same race or ethnicity. When lawmakers redraw political districts every 10 years to ensure they are equal in population, communities of color have a window in which to make their case.

The campaign for a district controlled by Latinos in North Texas is a manifestation of

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the demographic change that has transformed the region over the last few decades.

In Dallas County, the Hispanic population has grown by about 60% since 2000, crossing the 1 million mark to make up the largest portion of the county's population. Three out of every five residents the county gained in the last decade were Hispanic. Combined with Hispanic population growth in neighboring Tarrant County, Hispanic residents now outnumber white residents in the two large counties. At the same time, the white population has shrunk both in its share of the overall population and in absolute numbers. The 2020 census recorded a decrease of roughly 60,000 white residents in Dallas County in the last decade.

That change, locals say, makes for a different slate of needs that demand increased representation to ensure the community's priorities are being addressed.

"We need someone who can actually represent the voice of the ethnic makeup of the community. That is what, at this point, has been challenging and has been missing," said Elba Garcia, a Dallas County commissioner who represents the western end of the county. "We have never had a Latino or Latina member of Congress. The opportunity has been denied [even though] that's what the Constitution and redistricting is all about."

There are various complex legal thresholds to clear in order to claim a Latino opportunity district, including political cohesion among Latino voters in the area and evidence that other voters, namely white voters, tend to vote in a bloc to defeat the candidates favored by Latinos.

But their numbers must first grow enough so that a geographically compact district can be drawn containing their communities — a threshold, many proponents of a new district argue, Dallas Latinos have long since crossed.

Though they've expanded their presence across the region, helping to diversify even traditionally white suburban communities, the western end of Dallas County comprises some of the neighborhoods most densely populated by Latinos. Some have pointed to Garcia's commissioner precinct as a possible starting point since it has long allowed Latinos to elect their preferred candidate at the county level. (Garcia is often mentioned as a prospective candidate for Congress if a Latino opportunity district were drawn in the area.) Advocates for a Latino-controlled district in Dallas have also looked to the southeast to communities like Pleasant Grove, where the

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Latino population has been expanding.

But the redistricting process is mired in partisan considerations.

Efforts to draw a new district covering those areas, which would likely elect a Democrat, were resoundingly rejected by Republicans in the Texas Legislature — at times without much substantive opposition.

In the Senate, Republicans rebuffed a Democratic proposal for such a district after the chamber's lead map-drawer said it would result in a "detailed and painstaking racial gerrymander" in North Texas. Racial gerrymanders, in which lawmakers rely too heavily on race or ethnicity to draw a district, are illegal, though race can be considered as a primary factor when drawing political districts, particularly to create or maintain opportunity districts that comply with the federal Voting Rights Act. (Senate Republican leaders claimed the state's congressional map was drawn "race blind.")

In the House, floor debate over a potential Latino opportunity district combusted after Republicans offered an incongruous argument to shoot down an amendment by state Rep. Rafael Anchía of Dallas that would have anchored a new district in west Dallas County.

"It's immoral to prevent the creation of a district like this. It's also likely illegal," Anchía told his colleagues in presenting his amendment hours into the chamber's floor debate on a new congressional map. "You really have to try hard to deny Latinos in North Texas the ability to elect the candidate of their choice, but that's what's baked in this plan and I ask that we fix it through this amendment."

Addressing the House, state Rep. Jacey Jetton, a Republican from the Fort Bend area, spoke in opposition to the amendment by pointing out that it would "unnecessarily" drop the Hispanic population in neighboring Congressional District 33.

That district had been created by a three-judge federal panel a decade before to protect the voting rights of people of color in the area, offering Hispanic or Black voters an equal chance to elect their preferred candidate. A decade later, Hispanics were just shy of making up the majority of eligible voters in CD-33.

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Despite Jetton's stated opposition, it was Republicans' new congressional map that actually reduced the Hispanic population in the district from 48% to roughly 42% — a fact pointed out by state Rep. Victoria Neave of Dallas as she challenged Jetton's claim.

"It is the underlying map that's reducing the number of Latino voters in Congressional District 33 that you just mentioned. Did you know that?" Neave said as she pressed Jetton.

Jetton responded that he was "not advised."

In the end, Republicans approved a map that sliced heavily Latino areas of Dallas County into at least five different districts. In all but one, Latino voters make up about a fifth or less of the electorate. In reducing the share of the Hispanic population in CD-33, Republicans placed some of those residents into Congressional District 6, a sprawling, mostly white rural district that stretches across several counties to the south and east of Dallas, covering roughly 6,000 square miles.

They used an oddly shaped tendril to connect that swath of rural counties to the areas around Irving and Arlington, stranding urban and suburban Hispanic voters who in the past were concentrated enough to influence the election of who represents them in Congress.

More broadly, the congressional map Republicans approved for elections to come will shrink the number of districts in which Hispanic and Black voters are in the majority. White voters will largely determine who fills the two new Congressional seats the state gained based on its overall growth in the last decade, almost all of which was attributable to people of color. Hispanic Texans were responsible for half of the state's increase of 4 million new residents.

"I think it just goes to show you the lengths to which Republicans are willing to go to try to stick their head in the sand about the changing demographics of Texas," said Michael Li, a senior counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice whose work focuses on redistricting and voting. "The word I keep using is 'brazen.' There was a really strong argument for a Latino district [in Dallas] last decade. It's only gotten stronger because the population has grown even more."

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“Latinos will always have to fight in court”

As in the fight Martinez’s father helped waged, the fate of Dallas Latinos’ representation will be decided in a federal court — in this case, one more than 600 miles away in El Paso, where a panel of three federal judges will be considering various legal challenges to the state’s new political maps.

As they did in the last round of redistricting, and as they’ve done in legal fights dating past that, the individual voters and organizations that serve Texans of color suing the state will have to prove that state lawmakers denied them an equal opportunity to participate in the voting process. Their hope is that the courts will force a redraw of state’s political districts.

“What’s new? They’ve been doing it for the last 30 years, and sadly Latinos will always have to fight in court to get the representation they deserve,” said Garcia, the Dallas County commissioner.

Five different lawsuits have been filed against the state’s new congressional map, most arguing it is unconstitutional and violates the Voting Rights Act by diluting the electoral power of voters of color. To make their case, various of the complaints point to Republicans’ refusal to create new districts that give Latinos meaningful influence in elections. Some take specific aim at the new political boundaries in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, where they say lawmakers unlawfully manipulated the population based on race to the detriment of voters of color.

“Without such blatant cracking, map drawers could have created either an additional Latino majority district or a coalition district with Black and Latino voters in this region,” one of the lawsuits argues.

Those Texas voters and groups were recently joined in their fight by the U.S. Department of Justice, which in its lawsuit against the state scrutinized how Republicans “surgically excised” voters of color from the core of the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

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The state has so far failed to convince the court to dismiss the challenges but is expected to fight arduously to keep them in place for the upcoming March primaries, arguing there isn't enough time to redo the districts before voting is set to begin.

But with the litigation left as their only hope, it could be years before Dallas Latinos learn whether they were cheated out of increased representation or whether they will have to wait another 10 years to again make their case.

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Campbell draws GOP opponent in District 25

Will Wright

New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung

December 10, 2021

https://herald-zeitung.com/community_alert/article_e65cb2d4-5a1f-11ec-a5fe-9fcb7d33a1b8.html

In the past week several local candidates officially filed for the March 1, 2022 party primary elections, including a challenge to Republican Texas District 25 state Sen. Donna Campbell.

Channon Cain, a financial professional from Lakeway, says he's not a politician.

"I believe Texas remains the best place to raise a family and call home," he told the Herald-Zeitung on Friday. "District 25 is the very heart of Texas, and deserves a politically courageous state senator who can be counted on to solve hard problems instead of continuing to kick the can down the road."

Cain's opening salvo came in one of the few contested races in Comal and Guadalupe counties, where no Democrat has yet filed before Monday's 6 p.m. deadline.

Comal County has contested GOP races for Comal County Court at-Law No. 1 and for precinct 4 justice of the peace. Guadalupe County Judge Kyle Kutscher drew a challenge from Seguin's Nolan Schmidt; other contested races are for precinct 4 commissioner and precinct 1 justice of the peace.

Both parties have candidates in the District 73 Texas House race. Justin Calhoun has filed for the Democratic nomination and Barron Casteel, George Green and Carrie Isaac are vying for the Republican nod.

Comal Democratic Party Chair Marilyn Aden said the party office at 1592 West San Antonio Street will accept filings from 2-6 p.m. Monday. Sue Piner, county GOP chair, said her party headquarters at 265 Landa Street will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday.

Elections Administrator Cynthia Jaqua said the Comal County Elections Office at 396 North Seguin Avenue will also be open until the 6 p.m. filing deadline.

After redistricting, Senate District 25 will include all of Comal, Blanco and Kendall counties, north Bexar County, southwest Guadalupe County, and western portions of Hays and Travis counties.

Campbell, a physician with mailing addresses in San Antonio and Austin and a home in New Braunfels, has represented District 25 since winning a two-year term in 2012. She easily won reelection to four-year terms in 2014 and 2018.

"The 87th Texas Legislature has entered into the Interim period where we are now assessing the implementation of legislation passed, as well as studying policy topics that may need to be addressed in the 88th Legislative Session," she wrote to constituents on Nov. 29. "The Interim is also a time where you will see me out-and-about in my district attending policy luncheons, events, and meeting with all of you to discuss the issues you care about!

"It is a blessing to serve you in the Texas Senate. Together, we will continue to keep Texas strong! Why do we have to keep Texas strong? Because we don't have

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another Texas to move to!”

Cain’s rhetoric mirrors Campbell’s playbook in blasting government debt and spending, but also seeks to “stop the infringement of our medical freedoms by the Biden Administration and employers, work to secure our elections at local levels, and always fight for life, our Second Amendment rights, securing our border, and supporting our veterans.”

All Comal County incumbents have filed for reelection except for Precinct 4 JP Jennifer Saunders, who announced her retirement when her term expires in 2023, and 207th District Court Judge Jack Robison. First elected in 1994, Robison has privately indicated he will not seek an eighth four-year term.

The last day to register to vote in the 2022 party primary is Monday, Jan. 31; the early voting period runs from Monday, Feb. 14 through Friday, Feb. 25. Runoff elections in both parties will be held Saturday, May 24.

For election information and updated candidate filings, visit the elections link at the Texas Secretary of State’s website, www.sos.state.tx.us.

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Conservative wins show power of politics in HISD board races

Sam Gonzalez Kelly

Houston Chronicle

December 13, 2021

https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Conservative-wins-show-power-of-politics-in-HISD-16696925.php

Conservative candidates flipped two of the four open seats in Saturday’s runoff elections for the Houston Independent School District board — a testament, some

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say, to the grip that national politics have taken over local education.

Pastor Kendall Baker edged out Trustee Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca by less than 100 votes to win the seat in District 6. In District 7, Trustee Anne Sung lost to former PTO President Bridget Wade.

It will be the first time that a conservative has had a seat on the nine-person board since the last batch of trustees was elected in 2019.

About 5,300 people, less than 7 percent of registered voters, participated in the District 6 runoff, while over 12,400 people, about 12 percent of registered voters, turned out for the District 7 election, according to Harris County election statistics.

For the incumbents, the results were an indicator of just how deeply political talking points resonated with voters. Issues that sparked nationwide debate — such as the teaching of critical race theory and mask mandates in school — found themselves front and center of what are traditionally nonpartisan races.

“Knocking on doors in District 7, it was pretty clear to me that the impression that voters have of public schools, if they don’t themselves have children in public schools, is informed by Fox News and national news coverage that has nothing to do with what our kids are being taught,” Sung said.

“The fear that kids are being taught critical race theory or taught that they are victims is completely opposite of what we’re doing in HISD schools,” Sung said.

Critical race theory — an academic framework most typically taught in colleges and universities — was banned by Gov. Greg Abbott in public schools this year. Opponents of the ban say it is not taught in Texas schools in the first place and accuse proponents of the law of trying to whitewash discussions of race and the country’s history.

Superintendent Millard House II’s mask mandate for students in public schools also drew the ire of local conservatives, mirroring similar battles that played out elsewhere

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across the country.

Wade says the results are proof that issues like these matter to everyday Houstonians.

“It speaks to the fact that people want to have a say in their public education as taxpayers and parents and families, people want to be active participants and be heard, and so I think it was people crying out to be heard. That was the foundation from which everything came,” Wade said.

Jasmine Jenkins, executive director of Houstonians for Greater Public Schools, a school board watchdog group, said the results were not entirely surprising, as Districts 6 and 7, which cover swaths of west Houston, tend to lean Republican.

She lamented, however, that national political talking points had made their way into local nonpartisan races.

“School board races are nonpartisan for a reason, and here we saw particular vitriol being thrown by both parties in an attempt to grab power and saw real diversion away from actual education issues,” Jenkins said.

“I do think the Republicans, both nationally and here locally, were able to hammer home a very clear message that resonated with a lot of voters that ultimately led them to victory. Much like we see with Democrats nationally, here locally they were trying to defend their position without a clear and affirmative stance that resonated with voters,” she said.

Baker spoke out against mask mandates and critical race theory during his campaign but said Sunday that he will take time to assess the situation in Houston’s public schools before taking action.

He also attempted to put behind him sexual harassment allegations that cost him his job at the city’s 311 center in 2013. He was suspended indefinitely after an inspector general report found that he “made lewd comments and sexual advances toward

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subordinate female employees."

Baker has denied the allegations and said the Texas Workforce Commission cleared him of wrongdoing. A 2014 letter from the commission found that he was fired "for a reason that was not misconduct connected to the work."

He was also a vocal opponent of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance in 2015 and was featured in ad campaigns saying that "we have a moral obligation to protect women from the potential danger of perverted men," in reference to transgender people using public restrooms.

"We're going to move forward in the best interest of all of the children, keeping all of the children safe and protected, keeping children first and parents' voices first. Nothing will impede my ability to serve," Baker said. "That chapter of my life is closed."

With nine people on the school board, Baker and Wade still remain in the minority and will not be able to unilaterally affect the district's direction. Both have said they want to put politics aside and work with the other trustees to improve educational outcomes for the students.

"We are going to see very interesting dynamics play out on the board, which could be for good or for bad," Jenkins said, noting that school board issues rarely fall along the "typical left-right spectrum."

"I'm optimistic enough to think that people can grow and adjust once they're out of campaign mode and they can get work done for kids," Jenkins said.

Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, said members will continue to ensure that schools are safe and welcoming.

"We want to state very clearly that there is no place in HISD for discrimination of any kind. The HFT and our community simply won't tolerate it," she said.

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The HFT is disappointed in the results of the races in Districts 6 and 7 but said it expects all elected leaders to live up to their promises of higher pay for teachers.

“Priority one for this new board must be to stabilize staffing and ensure a qualified and certified teacher is available for every student. We don’t need anyone in Austin, D.C. or some new ‘think tank’ to tell us what we must do to retain teachers. The answer is simple. Ask them. We stand ready to work with the district to achieve this very important goal,” Anderson said in a statement.

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U.S. to Coordinate With Mexico, Regional Countries for Crackdown on People Smuggling

Cassandra Garrison

Reuters

December 11, 2021

https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-11/u-s-to-coordinate-with-mexico-regional-countries-for-crackdown-on-people-smuggling

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - The United States, Mexico and several regional countries will coordinate to apprehend the network of human smugglers responsible for a deadly accident that killed dozens of migrants, the U.S. embassy in Mexico said on Saturday.

The embassy announced the creation of an action group tasked with investigating, identifying and apprehending the smugglers involved in organizing a trailer, crammed with more than 160 people, which overturned on Thursday in the Mexican state of Chiapas. At least 55 migrants, most from Guatemala, were killed and dozens others were injured.

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The United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic would support the efforts, though coordination was open to all regional countries, the embassy said.

"We have a shared commitment to apply the full weight of the law against those who are responsible, in addition to working in a coordinated manner to combat human trafficking and smuggling in all its manifestations," the embassy said in a statement.

Thousands of migrants fleeing poverty and violence in Central America have traveled through Mexico to reach the U.S. border in recent years. They often face perilous conditions, including transport in crammed trucks organized by smugglers, known as "coyotes," in dangerous conditions.

Guatemala on Friday urged the United to invest in the country and elsewhere in Central America to boost development.

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USMCA neighbors Canada, Mexico cry foul over Biden's electric car subsidies

Haris Alic and David R. Sands

Washington Times

December 12, 2021

https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/12/usmca-neighbors-canada-mexico-cry-foul-over-bidens/

America's USMCA neighbors are unhappy with President Biden's proposed electric car subsidies for unionized U.S. carmakers, putting in question a key piece of the administration's climate agenda as it nears a critical test in the Senate.

The Canadian government over the weekend joined the Mexican government in escalating the fight over a provision in Mr. Biden's roughly $1.75 trillion social spending package now on Capitol Hill that offers a lucrative tax credit for electric vehicles made by union workers in America. Officials in both capitals say they are readying retaliatory tariffs if the U.S.-only tax credits are adopted.

The North American auto production market is one of the most integrated in the world, and even with the revised U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that went into effect in mid-2020, billions of dollars in cross-border trade in vehicles and parts remains a central feature of the market.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland sent a letter Friday to Senate leaders threatening retaliatory tariffs unless the White House strips the proposed tax credits from Mr. Biden's Build Back Better Act.

"We are deeply concerned that certain provisions of the electric vehicle tax credits as proposed in the Build Back Better Act violate the United States' obligations under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement," Ms. Freeland wrote, referring to the trade pact.

"The proposal is equivalent to a 34% tariff on Canadian-assembled electric vehicles."

Mr. Biden's big bill, if enacted, would provide a $7,500 tax credit for consumers that purchase electric vehicles throughout 2026. Car buyers would be eligible to receive a further $4,500 credit if they purchase a vehicle manufactured at a union-run plant located in the U.S.

After Mexico, South Korea, Japan and a number of European countries complained about the proposal in a letter in October, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai said her office backs the administration's support for the electric car industry and that she had had talks with countries unhappy with the offending provision.

The administration "is committed to tackling the threat of climate change by supporting the transition to electric vehicle manufacturing," USTR spokesman Adam Hodge said in a statement to the Reuters news agency on Dec. 3. "We will continue to engage a range of stakeholders, including our close trading partners, as Congress

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considers legislation to strengthen U.S. leadership in the sector."

But the combined $12,500 credit poses a significant "threat to the Canadian automotive industry," according to Ms. Freeland.

"This issue is at the top of Canada's agenda with the United States," she wrote. "We want to be clear that if there is no satisfactory resolution to this matter, Canada will defend its national interest … [by] applying tariffs on American exports in a manner that will impact American workers in the auto sector and several other sectors of the U.S. economy."

Mexican officials have sounded a similar note, saying the Biden subsidy would effectively be more punitive than straight automotive tariffs President Trump threatened during the USMCA negotiations.

"President Trump at the time proposed to implement a national security measure to impose a 25% tariff on all imports to the United States," Mexican Undersecretary for Foreign Trade Luz Maria de la Mora told The Hill newspaper earlier this month. "This proposed measure would be equivalent to a tariff that's higher than the 25% that Trump proposed at the time and that we all thought was a crazy idea."

In her letter, Ms. Freeland noted that Canada is the top market of U.S. "automotive exports, buying about 10%" of all American-produced vehicles annually.

Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer is pushing to hold a vote on the spending package before Christmas, though not all Senate Democrats are on board with the bill. One of the main holdouts, Sen. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, has raised concerns specifically about the electric vehicle tax credit.

Last month in an interview with Automotive News, Mr. Manchin argued that subsidizing electric vehicles from union shops would be un-American and wrong.

"We should not use everyone's tax dollars to pick winners and losers," Mr. Manchin told the auto industry trade publication.

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Mexican peso is on a skid; Buying power decreases with value

Steve Clark

Brownsville Herald

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https://news.yahoo.com/mexican-peso-skid-buying-power-172900719.html

Dec. 12—Mexico's economy is shrinking and dragging down the value of the peso, which is never good news for businesses on this side of the border that rely on cross-border shoppers.

Antonio O. Garza, counsel for White & Case Mexico City, retired U.S. ambassador to Mexico and Brownsville native, said in a recent analysis of the "Three Amigos" summit between President Joe Biden, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which Biden hosted on Nov. 18 at the White House, that Mexico's sagging economy is being caused in part by U.S. consumer price inflation and an increase in interest rates by the Bank of Mexico.

Ironically, the news comes on the heels of the recent reopening of the U.S. land ports-of-entry to "non-essential" travel from Mexico, a move cheered by the Rio Grande Valley's retail sector, largely forced to do without business from Mexican national shoppers since the U.S. Department of Homeland Security imposed restrictions in March 2020.

Garza wrote in his analysis that the impact of the challenges discussed during the summit was "reverberating throughout the region." U.S. inflation recently hit a 31-year high, as employers still face labor shortages and supply-chain issues, and the Mexican economy shrank 0.2 percent from the previous quarter, that country's first contraction since recovery from the pandemic began, he noted. Garza said the peso's value is expected to continue falling next year.

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"There are a number of things at play here, all of which I think we'll feel in Brownsville and along the border," he said. "First, the weakening of the currency will have an impact on Mexican's purchasing power and, in spite of some pent-up demand in the wake of the travel restrictions, Mexico's economy is sagging and folks are feeling it. I'm guessing you'll see a slight uptick in economic activity going into the holiday season, and a fall-off shortly thereafter and lasting well into 2022."

Among the sore points going into the summit was the Biden administration's proposed consumer tax credit for electric cars produced in the United States, Garza said. Canada and Mexico are worried such a credit would encourage automakers to move their factories to the United States and allege it would violate the terms of the U.S. Mexico Canada Agreement, which took force last year, he said.

Garza said in his report on the summit that Mexico's economy minister called out the United States for allegedly pursuing protectionist polities, while the Canadian finance minister said the proposal was at risk of becoming the "dominant issue in our bilateral relationship." Much of the steel used by automakers in Mexico comes through the Port of Brownsville, and it represents a key source of income for the port.

Other companies that cater to the auto industry in Mexico are located in the Valley as well, though Garza wasn't expecting any impact from the credit — if it comes to pass — anytime soon.

"The saving grace of Mexico's economy these past couple of years have been manufacturing and remittances," he said. "I think that to the extent that our port activity is tied to Mexico's auto sector we won't feel an immediate hit from initiatives like the electric car credit. What steel companies are more focused on in the short term are keeping production and employment in North America and fending off the challenge of China and other countries."

Garza described the summit, which took place against a backdrop of pressing challenges such as COVID-19 and regional migration, as a further step toward Biden's goal of re-institutionalizing relations abroad and more fully integrating North American nations in order to counterbalance China's growing global influence.

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Port Houston's trade jumps 51% to nearly $17B

Noi Mahoney

FreightWaves

December 12, 2021

https://www.freightwaves.com/news/port-houstons-trade-jumps-51-to-nearly-17b

Port Houston's trade totaled $16.9 billion during October, an increase of 51% compared to the same period last year, according to a WorldCity analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

Port Houston's trade totaled $137 billion for the first 10 months of 2020, a 31% increase compared to the same period in 2020.

Port Chairman Ric Campo said 2021 has been an "interesting year."

"There's been lots of really good stuff going on, but also a very complicated year for our team," Campo said during the port's monthly meeting Tuesday.

Exports increased 50% year-over-year in October, while imports grew 53%.

Trade was boosted by imports of gasoline/fuels ($5.58 billion); oil ($5.25 billion); passenger vehicles ($2.05 billion); iron tubes/pipes ($1.17 billion); and furniture ($1.06 billion).

Top exports included gasoline/fuels ($2.08 billion); liquified natural gas/petroleum gases ($1.45 billion); oil ($1.34 billion); plastics ($575 million); and acyclic hydrocarbons ($318 million).

Port Houston's top international trade partners during October were China ($1.68 billion); Mexico ($1.29 billion); Brazil ($1.21 billion); South Korea ($797 million); and Japan ($797 million).

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The port ranked sixth for total trade among the nation's roughly 450 airports, seaports and border crossings and is the third-ranked seaport, behind Port of Los Angeles and Port of Newark.

"One of the things that is really cool is that the Army Corps of Engineers came out with their 2020 statistics and the Houston Ship Channel is still at No. 1 in total tonnage in the U.S.," Campo said. "We handled more than 275 million short tons of cargo during 2020."

Campo said looking ahead to 2022 and beyond, the port aims to expedite Project 11, a $1.1 billion widening and deepening of the Houston Ship Channel.

"Port Houston's [Army Corp of Engineers] ranking highlights the need to continue to make improvements and expedite our Project 11 to make sure that we ensure sustainable opportunities for our community and industry for generations," Campo said.

The port commission also recently approved its fiscal year 2022 operating and capital budget.

"We're investing in the future with a lot of things — additional yard capacity and equipments, 12 ship-to-shore cranes, 19 rubber-tired gantry cranes, two additional container yards, two new container berths, additional wharves/turning basin facilities and redevelopment of general cargo and breakbulk docks."

Weekly maritime imports into Port Houston (WICSTM.USHOU) totaled 29,147 shipments last week. The port's weekly maritime shipments were up significantly year-over-year (as indicated by the blue line) compared to 2020 (red line), according to FreightWaves' SONAR platform, which collects data on the daily number of customs filings for maritime imports.

Automotive production in Mexico drops 20% in November

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Mexico's auto production of passenger vehicles recorded its lowest monthly output since 2012 in November at 248,960 vehicles assembled, according to data from Mexico's national statistics agency (INEGI).

The output represents a 20% decline compared to the same period in 2020, when 312,184 vehicles were produced.

Auto exports declined by 16% to 240,341 units, INEGI statistics showed.

It was the fifth month in a row that automotive output for passenger vehicles was down, fueled by an ongoing shortage of semiconductors.

AMIA chief Fausto Cuevas forecast that Mexico's auto production would return to pre-pandemic levels by late 2023 or in 2024.

The companies with the largest monthly declines were Japanese automaker JAC (97%), Mercedes-Benz (69%) and General Motors (44%).

Mexico OKs another state to export avocados to US

Mexico's agriculture department said it has reached an agreement with U.S. authorities on a plan to allow avocados from a second Mexican state to be exported to markets across the United States.

The state of Jalisco could begin exporting avocados as soon as early next year's harvest season, according to the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Since 1997, the state of Michoacán has retained the sole right to export avocados to the U.S.

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Mexico is the largest avocado producer in the world, with a volume that exceeded 2.3 million tons in 2020. Mexico supplies most of the avocados imported into the U.S., totaling $2.8 billion during the 2019-20 growing season.

The ports of entry in Laredo and Pharr, Texas, are two of the largest gateways for avocados from Mexico into the U.S., combining for more than $2 billion last year.

Constellation Brands to build large export brewery in Mexico

New York-based Constellation Brands Inc. recently announced it will build a $1.3 billion brewery in southeastern Mexico.

The brewery's exact site has not been officially announced, but Mexican officials have reportedly said it will be built in the state of Veracruz, along the Gulf of Mexico, according to El Economista.

The company, which distributes Corona beer and other Grupo Modelo brands across the U.S., was planning to build a factory in the Mexican city of Mexicali, along the California-Mexico border.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador halted plans for the Mexicali brewery in March 2020 after the facility ran into opposition from local residents who had concerns about its water consumption.

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Is it time to get tougher with AMLO as energy policies threaten U.S. companies?

George Baker

Houston Chronicle

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December 13, 2021

https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/energy/article/Comment-Is-it-time-to-get-tougher-with-AMLO-as-16682248.php

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, on the eve of the trilateral meeting of the heads of state of the United States, Mexico and Canada last month, urged President Biden to begin "aggressive engagement with Mexico."

He complained of the regulatory mistreatment of American investors in Mexico's energy sector. The situation, he said, requires "immediate attention by your administration to prevent irreparable harm to Texas businesses and workers." He cited the situation of just one Texas company, Monterra Energy, whose fuel terminals in Mexico were closed by elements of the National Guard. He called on the administration to negotiate the "immediate withdrawal" of the "militarized police force" from the facilities of Texas companies.

The governor was not alone. In a letter to Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., demanded that the Biden administration act to "reopen American energy assets that have been illegally shut by Mexican militarized police." In addition to Monterra, the senator mentioned Sempra Energy of San Diego, which operates natural gas and natural gas liquids pipelines and terminals in Mexico, and Bulkmatic, an Indiana transportation company that operates a refined products terminal in Mexico, as facing "similar operational threats."

Kennedy warned that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, seems intent on shutting down foreign competition to the state-owned oil company Pemex. Meanwhile, Kennedy complained, the Biden administration isn't doing anything to stop it.

A third recent protest about Mexico's energy policies to the Biden administration came from the House of Representatives. On November 3, 40 Republican House members cosigned a letter to the secretaries of Commerce, State and Energy, as well as the U.S. Trade Representative, exhorting them to "elevate efforts to press Mexican authorities to stop discriminatory actions and provide U.S. companies . . . a level playing field."

AMLO has made no secret of his desire to kill the energy reforms of his predecessor,

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Enrique Pena Nieto, which ended Pemex's monopoly and invited foreign competition and investment. His efforts to undermine the reform have been described by critics as "slow rolling expropriation" and left foreign investors who entered Mexico's energy markets in good faith in the lurch, to the detriment of Mexicans.

One of the egregious instances involves Talos Energy, a Houston offshore exploration and production company. Talos is the target of a state conspiracy to deprive it of most of the commercial rights to which it is entitled by virtue of its discovery of a major oil field on the Mexican side of the Gulf of Mexico. The field, known as Zama, holds an estimated 600 million barrels of recoverable hydrocarbons.

The Mexican government is to receive nearly 80 percent the revenues from the sale of Zama production, which is targeted at 150,000 barrels per day. At $70 a barrel, the foregone state royalties in a production-sharing agreement on sales of 150,000 barrels a day exceed $4 million a day or some $1.4 billion annually. Had standard industry practices been followed, Zama would have been producing two years ago. The government has willfully wasted two years and nearly $3 billion, damaging the finances of not only investors but of Mexico.

Neither Abbott nor Kennedy mentioned Talos in their letters advocating "aggressive engagement" with Mexico. Neither defined what they meant by aggressive engagement, but it's clear that the U.S. needs to react more strongly to AMLO's expropriatory policies — which likely violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, a free trade pact.

One suggestion: AMLO plays rough with American investors but he wants the U.S. regulator, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States to play nice with his proposed acquisition of the controlling interest in the Deer Park refinery, now operated by Shell. Inform AMLO that the committee's approval has been put on standby.

That small step should get the Mexican president's attention.

George Baker is the founding publisher of Mexico Energy Intelligence, a Houston-based industry newsletter. He is the platform director of Energia.com.

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Analysis: From homegrown culture warriors to tomorrow's Texas leaders

Ross Ramsey

Texas Tribune

December 13, 2021

https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/texas-republican-local-elections/

City councils and school boards in Texas are full of Republicans and Democrats, even if those people take office after nonpartisan elections in which they don't fly those party flags.

Local offices are where the political parties find many of their future leaders and where those future leaders are having some of their gnarliest fights. School boards, in particular, have become focal points for issues that combine local and statewide interests, like book bans, critical race theory, what's taught and what's not, property taxes, gender identity, parental involvement, teacher autonomy, vaccinations and mask mandates.

That's why the Republican Party of Texas is taking a "shop local" approach to candidate recruitment, trying to build farm teams of candidates who'll turn debates the party's way at the local level and then, perhaps, run for state and federal offices later.

The GOP announced its initiative this week, but both parties have been recruiting candidates this way for years. This is how the political ecosystem works.

Current issues work as fertilizer. Divisive topics being debated at school board and city council meetings often mirror what state legislators are talking about. They get the public's interest. They sharpen the rhetorical skills needed in political debate, if not in collaborative legislating.

At any given moment, the Texas Legislature has plenty of people who started off on

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school boards, as mayors and city council people, members of local commissions and boards. It's the training ground. And it's only natural that the political parties, always looking for new stars, are recruiting and grooming local government folk.

The GOP announcement wasn't surprising, but the timing is interesting. Texas Democrats are trying, again, to put together a win or two on the statewide ticket, hoping that their lock on most of the state's big cities and their growing strength in suburban counties will get them in position for that.

Republicans are looking at signs that Democratic strength in South Texas has begun to wane. They've been recruiting candidates — the full list will be available after the Monday evening deadline to file for the 2022 ballot — and in one case, getting incumbent Democrats in the Legislature to change parties. Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City started his current term as a Democrat and will end it as a Republican.

He's seen the numbers: Republican lawmakers, after the 2020 elections, redrew the state's political maps with those gains in mind, favoring their party where they could.

Lots of local races won't be on that ballot after Monday's deadline. For one thing, they're nonpartisan, and there are no primary races for the candidates. And the local elections are often on other dates.

Republicans in Austin have been after local governments for years, pushing aside local laws and rules on ride-sharing, short-term rentals, public health orders, mask mandates, property taxes, housing policies — a long list of issues where local and state powers overlap. Lawmakers have failed several times to outlaw lobbying by local governments and the associations they employ to tell the state lawmakers how their work will help or undermine what's happening back at home.

Those legislative eyes are still on cities and counties, particularly those in Democratic parts of the state, but they've turned their attention this year to school districts. State-level efforts — to reverse local COVID-19 responses, pull certain books from school libraries or block teachers whose lessons on history or social studies they don't like — have gone local. What were issues in Austin are echoed wherever local elected officials meet.

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It’s already a training ground for the next generation of state leaders. The Republicans are just formalizing it, and making an announcement that they hope will get like-minded people to run for local office and, maybe someday, for higher office.

The parties are just like sports teams in this way, building farm teams they hope will turn into dynasties.

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From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 12/14/21
Date: Tuesday, December 14, 2021 8:53:18 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Tuesday, December 14, 2021 8:44 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/14/21
Sensitivity: Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 14, 2021

The Texas election audit Trump encouraged, then called 'weak', enters a new stage, *Texas Standard*, December 13, 2021

An ill-advised plan for a GOP primary shows the power of election lies, *Votebeat*, December 13, 2021

'Rick Perry' is running for Texas governor against Greg Abbott but it's not the Rick Perry you know, *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 2021

Texas' 2022 races coming into focus as candidate filings close, *Texas Tribune*, December 13, 2021

Phase 2 details released for election audit that includes Collin, Dallas counties, *Rowlett Lakeshore Times*, December 13, 2021

Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election, *CW 39 Houston*, December 13, 2021

Former Dallas County DA Faith Johnson files with GOP to run for her former post, *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 2021

Texas Republicans swarm 2022 primaries while Democrats lament lack of battleground races, *Houston Chronicle*, December 14, 2021

When the Myth of Voter Fraud Comes for You, *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2021

Democrats worry their grip on Hispanic vote is loosening, *The Hill*, December 13, 2021

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Mexico May Reduce Pemex's Profit-Sharing Taxes Again, *Bloomberg*, December 13, 2021

Op-Ed: Texas Redistricting Needs to Protect Campus Communities, *Texas Signal*, December 13, 2021

Rep. Israel: What I want for Christmas, *Austin American-Statesman*, December 13, 2021

The Texas election audit Trump encouraged, then called 'weak', enters a new stage
Jill Amend and Laura Rice
Texas Standard
December 13, 2021
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/the-texas-election-audit-trump-encouraged-then-called-weak-enters-a-new-stage/

The Texas secretary of state's office is now asking four Texas counties to provide information and documentation surrounding the 2020 Election. It's the next step in an ongoing election audit that Republicans, including former President Trump, have pushed for, arguing without evidence that there was widespread election fraud.

Though Trump won in Texas by 5.5 percentage points in the 2020 election, he asked Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to audit the results. Instead of a full audit, Abbott requested an audit of four of the state's largest counties: Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris. Trump called the move "weak," but the audit effort has continued.

Texas Secretary of State John Scott has said the first phase of the audit is nearly complete, and the request from counties is the next phase.

Dallas Morning News Austin Bureau correspondent Philip Jankowski told Texas Standard, "phase two begs the question, 'What was going on in phase one?'" He said that might be made clearer when the secretary of state's office releases findings from it. That's scheduled to happen later in December.

Learn more about the background of this audit and what happens next in the audio player above or in the transcript below.

This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity.

Texas Standard: Trump won Texas. What's this election audit all about?

Philip Jankowski: It's kind of tough to say, to be to be honest. I mean, the audit itself is because of Trump. The governor hasn't said that, but I think the timing clearly outlines Trump makes public his demand and then hours later, the secretary of state announces that it's performing this audit. So I definitely do believe that it is.

This audit comes as, should be mentioned, Abbott is facing attacks from his right flank. [The Texas gubernatorial] election is coming up next year, and he's got two opponents who are trying to position themselves further to his right. And they saw, they possibly saw, the lack of a full audit of Texas' results as somewhere that they could go after [Abbott]. Trump adds some – a whole lot – of kindling to that fire. And

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so he makes an open demand, and so now we have an audit.

Give us some background on new Texas Secretary of State John Scott, and why the former person in that job left the office.

The former secretary of state was never confirmed by the Texas State Legislature, which actually invoked some ire from the governor. This new secretary of state didn't have to deal with any of that. He was appointed while the Legislature was out of session, so no need for a pesky vote. His name is John Scott and he's got some involvement in some of the Trump recount stuff that went on some of those lawsuits.

What is phase two of this audit he announced Friday?

Phase two is basically a total accounting of mail-in ballots and provisional ballots – seems to be the two largest focuses of this second phase. [Secretary of State John Scott has] asked for an "exhaustive" amount of information from these four counties. And most of it centers around mail-in ballots and provisional votes cast in the 2020 Election.

What four counties are we talking about here, and what do you make of the fact that we're talking about these four counties?

We're talking about Collin County, which is North Dallas; Dallas County; Tarrant County, where Fort Worth is; and, of course, Harris County, the largest county in the state. So we're looking at urban counties relative to the larger state and, as you know, those counties tend to vote more in favor of Democrats; denser populated counties tend to do that. And so it does seem to be some sort of, well, maybe not causation but, at the least, correlation between how those counties voted and the ones that are being examined.

How have local election officials been responding to this audit and this demand for more detailed information?

I'm unsure as of yet. As I said, this announcement was made late Friday. So, many of them might have already packed up and gone home for the weekend. And maybe this is top on their to-do list this Monday morning, but it's unclear at this point.

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An ill-advised plan for a GOP primary shows the power of election lies
Jessica Huseman
Votebeat
December 13, 2021
https://www.votebeat.org/2021/12/13/22832485/jeff-zink-election-integrity-symposium-hand-counted-ballots-potter-county

On Friday we published a scoop out of Amarillo, Texas, my ancestral homeland. The Potter County GOP chair, Dan Rogers, has decided to run his own Republican primary in March. He says he'll use manual poll books and hand-marked ballots, and that election workers will count those ballots by hand. It's a recipe for disaster, multiple election administrators and experts told me. They also told him that, but he doesn't seem to care.

Manual poll books will make it impossible for the county to prevent those who have already cast ballots in the Democratic primary (which will be run by the county in the standard way) from also casting a ballot in the Republican primary. Rogers

acknowledged this, but said he “trusts” people. He also says that “logic” tells him that all of the ballots will be counted in half an hour — despite multiple studies that show it would take much, much longer. “I don’t need studies, they are a waste of money,” he told me.

While parties are allowed to run their primaries however they see fit, they are not allowed to violate Texas election law. And Texas’s new voting bill, passed earlier this year, holds party chairs personally liable for any violations. In addition to being removed from his position, Rogers could face a $1,000 fine per individual violation. He, again, didn’t seem to care.

My conversation with Rogers was confusing. He rejected studies, gave short shrift to federal civil rights law, and ignored the problems with his plan the state and the county have pointed out to him. This, he said, is what his voters want. Why do they want this? Well, they received an “election integrity symposium” from Jeff Zink, a native of nearby Borger, Texas, and a congressional candidate for Arizona’s 7th District. Zink and his son were part of the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection, though he denies that they entered the building. That’s news to federal prosecutors, who have charged his son, Ryan, with several crimes. “We knocked down the gates! We’re storming the Capitol! You can’t stop us!” he said, facing his video camera. “We’re about to bum rush this shit!”

Jeff Zink is also a Cyber Ninjas truther who believes the company intentionally hid the 2020 fraud he is confident took place in Maricopa County. At the mid-October symposium, he expounded on the benefits of hand-counted ballots, and Rogers took the lessons to heart. He appears unwilling to back down from his half-baked plan and very willing to ignore facts.

The Jan. 6 insurrection continues to creep into actual policy and procedure, and this is a scary sign of things to come. While he’s so far received no buy-in from other county parties, Rogers has encouraged every GOP county chair in the state to follow suit. On Dec. 3, Rogers sent out an email saying, “We would like to see other County Committees follow our lead and we will help any County Chair interested in having real secret ballot elections,” he wrote.

The Texas secretary of state’s office (headed by John Scott, recently appointed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott) has told Rogers it’s a bad idea, and will do so again this week in a meeting on Tuesday. “This introduces a lot of potential mistakes and it also introduces opportunities for fraud,” said Christina Adkins, the legal director of the secretary of state’s elections division. “The candidates on this ballot really need to think about whether this is how they want their election run.”

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Amarillo is the largest city in Texas to use “cumulative voting,” which allows voters to cast as many votes as there are open seats in school board elections. If, for example, there are three open seats, voters can cast one ballot in each race or give all three votes to a single candidate. The city made the switch from at-large voting after being sued by civil rights groups in 1998. After the change, a Black school board member was elected for the first time, and a Latino candidate was elected for the first time since the 1970s.

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‘Rick Perry’ is running for Texas governor against Greg Abbott but it’s not the Rick Perry you know

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Robert T. Garrett
Dallas Morning News
December 13, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/13/rick-perry-is-running-for-texas-governor-against-greg-abbott-but-its-not-the-rick-perry-you-know/

AUSTIN — A “Rick Perry” from Parker County is trying to deny two-term Republican Gov. Greg Abbott the nomination of his party for a third term next year.

But the Perry who filed his papers as a gubernatorial candidate on Monday is not the former Texas governor and U.S. energy secretary.

The newly filed candidate, Rick Perry of Springtown, northwest of Fort Worth, is apparently a computer technician with the title of “senior desktop engineer” at Lockheed Martin, according to a LinkedIn profile.

Ballot-name confusion is part of Texas political lore, with Gene Kelly (not the Hollywood actor) a perennial candidate in recent decades. Earlier, candidates with Sam Houston in their monikers and some variant of former U.S. Sen. Ralph Yarborough’s surname made headway. In March 2020, political newcomer Jim Wright (not the former U.S. House speaker who represented Fort Worth in Congress for more than three decades) unseated Railroad Commissioner Ryan Sitton.

On the last day to file for the 2022 governor’s race, the Rick Perry from Springtown in Parker County briefly roiled the political community in Austin, where unfounded rumors that the former governor might come out of retirement to challenge Abbott had circulated for months. One online political news outlet, Capitol Inside, rushed out an email blast with the subject line, “State GOP: Perry Files to Run for Governor.” Five minutes later, another email followed sheepishly confessing “it’s not the former governor.”

Attempts to reach either Perry were unsuccessful Monday.

As to the Springtown-based Perry, voter registration, driver license and other public records show he is 63 and has worked as a computer technician.

In recent years, he has donated small amounts to some of the Texas GOP’s most conservative candidates — former Bedford Rep. Jonathan Stickland ($125), Garland House aspirant Jonathan Boos ($10) and onetime Railroad Commission candidate Gregory Parker ($75) — and $100 to the Parker County Conservatives’ political action committee, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission.

Although he used “Rick Perry” on LinkedIn, voter and driver records list him as “Ricky Lynn Perry.” The 71-year-old former governor, who grew up in Paint Creek in Haskell County north of Abilene, is James Richard Perry.

‘Stupid pet trick’
On Monday, Dave Carney, Abbott’s chief political strategist, fired off tweets calling Ricky Lynn Perry’s surprise candidacy a “stupid pet trick” and insinuating it’s a ploy that will backfire by one of the incumbent governor’s other Republican rivals — who include former Dallas state Sen. Don Huffines and former state GOP chairman Allen West.

“Hard to be a straw candidate by using [your] commonly referred to name now, isn’t it?” Carney said in one tweet that noted the discrepancy between Springtown Perry’s ballot name and voter registration records.

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University of Houston political scientist Brandon Rottinghaus said the new development "could be problematic" for Abbott, who's hoping to coast through the March 1 GOP primary. Abbott, who'd strongly prefer to avoid a runoff, already is running internet ads against his likely Democratic opponent next fall, former El Paso congressman Beto O'Rourke.

Any voter confusion with the former governor might require some application by Abbott of time and resources to dispel, the UH professor said.

"Rick Perry is still really well-liked in most Republican circles, if not the most far right," noted Rottinghaus, who is writing a political biography of the longest-serving chief executive (14 years) in Texas history.

"It's not likely to affect Abbott all that much, but there are still enough people out there who might feel wistful for the days of Rick Perry and Republican politics of old that this might be an issue for Abbott," he said.

In recent months, Abbott has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump. As he eyed both the 2022 governor's race and a possible run for the presidency in 2024, Abbott has embraced controversial elections legislation, the nation's strictest abortion ban and positions resisting COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

Two Ricky Perrys?
Since leaving the Trump administration, Perry and his wife Anita have lived in Round Top, near Brenham.

"He is fairly happily retired," Rottinghaus said. "He's on a couple of [corporate] boards — so earning a pretty good living. Still keeps his hand in politically. He's really close to Morgan Luttrell, who is running in CD 8, for the [Kevin] Brady seat," the political scientist said, referring to a former Navy SEAL who is running for Congress in the Houston area.

Rottinghaus said when he saw press reports about the Springtown-based Perry's candidacy, he chuckled.

"When I saw 'Ricky Perry,' my thought was that in his younger days, people called Richard Perry 'Ricky,'" he said. "His mom and his wife called him Ricky. And his wife still calls him Ricky. I mean, not that it means anything, but he's still also Ricky Perry in that way, I guess."

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Texas' 2022 races coming into focus as candidate filings close
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
December 13, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/texas-2022-elections-candidates/

Candidate filing for the 2022 primary in Texas closed Monday evening, and there were more than a few late developments in what is set to be a busy election cycle.

All the major statewide offices — including governor — are on the ballot, and every seat in the Texas Legislature is up for a vote because of redistricting. That is on top of the usual 36 congressional seats that are on the ballot every two years — plus two

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new U.S. House seats that Texas received because of population growth in the past decade.

The primary elections determining the two major parties' nominees will be March 1. The general election will be Nov. 8.

At the top of the ticket, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is running for a third term, but faces challengers from within the GOP. On the Democratic side Beto O'Rourke will likely be his party's nominee for a general election that is expected to be a marquee race. But farther down the ticket, there is a hive of activity generated by redistricting — dozens of state lawmakers are not seeking reelection to their current seats — and the GOP's determination to make new inroads in South Texas.

Still, statewide races continued to take shape Monday ahead of the 6 p.m. filing deadline. The Democratic primary for lieutenant governor got a third candidate as Carla Brailey, vice chair of the state party, announced her campaign. Her launch came amid a lingering discussion among Democrats about whether their statewide slate is diverse enough.

Brailey said in an interview that she was running because she "really believe[s] our democracy is at stake, and I think this is gonna be one of the most important elections we have experienced in a very long time in Texas."

"It's very important that we have leadership that just reflects Texans — all Texans — and I think I will be able to do that," said Brailey, who is Black.

She joined a primary field that includes Mike Collier, the last nominee for lieutenant governor who has been running since early this year, and state Rep. Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, who announced last month. Matthew Dowd, the cable-news commentator who once was a strategist for former President George W. Bush, had been running in the primary until last week, when he dropped out and said he wanted to make way for a more diverse field.

Brailey is not the only Democrat who has stepped forward for the statewide ticket as the filing deadline loomed. Janet Dudding, a 2020 candidate for a battleground state House seat in Brazos County, filed to run for comptroller, joining at least two other Democrats vying to take on GOP incumbent Glenn Hegar. Susan Hays, a prominent cannabis lawyer and hemp advocate, announced she was running for agriculture commissioner, giving Democrats their first candidate to challenge Republican incumbent Sid Miller.

"Farming is hard, but ethics should be easy," Hays said Thursday as she announced her campaign against the scandal-prone Miller.

In addition to the gubernatorial election, another blockbuster statewide contest is the GOP primary for attorney general, where incumbent Ken Paxton is trying to fend off three challengers: Land Commissioner George P. Bush, former state Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman and U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert of Tyler. Despite some volatility in recent weeks — state Rep. Matt Krause of Fort Worth ended his campaign and Gohmert launched his — that primary saw no 11th-hour surprises.

Congressional contests also saw 11th-hour developments Monday. Democrats lost a prominent candidate for the 15th Congressional District, which Republicans are trying to flip, as Ivan Melendez, the Hidalgo County health authority, announced he was passing on a campaign for the seat, saying he could better serve his community by continuing to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

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Another South Texas seat that the GOP wants to capture — that of U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo — gained at least one politically involved contender in Cassandra "Cassy" Garcia, a former staffer for U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. Cruz endorsed Garcia within minutes of her campaign announcement.

Over in the Houston area, where one of Texas' new congressional seats is located, the longtime Republican frontrunner, Wesley Hunt, got arguably his best-known opponent yet: Mark Ramsey, a former member of the State Republican Executive Committee. The seat was drawn to favor the GOP, so Republicans have been watching how complicated of a path Hunt will have on his quest for a general-election win.

Until Monday, no Democrat was contesting the Houston-area seat — the 38th District — but that changed when Centrell Reed, a Houston life coach, switched to the race after filing for the 7th District. Reed's decision spares the 7th District incumbent, U.S. Rep. Lizzie Pannill Fletcher, D-Houston, a primary challenge in a district that has been made much bluer by redistricting.

In state House races, there was little late drama involving incumbents. One question mark going into Monday was whether state Rep. Claudia Ordaz Perez would follow through on her plan to run against state Rep. Art Fierro, a fellow El Paso Democrat — and she did, filing with hours to spare. Ordaz Perez had chosen to take on Fierro after redistricting forced her into the district of a fellow El Paso Latina, Democratic state Rep. Lina Ortega.

In another late development in a state House contest, state Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, drew a primary challenger: Candis Houston, president of the Aldine chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. Dutton, chair of the House Public Education Committee, was under fire from fellow Democrats earlier this year over how he handled legislation placing restrictions on transgender student athletes.

Another primary challenge emerged at the 11th hour for a state House seat in the Bryan-College Station area. John Harvey Slocum, the son of former Texas A&M University football coach R. C. Slocum, filed to run against state Rep. John Raney, R-College Station.

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Phase 2 details released for election audit that includes Collin, Dallas counties
Audrey Henvey
Rowlett Lakeshore Times
December 13, 2021
https://starlocalmedia.com/rowlettlakeshoretimes/news/phase-2-details-released-for-election-audit-that-includes-collin-dallas-counties/article_819153bc-5c51-11ec-97f9-13264b13cf2f.html

The Texas Secretary of State's office has laid out details for phase two of its "full forensic audit" of the 2020 general election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties.

On Friday, the office shared a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott addressed to elections administrators for each county.

"As indicated in our office's previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State's office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the

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November 2020 General Election in your respective counties," the letter stated. "The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward."

The letter asks the elections offices to begin locating requested documents in preparation for on-site examinations by the office's Forensic Audit Division, which will be coordinated in January.

The request comes after the office first announced in September that an election audit had already begun in the state's two largest Democrat and Republican counties. The office has since said that the audit is expected to cover about 35% of votes cast for the 2020 general election in Texas.

Scott's Friday letter came with a 10-page attachment outlining the records and procedures that the office is reviewing.

"The specific review process for each category will be based on the county's response to the initial survey questions provided," the office stated. "Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category."

The outlined materials include voting system test records, lists of election workers, video surveillance records and questions about the county's election security measures.

According to an audit outline that was shared by the office in September, phase 2 involves the office conducting a comprehensive election records examination over several months "to ensure election administration procedures were properly followed during the 2020 General Election." That includes looking at county records including logic and accuracy testing records for voting machines, early voting and election day materials and training materials.

Irregularities or deviations from election administration procedures could trigger a full manual recount of ballots in a certain area, the office stated.

"I'm very confident that Collin County will come through this audit very well," Collin County elections administrator Bruce Sherbet said in September. "We had a very smooth and good election, and I think the biggest part for me is if this audit will help voters that don't have confidence in the process have confidence or more confidence that everything was handled appropriately, then that's very important."

Official election results posted on the Texas Secretary of State's website show that three of the four counties voted for President Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the 2020 general election. Collin County was the only one of the four that overall voted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2020 general election with 51.4% of the votes cast. Dallas County overall showed favor for Biden with 65.1% of votes cast.

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Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election
Judd Baker
CW 39 Houston
December 13, 2021
https://cw39.com/news/texas/potter-county-republican-party-making-move-to-hand-

marked-hand-counted-ballots-in-primary-election/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT)— The Potter County Republican Party said it is changing the way it holds primary elections, making a move to hand-marked and counted ballots.

“This is the way we did it, and it worked for over 200 years,” said Republican Party Chairman, Dan Rogers.

“They vote to not go with electronic voting machines, that we go back to the way we used to do things where we vote in our precincts, and marked and counted manual poll books county wide,” said Rogers.

So how does this change the way you vote?

Potter County Elections Administrator Melynn Huntley said if you are voting in the Republican Primary during early voting, you can still go to a voting center and cast your ballot on an electronic voting machine as normal, for now. The same applies to absentee voting. Voters will still mail in their ballots and have them tabulated by the Huntley’s office.

However, if you are going to vote as a Republican in the primary on Election Day, in Potter County, you will have to vote in a precinct, not a voting center, on the hand-marked paper ballots.

“I look up your name, you sign, we look at your ID make sure it matches what’s on there, you sign, we give you a ballot, and you fill it out, and then you drop it in a box, and you leave,” said Rogers.

Rogers said he would like to see the Potter County Democratic Party adopt the same voting style.

We reached out to the Potter County Democratic Chair, Amy Taylor, for comment. Said said in a statement:

“The system of voting that’s been in place for the last fifteen years in Potter County is watertight. Voter fraud under the current system is not possible. Therefore, I see no need to change to a system of all paper ballots. It’s the Republican Party’s right to run the Primary Election as they see fit, but the Potter County Democratic Party will not be following suit.” - AMY TAYLOR | POTTER COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CHAIR

“I want the Democrats vote counted, as well as the Republicans without any question. And I’m not saying there’s fraud. I’m not accusing anybody of doing anything wrong,” said Rogers. “You know, we have a phenomenal election administrator here that does a wonderful job. But it’s not about that. It’s about doing what’s right for the voters.”

Rogers said he has contacted other Republican County Chairs to let them know what they are doing, and what he thinks every Republican county chair should follow suit.

We asked Randall County Elections Administrator Shannon Lackey if she anticipated any changes to their primary election. She said, “I don’t anticipate any changes for Randall County. A joint primary has already been decided upon by both Party Chairs and the resolution will be adopted in Commissioner’s Court on Tuesday.”

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Former Dallas County DA Faith Johnson files with GOP to run for her former post

Krista M. Torralva
Dallas Morning News
December 13, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/courts/2021/12/13/former-dallas-county-da-faith-johnson-files-with-gop-to-run-for-her-former-post/

Former Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson is vying to win back her old post, making her the third candidate from the 2018 election to compete again to be the county's top prosecutor.

Johnson, a Republican who was appointed to the job in 2016 but lost the election, threw her hat into the ring on the last day to file for the race, the local GOP said Monday.

The primary is in March, and the general election will be in November.

When reached Monday, Johnson said she would release a statement but had not as of 8:30 p.m. Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot did not comment about Johnson's joining the race.

Last week, former state district judge Elizabeth Frizell also filed to run against Creuzot in the Democratic primary. Creuzot narrowly defeated Frizell in the 2018 primary. She did not respond to requests for comment.

Creuzot went on to face Johnson in the general election and won 60% of the vote.

Republican Party chairwoman Jennifer Stoddard-Hajdu said the party urged Johnson to run.

"She is a very big difference from John Creuzot, who has not been upholding the law," she said. "He's not prosecuting people."

The GOP has faulted Creuzot for one of his early policy changes as district attorney: no longer prosecuting theft of personal items worth less than $750 unless a theft is for financial gain. The amount of $750 is the value of stolen items that under state law is at most a Class B misdemeanor.

The change was intended to decriminalize poverty, Creuzot said, but Republican leaders and law enforcement groups quickly criticized the change.

"Crime is crime, and we believe that all crime needs to be prosecuted," Stoddard-Hajdu said. "It needs to be fair, but it all needs to be prosecuted."

She did not say whether she expected Johnson to overturn the theft policy or another of Creuzot's heavily criticized decisions: to stop taking most first-time misdemeanor marijuana cases.

He has said data shows police disproportionately arrest Black people for marijuana offenses even though national studies have shown that people of most races use marijuana at similar rates.

Johnson became district attorney when Gov. Greg Abbott appointed her in December 2016 to replace Susan Hawk, who resigned because of health issues.

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Hawk was the last Republican district attorney to win an election in Dallas County. She defeated embattled Democratic former District Attorney Craig Watkins in 2014.

Under Johnson, prosecutors tried former Balch Springs Officer Roy Oliver, who is white, for killing 15-year-old Jordan Edwards, who was Black, while on duty. Jurors convicted Oliver of murder and sentenced him to 15 years in prison. Johnson was praised for her office's handling of the racially charged case.

In another case with racial overtones, Johnson's prosecutors secured a murder indictment against Amber Guyger, a white police officer who was off-duty when she shot fatally Botham Jean, a Black man, in his own apartment. Guyger had initially been arrested on the lesser charge of manslaughter.

Creuzot had taken over the office before Guyger's trial and agreed she should be charged with murder. His prosecutors secured a conviction, and jurors sentenced her to 10 years in prison.

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Texas Republicans swarm 2022 primaries while Democrats lament lack of battleground races
Jasper Scherer
Houston Chronicle
December 14, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-Republicans-swarm-2022-primaries-while-16699597.php

With the field now set for the March 1 primaries in Texas, much of the focus this winter will fall on the Republican side, where a raft of retirements and newly drawn districts have created an opening for first-time candidates to run for dozens of open seats, including in the Houston area.

Meanwhile, GOP incumbents who have historically received little or no primary opposition, including Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton, are in newfound territory defending their seats against fellow Republicans.

Democrats did not see the same flurry of activity in Houston or on the statewide ballot, with elected officials mostly avoiding major primary opposition. Only one Democratic elected official in Texas, state Rep. Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, is giving up her seat to run for a statewide office.

Republicans, on the other hand, have fielded candidates in each countywide judicial race in Harris County, a reversal from last year's sparse showing. And a half-dozen GOP elected officials in Texas are giving up their seats to run against statewide incumbents from their own party.

The outlook is a departure from the last two election cycles, when Democrats went after Republican districts long considered untouchable as they made aggressive plays to flip Texas blue.

But in advance of the 2022 primaries, Texas Republicans redrew many of those districts to move them well out of reach for Democrats. And the political landscape appears far tougher for the state's minority party, largely due to redistricting and President Joe Biden's dismal approval rating in Texas.

"This whole election cycle has been about Republican primaries," said state Rep.

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Garnet Coleman, D-Houston, who is not seeking re-election. “The whole special sessions were about Republican primaries. The rhetoric is about Republican primaries.”

Harris County GOP ‘pretty fired up’

In north Harris County, state Rep. Valoree Swanson, R-Spring, is set for a rematch against Tomball Republican Debbie Riddle, whom Swanson beat in 2016. At least two other GOP candidates are running in the district, which former President Donald Trump carried by 14 percentage points in 2020.

State Rep. Lacey Hull, a freshman Republican who represents a portion of west Houston, also is slated for a rematch against 2020 primary opponent Josh Flynn, a GOP activist and former Harris County Department of Education board president.

But some of the most crowded contests are in seats where the incumbent is stepping down or running for another office. In Hull’s neighboring district, five Republicans are running for the seat being vacated by state Rep. Jim Murphy, R-Houston — among them former City Council members Greg Travis and Bert Keller and Republican attorneys Mano DeAyala and Shelley Barineau.

Harris County Republican Party Chair Cindy Siegel said the national environment has given local conservatives a much-needed dose of optimism following recent cycles that saw them lose control of county government and other long-held offices.

“When I first took over last December, I think Republicans were very disheartened, and I include myself in that,” Siegel said. “But I think based upon what they’ve seen locally, and quite frankly what they’ve seen from the Democrat side nationally, the Republican Party here particularly in Harris County is pretty fired up.”

Even some Republican candidates who were primed for a smooth ride through the March primary received last-minute opponents. In northeast Harris County, Republican Deanna Robertson joined Humble City Councilman Charles Cunningham in the GOP primary to succeed retiring state Rep. Dan Huberty. Cunningham was endorsed by Huberty and had a clear path to the Republican nomination before that.

And in a newly drawn congressional seat in west Harris County, former Army helicopter pilot Wesley Hunt received a last-minute challenge Monday from Mark Ramsey, a former member of the State Republican Executive Committee. At least seven other Republicans are also vying for the GOP-leaning seat, though Ramsey appears to be the best-known challenger to Hunt, the 2020 nominee for a nearby congressional seat.

Democrats spared primary battles

In mid-August, three Houston Democrats returned to the Texas House for the first time in almost six weeks, allowing Republicans to advance their priority elections bill that had been stalled since early July.

The move by state Reps. Coleman, Ana Hernandez and Armando Walle sparked outrage among some Democratic activists and even a few fellow legislators, prompting calls for the lawmakers to face primary challenges. But by 6 p.m. Monday — the deadline for candidates to file for Texas’ March primaries — nobody had stepped forward to challenge Hernandez, Walle or most other Democrats who helped Republicans restore a quorum this summer.

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Across all of Harris County's state House districts, only a few Democratic incumbents, including state Reps. Alma Allen and Harold Dutton, received primary opponents.

"What that tells me is that our people are doing a good job," Harris County Democratic Party Chair Odus Evbagharu said. "Obviously we encourage competition. In a democracy, it needs to be competitive. But when your primary isn't as crowded, what that also says is that our electeds are doing a good job up and down the ballot."

Still, it appeared the party did not have the same enthusiasm among prospective candidates that it saw in the last two cycles.

Until Monday, no Democrat had filed to run for Murphy's open west Houston seat, which Trump carried by less than a percentage point in 2020. Hours before the filing deadline, Mohamad Maarouf, a program director for School Empowerment Network, an education nonprofit, filed for the seat.

"The reality is, there are no battleground seats. That's the problem," Evbagharu said. "When Republicans get to carve up the state of Texas and gerrymander it by diluting the votes and taking away the voice of Texans, particularly brown and Black people, you're not going to have these seats that are competitive."

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When the Myth of Voter Fraud Comes for You
Vann R. Newkirk II
The Atlantic
December 14, 2021
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/voter-fraud-myth-election-lie/620846/

When I met with Crystal Mason recently at her home in Rendon, Texas, we sat on a wide couch that served as the center of her domain, with plenty of space for children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. Their photographs filled the house. Mason's mother called to her from another room, needing advice; later, her eight-month-old grandson, Carter, joined us on the couch after waking up from an afternoon nap. For hours that day, Mason spoke candidly about the illegal-voting case that has consumed her life for half a decade. With us was one of her lawyers, Alison Grinter Allen.

If there is an individual in America who epitomizes one central aspect of our political moment, it might well be Crystal Mason. The story of Mason, a Black woman, illuminates the extraordinary efforts the Republican Party has made to demonstrate that fraud is being committed by minority voters on a massive scale. That false notion is now an article of faith among tens of millions of Americans. It has become an excuse to enact laws that make voting harder for everyone, but especially for voters of color, voters who are poor, voters who are old, and voters who were not born in the United States.

Mason watches the news diligently and can recount the details of prosecutions that have resulted thus far from the attack on the Capitol on January 6—an attack that was stoked by conspiracy theories about fraudulent voters. She can't help but wonder about punishments meted out for the insurrection as compared with the one she has already received for, she says, unwittingly violating a Texas voting law. "These people," Mason said of the participants in the January 6 assault, "came to do and commit dangerous crimes." When she and I spoke, only two of them had been sentenced to jail or prison, and neither for more than eight months. Mason was

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sentenced to five years. She is currently out on bond while she appeals her conviction.

The idea that systemic fraud has subverted the democratic process demands a search for evidence of such fraud. The point of this effort is not merely to support spurious claims that Donald Trump won the 2020 election or to stockpile spurious arguments in advance of 2024. It is to lay a foundation for the resurgence of a specific form of Jim Crow–style disenfranchisement. Jim Crow relied on outright bans at the ballot box and threats of violence to ensure white political power. But eliminating the Black vote during that era was accomplished in subtler ways as well: by undermining community cohesion, by sapping time and energy, by sheer frustration. The modern effort relies on similar tactics. The so-called Big Lie is built on small lies, about the actions and intentions of individuals—the kinds of lies that can destroy lives and families.

Crystal mason's role in this story began during the 2016 presidential election. She was 41 and readjusting to life at home after serving most of a five-year sentence in federal prison for tax fraud. Mason had run a tax-preparation business with her then-husband and had been charged with inflating their clients' refunds. Mason pleaded guilty and paid the penalty; after four years, a supervised-release program allowed her to return to her home. She has publicly "owned up," as she has said, to her mistakes.

Mason has three adult children, and cares for other members of the family. She had been putting her life back together, working at a Santander bank in nearby Dallas and taking classes to become an aesthetician. Around this same time, Donald Trump was making his ascent: calling Mexican immigrants "rapists," brandishing casual racism and xenophobia, and asking Black voters what the hell they had to lose by voting for him. Texas was not expected to be a swing state, but in this menacing atmosphere, Mason's mother told Crystal it was her duty to vote.

On Election Day, Mason drove to her polling place, the Tabernacle Baptist Church. She was coming from work, and almost didn't make it. "It was raining," Mason told me, remembering the night. "It was right at 7 o'clock, when it was about to be closing up. I went with my name and my ID—who I was—to where I was supposed to go." But a volunteer there, a 16-year-old neighbor of hers named Jarrod Streibich, couldn't find her name on the rolls, which happens sometimes. Streibich suggested that she use a provisional ballot. "They offered it to me," Mason recalled, "and I said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Well, if we're at the right location, it'll count. If you're not, it won't.'" There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the interaction. Like tens of thousands of Texas voters, and millions of Americans across the country, Mason cast a provisional ballot, and went home.

Mason's provisional ballot was destined to be rejected, however. Texas law requires all terms of any felony sentence to be completed before a person once again becomes eligible to vote, and Mason had not fully completed her sentence for the tax-fraud conviction. Mason says she didn't know that ineligibility extended to the period of supervised release; she made a simple mistake. Many provisional ballots are rejected because of ineligibility, often for reasons potential voters are unaware of. Mason was sent a letter after the election stating that her provisional ballot had been disallowed.

By any reasonable measure, Mason's experience at the polls amounted to a meaningless misunderstanding that had no effect on anything. Donald Trump carried Tarrant County, which includes Rendon, and all of Texas by a healthy margin on his way to winning the White House in 2016. Republicans in Texas retained control of

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most of the political system in the state. Trump was inaugurated in January. Mason continued her court-mandated check-ins with her supervision officer.

Without realizing it, however, Mason had become the subject of an investigation. After the polls closed, Streibich, the neighbor who had suggested that she use a provisional ballot in the first place, told an election judge on the scene—who was also a neighbor of Mason's—something he had just remembered: that he thought Mason might still be on supervised release for a federal offense. The judge, Karl Dietrich, a local Republican Party official, informed the Tarrant County district attorney, Sharen Wilson. On February 16, 2017, Crystal Mason was arrested for illegal voting.

Fear of voter fraud, or at least the pretense of fear, has been a centerpiece of conservative objections to the expansion of voting rights going back, in the modern era, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Taking steps to curb alleged illegal voting tends to boost Republican electoral fortunes by disenfranchising people of color.

In 2008, the increase in Black turnout that helped put Barack Obama in office—and raised hopes among Democrats for a "demographic revolution" that would aid their cause for years to come—gave voter suppression new urgency. Then, in 2013, the Supreme Court's decision in Shelby County v. Holder granted states more power to keep people from the polls. The decision effectively eliminated the system of preemptive federal oversight that had been in place since the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the absence of new legislation at the national level, state laws restricting the right or ability to vote could now be blocked only if courts found them to be discriminatory after their passage. In other words, governments could be elected under legal regimes that might ultimately prove to be unconstitutional; once in office, they would be free to further restrict voting.

Meanwhile, the Court made clear in other cases that it was inclined to take states at their word if they said restrictive voting laws were simply intended to combat fraud and had no racist intent—even if the predictable consequence of those laws was to create greater burdens for voters of color. Taking states at their word provided a lot of cover. The result was a surge of democracy-limiting measures in Republican-led states: restrictive voter-ID laws, tighter guidelines for registration, and wholesale purges of voters from the electoral rolls, conducted in such a way that people of color have been disproportionately affected. According to the nonprofit Brennan Center for Justice, 33 restrictive laws were passed in 19 states in the first nine months of 2021. The laws, which will make casting a ballot more difficult in 2022, reveal how central voter suppression has become as a mobilizing issue for the GOP.

It must be underscored: There is no evidence that illegal voting of any kind occurs at a level capable of influencing elections. Nor is there evidence that the scattered violations that do take place have been increasing in frequency or severity. Common kinds of election violations include local candidates fudging signatures to get on the ballot, partisans politicking too close to polling places, and people accidentally voting at the polls after forgetting that they had already mailed in a ballot—a glitch easily corrected by administrative procedures that already exist.

Most of the new laws, however, are aimed at violations that are exceedingly rare: impersonation of one person by another, or noncitizens attempting to vote. Such violations are already illegal, yet their specter is raised to make the case for, among other measures, voter-ID laws. Voting-rights advocates and federal courts have agreed that such laws tend to target and disenfranchise people of color, older folks, and students—groups less likely to have identification documents of the kind that many of the new laws require.

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In 2012, before Shelby County allowed Texas to implement a strict new voter-ID law without federal oversight, Greg Abbott, then the Texas attorney general, railed against a decision by the Department of Justice to block the law from going into effect. “I know for a fact that voter fraud is real, that it must be stopped,” he said. When he made that statement, the official rate of alleged election violations reported to his office over the previous decade—allegations, not convictions—was seven for every 1 million votes cast in the state. Data from Abbott’s own office showed that, over the same period, in all Texas elections at every level, 26 people had been convicted of some form of election violation. Only two of those cases involved someone impersonating another voter, which is what the voter-ID law was ostensibly supposed to address. Rather than attempting to prove the impossible—that illegal voting was truly a problem—Abbott and other GOP officials across the country chose to make public examples of the very few cases of alleged voter fraud they could find.

Abbott was elected governor in 2014. His successor as attorney general, Ken Paxton, eagerly took up the cause. One of Paxton’s allies was District Attorney Sharen Wilson. In 2015, she began investigating Rosa Maria Ortega, a 35-year-old mother of four who lived in the Dallas suburbs. Ortega had been born in Mexico and came to the U.S. as a baby. She held permanent-resident status. As a noncitizen, she was not eligible to vote, but she had registered (as a Republican) and had cast ballots in several elections in Dallas County, including for Paxton as attorney general, before she moved to Tarrant County. Her new voter-registration application was rejected because she had correctly indicated her citizenship status. Ortega then sent in another application, this time identifying herself as a citizen. She had done the same thing in Dallas County, and voted without issue; she has said that when Tarrant County accepted her registration, she assumed she was allowed to vote again.

Ortega was indicted and declined a plea deal, which, her lawyers warned, would likely result in deportation. In court, the defense cited Ortega’s professed misunderstanding of election law as it applied to permanent residents, and her lack of a motive for purposefully breaking the law. The prosecution presented her actions as part of a disturbing statewide pattern. As Wilson said after Ortega’s indictment, “People insist this kind of thing doesn’t happen, but it’s happening right here at home.”

Wilson’s office has denied in the past that its work has been politically motivated or employed as a “scare tactic.” In a statement, a spokesperson for the district attorney wrote that Wilson “didn’t go out looking for the voter fraud cases against Crystal Mason and Rosa Maria Ortega.” The spokesperson also noted that Ortega had been offered probation, but had turned it down. In February 2017, she was convicted of illegal voting and sentenced to eight years in prison. When the Fort Worth Star-Telegram reviewed hundreds of voting-related cases in Texas from 2005 to 2018, it found that Ortega’s sentence was the longest one handed down. A prosecutor praised the jury, saying it had secured the “floodgates” that kept illegal voting under control. Ortega’s case fit a familiar narrative: that immigrant voters are subverting democracy. She served nine months in prison before being paroled, then spent nearly two months in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. She is currently on parole and living in Dallas, according to Wilson’s office.

One week after ortega’s conviction, Crystal Mason was arrested, and found her life newly upended. Mason’s family had often been in conflict with other residents in their predominantly white community—for a variety of reasons, including, Mason and her lawyers believe, outright racism. When her children were younger, she told me, a neighbor had once brandished a shotgun as her son passed by; her then-husband reported the incident, and she said that local authorities added a bus stop closer to her home so that her children could keep away from the neighbor’s house. Now she faced charges brought by the local district attorney. There was no way to keep a low

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profile. She lost her job.

The district attorney offered a deal: 10 years' probation. But the deal required an admission of guilt, which Mason could not accept. It also would have put her back in prison: The mere fact of a conviction would mean that she had violated the terms of her supervised release. The only way for Mason to remain free was to prove her innocence. She chose a trial before a judge.

As prosecutors presented it, Mason was a felon who had ignored notifications sent by election officials to her home, warning that she was no longer a registered voter. Despite those warnings, she had nevertheless signed an affidavit when accepting her provisional ballot, affirming that she was indeed a registered voter. Her crime was not accidental, prosecutors argued, but a purposeful subversion of democracy.

Mason's legal team countered that the notices about illegal voting had been sent to her home while she was in prison, and therefore she had never received them. They argued, too, that, unlike people returning from state prisons on parole or probation, who typically receive official instruction about voting eligibility, as a federal inmate, she had been given no such instruction when starting her supervised release. (The person who oversaw the officer responsible for Mason's supervision confirmed this in court testimony: "That's just not something we do.") As Mason recalled when I spoke with her, the affidavit was just another thing to sign, and she hadn't really read it closely. She was focused on providing the personal information that the same sheet of paper was requesting. She said to me, "Do you have a mortgage? Have you read all your mortgage papers and all the closing [documents]?" What bothers her most is that there was no serious attempt to establish any sort of criminal motive. "They said I tried to circumvent the system," Mason said. "And for what? For a sticker?" Alison Grinter Allen, her attorney, echoed the point: "Why would you risk two to 20 years in the penitentiary in order to shout your opinion into the wind, basically?"

The arguments on Mason's behalf proved unavailing. She was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. The prosecution had argued for "a stern prison sentence" in order to "send a message." Mason subsequently appealed to a three-judge panel, which upheld her conviction. Her case is now under review by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.

The ACLU of Texas has been assisting with Mason's defense, and its data suggest a racial double standard in cases like hers. A 2021 study by the group found that nearly three-quarters of prosecutions by the state's Election Integrity Unit appear to have been brought against people of color. Almost half of the total cases appear to have been brought against Black and Latina women, two of the core groups of Democratic voters in the state.

Of course, facts and circumstances differ from case to case, and rules and procedures differ from one legal setting to another. But it is worth recalling the treatment accorded to some white officials who have had encounters with election law. In 2018, Russ Casey, a Republican judge in Tarrant County, pleaded guilty to falsifying signatures in order to get his name on the ballot. Casey held a position of public trust, his actions were egregious, and he admitted that the accusations were true. In a plea deal, he received five years' probation, with no prison time. In 2016, Sharen Wilson herself was accused of an election-related violation: using the personal information of her subordinates in the D.A.'s office to invite them to a fundraiser and solicit donations from them for her reelection campaign. Her case was dismissed by the district attorney in a nearby county for "insufficient evidence of criminal intent." Wilson has acknowledged that including her employees on the invitation list for the fundraiser was a mistake.

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In Mason's case, the ACLU of Texas argues that the illegal-voting charge is inappropriate on its face because Mason did not, strictly speaking, ever vote. Her provisional ballot was not counted. According to Tommy Buser-Clancy, an ACLU staff attorney, Mason's prosecution could theoretically open the door to felony charges against any potential voter whose provisional ballot is rejected: "If you start to criminalize people who make mistakes, [who think] they're eligible and then find out they're not, then that guts the provisional-balloting system—turns it into a trap." The D.A.'s office has publicly dismissed the possibility that Mason's prosecution poses any danger of precedent to people who make simple mistakes or act unknowingly; the decision by the three-judge panel in the Mason case articulated a different view. It declared that, under Texas law, prosecutors did not need to establish that Mason knew she was ineligible.

Because of her conviction, Mason's supervised release was revoked, and in September 2018 she was returned to prison. One of Mason's lawyers launched a crowdfunding effort to help provide for her immediate and extended family; health insurance was a particular concern. (She has been able to raise $81,000.) "It was devastating," Mason told me. "I was like, 'Are you serious? I'm a mother.'" She recalled her original experience of emerging from prison into the supervised-release program. "I was embarrassed. I was. Because when I got out of prison, I wanted my kids to know that, yeah, I hit that bump in the road. But you can get your life back on track. And that's what I did." She was working. She was going to school. And then she was back in prison. Mason was released in May 2019 and was able to return home in June.

As we spoke, the practiced cheerfulness in her voice drained away. "This isn't supposed to be happening to me. This is not right."

Only days after his inauguration in 2017, Trump declared that millions of fraudulent votes had been cast, implying that many had been cast by noncitizens or by citizens of color mobilized by Democrats to vote more than once. His evidence for widespread fraud was nonexistent, and his anecdotal accounts, and those of others, collapsed under scrutiny. Gregg Phillips, a Texas businessman and self-proclaimed voter-fraud sleuth, tweeted that he and the Tea Party–associated group True the Vote had identified 3 million noncitizen voters. The source of this information was an unnamed private database, and Trump declared that he would order a full investigation. I spoke with Phillips at the time, and in that conversation he provided no supporting evidence and backed away from any specific number of illegal voters. He told me, "The work that we're doing could create a foundation for looking at elections moving forward." I interpreted his statement to be a kind of face-saving fallback. Now I understand it to have been prophetic.

Crystal Mason's lawyers believe that Trump's claim of mass voter fraud created an environment in which actions against Mason could be especially punitive. Clark Birdsall, a lawyer for Rosa Maria Ortega, made the same argument, describing Trump's comments about millions of fraudulent voters as "the 800-pound gorilla sitting in the jury box."

Trump established a Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, an ostensibly bipartisan body designed to uncover "those laws, rules, policies, activities, strategies, and practices that undermine the American people's confidence in the integrity of voting processes used in Federal elections." It fell apart in 2018 after it tried to push states to turn over massive amounts of voter data—including Social Security numbers, party affiliations, and voting histories. Even many Republican politicians believed that the voter data might be used for nefarious purposes.

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Resistance to handing over the data helped kill the commission.

It had found no evidence of any widespread election violations. But in Republican-led states, investigations proliferated. Kris Kobach, then the Kansas secretary of state and a vice chair of the presidential commission, had provided a blueprint. Even before Trump's election, he had claimed that there were thousands of fraudulent or dead voters on the rolls in Kansas. He would later claim to have identified more than 100 noncitizen voters in his state. In 2015, leveraging the hysteria he had begun to create, Kobach persuaded the state legislature to give him the power to directly prosecute election-violations cases. (In every other state, only an attorney general or a local district attorney has such authority.) Yet over a period of four years, Kobach brought forward just 15 illegal-voting cases, most of which involved people who had accidentally voted in two places. He secured a single conviction involving a noncitizen voter.

In Texas, besides Ortega's case, there has been only one other successful prosecution by the state attorney general for voting as a noncitizen since 2005. Five people have been successfully prosecuted for impersonating other voters. Fourteen people—including Crystal Mason—have been successfully prosecuted for voting as felons with unresolved sentences. Only 11 people have been sent to prison by the state for voting violations of any kind. In 2020, Paxton's office almost doubled the working hours spent on election-violations cases and resolved only 16 of them. All stemmed from voters giving false addresses. (Paxton's office did not respond to multiple queries related to this article.)

Since 2005, nearly 90 million votes have been cast in Texas. Even if the true number of fraudulent voters is double what the state has prosecuted, the prevalence of election violations—the majority of which involve bad addresses—is about three ten-thousandths of a percent. As for voter impersonation, it is more common for a person to be struck by lightning twice than it is for voter impersonation to happen in Texas.

Those involved in investigating allegations of voter fraud argue that the detection of a small number of violations just means we aren't as good at detecting the larger number that must be out there somewhere—thus the need for new laws. But laws that make the process of registering and casting a ballot even more convoluted also increase the likelihood that people will make mistakes—the kinds of mistakes that can land them in jail.

It's a vicious cycle—which is exactly the point. First gin up fear about fraud, then use that fear to aggressively prosecute voting infractions, then use those prosecutions to create stricter laws, then use the stricter laws to induce more examples of fraud, then use those examples to gin up even more fear. The potential impact on turnout is bad enough. But the cumulative effect of restrictive laws corrodes the democratic process itself. In Texas, the narrative fueled in part by Mason's conviction has given Republicans the momentum to pass laws that restrict voting by mail, permit forms of interference by partisan poll watchers at election sites, and create new classes of felonies for engaging in common forms of voter assistance, such as explaining written instructions to people who don't speak English. (This last measure is currently facing a lawsuit brought by the Department of Justice.)

Crystal Mason is not the same person she was in 2017, when she was indicted. At the time, she was fearful; her impulse was to lie low. She eventually came to realize that her unwanted notoriety could be leveraged, not only for her own cause but for the cause of voting rights nationwide. When I spoke with her at her home, she had just gotten back from a voting-rights rally in Washington, D.C. She wore a shirt that read crystal mason: the fight against voter suppression.

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If she serves her five-year sentence, her infant grandson, who was sitting on her lap, will be reading and at school by the time she gets out. She is thinking about how to prepare family members for what may lie ahead. Her adult children have been deputized to run the house in her absence.

Demagogues and insurrections are not the only—or even the primary—threats to our democracy. The slow, relentless erosion of individual civic agency is at least as dangerous, and perhaps more so. Most of the people accused of "voter fraud" have made mistakes with no provable malicious intent as they navigate voting systems that grow ever more byzantine and frustrating. Their lives may be derailed by reputational damage, by time and money spent in court, by prohibitive fines, and by jail or prison. The people who bear this burden may be the cornerstones of their social worlds. Their fates stand as warnings to others in already fragile communities. In a country where the influence of Black and Latino voters is purposefully diluted by gerrymandering, and where poorer, overworked folks must contend with long lines and short hours at sparse polling locations, the fear of being caught up in a punitive administrative labyrinth adds another variable to the calculus of deciding whether to vote at all.

That is why there is something in this moment reminiscent of the insidious bureaucratic character of Jim Crow. As all-encompassing as we know it to have been, Jim Crow was not imposed by a single stroke. It was built community by community, year by year, ruined life by ruined life, law by law, and lie by lie.

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Democrats worry their grip on Hispanic vote is loosening
Rafael Bernal and Alex Gangitano
The Hill
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https://thehill.com/latino/585381-democrats-worry-their-grip-on-hispanic-vote-is-loosening

Democrats are worried they could be losing their electoral grip on Hispanics, the country's second-largest voter bloc by ethnicity.

A Wall Street Journal poll released last week showed Hispanic voters evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, and while that poll's data faced substantive questions over its tiny sample size, its results sounded alarm bells among Democrats nonetheless.

"I think that both parties should always have a sense of urgency in communicating with Hispanics, Latinos," said Ivan Zapien, a Democratic lobbyist and former executive director at the Hispanic Leadership Council of the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

"Do I think that Democrats' heads should be on fire over this issue? Yeah, I do. I think that their head should be on fire over this issue every day regardless of what polls say," he added.

The poll is just the latest data point that shows a growing sympathy among Hispanics toward Republican messaging. Democrats lost the states of Florida and Texas in the 2020 presidential race, and they were disappointed with some of their results from Hispanic voters.

President Biden still won 63 percent of the Latino vote in the 2020 race, nearly 30 percentage points more than former President Trump.

But the Journal's poll offered troublesome signs, finding that just 44 percent of Hispanics would vote for Biden if the 2024 presidential election were held today and 43 percent would vote for Trump.

In recent presidential elections, Democratic candidates have done about as well as Biden in 2020, but former President George W. Bush did fairly well with Hispanic voters as recently as 2004.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 40 percent of the Hispanic vote went to Bush that year, compared to 58 percent for Democratic nominee John Kerry.

The various figures suggest Democrats should not take a large edge with Hispanic voters for granted, and Zapien said that whichever party can communicate best with Hispanic voters while "figuring out what's on their mind" is likely to increase their share of the Hispanic vote going forward.

Democrats say they have a lead on cultural competency in communicating with most Hispanic communities in the country — Cubans, Venezuelans and Colombians in South Florida may be the exception — but they face challenges due to the size of their coalition.

"The Republican Party has a way easier job than we do. They just need to strip 5 percent to 7 percent of our national vote and they win," said Rep. Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.), chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's campaign arm, Bold PAC.

He said the GOP needs to spend in the range of $10 million to $30 million on a combination of voter suppression efforts and campaign messaging to hit that goal.

"We have to continue to invest and make sure that we're still hitting in the 65 to 70 percent range in order to keep our national coalition together, which is very expensive, especially as we have a growing population," added Gallego.

Republicans are latching on to the polling numbers and indications from 2020 that Hispanics — particularly voters in Texas and Florida — are increasingly responsive to a conservative economic message.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) called last week's Journal polling troubling for Democrats.

"Hispanic voters are splitting their support more evenly between the two parties, a new WSJ poll finds. That's an ominous sign for Democrats," he said on Wednesday.

The White House is working to sell Hispanic voters on their Build Back Better social spending agenda, blasting out quotes last month from Tucson, Ariz., Mayor Regina Romero, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Colorado state Senate President Leroy Garcia, among others. They also highlighted statements from UnidosUS, the Hispanic Federation and Voto Latino.

In addition, they're selling Hispanic voters on the two major bills already signed by Biden: the American Rescue Plan, signed into law in the spring, that provided stimulus checks and other forms of coronavirus relief, and the recently approved infrastructure measure.

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“Unemployment is down, the lowest it's been in 50 years. We've created nearly 6 million jobs. Our economy is recovering faster than any other advanced economy in the world,” said Mayra Macías, chief strategy officer of Building Back Together, a political nonprofit dedicated to selling Biden's message.

“While we've made progress. We realize that people are still not fully feeling the positive impacts in their day to day lives, but this is, if anything, more of an impetus to get Build Back Better across the finish line, because this legislation will lower the cost of health care, prescription drugs, housing, child care and more,” she added.

The White House made another effort to gain popularity among Latinos for Hispanic Heritage Month in September with a virtual discussion to highlight the benefits of the Build Back Better agenda for the community.

The roundtable featured Latinos in the administration, including Small Business Administration chief Isabel Guzman, Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Lucas Acosta, coalitions director and senior spokesman at the DNC, argued that Biden has been delivering for Latino families since the start of his administration, naming the expanded child tax credit and helping Latino-owned small businesses as examples.

“In the coming year, Democrats will continue to make the case to Latinos that while President Biden has focused on improving their lives, Republicans have consistently tried to stand in the way,” he said.

Aside from extending social programs popular among many Latino communities, the bill currently includes immigration language that is generally popular among Hispanics.

Democrats like Gallego say the immigration provisions could be a boon if they make it into law — potentially granting immigration relief to up to 6.5 million people — but that they are not a necessary magic bullet to get Latinos to the polls.

“I don’t think that there’s a magic wand or a particular issue that is going to assure you some sort of long-term fidelity by ‘the Hispanic vote.’ Or even segments of the Hispanic vote,” Zapien said. “The party that spends the most time, energy and resources communicating with them, where they are, is going to have the momentum.”

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Mexico May Reduce Pemex’s Profit-Sharing Taxes Again
Amy Stillman and Maya Averbuch
Bloomberg
December 13, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-13/mexico-may-reduce-pemex-s-profit-sharing-taxes-again-amlo-says?sref=ytoldrow

Mexico could slash Petroleos Mexicanos’s taxes further as the world’s most indebted oil company scrambles to reverse long-term oil production declines.

“With Pemex, for example, we are constantly or periodically lowering taxes so they

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have more funds," said President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador during his daily press conference on Monday. "And we can lower them more."

In September, the government cut Pemex's profit-sharing duty to 40% for 2022 from 54% in 2021. Last week, Pemex announced that it will receive a $3.5 billion capital injection from the government as part of a transaction to pay down obligations and also embark on a series of bond buybacks and new issuance to reduce the cost of servicing its borrowings.

The beleaguered state oil company has $113 billion in debt, the most of any major oil producer, and has seen output decline for over a decade. Pemex replaced its chief financial officer this month amid concerns he wasn't able to win investors' confidence. It could also end up spending nearly twice as much as originally projected to take over Royal Dutch Shell Plc's Deer Park refinery in Texas.

Since coming into power in late 2018, Lopez Obrador has made it his mission to roll back the energy reforms of his predecessor and reinstate Pemex's near monopoly in the oil sector. AMLO's energy policies have been criticized by investors for allocating more resources to the company's unprofitable refining business and reducing crude exports in order to send oil to its refineries instead. International credit ratings companies such as Fitch Ratings and Moody's Corp. have downgraded Pemex's bonds to junk in recent years, in part because they say it has no clear strategy to reverse production declines.

"We're no longer following neoliberal policies, which treated Pemex as if it were any other company," said Lopez Obrador on Monday. "Now Pemex is a protected company, supported and backed by the government."

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Op-Ed: Texas Redistricting Needs to Protect Campus Communities
Jocelyn Carrera and CJ Cetina
Texas Signal
December 13, 2021
https://texassignal.com/op-ed-texas-redistricting-needs-to-protect-campus-communities/

Following the 2020 U.S. Census, the state of Texas reapportioned its districts based on population changes in a process called redistricting. This process should be guided by public input so that policymakers can make informed decisions about what our districts should look like. However, that has not been the case in our state. Texas has decades of partisan and racial gerrymandering embedded in its legislative districts. As a result, many communities continue to be split apart, leaving them unheard and underrepresented in our government. Of note, colleges and universities across the state and country consistently endure the consequences of redistricting processes that largely ignore their interests.

Between a lack of notice for public hearings, the need to travel hours to Austin for hearings that lack remote testimony options, and the need to potentially wait hours to testify in the end, our redistricting process does not encourage public participation. In fact, it actively discourages it.

As redistricting fellows with Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project, we are a voice for Texas college students in our state's redistricting process. The focus of our advocacy efforts has been to keep college and university communities together as communities of interest. While campus communities are incredibly diverse, we have

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common interests and concerns that deserve proper representation by elected officials.

Jocelyn attends the University of Texas at El Paso which, thankfully, is kept together in its Congressional and State Legislative districts. However, CJ and his community are not as lucky: Texas State University and the San Marcos area are split, or "cracked," into multiple Congressional and State Senate districts. As a result, the voting power of students in the San Marcos community is diluted, impacting their ability to elect officials who will understand and advocate for their needs. Students are split into different districts depending on which dorm they live in, meaning different representatives and, when it comes to voting in elections, different ballots and polling places. This is unnecessarily confusing and complex for students who want to participate in their democracy.

Over the past couple of months, we drew and submitted nearly 100 maps of Texas college and university communities, illustrating where students live on and off-campus. These maps are an important way for us to inform map-drawers about what our campus communities look like and how they should be kept together. We also waited hours (CJ waited over 5 hours and Jocelyn waited over 8 hours) to testify at public hearings held by the Texas House of Representatives' redistricting committee. At these hearings, we shared our concerns about campus communities being split apart and the need to bring and keep them together. Although we were privileged to be able to wait for hours to testify, we noticed many Texans who gave up after a while because waiting an entire day to testify is impractical. Many of these prospective testifiers traveled hours to Austin, only to have to give up on making their voices heard in the end.

Governor Greg Abbott recently signed into law our Congressional and State Legislative districts for the next decade, which continue to split Texas campus communities apart. However, the fight for fair districts in Texas is not over —— these maps are already in the courts with litigation well underway. Texans, including college students, need to continue advocating for our communities. We need to take advantage of every opportunity to share with the courts that our communities, the state of Texas, and our democracy are at their strongest when fair districts are drawn, communities are kept together, and every Texan is properly represented and heard by our lawmakers. And we need to continue advocating for a redistricting process that embraces public participation and ends partisan and racial gerrymandering.

Jocelyn Carrera is a senior at the University of Texas at El Paso, and CJ Cetina is a senior at Texas State University. They are also redistricting fellows with Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project

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What I want for Christmas
Rep. Celia Israel
Austin American-Statesman
December 13, 2021
https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2021/12/13/rep-israel-what-want-christmas/6494802001/

It's been a year like no other. And I pray we never experience this kind of year again.

Let me begin by saying each of us have gone through unique challenges over the past 12 months. The stresses of a pandemic have elevated the regular stresses of life

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in ways we don’t always appreciate. I hope you’ve found and are continuing to find ways to take care of yourself. Here’s some of my observations on the year as a member of the Texas Legislature during a time when finding common ground is elusive and being hopeful about the future is increasingly difficult.

Let's think back on how this year started. Perhaps in hindsight, the Jan. 6 insurrection could have set the tone for just how challenging this year would be. It was chaos. Seeing Americans attack the U.S. Capitol because they didn’t believe the outcome of an election still gives me chills. That was followed up by a February winter storm that caused the loss of life and billions in property damage, then three special legislative sessions focused on far-right agendas rather than the mainstream middle issues we should have focused on, like the energy grid.

The dramatic quorum break in July made national news and helped move the needle on what became the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. I, along with most of my fellow Democratic House members, saw an opportunity to take this fight literally to the steps of Congress to push for federal legislation protecting the right to vote. I felt so strongly about the quorum break and voting rights that I postponed my wedding on the House floor to join my colleagues and keep up the fight. We gave up time with family, our businesses, and some pretty darn good Tex-Mex to take the fight to Congress.

Because much of my legislative energy has been spent on elections reform as well as helping to encourage others to vote, I’ve been so disturbed by recent stories of local Texas officials being bullied because they are not buying into the "big lie" of a stolen election. In Hood County, the long-serving elections administrator was forced to resign because she wouldn't feed into the false stories about stolen elections.

The Texas Legislature should be focused on how to help us vote more efficiently and more securely. I have always had hope of passing online voter registration to help our counties save money and ensure the accuracy of our voting rolls. As time passed, what was a common sense reform enacted by over 40 states became a politically-charged change that began to have little chance of passing. This is just one of the policies now wrapped in the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

It’s a very involved piece of elections legislation. If passed, it would prevent elected officials from the revolving door practice of leaving public office then going into a paid lobbying position. It would allow for uniform early voting practices. There is also a requirement that states would enact same-day voter registration. This is really important to a state like Texas where people are moving frequently and unsure about where and when to vote.

For example, if your registration has expired and you didn't know it but showed up to vote, wouldn't it just make sense to have the election officials look you up and renew you on the spot? We have the technology to do so. When we go vote, elections officials look us up and validate our eligibility. Why not just hit the "renew" button right then and there rather than send a voter home because their registration expired when they are eligible to vote?

If you believe, as I do, that we need to stand up for voting freedoms and stand against corruption, please make your voice heard with your congressional representatives and let them know you want measures like the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act to move forward.

So this Christmas, after this most extraordinary year, I want my country to begin healing and getting back to basics in ensuring a healthy democracy for us all. The

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basis of our democracy is worthy of urgent action in Congress. Unfortunately the words “urgent” and “congressional action” rarely work well together.

So we are at the end of 2021 and on the verge of another big election year. Let’s all find time to take a breath. I urge you to be mindful of what we have all been through, take care of yourself and those around you, and let us give grace to ourselves for the resiliency we've each endured through these truly historic times. I wish you all a peaceful and happy holiday season and I look forward to what 2022 has to bring.

Rep. Celia Israel represents House District 50, which includes Pflugerville. Follow her on Twitter @celiaisrael, or like her on Facebook at fb.com/CeliaIsraelTX.

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From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 12/16/21
Date: Thursday, December 16, 2021 9:27:53 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Thursday, December 16, 2021 9:05 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/16/21
Sensitivity: Personal



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 16, 2021

Potter County Republican Party wants to run its GOP primary, *Texas Standard*, December 15, 2021

Texas GOP Denies Appeal to Remove a 'Rick Perry' from GOP Governors Primary Ballot, *The Texan*, December 15, 2021

Not enough voter fraud cases in disputed states to change 2020 election, AP analysis finds, *Associated Press*, December 14, 2021

Texas attorney general cannot unilaterally prosecute election cases, state's highest criminal court rules, *Texas Tribune*, December 15, 2021

Former HPD captain indicted in 2020 aggravated assault case over false voter fraud claim, *KHOU-TV*, December 14, 2021

County approves reestablished voting districts, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 15, 2021

Last minute campaign announcement creates opening for Bexar County commissioner in Pct. 3. What happens next?, *KSAT-TV*, December 15, 2021

'Prison gerrymandering:' How inmates are helping the Texas GOP maintain its power, *Dallas Morning News*, December 15, 2021

March Primary brings contested Taylor County judge race, but many candidates are unopposed, *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 15, 2021

Primaries are set for Texas gubernatorial race. See who's running, *CNHI News*,

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December 14, 2021

See who has filed for candidacy in Harris County ahead of the March 2022 primaries, *Community Impact*, December 15, 2021

Senate Democrats push to pass voting rights bills by Christmas, *Nexstar*, December 15, 2021

Study to look at relief route for Mines Road traffic, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 15, 2021

North America's biggest railroad born as Kansas City sale is completed, *Mexico News Daily*, December 15, 2021

Supply-Chain Hell Ignites Economic Boom Along U.S.-Mexico Border, *Bloomberg*, December 14, 2021

Civil rights groups ask DOJ to investigate 'discriminatory' Operation Lone Star in Texas, *Border Report*, December 15, 2021

Editorial: Texas election audit undermines democracy, *Dallas Morning News*, December 16, 2021

Potter County Republican Party wants to run its GOP primary
Jill Ament
Texas Standard
December 15, 2021
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/potter-county-republican-party-wants-to-run-its-gop-primary/

Despite Potter County going 70% for former President Donald Trump in 2020, GOP leaders there are raising unfounded claims of election irregularities and fraud. Potter County GOP chair Dan Rogers wants to reintroduce hand-marked, paper ballots for people voting in the March 2022 Republican primary, despite warnings from statewide election officials that this change could actually increase the risk of voter fraud. Rogers also wants to run his own election, rather than relying on county officials to do it.

Jessica Huseman has been reporting on this for VoteBeat.org, an online publication dedicated to reporting on elections and voting in the U.S. Listen to the interview above or read the transcript below.

This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity:

Texas Standard: First, why does the Potter County Republican Party want to conduct their own election in the 2022 Republican primary?

Jessica Huseman: The chairman of the party, Dan Rogers, has said that his voters do not trust the machines or the central count system that Potter County uses. He hasn't presented any survey data to back that up, but that is what he claims.

Does this have anything to do with President Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 presidential election he claims was stolen from him?

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Absolutely, it does. A few weeks ago, they had a presentation from Jeff Zink, who is running for Congress in Arizona and believes that the Arizona audit was, for example, manipulated and that the CyberNinjas audit there was false and hid a lot of the fraudulent numbers. And so I think that this is definitely a continuation of "the big lie."

CyberNinjas, by the way, is the name of the company that Arizona hired to do the to do the audit. So how would they be able to do this? And by bypassing county election officials, is that something they can do under the Texas Constitution?

That is something that they can do. The parties are entirely responsible for the conduct of the primaries on Election Day, but not during early voting. And so the county will continue to conduct early voting through the normal means. And then on Election Day, they will run their own, using paper ballots that they will hand count. And the hand counting process is really where the experts tell me things are going to go awry. It's harder than it sounds to hand count lots of ballots, especially when there are more than two dozen races on there. And so I anticipate it will take them quite a while if they if they end up doing it at all.

Well, I guess one question would be whether or not other counties might try to follow suit. Is that something people are talking about right now?

That is something that Dan Rogers really wants to happen. He sent an email out on December 3 to every party chair in the state, encouraging them to follow their lead. I have not heard of anyone doing this quite yet, nor has the Secretary of State's Office. So it seems like it's Dan Rogers out there on his own in Potter County, but who knows what will catch on in the next couple of months?

How have state election officials been responding to this? Have they made any sort of official pronouncements? Have you heard anything from your sources?

They have no power to stop Mr. Rogers from doing this, if that's what he'd like to do. The party chairs can run the primaries however they like as long as they comply with Texas' election code. The state has not been shy at telling Mr. Rogers that they think this is a terrible idea though. They think it will cause massive voter confusion and potentially lead to fraud. The checks and balances of the system that Potter County uses would all go away in this iteration of Mr. Rogers' vote counting method. I think that the state the state has told Mr. Rogers under no uncertain terms that they prefer he not do this, but they have no power to stop him.

What about local Potter County election officials? Are they anticipating separate voting sites for Republicans and Democrats, or how does this play out

That's exactly what they're anticipating. Mr. Mr. Rogers also declined to use the e-poll books that that check voters in, which allow voters to vote at any precinct in Potter County. So because he wants to use paper pull books, voters will have to turn up at an assigned precinct and can only vote there. So it really is going to be a radically different voting system than what Potter County voters are used to.

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Texas GOP Denies Appeal to Remove a 'Rick Perry' from GOP Governors Primary Ballot
Brad Johnson
The Texan
December 15, 2021
https://thetexan.news/texas-gop-denies-appeal-to-remove-a-rick-perry-from-gop-

governors-primary-ballot/

Parker County resident Rick Perry — not the former governor — filed a declaration of candidacy for the GOP gubernatorial primary this week.
At first, this sparked a frenzy over whether former presidential candidate and Texas governor Rick Perry had decided he wanted his old job back. After that claim was disputed, questions were raised over this unknown Rick Perry's existence. Turns out, he is an IT engineer from Springtown who has served as a precinct chair for the Republican Party.

The validity of his gubernatorial candidacy was challenged Tuesday by attorney Eric Opiela who delivered a letter to the Republican Party of Texas (RPT) requesting Perry's removal from the 2022 gubernatorial primary ballot on behalf of a client.

Being a primary election, its oversight is the responsibility of the party rather than the secretary of state.

RPT Chair Matt Rinaldi issued a ruling on Opiela's appeal on Wednesday and denied the request.

The issue at hand is that Perry filed for re-election to his precinct chair position on November 30. Under state code, individuals may not be on the same ballot for two different positions at once. If that happens, "each application filed subsequent to the first one filed is invalid."

On December 12, the day before he filed for governor, Perry sent a letter to Scott Utley, chairman of the Parker County GOP, to withdraw his name from the precinct chair race. That normally triggers the removal automatically, but Opiela's letter alleges the withdrawal isn't valid because it wasn't properly notarized.

"I ask that you immediately reject his application, or in the alternative declare him ineligible, take any and all necessary steps to remove Mr. Perry from the 2022 Republican Primary Ballot for Governor, and notify me when you have done so," Opiela's letter reads.

"If you fail to do so, litigation may be necessary to compel the performance of your duty under the law."

Perry's campaign treasurer is Tony McDonald, an Austin attorney and conservative activist who is on the endorsement list for Don Huffines, one of Governor Greg Abbott's primary opponents.

Reached Wednesday, McDonald pointed to a section of the state election code which both supersedes the section of code Opiela cites and lacks the "acknowledge[ment]" requirement pointed to.

There is also legal precedent on this question. In 1986, a similar situation arose and Texas' Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the section Opiela cited this week "has no application" in situations of a withdrawal from a primary ballot.

RPT's reply to Opiela's letter said, "You rely upon Section 145.001 of the Election Code, which is a general provision for withdrawal of candidates that does require a request be in writing, signed and acknowledged. This section has no application."

The letter then cited that case law precedent as support for its ruling.

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Further, Rinaldi writes, “As an initial matter, it is unclear from your correspondence whether you are making this request in your personal capacity or on behalf of a client. If it is the former, I question your standing to seek a judicial remedy. If it is the latter, please identify on whose behalf this request is being made.”

For a legal challenge to be heard, before its merits are considered, the plaintiff must prove legal standing, or that they were dealt harm by the issue and person at hand. At first glance, it’s likely that the only individuals who might have standing against Rick Perry ineligibly appearing on the ballot are the other GOP gubernatorial candidates.

Abbott is facing the first substantial primary of his political career, headlined by Huffines and Allen West. While not the fruits of his labor, Perry’s spot on the ballot would carry with it considerable name-ID and threaten to siphon off votes from the other candidates.

Neither Opiela nor Perry returned a request for comment after the RPT issued its ruling.

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Not enough voter fraud cases in disputed states to change 2020 election, AP analysis finds
Christina A. Cassidy
Associated Press
December 14, 2021
https://www.12newsnow.com/article/news/nation-world/alleged-voter-fraud-analysis-no-change-to-outcome/507-b8894a38-f7e3-4159-84e7-c53abd4a92c6

ATLANTA — An Associated Press review of every potential case of voter fraud in the six battleground states disputed by former President Donald Trump has found fewer than 475 — a number that would have made no difference in the 2020 presidential election.

Democrat Joe Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by a combined 311,257 votes out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president. The disputed ballots represent just 0.15% of his victory margin in those states.

The cases could not throw the outcome into question even if all the potentially fraudulent votes were for Biden, which they were not, and even if those ballots were actually counted, which in most cases they were not.

The review also showed no collusion intended to rig the voting. Virtually every case was based on an individual acting alone to cast additional ballots.

The findings build on a mountain of other evidence that the election wasn’t rigged, including verification of the results by Republican governors.

The AP review, a process that took months and encompassed more than 300 local election offices, is one the most comprehensive examinations of suspected voter fraud in last year’s presidential election. It relies on information collected at the local level, where officials must reconcile their ballots and account for discrepancies, and includes a handful of separate cases cited by secretaries of state and state attorneys general.

Contacted for comment, Trump repeated a litany of unfounded claims of fraud he had

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made previously, but offered no new evidence that specifically contradicted the AP's reporting. He said a soon-to-come report from a source he would not disclose would support his case, and insisted increased mail voting alone had opened the door to cheating that involved "hundreds of thousands of votes."

"I just don't think you should make a fool out of yourself by saying 400 votes," he said.

These are some of the culprits in the "massive election fraud" Trump falsely says deprived him of a second term:

- A Wisconsin man who mistakenly thought he could vote while on parole.
- A woman in Arizona suspected of sending in a ballot for her dead mother.
- A Pennsylvania man who went twice to the polls, voting once on his own behalf and once for his son.

The cases were isolated. There was no widespread, coordinated deceit.

The cases also underscore that suspected fraud is both generally detected and exceptionally rare.

"Voter fraud is virtually non-existent," said George Christenson, election clerk for Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, where five people statewide have been charged with fraud out of nearly 3.3 million ballots cast for president. "I would have to venture a guess that's about the same odds as getting hit by lightning."

Even in the state with the highest number of potential fraud cases — Arizona, with 198 — they comprised less than 2% of the margin by which Biden won.

Trump has continued to insist that the election was fraudulent by citing a wide range of complaints, many of them involving the expansion of mail voting because of the pandemic. As the Republican weighs another run for president in 2024, he has waded into some GOP primary contests, bestowing endorsements on those who mimic his "Stop the steal" rhetoric and seeking to exact revenge on some who have opposed his efforts to overturn the results.

Trump's false claims of a stolen election fueled the deadly Jan. 6 attempted insurrection at the Capitol, have led to death threats against election officials and have become deeply ingrained within the GOP, with two-thirds of Republicans believing Biden's election is illegitimate. Republican lawmakers in several states have used the false claims as justification to conduct costly and time-consuming partisan election reviews, done at Trump's urging, and add new restrictions for voting.

The number of cases identified so far by local elections officials and forwarded to prosecutors, local law enforcement or secretaries of state for further review undercuts Trump's claim. Election officials also say that in most cases, the additional ballots were never counted because workers did their jobs and pulled them for inspection before they were added to the tally.

"There is a very specific reason why we don't see many instances of fraud, and that is because the system is designed to catch it, to flag it and then hold those people accountable," said Amber McReynolds, a former director of elections in Denver and the founding CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, which promotes mail voting.

The AP's review of cases in the six battleground states found no evidence to support Trump's various claims, which have included unsupported allegations that more votes were tallied than there are registered voters and that thousands of mail-in ballots

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were cast by people who are not on voter rolls. Dozens of state and federal courts have rejected the claims.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates said the AP's reporting offered further proof that the election was fairly conducted and decided, contrary to Trump's claims.

“Each time this dangerous but weak and fear-ridden conspiracy theory has been put forward, it has only cemented the truth more by being completely debunked — including at the hands of elections authorities from both parties across the nation, nonpartisan experts, and over 80 federal judges,” he said.

Experts say to pull off stealing a presidential election would require large numbers of people willing to risk prosecution, prison time and fines working in concert with election officials from both parties who are willing to look the other way. And everyone somehow would keep quiet about the whole affair.

“It would be the most extensive conspiracy in the history of planet Earth,” said David Becker, a senior trial attorney in the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush who now directs the nonprofit Center for Election Innovation & Research.

Separate from the fraud allegations are claims by Trump and his allies that voting systems or ballot tallies were somehow manipulated to steal the election. Judges across the country, of both parties, dismissed those claims. That includes a federal judge in Michigan who ordered sanctions against attorneys allied with Trump for intending to create “confusion, commotion and chaos” in filing a lawsuit about the vote-counting process without checking for evidence to support the claims.

Even Trump’s former attorney general, William Barr, said a month after the election that there was no indication of widespread fraud that could change the result.

For its review, AP reporters in five states contacted roughly 340 election offices for details about every instance of potential voter fraud that was identified as part of their post-election review and certification process.

After an election is over, officials research voter records, request and review additional information if needed from the state or other counties, and eventually decide whether to refer potential fraud cases for further investigation — a process that can take months.

For Wisconsin, the AP relied on a report about fraud investigations compiled by the state and filed public records requests to get the details of each case, in addition to prosecutions that were not initially reported to the state elections commission. Wisconsin is the only one of the six states with a centralized accounting of all potential voter fraud cases.

A state-by-state accounting:

Arizona
Authorities have been investigating 198 possible fraud cases out of nearly 3.4 million votes cast, representing 1.9% of Biden’s margin of victory in the state. Virtually all the cases were in Pima County, home to Tucson, and involved allegations of double voting. The county has a practice of referring every effort to cast a second ballot to prosecutors, something other offices don’t do. In the Pima cases, only one ballot for each voter was counted. So far, nine people have been charged in the state with voting fraud crimes following the 2020 election. Six of those were filed by the state

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attorney general's office, which has an election integrity unit that is reviewing an undisclosed number of additional cases.

Georgia
Election officials in 124 of the state's 159 counties reported no suspicious activity after conducting their post-election checks. Officials in 24 counties identified 64 potential voter fraud cases, representing 0.54% of Biden's margin of victory in Georgia. Of those, 31 were determined to be the result of an administrative error or some other mistake. Eleven counties, most of them rural, either declined to say or did not respond. The state attorney general's office is reviewing about 20 cases referred so far by the state election board related to all elections in 2020, including the primary, but it was not known if any of those overlapped with cases already identified by local election officials.

Michigan
Officials have identified 56 potential instances of voter fraud in five counties, representing 0.04% of Biden's margin of victory in the state. Most of the cases involved two people suspected of submitting about 50 fraudulent requests for absentee ballots in Macomb, Wayne and Oakland counties. All the suspicious applications were flagged by election officials and no ballots were cast improperly.

Nevada
Local officials identified between 93 and 98 potential fraud cases out of 1.4 million ballots cast, representing less than one-third of 1% of Biden's margin of victory. More than half the total — 58 — were in Washoe County, which includes Reno, and the vast majority involved allegations of possible double voting. The statewide total does not include thousands of fraud allegations submitted to the state by local Republicans. Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske has said many of those were based "largely upon an incomplete assessment of voter registration records and lack of information concerning the processes by which these records are compiled and maintained." It's not known how many remain under investigation.

Pennsylvania
Election officials in 11 of the state's 67 counties identified 26 possible cases of voter fraud, representing 0.03% of Biden's margin of victory. The elections office in Philadelphia refused to discuss potential cases with the AP, but the prosecutor's office in Philadelphia said it has not received any fraud-related referrals.

Wisconsin
Election officials have referred 31 cases of potential fraud to prosecutors in 12 of the state's 72 counties, representing about 0.15% of Biden's margin of victory. After reviewing them, prosecutors declined to bring charges in 26 of those cases. Meagan Wolfe, administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, said the number of cases in 2020 was "fairly run of the mill."

AP's review found the potential cases of fraud ran the gamut: Some were attributed to administrative error or voter confusion while others were being examined as intentional attempts to commit fraud. In those cases, many involved people who sought to vote twice — by casting both an absentee and an in-person ballots — or those who cast a ballot for a dead relative such as the woman in Maricopa County, Arizona. Authorities there say she signed her mother's name on a ballot envelope. The woman's mother had died a month before the election.

The cases are bipartisan. Some of those charged with fraud are registered Republicans or told investigators they were supporters of Trump.

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Donald Holz is among the five people in Wisconsin who face voter fraud charges. He said all he wanted to do was vote for Trump. But because he was still on parole after being convicted of felony drunken driving, the 63-year-old retiree was not eligible to do so. Wisconsin is not among the states that have loosened felon voting laws in recent years.

Holz said he had no intention to break the law and only did so after he asked poll workers if it was OK.

“The only thing that helps me out is that I know what I did and I did it with good intentions,” Holz said after an initial court appearance in Fond du Lac. “The guy upstairs knows what I did. I didn’t have any intention to commit election fraud.”

In southeast Pennsylvania, 72-year-old Ralph Thurman, a registered Republican, was sentenced to three years’ probation after pleading guilty to one count of repeat voting. Authorities said Thurman, after voting at his polling place, returned about an hour later wearing sunglasses and cast a ballot in his son’s name.

After being recognized and confronted, Thurman fled the building, officials said. Thurman’s attorney told the AP the incident was the result of miscommunication at the polling place.

Las Vegas businessman Donald “Kirk” Hartle was among those in Nevada who raised the cry against election fraud. Early on, Hartle insisted someone had unlawfully cast a ballot in the name of his dead wife, and state Republicans seized on his story to support their claims of widespread fraud in the state. It turned out that someone had cast the ballot illegally — Hartle, himself. He agreed to plead guilty to a reduced charge of voting more than once in the same election.

Hartle’s attorney said the businessman, who is an executive at a company that hosted a Trump rally before the election, had accepted responsibility for his actions.

Additional fraud cases could still surface in the weeks and months ahead. One avenue for those is the Electronic Registration Information Center, a data-sharing effort among 31 states aimed at improving state voter rolls. The effort also provides states with reports after each general election with information about voters who might have cast ballots in more than one state.

In the past, those lists have generated small numbers of fraud cases. In 2018, for example, Wisconsin used the report to identify 43 additional instances of potential fraud out of 2.6 million ballots cast.

Official post-election audits and other research have shown voter fraud to be exceptionally rare. A nonpartisan audit of Wisconsin’s 2020 presidential election found no evidence of widespread fraud and a Republican lawmaker concluded it showed that elections in the state were “safe and secure,” while also recommending dozens of changes to how elections are run. In Michigan, Republican state senators issued a report earlier this year saying they had found “no evidence of widespread or systematic fraud” in the 2020 election.

Not only do election officials look for fraud, they have procedures to detect and prevent it.

For mail voting, which expanded greatly last year because of the pandemic, election officials log every mail ballot so voters cannot request more than one. Those ballots also are logged when they are returned, checked against registration and, in many

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cases, voter signatures on file to ensure the voter assigned to the ballot is the one who cast it.

If everything doesn't match, the ballot isn't counted.

"Often, we don't get to fraud," said Jennifer Morrell, a former local election official in Utah and Colorado who advises election officials on security and other issues. "Say we have evidence that something might not be correct, we ask the voter to provide additional documentation. If the person doesn't respond, the ballot isn't accepted. The fraud never happened."

If a person who requested a mail ballot shows up at a polling place, this will become apparent when they check in. Typically, poll workers either cancel the ballot that was previously issued, ensuring it's never counted, or ask the voter to complete a provisional ballot that will only be counted if the mail ballot is not.

In Union County, Georgia, someone voted in person and then election officials found their ballot in a drop box. Since the person had already voted, the ballot in the drop box was not counted and the case was referred to the state for investigation, Deputy Registrar Diana Nichols said.

"We can tell pretty quick whenever we pull up that record -- wait a minute, this person has already voted," Nichols said. "I'm not saying it's foolproof. We are all human, and we all make mistakes. But as far as the system is set up, if you follow the rules and the guidelines set up by the state, I think it's a very good system."

The final step is the canvassing process in which election officials must reconcile all their counts, ensuring the number of ballots cast equals the number of voters who voted. Any discrepancies are researched, and election officials provide detailed explanations before the election can be certified.

Often, an administrative error can raise questions that suggest the potential for fraud.

In Forsyth County, Georgia, election officials were asked by Arizona investigators for records confirming that a voter had also cast a ballot in Georgia last November. It turns out that voter didn't cast a ballot but was listed as having done so because their registration number was mistakenly associated with another voter's record in the county's system, according to a letter sent by county election officials.

In other cases, it could be as simple as a voter signing on the wrong line next to another person's name in a paper pollbook at their polling place. Once researched, it quickly becomes clear no fraud occurred.

Republican lawmakers have argued there are security gaps in the process, using concerns of fraud to justify restrictions on voting laws. This has happened even in places where Republican lawmakers have pushed back against Trump's false claims and said the 2020 election was valid.

The review by Republican lawmakers in Michigan that found no systemic fraud cited various claims they had investigated. For example, senators were provided with a list of over 200 voters in Wayne County who were believed to be dead. Of these, the report noted, only two instances involved actual dead voters. The first was due to a clerical error in which a son had been confused with his dead father and the second involved a 92-year-old woman who had died four days before the election.

And yet, Republicans in the state are collecting signatures for a citizen initiative that

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would allow the GOP-controlled legislature to approve voting restrictions and bypass a veto by the Democratic governor. Republicans say mail voting needs to be more secure as more people embrace it.

“These bills will restore confidence in our elections,” said GOP Rep. Ann Bollin, chairwoman of the Michigan House Elections and Ethics Committee and a former township clerk. “Voters want to know their vote will count and that they, and only they, are casting their own ballot.”

Overall, 80% of counties in the six states reviewed by the AP reported no suspicious activity after completing their post-election reviews. This was true of both small and large counties, something experts said was to be expected given how rare voter fraud has been.

Limited instances of fraud do occur, as the AP review illustrates, but safeguards ensure they are few and that they are caught, said Ben Hovland, a Democrat appointed by Trump to serve on the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which supports the state and local officials who administer elections.

“Every credible examination has shown there was no widespread fraud” in the 2020 presidential election, Hovland said. “Time and again when we have heard these claims and heard these allegations, and when you do a real investigation, you see that it is the exception and not the rule.”

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Texas attorney general cannot unilaterally prosecute election cases, state's highest criminal court rules
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
December 15, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/15/ken-paxton-election-prosecute-court/

Texas’ highest court for criminal cases on Wednesday struck down a law that allows the attorney general to unilaterally prosecute election cases.

The state’s Court of Criminal Appeals issued an 8-1 opinion saying a provision of the law violates the separation of powers clause in the Texas Constitution, representing an intrusion by the executive branch into the judicial branch. The attorney general can only get involved in a case when asked to by a district or county attorney, the court said.

Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican who has been aggressive in trying to root out voter fraud, bashed the opinion from the all-GOP court. He said in a tweet that the ruling “could be devastating for future elections in Texas.”

At stake was a part of the election code that says the attorney general, the state’s top law enforcement officer, “may prosecute a criminal offense prescribed by the election laws of this state.”

The provision was thrown into jeopardy by a long-winding case involving Jefferson County Sheriff Zena Stephens. After the county district attorney declined to prosecute Stephens over campaign-finance allegations stemming from the 2016 election, Paxton's office stepped in and obtained an indictment from a grand jury in neighboring Chambers County.

In its opinion, the Court of Criminal Appeals overturned a lower-court ruling that said the election code provision "clearly and unambiguously gives the Attorney General power to prosecute criminal laws prescribed by election laws generally whether those laws are inside or outside the Code."

Rather, the Court of Criminal Appeals said, "the Attorney General can prosecute with the permission of the local prosecutor but cannot initiate prosecution unilaterally."

In his tweet, Paxton said the ruling means "Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas." That is a reference to George Soros, the Democratic megadonor who has become a force in local prosecutor elections.

Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee cheered the ruling. Harris County, the largest in Texas, was the epicenter of election-related litigation in the lead-up to the 2020 election in Texas.

"This is a big win for local government and Texans who are tired of state officials exaggerating voter fraud claims to undermine elections," Menefee tweeted.

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Former HPD captain indicted in 2020 aggravated assault case over false voter fraud claim
Charlie Haldeman
KHOU-TV
December 14, 2021
https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/former-hpd-captain-indicted-in-2020-aggravated-assault-case-over-false-voter-fraud-claim/285-a24374dc-ae3e-47d0-8b1b-e4b7bbe2c69e

HOUSTON — A former Houston Police Department captain accused of causing an accident and holding a man at gunpoint has been indicted by a Harris County grand jury.

Mark Anthony Aguirre is charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, a second-degree felony.

The indictment comes a year after his arrest in connection with the alleged incident.

According to court documents, Aguirre told police shortly after the Oct. 19 incident that he was part of a group of private citizens called "Liberty Center," who were conducting a civilian investigation into an alleged ballot scheme.

Aguirre told investigators he had been conducting surveillance on the victim for four days under a theory the victim was the mastermind of a giant fraud, and there were 750,000 fraudulent ballots in a truck he was driving.

Instead, the victim turned out to be an innocent air conditioner repairman.

According to the documents, Aguirre ran his SUV into the back of the truck to get the repairman to stop and get out. When the technician got out of the truck, Aguirre pointed a handgun at him, forced him to the ground, where Aguirre reportedly put his knee on the man's back. The incident was captured on the body-worn camera of a police officer.

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Aguirre directed police to a parking lot nearby where another suspect, who has not been identified, took the truck, investigators said. There were no ballots in the truck. It was filled with air conditioning parts and tools.

Aguirre's claims of election fraud were found to be baseless after an investigation by Houston police and by the Harris County Precinct 1 Constable's Office, as part of the Harris County Election Security Task Force.

If convicted, Aguirre faces up to 20 years in prison.

Aguirre had been indefinitely suspended from HPD in January 2003.

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County approves reestablished voting districts
Thomas Lott
Laredo Morning Times
December 15, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/County-approves-reestablished-voting-districts-16703941.php

The Webb County Commissioners Court voted unanimously at Monday's meeting to adopt the reestablished county election districts.

As part of the action, which was required "by Order," the county will establish, redefine and renumerate all of the election precincts to conform with the adopted redistricting changes and to comply with population requirements.

Additionally, to the extent legally permissible, it will separate unincorporated territory from incorporated territory of municipalities with a population of 10,000 or more.

There were two locations brought up during Monday's meeting that needed to be addressed and were presented by Webb County Assistant Planning Director Jorge Calderon.

"We've gone through this and worked it out with the elections department. It's in compliance with the state election regulations right now the order as it is," Calderon said. " But we wanted to bring to your attention a couple of issues.

"Section 2 and 3 of the order, basically outlining a couple of VTDs (voting tabulation districts or County Election Precincts) that are underpopulated, but based on their boundaries we can't really change them so they have to stay that way."

Additionally, there was one other issue Calderon brought to the commissioners.

"In Section 3 some VTDs or Election Precincts that are half in, half out on the City of Laredo that we also couldn't mess with based on the boundaries," he said.

"This has nothing to do with commissioners precincts, these are election boundaries within the precincts."

Webb County Judge Tano A. Tijerina made sure to clarify everything had been worked out despite these issues and Calderon confirmed it had.

Another commissioner made sure to confirm there was no way to fix the underpopulation problem of the two districts.

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“So only 258 and 457 shall remain as is even though they have less than 100 voters?” he asked.

“Because of the underpopulation yes,” Calderon replied. “As is. There’s other election precincts that we did not change but these two have to stay even though they’re underpopulated.”

“But they couldn’t be absorbed by an adjacent precinct?” the commissioner asked.

“No, based on their boundaries we can’t change those lines at this time,” Calderon said.

“Because some other boundary interferes?” the commissioner asked.

“Yes. Some other boundary interferes,” Calderon replied.

“And this is kosher?” the commissioner asked. “We’re doing it?”

“Yes,” Calderon replied. “This will become effective Jan. 1 as adopted.”

In adopting the reestablished precincts, the County Judge is authorized to execute all required documents and directives to the County Clerk and the Elections Administrator and staff are required to publish required notices in the newspaper and the county’s official website.

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Last minute campaign announcement creates opening for Bexar County commissioner in Pct. 3. What happens next?
Fares Sabawi
KSAT-TV
December 15, 2021
https://www.ksat.com/news/local/2021/12/15/last-minute-campaign-announcement-creates-opening-for-bexar-county-commissioner-in-pct-3-what-happens-next/

SAN ANTONIO – On Monday evening, just an hour before the filing deadline expired, Bexar County Pct. 3 Commissioner Trish DeBerry made a surprise announcement that she is running for county judge.

The last minute filing will change the makeup of the Commissioners Court, as DeBerry must resign in order to embark on the political campaign according to state law. DeBerry still had roughly three years left before her term expired.

Shortly after DeBerry’s announcement, Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff said DeBerry will remain in the office in “hold over status” until he appoints an interim commissioner within 60 days.

That commissioner would only serve through November, when voters will decide on who will fill out the remainder of the term, according to the Secretary of State’s Office.

Candidates interested in succeeding DeBerry have until 6 p.m. on Dec. 20 to file for the race with their respective political party, officials confirmed on Wednesday.

Those candidates will have to win their party’s nomination during the March 1 primary to appear on the ballot during the general election in November.

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Though the North Side seat has been reliably Republican in recent years, Democrat Christine Hortick ran a competitive race against DeBerry in 2020. In the end, DeBerry edged out Hortick with nearly 55% of the vote.

As of Wednesday, no candidate has yet filed for the Pct. 3 race.

DeBerry is only the second Republican to file for the county judge race. Nathan Buchanan, a small business owner, filed for the race in November. Several candidates are running for the Democratic nomination, including mayoral Chief of Staff Ivalis Meza Gonzalez, State Rep. Ina Minjarez, former mayoral candidate Gerard Ponce and former District Court Judge Peter Sakai.

Bexar County voters have not elected a Republican for the county judge office since 1998, when Cyndi Taylor Krier ran unopposed. Krier stepped down in 2001 to join the UT System Board of Regents. Wolff was appointed in her place, and has remained in that office ever since. Earlier this year, Wolff confirmed he will not run again after a long career of public service.

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'Prison gerrymandering:' How inmates are helping the Texas GOP maintain its power
Lauren McGaughy and Ari Sen
Dallas Morning News
December 15, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/investigations/2021/12/15/prison-gerrymandering-how-inmates-are-helping-the-texas-gop-maintain-its-power/

On paper, the Tennessee Colony area looks like a small but growing East Texas community of 16,000 residents.

But in reality, it's not much more than a country road intersection anchored by a feed store, a church and a shuttered post office. Locals say the biggest draws are Taco Tuesdays at the gas station and the monthly meeting at the Masonic lodge. Only about 2,000 people actually live in this part of rural Anderson County.

The other 13,344 are prisoners here.

Nearly a quarter of a million people were incarcerated in Texas when the Census was taken last year. When lawmakers redrew the state's voting maps this fall, these inmates were counted in the prison towns where they were locked up, rather than where they lived beforehand.

A Dallas Morning News analysis of Census and prison data found this practice, which opponents call "prison gerrymandering," inflates the political power of Republican districts while draining clout from Democratic strongholds. It also makes more conservative, rural areas of the state look larger and more diverse than they truly are.

Republicans say the maps are legal and fair. They argue there isn't a viable alternative for counting prisoners, and changing that won't shift the balance of power in Texas to Democrats.

But The News found the state's new legislative maps would look significantly different if Texas stopped this practice. Reallocating prisoners to the place where they were charged would cause nearly one in five counties — most of which went for Donald

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Trump last year — to lose population to more urban, liberal areas. Not counting prisoners at all would throw more than two dozen House districts out of population boundaries, making them subject to court challenge.

Experts say The News' findings raise questions about diluting the minority vote, fair representation and the principle of "one person, one vote." Incarcerated people in effect become ghost constituents, they said, unwittingly boosting the power of prison towns, and helping Republicans stay in power, while largely lacking the right to vote.

This and other concerns about the state's most recent redistricting plan have led to a half dozen lawsuits alleging the Texas GOP illegally gerrymandered districts this year to disenfranchise Black and Hispanic communities and retain control in the long term. Last month, a state prisoner from Grand Prairie filed a suit to force Texas to stop counting inmates in their cells.

He's asking for class action status for incarcerated people across the state.

"I'm hoping to be their voice," Damon James Wilson wrote in a letter from his prison cell in Fort Bend County. "I pray it will be the catalyst to spark a change in this manipulative process."

In the past decade, a dozen states have changed how they count incarcerated people. Texas' GOP legislative majority, however, shows no signs of changing unless one of the pending lawsuits against the state is successful.

Prisoners and redistricting
State Rep. Jasmine Crockett watches Corinth Street pass by outside the car window.

Baptist churches and tire shops line the avenue. Crockett points out duplexes built by the area's earliest Black residents. Behind her, the downtown Dallas skyline shines in the morning sun.

This east Oak Cliff zip code sends the most people to state prisons, according to information self-reported by about 100,000 inmates incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Though they're locked up in units from Amarillo to Edinburg, Crockett considers these men and women to be members of her district, and says they should be counted as such.

"The name of the game here in the state of Texas is we use Black and brown bodies to gain power," Crockett said. "Our constituents, sadly, we know are going to be arrested at a higher rate and incarcerated at a higher rate — and they're not being counted where they actually reside."

Every 10 years, the U.S. Census provides a snapshot of the country's population, which is used to redraw electoral maps that last for a decade, a process called redistricting.

The Census Bureau has counted incarcerated people at the lockups where they are held since the first survey in 1790. Criminal justice and anti-gerrymandering activists began criticizing the policy in the 1980s and 90s, as states built more prisons, many in rural areas, to accommodate rising inmate populations.

The Census Bureau decided to keep its policy in place for the 2020 national headcount. But states have the flexibility to allocate incarcerated people where they want during redistricting.

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The 12 states that have decided to ban “prison gerrymandering” since 2010 include California, New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Most now count the majority of prisoners at their last known home address. Some exclude federal prisoners or those serving life sentences from their district population counts; others only reallocate incarcerated people for state legislative, not congressional, redistricting.

But the Texas Legislature, controlled by Republicans in both chambers, continues counting incarcerated people where they are held when redrawing state and congressional maps this year.

The News’ data analysis shows that this practice transfers political representation away from Democratic strongholds to GOP counties with prisons, since most rural counties lean conservative and large cities are more liberal. The decision, if it remains unchallenged, will help the GOP remain in power even as Texas becomes more urban and more diverse.

Texas added nearly 4 million people in the last decade, Census data show, and Hispanics accounted for nearly half of this growth. The boost helped Texas pick up two additional congressional seats this year. But Democrats complain this diverse population growth was not reflected in the electoral maps the GOP majority created. The two new U.S. House seats both favor white candidates, and state Senate maps split communities of color in Tarrant County.

Including jails, federal and state prisons and detention centers, Texas incarcerated more people than any other state, last year’s Census data show.

Counting these people at their place of confinement helped Republicans, The News analysis found. It’s impossible to know how these incarcerated people would vote. But while many inmates in state prisons were charged in urban areas, and most are not white, the vast majority were drawn into GOP districts.

According to The News’ analysis, Republicans in the state Legislature will represent two-thirds of incarcerated people under the newly redrawn maps. The number is even higher for the U.S. Congress: 76% of people incarcerated at Census time were drawn into districts represented by a Republican in Washington.

Two state lawmakers saw their district numbers inflated most by the count of incarcerated people: Rep. Kyle Kacal of College Station and Cody Harris of Palestine, both Republicans. One in 10 people in Kacal’s district, where death row and the prisons department headquarters is located, is behind bars.

In Harris’ district, which includes Tennessee Colony in Anderson County and all or part of three other counties in East Texas, nearly 8% are incarcerated.

How would the Texas maps change without prisoners?
The News analyzed how the state’s new electoral maps would be affected if incarcerated people were counted differently. We used data on more than 140,000 inmates incarcerated in state-run jails and prisons when the Census was taken. This analysis does not include the effect of moving federal inmates or those housed in local jails or ICE detention centers.

Of the 232 counties that went for Donald Trump in the 2020 election, 46 would shrink in population if incarcerated people were counted in the county where they were charged. This is the best measure The News could use for previous residence, since state and federal prison agencies declined to release comprehensive data on inmates’ previous home addresses.

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The 46 counties would lose more than 104,000 people, The News' analysis shows. When added together, pro-Trump counties would lose nearly 52,000 people. Nearly all of them — 49,667 people — would be reallocated back to one of the state's five largest counties, which all went for President Joe Biden last year, with more than 11,000 going to Dallas County.

The News analysis also found counting incarcerated people at their prison address hurts GOP counties without lockups. McLennan, Smith and Montgomery Counties, all of which went for Trump in 2020, would gain more than 2,500 people each if incarcerated people were moved back to the county where they were charged.

If prisoners were excluded from population counts altogether, The News found that 29 state House districts might need to be redrawn. This is because every Texas legislative district is meant to represent roughly the same amount of people, and there should be no more than a 10% difference in population between the smallest and largest districts.

Those that don't meet this requirement could be challenged in court; they are about equally split between Democrats and Republicans.

Two state Senate districts would come within 1% of crossing the 10% population gap rule if inmate counts were zeroed out: those represented by Sen. Charles Perry of Lubbock and Kel Seliger of Amarillo, both Republicans.

Perry declined to comment for this story. Seliger, who announced his retirement this year, said lawmakers must ensure they are following constitutional rules about equal representation and minority voting rights when drawing new maps. Other tactics within those rules that may help one party over the other, he said, are fair game.

"I'm in favor of anything that benefits Republicans," Seliger said.

Congressional districts are meant to be as equal as possible, representing just fewer than 767,000 people each in Texas. Without the incarcerated population, there would be a 2.9% population gap between the largest and smallest districts.

During redistricting this year, Crockett filed a bill to require incarcerated people to be counted in their home districts. It never got a hearing. Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson, her predecessor in the House, as well as other members of the Texas Legislative Black Caucus have also repeatedly backed this bill — without success.

"People don't stick around the area where they were incarcerated after they are released. They go back home," Johnson said. "Counting them as part of the population of any other city or county during their prison term does not make any sense — except as a way to boost the population of rural areas for political purposes at the expense of cities such as Dallas."

GOP: Prisoners a 'rounding error'
Experts acknowledge that Texas won't suddenly turn blue if "prison gerrymandering" is banned.

In a state of 29 million, incarcerated people account for less than 1% of the population. Plus, as the party in power, Republicans could simply tweak district boundary lines to make up for a few thousand prisoners here or there.

But critics note it's one of several tools the GOP uses to maintain power in a rapidly

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changing state. While they are a fraction of the population, there are more incarcerated people than needed for an entire House district and nearly one-third of a congressional district.

“The dynamics just described obviously favor white, rural Texas,” said Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, chairman of the Texas House Democratic Caucus. “[It] real questions of fairness.”

Rory Kramer, an associate professor at Villanova University who is completing a nationwide analysis of incarceration and redistricting, said The News’ findings did not surprise him.

“As your analysis demonstrates, this harms equal representation for people who live in neighborhoods with high incarceration rates,” Kramer said. “There’s no reason why living near a prison should mean some Texans have greater voices in the state legislature than other Texans.”

Mike Wessler, communications director for criminal justice advocacy group the Prison Policy Initiative, echoed Kramer’s concern: “It distorts political representation at all levels of government.”

Speaker of the Texas House Dade Phelan declined to comment for this story, citing pending lawsuits. Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Texas House Redistricting Committee Chairman Todd Hunter, all Republicans, also did not weigh in on the findings.

Jim Murphy, chairman of the House Republican Caucus, told The News that changing how prisoners are counted was not on the table this year.

“The caucus has not discussed that at all,” Murphy, R-Houston, said in October.

Because Texas is so massive, he insisted counting prisoners differently would have a minimal impact on the final maps — and definitely would not have upset the overall balance of power.

“It’s a rounding error,” Murphy said.

In some rural areas of Texas, however, prisoners are not a negligible fraction. In 24 counties, they accounted for at least one in 10 people counted in last year’s Census.

In Anderson County, they make up 23% of the population.

Plantations to prisons

Tennessee Colony was first settled as a plantation town. For decades, slaves toiled in its cotton fields. But it struggled to retain more than a few hundred people after the Civil War, as residents were drawn to Palestine, the Anderson County seat, and its new railroad.

The first state lockup arrived in the mid-1960s. Thirty years later, the county’s five prisons were the single largest employer.

Many of Texas’ other 100 state-run units were built in rural areas, where local leaders either balked less at housing inmates or actively lobbied to bring prisons to town. By contrast, just a handful were built in the state’s largest cities.

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There's little evidence on Palestine's tidy Main Street that thousands of men are behind bars just down the road. A half dozen antique stores and even more churches dot downtown. Victorian mansions of yellow and blue, relics of the railroad's heyday, decorate its quiet neighborhoods.

Chatting over chicken salad sandwiches at a local diner, the former mayor, Steve Presley, said rural communities have shouldered the responsibility for guarding these inmates for decades. It's only fair, he argued, that they should be able to reap the benefits, too.

"They should be counted here," Presley said. Big cities could claim prisoners, he added, but then they should have to guard them, too. "If Houston wants that fix, then build those units in Houston."

According to state demographer Lloyd Potter, while Texas is growing, the population has steadily been shifting from rural to urban and suburban areas. Since 2010, he said 134 mostly rural counties have actually lost population.

Keeping prisons open and full helps mitigate the drain. Anderson County has lost about 500 people in the last decade, Census data show. Without prisoners, the drop would have been much more severe.

Counting inmates in their cells also has an effect on another demographic trend: racial diversity. In majority white Anderson County, more than 5,000 of the county's 11,430 Black residents are actually behind bars, and two-thirds of its prison population was Black or Hispanic when the Census was taken.

This is also true statewide. Texas is 12.6% African American but one in three state inmates are Black, the Census and state prison data show.

Rep. Harris, of Palestine, declined to comment for this storyState Sen. Robert Nichols said he doesn't know of a feasible alternative.

"I'm not so sure it really matters that much," Nichols, R-Jacksonville, said.

But some county officials have pursued another way for years: Don't count prisoners at all.

Just as state lawmakers are in charge of legislative and congressional maps, local officials draw new county districts for positions like commissioners court, justices of the peace and constables after each Census. Many smaller, conservative counties with large inmate populations have long chosen to exclude incarcerated people when redrawing local maps because prisoners would skew their demographics.

Anderson County Judge Robert Johnston said counting the local 13,344 prisoners as constituents would inflate his actual population and result in one of his four commissioners representing only a handful of people outside the prison walls.

"[Prisoners are] not out roaming the streets, spending money in my county," he said.

County judges also said that it wouldn't be fair to count prisoners because they can't vote. This is mostly, but not totally, true.

State elections law allows convicted felons to vote if they are in active appeals. But they can only vote in the district where they lived prior to being incarcerated, the Department of Criminal Justice told The News. This allows Republicans who

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represent prison towns to maintain the benefit of counting inmates in their district without having to worry about winning their vote.

One former prisoner who was released in May from Anderson County's Coffield Prison was surprised to learn that he will be counted as a member of the community there for the next decade, even though he has returned home to North Texas. The News is not naming him because he is on parole and fears reprisals for talking to the media.

"We can't vote. Our voice has no say," he said. "And then using us to fatten up the Census in those towns — That isn't right."

Wilson, the Dallas area man suing to overturn the new congressional maps, believes that legislators used prisoners like him to advance their own political ambitions.

He intends to move back to Grand Prairie after he is released from this, his fourth, time behind bars and wants to be counted in Dallas County, not Potter, where he was incarcerated when the Census was taken last year.

If Wilson fails, he'll be counted in the 13th Congressional District, which is anchored in Amarillo and represented by Rep. Ronny Jackson, a Republican. If he wins, Wilson will be added to Democrat Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson's district in Dallas.

Johnson, who has represented the district since 1993, announced her retirement this year. Last month, she endorsed a successor: Jasmine Crockett.

"I plan to pursue [prison gerrymandering], federally," Crockett vowed. "I don't believe it should be a state specific issue. It's about doing things that are fair."

Methodology

To conduct this analysis, The News began with three data files: one from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice with each incarcerated persons' name, county of charge and the facility where they were housed on March 31, 2020; another from TDCJ showing the location of each prison and a third from the Census Bureau containing the population of every county in 2020. These three files were joined together for analysis.

To conduct the reallocation analysis, The News wrote a script in the Python programming language to loop through every row of the combined data, adding one person to the county where the prisoner was charged and subtracting one person from the county where they were incarcerated, to generate final adjusted populations for every county in Texas.

The News joined a fourth data table showing county election results for 2020, obtained from the Texas Secretary of State's office, to the combined data.

The first map of prison population was generated by joining a count of all incarcerated adults in every 2020 Census Tract to a Census geospatial file of these tracts in QGIS. This was then exported as a combined shapefile and styled in Tableau.

To conduct the analysis on excluding inmates, The News reduced each district's population by its total population of incarcerated adults, as counted by the Census Bureau and then adjusted the ideal district size by the total statewide incarcerated population. The News then calculated which districts, by population size, would fall outside of the 10% maximum-minimum population threshold.

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To conduct the demographic analysis, The News used the March TDCJ data and 2020 Census Bureau data for adult correctional facilities (group quarters, institutionalized population). This was compared to the 2020 Census Bureau racial demographic data for Anderson County.

The News used the March TDCJ data to determine sentencing and projected release data for Anderson County prisons in state-run facilities. Texas counties with the highest incarceration rates were determined using the 2020 Census Bureau data for adult correctional facilities.

TDCJ provided The News with data of the number of incarcerated people who reported living in specific zip codes prior to incarceration. TDCJ warned this data was incomplete and self-reported. This data was used solely to determine, to the best of The News' ability, which zip code sent the most people to state-run jails and prisons.

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March Primary brings contested Taylor County judge race, but many candidates are unopposed
Brian Bethel
Abilene Reporter-News
December 15, 2021
https://www.reporternews.com/story/news/2021/12/15/primary-bring-contested-county-judge-race-some-unopposed-races/8908992002/

A contested race for Taylor County judge has emerged, while turnover in other areas of the county has put new names on the ballot for the March party primaries.

Filings indicate change is coming in several areas, including the position of county clerk and several justice of the peace slots.

The position of county judge, held by Downing Bolls since 2010, will see a two-man race, consisting of Taylor County Assistant District Attorney Phil Crowley and Scott Lebowitz, who formerly worked for the Taylor County Sheriff's Office.

Bolls, a former TV news anchor, first was appointed by commissioners after Judge George Newman retired, then was elected to the office.

No one filed locally as a Democrat in the primary for county offices.

At the state level, Rep. Stan Lambert drew a Democrat Linda Goolsbee as an opponent for District 7.

State Sen. Charles Perry is unopposed in District 28.

Local Democratic Party chairwoman Elizabeth Smyser and Republican Party chairman Chris Carnohan, both incumbents, did not draw opponents, according to the listings.

Candidates are listed on the Texas secretary of state's website.

County Judge race heats up

Lebowitz, in a statement about his candidacy, said he brings 32 years of experience in personnel management, budgeting and law enforcement.

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He has been a resident of Taylor County for 17 years and is a 20-year retired Air Force veteran.

He served at Dyess Air Force Base from 1992-98 in the 96th Security Police Squadron until he was transferred, returning here in 2004.

He continued his career in public service by accepting a position with the sheriff's office in its adult detention facility, where he attained the rank of sergeant. He became a certified peace officer in 2010.

In 2015, he laterally transferred within the county to the Road and Bridge Department in Precinct 2.

Lebowitz has served as a volunteer firefighter with volunteer departments in the cities of Tye and Merkel, also working for Rural Metro Ambulance in Abilene and volunteering with Merkel EMS, he said.

His experience in law enforcement and public safety will aid him in performing required judicial duties, he said, including emergency management, matters of probate and mental health commitments, juvenile cases and guardianships.

"When it comes to the budget I will ensure that our tax dollars are spent wisely," he said. "I also look forward to working with other government entities as needed to ensure the forward progression of Taylor County."

Crowley seeks office

Crowley, who announced his candidacy in September, said he brings "experience and legal knowledge" that will serve him in probate, guardianship, mental health commitment and occasional juvenile law matters heard by the county judge.

He graduated from the Abilene Independent School District and Hardin-Simmons University. He then graduated from Texas Wesleyan School of Law (now Texas A&M School of Law) and immediately returned home to practice.

If elected, his experience would help "efficiently manage the court's civil docket," he said, adding that he also brought experience as a small businessman with his own law practice.

He promised a "capability to make tough decisions daily on felony cases," and said he would set budget priorities to make sure the county's public safety needs are being met.

He said he would bring "strong conservative leadership and knowledge of Taylor County government structure" to the judge's role as the county's administrator.

He also would bring an understanding of the structure and organization of county government through his own experience as a county employee, he said.

"I want to make sure we have someone in that job who cares about government and cares about delivering good service to our constituents," Crowley said.

New blood
Several new candidates seeking office are unopposed:

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► Brandi DeRemer, a former Taylor County clerk's office employee, announced her intention to seek that role after Larry Bevill, the elected clerk for 15 years, announced plans to retire.

DeRemer has worked for Taylor County since 2003, and is currently serving in Haig's office as court administrator.

► Court clerk Shawna Joiner put in a solo bid for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1, Place 2, an office presently held by Sparky Dean.

Dean said Wednesday that while he might not rule out future political endeavors, he and his wife have trips to take and some independent ventures to explore.

Joiner previously ran for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1, Place 1, against incumbent Mike McAuliffe in 2019.

►Unopposed is Earl Donnell of Tuscola, who put in a bid for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 3.

That position is currently held by Bob Shea Jr., who said Wednesday he did not planned to run again.

Incumbents and others

A number of incumbent county employees didn't draw opponents in their races, including County Commissioner Kyle Kendrick, County Court at Law No. 1 Judge Robert Harper, County Court at Law No. 2 Judge Harriett Haag and Treasurer Lesa Hart Crosswhite.

Incumbent Justice of the Peace Robert Jones, Precinct 2, and David Doherty, Precinct 4, also are unopposed.

Doherty, who was chief deputy for the Sheriff's Office, replaced Frank Cleveland, who retired in June.

Cleveland had served in the Precinct 4 position for almost 23 years.

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Primaries are set for Texas gubernatorial race. See who's running
Ali Linan
CNHI News
December 14, 2021
https://www.cnhinews.com/cnhi/article_6ab29b18-5c67-11ec-abad-63e751fa4bee.html

AUSTIN — Twelve candidates— seven Republicans and six Democrats — have thrown their hats in the race for Texas' highest office and will face primaries in March.

The filing period for the 2022 Texas gubernatorial race closed at 6 p.m. Monday. Now, candidates will face a primary on March 1 that will narrow the field to a single candidate for each party, unless there is a runoff where no one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote. In that case, a primary runoff election will take place on May 24. Election Day is Nov. 8.

Texas voters elect a governor every four years. The governor operates as the state's

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chief executive and makes policy recommendations as well as appoints the Secretary of State and other members of boards and commissions, according to the state website.

As of 9:30 a.m. Dec. 15, the following candidates have been officially accepted into the primary race, according to the Texas Secretary of State website:

Republican candidates:

- Greg Abbott—incumbent
- Paul Belew—attorney
- Danny Harrison—small business owner
- Kandy Kaye Horn—philanthropist
- Don Huffines—real estate
- Chad Prather—television host
- Allen West—retired military

Democratic candidates:

- Inocencio Barrieniez—retired
- Michael Cooper—automotive executive
- Joy Diaz—former reporter
- R. Star Locke—veteran
- Beto O'Rourke—organizer
- Rich Wakeland—engineer/attorney

In the 2022 election, Texans will vote for all major statewide offices including lieutenant governor, attorney general, comptroller, railroad commission and state board of education.

Every state house and senate seat is also up for reelection following redistricting, as well as every U.S. House seat — a total of 38 after Texas gained two seats because of population growth.

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See who has filed for candidacy in Harris County ahead of the March 2022 primaries
Hannah Zedaker
Community Impact
December 15, 2021
https://communityimpact.com/houston/spring-klein/election/2021/12/13/see-who-has-filed-for-candidacy-in-harris-county-ahead-of-the-march-2022-primaries/

Nearly 100 candidates have filed for Harris County positions ahead of the March 2022 primaries, as of the candidate filing deadline Dec. 13, according to the Texas Secretary of State website.

The winners for each party in the March primaries will determine which candidates will be on the ballot in the November general election. Of note, 11 candidates have filed for county judge, including incumbent Lina Hidalgo; seven candidates have filed for Precinct 2 county commissioner, including incumbent Adrian Garcia; and seven candidates have filed for Precinct 4 county commissioner, including incumbent R. Jack Cagle.

Ahead of the March 2022 primaries, the first day to apply for a ballot by mail will be

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Jan. 1 and the last day will be Feb. 18 (received not postmarked); the last day to receive ballots by mail will be March 1. Additionally, the last day to register to vote in the March 2022 primaries will be Jan. 31. Early voting will run Feb. 14-25 and election day will be March 1.

Through Harris County's countywide polling place program, registered voters may cast their ballots at any vote center countywide during both early voting and on election day.

For more information about voting in Harris County, click here.

*Indicates incumbent

County Judge

Hector Bolanos (R)

Martina Lemond Dixon (R)

Robert Dorris (R)

Oscar Gonzales (R)

Warren Howell (R)

Randall Kubosh (R)

Vidal Martinez (R)

Alex Mealer (R)

Ahmad R. "Rob-Beto" Hassan (D)

Lina Hidalgo* (D)

Georgia D. Provost (D)

County Civil Court at Law No. 1

James Lombardino (R)

Audrie Lawton Evans* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 2

Clyde Raymond Leuchtag (R)

Jim F. Kovach* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 3

Lashawna A. Williams* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 4

Brian Staley (R)

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David M. Patronella (D)

M. K. Monica Singh (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 1

Alex Salgado* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 2

Paula Goodhart (R)

Ronnisha Bowman* (D)

Jannell Robles (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 3

Leslie Johnson (R)

Staci Biggar (D)

Porscha Natasha Brown (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 4

Zachary Gibson (R)

Shannon Brichelle Baldwin* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 5

Elizabeth Buss (R)

Carlos Aguayo (D)

David Marcel Fleischer* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 6

Mark Montgomery (R)

Selina Alaniz (D)

Kelley Andrews* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 7

Mauricio Vazquez (D)

Andrew A. Wright* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 8

Mark Goldberg (R)

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Erika Ramirez (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 9

Toria J. Finch* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 10

Dan Spjut (R)

Juanita Jackson (D)

Thuy Le (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 11

Daniel Simons (R)

Sedrick T. Walker II* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 12

Genesis E. Draper* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 13

Lance Long (R)

Raul Rodriguez* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 14

Je'rell A. Rogers (D)

DAvid L. Singer* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 15

Tonya Jones* (D)

Probate Court No. 1

Loyd Wright (R)

Jerry Simoneaux* (D)

Probate Court No. 2

Pamela Medina (D)

Michael Newman* (D)

Probate Court No. 3

Rory Olsen (R)

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Jason Cox* (D)

Probate Court No. 4

Will Archer (R)

James Horwitz* (D)

District Clerk

Chris Daniel (R)

Desiree Broadnax (D)

Marilyn Burgess* (D)

County Clerk

Stan Stanart (R)

Teneshia Hudspeth* (D)

County Treasurer

Eric Dick (R)

Kyle Scott (R)

Dylan Osborne* (D)

Carla L. Wyatt (D)

Harris County Department of Education, Place 1

Ben Saldana (R)

Amy Hinojosa* (D)

Harris County Department of Education, Place 2

Danielle Dick (R)

Andrea Duhon* (D)

County Commissioner Precinct 2

Daniel N. Jason (R)

John Manlove (R)

Jack Morman (R)

Jerry Mouton (R)

Richard Vega (R)

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Adrian Garcia* (D)

Gary Harrison (D)

County Commissioner Precinct 4

R. Jack Cagle* (R)

Lesley Briones (D)

Gina Calanni (D)

Bejamin "Ben" Chou (D)

Clarence Miller (D)

Jeff Stauber (D)

Ann Williams (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2

Steve Duble (D)

Victor Lombrana (D)

Chris Watson (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 2, Place 2

Blair McClure (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 3, Place 2

Denise Graves (R)

Lucia Bates* (D)

Herbert Alexander Sanchez (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 5, Place 2

Zee Adam Gire (R)

Eman Afshar (D)

Roderick D. Rodgers (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 6, Place 2

Luis Garza (D)

Angela D. Rodriguez* (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 7, Place 2

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Sharon Burney* (D)

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Senate Democrats push to pass voting rights bills by Christmas
Raquel Martin
Nexstar
December 15, 2021
https://www.everythinglubbock.com/news/washington-dc/democrats-split-on-changing-senate-rules-to-pass-voting-rights-legislation/

WASHINGTON (NEXSTAR) — Democrats are renewing their call to pass voting rights legislation before heading home for the holidays. The trouble is not every Democrat is on board.

“We must deal with this issue now,” Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., said. “The judgment of history is upon us.”

On the Senate floor Tuesday, Warnock said Democrats should change Senate rules to get the job done without Republicans.

“We’ve decided we can do it for the economy but not for the democracy,” Warnock said. “How do we in good conscious justify doing one without the other?”

With President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better Plan likely stalled until the New Year, a growing number of Democrats are backing Warnock’s call to tackle voting rights now.

“I’m completely inspired by and agree with what he said,” Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said.

“If we don’t modify the filibuster to modify voting rights then we’re going to lose Democracy,” Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., said.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said federal legislation is needed to combat a wave of new state voting rules as Michigan is “one of the states where that’s playing out in real time.”

On Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., voiced his support but stopped short of endorsing the new timeline.

“There is universal consensus in our caucus that we need to pass legislation,” Schumer said.

The problem is, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said he will only support a bipartisan effort. This renewed push comes after Senate Republicans have already struck down voting rights legislation three times this year, and Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said its for good reason.

“It’s a federal takeover bill and it’s a democrat party protection bill,” Hawley said.

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Study to look at relief route for Mines Road traffic
Thomas Lott
Laredo Morning Times

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December 15, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/insider/article/Study-to-look-at-relief-route-for-Mines-16703901.php

City officials are now working with the Regional Mobility Authority on relieving congestion on FM 1472 and Mines Road.

Jed Brown, who was appointed as the presiding officer of the Webb County, City of Laredo Regional Mobility Authority by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott back in 2019, told the Metropolitan Planning Organization during a meeting last month that the RMA was ready to participate on what is known to the city as the "River Road Project."

Brown said the RMA Board passed a resolution one day prior to the Nov. 17 meeting to work with the MPO on the project and to perform an "alignment study" which would map out a potential avenue west of Mines Road to give passenger vehicles relief from tractor-trailer traffic.

Part of the study would be to find out exactly where the road would start and where it could possibly finish. As of right now, the potential avenue starts where River Bank Road intersects with Aquero Boulevard and ends several miles north on FM 1472.

"That's part of the alignment study, where the logical location for that road could be," Brown said.

"The motion that was approved by the RMA was that we would partner with the MPO on that. We did not have that project on our radar screen, but once we really looked at the project, we saw the merit."

The RMA's job is to assist the establishment of a comprehensive transportation system to directly benefit the traveling public of the area through the development of additional transportation alternatives within the region.

The problem

Traffic congestion on Mines Road has been a topic of discussion in Laredo for years. Even Rep. Henry Cuellar brought up the issue in September when discussing the construction on one of the bridges going to Mexico.

City Councilmember Vanessa Perez represents District VII where Mines Road sits. She believes a project like the one the RMA will be researching needs to be done for the good of the people in that area.

"With the expansion of the World Trade Bridge on all these outlets, it's going to alleviate some of the traffic that we have now but it's also going to cause more traffic," she said at the Nov. 17 meeting. "There's going to be more development, there's going to be more trucks, and I think this project here is pretty much our only way out."

Laredo is the largest inland port in the United States and Nuevo Laredo is the largest in Latin America. More than 47% of United States international trade and more than 36% of Mexican international trade crosses through the Laredo Port of Entry.

On Mines Road, there sits multiple facilities where trucks pick up and drop off goods which results in heavy traffic throughout the day. Muller Elementary is just off of Mines Road which presents a challenge for many parents getting to the school and making their way back home during school pickup and drop-off hours.

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This situation prompted Brown to see the need for relief at this location.

“For us, largely, it’s a safety factor,” he said. “If that road is constructed and tractor-trailer traffic is not allowed on the road, but yet, you can have pedestrian vehicles, smaller vehicles, school buses and emergency services vehicles on that road only, it makes a lot of sense for parents and school buses getting children to all the schools up and down the Mines Road, never having to travel on the Mines Road probably.”

What would RMA be doing

With the RMA’s approved resolution the day before the Nov. 17 meeting, they agreed to work on the River Road project with the city. What that means is they would both map out potential tracks for the road as well as research the potential cost of said roads.

The RMA does not yet have a cost estimate for what a road would cost. That would come with the study.

The study — what Brown called an “alignment study,” which he said might not be exactly what it will be called — carries with it an estimated cost of $250,000, but that number cannot be exceeded. It could cost less but it will not cost more, according to the RMA.

Laredo and RMA would likely partner on this study and share the cost.

A question on studies

Congestion on Mines Road has been an issue for a while. The city, county and even RMA and TxDOT have done studies on potential solutions for the problem in the past but no changes have come about from those studies yet.

One study done on the North Laredo area was one costing $675,000, which gave TxDOT and RMA a “bird’s-eye view” of the area several years ago. This particular study would be more specific and potentially determine an exact track for the relief road to take.

However, with all of the studies that have been done in the last several years, Webb Co. Judge Tano Tijerina — who sits on the MPO — had some questions about the value of this one.

“I’m one of these guys that … when we’re paying this amount of money for studies and studies and studies and studies and nothing’s getting done, I just feel like we’re just spinning our wheels and getting nothing done,” he said. “And I’m not going against anybody here. I’m not trying to put anybody in a bad light. But if we’re spending the money, we should have some kind of results.”

Tijerina made a motion which passed unanimously asking for the MPO to collect every study done on the area by the city, county, RMA and TxDOT for the past eight years.

Brown was appointed to his position at the RMA in 2019 by Abbott. He was not part of the RMA’s study with TxDOT, so he cannot speak to the lack of action that has come out of studies on possible relief of traffic congestion in the area.

However, he said he wants this study the RMA is doing to specifically be the one to plot out the relief route residents have been wanting.

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“It has to be an actionable study,” Brown said. “That’s the way I look at it. It has to be something that the work product that’s developed from it is something that … the alignment that’s ultimately selected hopefully is a result of this study.”

Funding

The RMA and the City of Laredo still have to iron out some things on the cost of the study, but city officials also wondered out loud at the meeting if there was a way to find alternative funding for the eventual road path selected by the study as opposed to paying for it with local funds.

“I was just thinking, maybe, have a setup to where we can get maybe some fed monies and use that as a security road,” Tijerina said.

“I’m just trying to find different alternatives, different monies, trying to look at different opportunities.”

The hope would be that if this road is close enough to the border of Mexico that it could be designated as necessary for, what Mayor Pete Saenz and Tijerina referred to as, a virtual wall.

If that were to happen, Tijerina hopes maybe the city would be able to obtain some funds from the federal government to build the road. He also additionally said the latest passed infrastructure bill could help.

“I know with this infrastructure bill that has been shoved down the United States by Congress and by the Senate, that’s fine,” Tijerina said. “President (Joe) Biden wants his infrastructure bill, this is the perfect infrastructure project. That’s what I’m saying. If there’s not any money for this then what was the bill for?”

The biggest thing that seemed to be on everyone’s mind at the meeting was that there needs to be action taken to get this relief route at that location.

Several members at the meeting acknowledged their confusion that all of the studies done have yet to result in changes for the area.

“I applaud the judge for trying to figure out all of the different projects and all of the different studies that have been done, because I’ve seen six or seven studies that say the same thing — we need more roads,” Councilmember Dr. Marte Martinez said. “Well, I mean, we probably could have funded a road with as many projects as we’ve done, you know? As many studies as we’ve done. That’s the truth.”

What’s next?
Mr. Brown said he will take everything the members of the MPO said and give it to the RMA Board, and they will plan accordingly.

Saenz asked if they could make a motion for Brown to update the MPO on the project monthly, but since this wasn’t a direct item on the agenda they could not take immediate action.

However, Brown said he would come back to the MPO monthly and update the progress on the study.

The MPO meets the third Wednesday of every month and will meet again Wednesday, Dec. 15.

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“I’m hearing everything everybody is saying,” Brown said. “We take this information, leave this room and start trying to process it and figure out how to implement it. We have the green light to definitely conceptually be able to move forward, to meet with staff, to meet (with) city staff, whoever we need to who’s appropriate to see what the next step is.”

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North America’s biggest railroad born as Kansas City sale is completed
Mexico News Daily
December 15, 2021
https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/north-americas-biggest-railroad-born-as-kansas-city-sale-is-completed/

Railway giant Canadian Pacific (CP) closed a US $31 billion deal including the assumption of $3.8 billion of debt for United States railroad Kansas City Southern (KCS) on Tuesday, a sale that was originally agreed upon in September.

The landmark deal creates Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC), an approximately 32,000 kilometer railroad that connects Canada, the United States and Mexico and will generate an estimated $8.7 billion annually.

CPKC will offer a direct link between Vancouver, Montreal, New York, Texas and large parts of Mexico, currently operated under KCS’ wholly-owned subsidiary Kansas City Southern de México, which carries freight from the Pacific port of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán; ports in Tampico and Altamira in Tamaulipas; the port of Veracruz; and the Valley of México and the El Bajío industrial region to the U.S. via Texas.

The combination will capitalize on the North America trade agreement (USMCA), particularly in the automotive and agriculture industries, which are together worth almost $190 billion, according to the Economy Ministry.

However, the deal isn’t quite finalized yet: KCS shares have been placed in a voting trust while U.S. regulators review it. The companies expect approval in the fourth quarter of 2022, and will operate independently until then.

The acquisition was given the green light by Mexican regulators in November.

Completion will bring an end to a bidding war between CP and its domestic rival Canadian National (CN), which was previously in line to take over KCS.

The president of CP, Keith Creel, said the deal would benefit North American economies: “Today is an historic day for our two iconic companies … CPKC will become the backbone connecting our customers to new markets, enhancing competition in the U.S. rail network, and driving economic growth across North America while delivering significant environmental benefits,” he said.

President of KCS, Patrick Ottensmeyer, said the agreement will be beneficial for clients, shareholders and workers: “The CP-KCS combination will not only benefit customers, partners, labor and shareholders through new single line transportation services, attractive synergies and complementary routes, but will also benefit KCS and our employees by enabling us to be part of a growing corporate enterprise on the North American continent,” he said.

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CP began operating in 1881 and has approximately 20,100 kilometers of track in the United States and Canada.

KCS is the smallest of the major freight railroads in the U.S, with 10,800 kilometers of track in the U.S. and Mexico.

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Supply-Chain Hell Ignites Economic Boom Along U.S.-Mexico Border
Thomas Black
Bloomberg
December 14, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-14/supply-chain-hell-ignites-economic-boom-along-u-s-mexico-border?sref=ytoldrow

Wedged up against the southern edge of the Rio Grande, the sprawling desert city of Juarez has seen its share of economic booms over the years.

But perhaps none quite like the one that's taken hold today.

There are excavators and bulldozers seemingly everywhere, pushing dirt into tall piles and leaving everything -- and everyone -- covered in a coat of wind-blown dust. The space they are carving out of the desert floor will house a long list of new factories that were ordered up by anxious CEOs across the world when the pandemic roiled their global supply routes.

Ambu A/S, a Danish medical device maker, is erecting a facility on the outskirts of the city. Several miles away, Keeson Technology Corp., a Chinese furniture maker, is building a second plant here just months after opening its first. Boyd Corp., a California-based conglomerate, recently inaugurated one factory and plans to build three more. And MGA Entertainment, a California-based toymaker, began cranking out Little Tikes Cozy Coupes from its plant last month even before construction crews had cleared out debris piles or paved the parking lot.

What's the rush at MGA?

The company has 750 containers of toys stuck in supply-chain hell at ports around Los Angeles. Produced in China, those items were supposed to be on U.S. store shelves this holiday season. That won't happen, says Isaac Larian, MGA's chief executive officer. But the Juarez plant is now shipping two truckloads of toys into the U.S. each day and that number will soon grow to 10. What's more, Larian plans to break ground on a second factory in Mexico next year and will begin shifting some of MGA's Chinese production to these plants.

"We have big ambitions and big plans for Mexico," he says.

This, in the lingo of corporate executives, is near-shoring, one of the biggest economic transformations sparked by the pandemic: Shrink the length of the supply chain to keep production closer to its final destination and reduce the risk of some snag messing things up along the way. A shorter chain is a stronger chain, the thinking now goes, and there's a growing sense that this new approach will remain in vogue in C-suites long after Covid fades.

For the multinationals that do business in the red-hot U.S. economy, near-shoring often means northern Mexico, where labor costs are cheap, land is plentiful and the border is just a short ride away. El Paso, Texas, is less than 10 miles to the north of

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most of the new plants in Juarez.

Other border cities -- Tijuana, along the west coast, and Reynosa, Matamoros and Piedras Negras, far to the east -- are undergoing similar industrial booms, providing a much-needed lift to a Mexican economy that has been slow to recover from last year's collapse.

For more than half a century now, the factories in these cities have been a key cog in the U.S. supply chain. Known in the industry as maquiladoras, they take imported parts, assemble them into consumer and industrial products and then ship them north.

When Nafta, the free trade deal between the U.S., Mexico and Canada, took effect in 1994, multinationals set up maquiladoras at a frenetic pace. Juarez alone is home to plants owned by General Electric, Honeywell International, Bosch, Foxconn Technology, Siemens and Electrolux, among others.

Years later, the region began to stagnate when China entered the World Trade Organization. Many companies pulled out of Mexico and set up shop in China, where labor costs were even lower. Flareups of gruesome narco violence along the border only added to the exodus.

China kept stealing U.S. market share from Mexico right up until Donald Trump took office in Washington. When he started slapping tariffs on Chinese-made products, Mexico suddenly looked pretty attractive again to executives. Then the pandemic came along and turbocharged the shift. Keeson, the furniture maker, is Exhibit A for this: It first made plans to open a factory in Juarez shortly after Trump launched his trade war against Beijing, and it sped up those plans by a full year when Covid hit.

"Manufacturing is coming back for sure," says Jason Tolliver, a managing director who helps oversee logistics and industrial services in the Americas for real-estate firm Cushman & Wakefield PLC. The conversations he's having with corporate leaders, he says, indicate this wave of investment along the border is just beginning. "It is structural and it's long term."

The boom is so intense in Juarez that industrial real estate is suddenly getting tight: 98% of existing space is already leased, and the price has jumped more than 20% over the past year to about $5.25 per square foot, according to Jesse Melendez, a director at industrial real estate company Intermex.

Intermex is rushing to cash in. It's leasing out 5 million square feet more of factory space in the city today than it did a year ago, and it's building four additional factory sites. They will be tightly clustered in what is now just a barren field of dirt on the city's southwestern edge.

As excited as Melendez is about the boom, he's already mentally preparing for the bust that often follows. "In my career, I've typically seen the valleys and peaks seven to 10 years apart," he says. He figures the slowdown will begin by 2024.

As Melendez drove through the city on a recent weekday afternoon, that seemed like a distant thought. "Hiring" signs kept popping up all around him -- on the facades of factories, on buses, in shop windows.

This is what lured Efrain Gonzalez back to Juarez from his native Veracruz in the south.

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People associate Mexican migrants with the U.S. labor market, but the truth is many of them, like Gonzalez, end their journeys just miles south of the border, especially when the maquiladoras are humming like they are now.

The factory jobs offer pay that, while a fraction of typical U.S. wages, is markedly higher than what the migrants can earn back home in the impoverished south of Mexico. And they don't have to worry about getting deported.

Gonzalez, 49, earns a little over $80 a week, plus benefits like free lunch, at the Keeson plant, which produces the company's Ergomotion adjustable beds. He said he knew he'd find work as soon as he set foot back in Juarez a few months ago. The sight of all the new factories going up made that clear. "There's a lot of work here."

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Civil rights groups ask DOJ to investigate 'discriminatory' Operation Lone Star in Texas
Sandra Sanchez
Border Report
December 15, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/civil-rights-groups-ask-doj-to-investigate-discriminatory-operation-lone-star-in-texas/

McALLEN, Texas (Border Report) — Ten civil rights organizations have filed a joint discrimination complaint asking the Department of Justice to investigate Operation Lone Star, a law enforcement initiative headed by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to deter illegal immigration on the Texas/Mexico border.

The ACLU of Texas, Latino Justice, Texas Civil Rights Project and Texas Fair Defense Project are among those on Wednesday that filed a Title VI complaint with the federal government alleging that Operation Lone Star is an "unlawful, racist and xenophobic system of state immigration enforcement in Texas."

In a letter sent Wednesday to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, the agencies ask that the Department of Justice launch a formal investigation into the operation and end all federal funding received by Texas agencies and counties that are engaged in what they call a "discriminatory operation."

Operation Lone Star began in March under Abbott's direction and utilizes the Department of Public Safety, Texas National Guard, as well as support from National Guard sent from other states to several Texas border counties.

In September, Abbott signed into law over $1.8 billion for Texas border security efforts, which includes Operation Lone Star. Abbott has held steadfast in his belief that Texas must "secure" its borders and he has repeatedly faulted the Biden administration for "failing" to better prevent migrants from entering the country illegally.

"Texas supports legal immigration but will not be an accomplice to the open border policies that cause, rather than prevent, a humanitarian crisis in our state and endanger the lives of Texans. We will surge the resources and law enforcement personnel needed to confront this crisis," Abbott said in March when he began Operation Lone Star.

Over 100 organizations supported the discrimination complaint, according to the letter. This included: Amnesty International USA, Catholic Legal Immigration Network,

Freedom Network USA, Human Rights Watch, RAICES, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and the Haitian Bridge Alliance.

In a call with media Wednesday, several of the groups said the surge of DPS troopers and National Guardsmen inflict undue harm on migrants and unfairly affects border communities.

Their discrimination complaint alleges the operation violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that bars discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

“They’ve created a nefarious state enforcement system to punish brown and black immigrants,” said Laura Peña, legal director of the Racial and Economic Justice Program at the Texas Civil Rights Project. “There’s real human suffering … as well as consequences to the border communities that are required to enforce it.”

Claudia Muñoz, co-executive director of Grassroots Leadership, said 1,500 migrants currently are in prison on arrest charges associated with Operation Lone Star.

She said some of their clients report being magistrated by judges “in parking lots” with hundreds of other migrants.

She said that after charges were dismissed for some migrants, they had to wait days for release, and then some say they were not released but handed over to U.S. Border Patrol agents who deported them.

“It is clear to us that local officials in Texas do not care about the rules,” Muñoz said. “They target migrants and disregard federal law.”

The complaint alleges that law enforcement lure migrants to trespass on private property and “have directed individuals near the border to a particular place – giving them the impression they have permission to be on the property – only then to arrest them for trespassing.”

Kate Huddleston, a lawyer with the ACLU of Texas, said “the program deliberately targets black and brown and LatinX migrants for punishment.” And she alleged that “arrests are often lacking in probable cause.”

“They languish in that system for extremely long periods of time, weeks or months on misdemeanor charges,” Huddleston said.

Border Report reached out to Gov. Abbott’s office for a response to the allegations. This story will be updated if additional information is received.

The letter also says law enforcement have “boasted on social media” about arrests.

Law enforcement say Operation Lone Star has helped to decrease the amount of drugs and migrants trafficked through Texas.

For the past nine months the operation has steadily been increasing in manpower and funding and support from other states. There has been a blockade of the Rio Grande formed off Starr County, and shipping containers were placed off the banks of Eagle Pass, Texas, to help block those trying to enter in between legal ports of entry.

“We’re here to repel and to block any criminal activity coming into the state,” Maj. Mike Perry of the Texas Military Department said Dec. 9 during a media briefing in

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Weslaco.

Perry said during the first week of this month officers with Operation Lone Star caused nearly 700 migrants to turn back to Mexico.

DPS Lt. Chris Olivarez said law enforcement through Operation Lone Star have, so far, stopped from crossing the border massive loads of fentanyl drugs — enough that could have killed 200 million people, he said Dec. 9.

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Texas election audit undermines democracy
Editorial Board
Dallas Morning News
December 16, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2021/12/16/the-real-cost-of-the-texas-elections-audit/

In the days after Gov. Greg Abbott ordered a "forensic audit" of the November 2020 elections, the elections administrators of the four targeted counties were left scratching their heads. Officials in Dallas and Collin counties told us in late September that they were waiting to receive instructions from the Texas secretary of state. Tarrant and Harris counties were also in the dark.

We condemned the audit at that time, though we hoped there would be no follow-through. We thought it might be a superficial stunt to appease President Donald Trump, and nothing more.

But our news colleagues recently reported that Secretary of State John Scott sent a long list of requested documents to the four counties. And last month, the governor and GOP legislative leaders shifted $4 million from the state prison system to the office of the secretary of state to pay for the audit.

Abbott is making a mistake by pressing on with this forensic audit — whatever it is that GOP leaders mean by "forensic." The myth of widespread voter fraud is red meat for Republican primary voters but far less palatable to moderate suburban voters in a general election, a political calculus that the governor must make as he campaigns for another term and seeks to carry down-ballot Republicans with him.

Above all, this obsession with election audits is eroding democracy for all of us, no matter our political affiliation.

The Texas GOP's treatment of election integrity as a legislative emergency makes no sense on its face. Trump won Texas comfortably, and voters here kept the state a Republican stronghold. The state's director of elections described the 2020 vote as "smooth and secure."

Yet Abbott and his allies have steered us into Orwellian territory. Texans have heard repeatedly that the elections audits are an attempt to restore confidence in our state's elections systems. They are having precisely the opposite effect. Our democracy is being weakened by these baseless searches for fraud.

Targeted for suspicion are two counties that are Democratic strongholds and two counties that have grown more diverse and where Democrats are gaining ground. That's not a coincidence.

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Efforts to undermine election systems continue unabated nationwide. According to one study, at least 16 states have proposed or passed laws this year that would transfer power over election administration from governors or elections officials to legislatures. We should all be alarmed about what this shift means for our future votes.

Our democracy draws its strength from a tradition of debate. We debate issues, we debate policy. We offer choices, and we accept the will of voters. That is what has made our democracy healthy for generations, regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat lived in the White House.

This campaign to make Americans question the validity of elections is corrosive, and all of us will pay the price. How long can our leaders chip away at the foundation of our democracy before the house comes crashing down?

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From: Melanie Best
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 12/17/21
Date: Friday, December 17, 2021 12:57:23 PM
Attachments: image001.png

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, December 17, 2021 9:38 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/17/21



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 17, 2021

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Texas' renewed voter citizenship review is still flagging citizens as "possible non-U.S. citizens," *Texas Tribune*, December 17, 2021

Ballot numbering under scrutiny in Ellis County, *Waxahachie Daily Light*, December 16, 2021

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Lawsuit alleges Harris County Democrat's map disqualifies some voters for six years, *The Center Square*, December 16, 2021

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How Out Texas Rep. Celia Israel Put Voting Rights First in 2021, *The Advocate*, December 16, 2021

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Arlington approves redrawn council districts that some say dilute Black, Latino voting power, *KERA News*, December 16, 2021

Court tells Texas AG, "Nah," On Election Prosecutions, *The Root*, December 16, 2021

Controversial businessman with Dallas ties sees renewed fame as election 'expert', *KERA News*, December 16, 2021

Nevada county where Trump won to replace voting machines, *Associated Press*, December 16, 2021

Yes, many noncitizens can now vote in New York City, but only in municipal elections, *KCEN-TV*, December 16, 2021

Biden met virtually with U.S. senators to discuss voting rights bill, *Reuters*, December 16, 2021

Voting rights advocates hold hunger strike near White House, *Washington Post*, December 17, 2021

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Opening of Texas-Mexico border boosts holiday retail in San Antonio, *Texas Public Radio*, December 16, 2021

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Texas has built 6 miles of wire border fencing along Rio Grande under Operation Lone Star, *Border Report*, December 16, 2021

Dallas County audit details released
Audrey Henvey
Coppell Gazette
December 16, 2021
https://starlocalmedia.com/coppellgazette/news/dallas-county-audit-details-released/article_37d2abc8-5e99-11ec-9aff-7b644dd8215e.html

The Texas Secretary of State's office has laid out details for phase two of its "full forensic audit" of the 2020 general election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties.

On Friday, the office shared a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott

addressed to elections administrators for each county.

“As indicated in our office’s previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State’s office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the November 2020 General Election in your respective counties,” the letter stated. “The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward.”

The letter asks the elections offices to begin locating requested documents in preparation for on-site examinations by the office’s Forensic Audit Division, which will be coordinated in January.

The request comes after the office first announced in September that an election audit had already begun in the state’s two largest Democrat and Republican counties. The office has since said that the audit is expected to cover about 35% of votes cast for the 2020 general election in Texas.

Scott’s Friday letter came with a 10-page attachment outlining the records and procedures that the office is reviewing.

“The specific review process for each category will be based on the county’s response to the initial survey questions provided,” the office stated. “Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category.”

The outlined materials include voting system test records, lists of election workers, video surveillance records and questions about the county’s election security measures.

According to an audit outline that was shared by the office in September, phase 2 involves the office conducting a comprehensive election records examination over several months “to ensure election administration procedures were properly followed during the 2020 General Election.” That includes looking at county records including logic and accuracy testing records for voting machines, early voting and election day materials and training materials.

Irregularities or deviations from election administration procedures could trigger a full manual recount of ballots in a certain area, the office stated.

“I’m very confident that Collin County will come through this audit very well,” Collin County elections administrator Bruce Sherbet said in September. “We had a very smooth and good election, and I think the biggest part for me is if this audit will help voters that don’t have confidence in the process have confidence or more confidence that everything was handled appropriately, then that’s very important.”

Official election results posted on the Texas Secretary of State’s website show that three of the four counties voted for President Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the 2020 general

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election. Collin County was the only one of the four that overall voted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2020 general election with 51.4% of the votes cast. Dallas County overall showed favor for Biden with 65.1% of votes cast.

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Texas' renewed voter citizenship review is still flagging citizens as "possible non-U.S. citizens"
Alexa Ura
Texas Tribune
December 17, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/17/texas-voter-roll-review/

Texas' last attempt to scour its voting rolls for noncitizens two years ago quickly devolved into a calamity.

The state flagged nearly 100,000 voters for citizenship checks and set them up for possible criminal investigation based on flawed data that didn't account for immigrants who gained citizenship. After it became clear it was jeopardizing legitimate voter registrations, it was pulled into three federal lawsuits challenging its process. Former Secretary of State David Whitley lost his job amid the fallout. And the court battle ultimately forced the state to abandon the effort and rethink its approach to ensure naturalized citizens weren't targeted.

This fall, the state began rolling out a new, scaled-down approach. But again, the county officials responsible for carrying it out are encountering what appear to be faults in the system.

Scores of citizens are still being marked for review — and possible removal from the rolls. Registrars in some of the state's largest counties have found that a sizable number of voters labeled possible noncitizens actually filled out their voter registration cards at their naturalization ceremonies. In at least a few cases, the state flagged voters who were born in the U.S.

The secretary of state's office says it is following the settlement agreement it entered in 2019 — an arrangement that limited its screening of voters to those who registered to vote and later indicated to the Texas Department of Public Safety that they are not citizens. Flagged voters can provide documentation of their citizenship in order to keep their registrations, officials have pointed out.

But the issues tied to the new effort are significant enough that they've renewed worries among the civil rights groups that forced the state to change its practices. They are questioning Texas' compliance with the legal settlement that halted the last review. And for some attorneys, the persisting problems underscore their concerns that the state is needlessly putting the registrations of eligible voters at risk.

"We're trying to get a grasp of the scale, but obviously there's still a problem, which I think we always said would be the case," said Joaquin Gonzalez, an attorney with the

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Texas Civil Rights Project, which was involved in the 2019 litigation. “It’s definitely something we were concerned would happen if they tried to restart this process.”

The review process tries to identify noncitizens using the Department of Public Safety’s massive driver’s license and ID database. It takes people who indicated they were not citizens when they obtained their IDs and then matches them to the voting rolls. But civil rights groups have been wary of that strategy because the database can contain inaccuracies and is prone to human error.

“It made sense to improve the process [in the settlement], but I think all parties were aware that there were still fundamental problems with the database and how they matched records,” Gonzalez said.

Texas’ voter citizenship review has persisted through the tenure of multiple secretaries of state and has been backed by state Republican leaders who have touted the broader review effort as a way to ensure the integrity of the voter rolls, though there is no evidence that large numbers of noncitizens are registered to vote.

The current iteration was formally initiated in early September before the appointment of the state’s new secretary of state, John Scott, who helped former President Donald Trump challenge the 2020 presidential election results in Pennsylvania.

That’s when the state sent counties 11,737 records of registered voters who were deemed “possible non-U.S. citizens.” It was a much smaller list than the one it produced in 2019, when it did not account for people who became naturalized citizens in between renewing driver’s licenses or ID cards they initially obtained as noncitizens.

But when Bexar County received its list of 641 flagged voters, county workers quickly determined that 109 of them — 17% of the total — had actually registered at naturalization ceremonies. The county is able to track the origin of those applications because of an internal labeling system it made up years ago when staff began attending the ceremonies, said Jacque Callanen, the county’s administrator.

Election officials in Travis County said they were similarly able to identify that applications for 60 voters on the county’s list of 408 flagged voters — roughly 15% of the total — had been filled out at naturalization ceremonies.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, another group that sued the state in 2019, is still assessing the extent to which the state’s new attempt to review the rolls may be defective. But those figures alone should give everyone pause, ACLU staff attorney Thomas Buser-Clancy said after The Texas Tribune provided him those tallies.

“What we do know is that every time the secretary of state tries to do something like this it fails and that these efforts, which inevitably ensnare eligible voters, should not be happening,” Buser-Clancy said.

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In an advisory announcing the revised process, the secretary of state's office told counties that they should first attempt to "investigate" a voter's eligibility. If they are unable to verify citizenship, the county must then send out "notices of examination" that start a 30-day clock for the voter to submit proof of citizenship to retain their registration. Voters who don't respond with proof within 30 days are removed from the rolls — though they can be reinstated if they later prove their citizenship, including at a polling place.

Beyond the figures from Bexar and Travis counties, local election officials in other counties, including Cameron and Williamson, confirmed they've heard back from flagged voters who are naturalized citizens. After mailing 2,796 notices, officials in Harris County said 167 voters had provided them with documentation proving their citizenship. In Fort Bend, officials received proof of citizenship from at least 87 voters on their list of 515 "possible noncitizens." Last week, Texas Monthly reported on two cases of citizens in Cameron County who were flagged as possible noncitizens.

"This process, agreed upon by all parties and stakeholders, will ensure that only qualified U.S. citizens remain on the voter rolls in Texas' 254 counties," said Sam Taylor, the secretary of state's spokesperson. "We do not want any legitimate, qualified U.S. citizens to be canceled from the voter rolls, and this process protects U.S. citizens' right to remain registered and to vote."

In its advisory, the secretary of state suggested voter registrars could attempt to confirm a flagged voter's eligibility by consulting with other county governmental entities that may have verified their citizenship or by trying to identify voter registration applications that originated from naturalization ceremonies.

"To the extent that counties were able to confirm their citizenship status and they were kept on the rolls — that's exactly how the agreed-upon process is supposed to work," Taylor said of the naturalized citizens identified by officials in Bexar and Travis counties.

However, county officials have previously told the state they often have no way to independently verify someone's citizenship status to avoid sending out the 30-day notices. And most counties don't appear to track applications from naturalization ceremonies.

So far, 2,327 voter registrations have been canceled as part of the review — 88% of them because the voter did not respond to the notice within 30 days. Just 278 were canceled after voter registrars verified they were not citizens. In some cases, county officials said, this occurs because of clerical errors. Nearly 17 million Texans are registered to vote.

The rest remain pending, largely because the state is now under a federally mandated moratorium on registration cancellations within 90 days of a federal election — in this case, the upcoming March primaries. (Various counties did not send out notices until the last few weeks, meaning any cancellations for failing to respond cannot be carried out until after the primary election.)

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Voters flagged through the review process “have every opportunity to confirm their U.S. citizenship status and remain on the rolls, including at the polls when they go to vote,” Taylor said.

But lawyers involved in the 2019 litigation said the state cannot rely on that as a failsafe if the review process is systematically including eligible voters.

“Whatever the flaw is, it’s systematic with respect to naturalized citizens,” said Nina Perales, the vice president of litigation for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which also sued the state in 2019.

In the shadow of the state’s botched 2019 effort, some county elections officials told the Tribune they approached the renewed effort with hesitation. But unlike two years ago when many of them held off on acting on the state’s lists, county voter registrars are now under financial threat if they don’t cull through them.

The Texas Legislature this year empowered the secretary of state’s office to withhold funds from them if they fail to “timely perform” voter roll maintenance duties, including those related to voters flagged as possible noncitizens. Keith Ingram, the director of the office’s elections division, reminded locals of this in a Nov. 15 email in which he noted “that a number of counties” had taken no action on the registrations his office put into question.

Ingram’s email appears to have prompted several counties to send out notices of examination, while others are still seeking additional data or information that could allow them to confirm that voters are citizens without sending the notices.

Gretchen Nagy, the director of voter registration in Travis County, sees it as “due diligence” owed to the voters, recalling the phone conversations she had with anguished naturalized citizens who were caught up in the state’s 2019 review.

“It was really difficult when people on the other end were really upset and emotionally distraught, [asking] ‘Is there something wrong? Did I do something wrong?’” Nagy said. “We’re basically trying to think outside the box — any agency, any department that we can reach out to — to see if we can do a confirmation of citizenship before these individuals ever have to hear from us.”

Up the road, election officials in Williamson County last week were waiting on guidance from the state in regard to nearly a fifth of the voters on their list of 138 “possible noncitizens” who appeared to have registered through the Department of Public Safety, which only registers individuals once their citizenship has been verified.

The state erroneously included 25,000 of those types of records in its 2019 review — a mistake it began quietly walking back within days of announcing the review effort.

The secretary of state’s office confirmed its current review includes “a limited number” of those matches, though it did not respond to a request for an exact number. Taylor,

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the spokesperson, said the state determined that some voters who initially registered through DPS were flagged because they "marked 'yes' on the citizenship field but later marked 'no' on the same field at a subsequent visit to DPS." Those records could also include voters who were unable to provide citizenship documents to DPS.

"As a result, these records were flagged for citizenship review," Taylor said.

The issues with the revised review appear to even be reaching voters who were born in the U.S.

Among them is Ivan Henson, a certified public accountant in Tarrant County, who was puzzled when he found in his mailbox a notice from the county dated Nov. 30 indicating his citizenship was in question. He was born in New Mexico.

"There is absolutely no reason I should be on this list," Henson said.

Henson's name appeared alongside more than 600 others on the list of possible noncitizens Tarrant County received from the state. County officials said they reviewed the list to see if they could find any clerical errors but ultimately sent out the notices following the state's instructions.

Recalling news coverage of the state's voter rolls debacle from two years ago, Henson made copies of his birth certificate and passport and quickly mailed them to the county, but he said he worries others who "don't have time to mess with it" won't be able to comply as easily.

"I am self-employed with my own copier and my own resources and my own time," Henson said. "You know who this letter is going to disenfranchise."

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Ballot numbering under scrutiny in Ellis County
Bill Spinks
Waxahachie Daily Light
December 16, 2021
https://www.waxahachietx.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/12/16/ballot-numbering-under-scrutiny-ellis-county/8935432002/

Ellis County's election system is secure, members of the Commissioners' Court were told during Tuesday's regular bi-weekly meeting as they peppered county elections administrator Jana Onyon with questions and heard public comments on election security across almost an hour and a half.

Onyon's assertions, though, didn't seem to assuage some members of the court as they seemed to lean toward reinstating sequentially numbered ballots for elections in the county.

Onyon told commissioners that ballots are numbered for security purposes so that they can be traced back to a polling location. The process dates back to legislation when hand

ballots were still commonplace, but Onyon said the same process was kept even with technology advances.

A 2019 change to the balloting process allows for unused ballot stock to be reused in subsequent elections, which Onyon said resulted in significant cost savings — about $13,000 for the November 2020 election. The reason this is possible is because ballots are not numbered until the votes are cast with the electronic system Ellis County began using in May 2019. The system generates a 2-digit alpha code and a random serial number.

Several public speakers urged a return to sequentially numbered ballots and called into question the Texas Secretary of State's advisory allowing for non-pre-numbered ballots. Most cited what they said was lack of confidence that votes were being securely counted, and said the money being saved wasn't worth the concern over security.

Onyon replied afterward that all guidance regarding the update originated from state legislation, and that all ballots that are placed in the tabulator are counted after they are filled out, regardless of numbers.

Onyon said voting equipment is routinely tested before every election. In the event that a voter is not satisfied with his or her recorded vote, that voter can request a new ballot and the old ballot is "spoiled." Onyon added that a rigorous count of all ballots — used, unused or "spoiled" — is kept at each polling site. All ballots are kept on file for 22 months following an election.

Voting devices are not connected to the internet, Onyon said. The laptop that checks in voters is the only computer that will be connected to the web, so that voters are able to be verified.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Paul Perry said he will ask County Attorney Ann Montgomery to research election statutes to find out if the allowance of random numbering has any basis in law, and bring an answer back for the Dec. 28 court meeting. Perry also said even though the Ellis County Elections Office is independent of the Commissioners' Court, the court does hold the budgetary purse strings for the office.

Precinct 1 Commissioner Randy Stinson said funding should be no object in the name of securing ballots.

"When it comes to elections, we have the money," Stinson said. "We need to put extra staff over there to implement the situation that we're trying to solve. I don't think any commissioner on this court would back off of that."

All court members were present.

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Column: Get set for the weirdest county commissioner race we've ever seen
Gilbert Garcia
San Antonio Express-News
December 16, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/gilbert_garcia/article/Garcia-Get-set-

for-the-weirdest-county-16708414.php

Let's say you're a politically active person living on the North Side and you've thought about running for county commissioner.

But the precinct in which you live (Precinct 3) didn't have another election scheduled until 2024, and, besides, it had a solid incumbent, Trish DeBerry, who just took office at the beginning of this year.

Given those circumstances, you recently filed to run for another office.

This must be a strange time for you.

On Monday afternoon, moments before the filing period closed for the 2022 Texas primary elections, DeBerry stunned political observers by filing paperwork to run for county judge. In doing so, she relinquished her Precinct 3 seat.

DeBerry's move triggered an obscure provision in the Texas Election Code, which states that if a vacancy occurs after the 10th day before the filing deadline, candidates have five days from the regular filing deadline in which to apply for the primary election.

In this case, that would have meant a Saturday deadline, but the Texas Secretary of State's office rolled the deadline over to Monday.

It has created one of the weirdest dynamics we've ever seen in Bexar County politics.

"People are struggling," said Jacque Callanen, the elections administrator for Bexar County. "Lots of phone calls will be made."

Callanen said some primary candidates for other offices have contacted her to inquire about switching to the Precinct 3 contest.

"They've said, 'Hey, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have filed for this slot. Can I withdraw from this slot now and run for that one?'"

The answer, of course, is they can't.

John Austin, the chairman of the Bexar County Republican Party, said no GOP candidates had filed for the Precinct 3 seat as of Thursday morning.

"I've talked to multiple individuals that are interested," Austin said. "People are just kind of mulling it over. It's so fast and whirlwind.

"A typical executive at one of the big companies in town might be interested in that at some point. But to have only four or five days to put everything in order, it's just not enough time."

There's also the issue of filing fees. Candidates for Bexar County commissioner have the option of paying a $1,250 filing fee or submitting 500 petition signatures.

In this case, however, with only a few days in which to gather signatures, Precinct 3

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hopefuls will almost certainly have to cough up the $1,250 if they hope to get their names on the March 1 primary ballot.

It's worth considering that the race for Precinct 3 commissioner (a gig which pays nearly $138,000 a year) is operating on two tracks.

There's the behind-the-scenes jockeying to secure an interim appointment from Democratic County Judge Nelson Wolff (whose voice mail, as I write this, is probably filling up with flattery from ambitious local Republicans). That appointment will get you the job for about a year.

Then there's the election battle, which will secure the Precinct 3 seat for the winner until the end of the 2024 election cycle. This is a solid Republican seat and most of the real action will be in the GOP primary.

Here's what we know about the Republican race:

Former Councilman (and two-time mayoral candidate) Greg Brockhouse will be running. Seven months after getting smoked by a 2-1 margin in the mayoral election by Ron Nirenberg, Brockhouse sees the Precinct 3 seat as a prime opportunity for a political comeback.

Patty Gibbons, a long-time Republican activist who finished fifth in a 10-candidate North Side field for City Council in 2017, also plans to run.

In addition, there's a slew of prominent players in the local business community who are giving this race a look.

Grant Moody, the director of policy, strategy and innovation at Valero Energy, told me that he is "prayerfully considering whether this is the right time and right opportunity for me to serve our community."

Moody majored in economics at the U.S. Naval Academy, served 10 years as a Marine F-18 pilot (including deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq) and received a gubernatorial appointment to the Texas Veterans Land Board.

Former Councilman Jeff Webster, the vice president of business development with Jacobs Engineering Group, said he is "putting it through the consideration process." A few months ago, Webster nearly entered the race for the Texas House seat being vacated by Lyle Larson, but decided he didn't want the aggravation.

Preston Woolfolk, the co-president of DOCUmation, said "he is giving it a lot of thought."

The tech executive added, "It's going to be a tight race, due to the timeline. That's a pro or a con, depending on who's looking at it. That's going to be the bigger conversation piece for everybody looking at it."

It's definitely a major conversation piece. And prospective candidates won't have much time to conduct those conversations.

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Texas AG Paxton's $2.2M voter fraud unit closed three cases in 2021. GOP lawmakers still boosted its budget

Taylor Goldenstein
Houston Chronicle
December 17, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-AG-Paxton-s-2-2M-voter-fraud-unit-closed-16708051.php

Texas Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton has been one of former President Donald Trump's most reliable allies in spreading the myth of widespread voter fraud, particularly in the 2020 election, and frequently boasts that few states are as vigilant.

His office's election integrity unit added two lawyers to the team in the last year, bringing it up to six staffers total, and worked more than 20,000 hours between Oct. 2020 and Sept. 2021. Its budget, meanwhile, ratcheted up from $1.9 million to $2.2 million during that time.

Yet records from the office show that the unit closed just three cases this year, down from 17 last year, and opened seven new ones. That includes the newly created unit focused on the 2021 local elections, which has yet to file a single case.

"This is an exorbitant amount of money that has resulted in no benefit for the average Texan," said Austin Evers, executive director of American Oversight, a left-leaning nonprofit government watchdog that regularly files public information requests and files suits to force compliance with those requests. The organization shared some records it obtained from the Texas attorney general's office with Hearst Newspapers for this report; others were obtained independently by Hearst Newspapers.

Evers added: "Taxpayers are funding a political stunt meant to fuel the false claim of a stolen election and justify voting restrictions."

The scant caseload comes after Texas Republican lawmakers insisted a 2020 election audit was necessary and passed a sweeping elections overhaul bill loaded with voting restrictions that Democrats have warned will have a disproportionate effect on already-marginalized voters.

Paxton's office has not uncovered any evidence of voter fraud in 2020 beyond isolated incidents affecting a handful of votes in an election in which more than 11 million Texans cast ballots.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, under pressure by former president Donald Trump, initiated reviews of election processes across the state in the fall.

Paxton's office did not respond to a request for comment for this story, but in a podcast his office produced in November 2020 about voter fraud, Paxton blamed low resources for the election integrity unit's output.

"I don't think anybody knows the degree to which it happens because even our office who probably prosecutes more election fraud than anyone else in the country ... We don't have

enough resources to cover all election fraud. So it's really hard to know how large an issue this is because very few states put any resources in to actually detect or prosecute voter fraud."

It's a point he's made often before, though he's never offered specifics as to what kind of staffing or funding he would find sufficient.

Richard L. Hasen, an election law professor at the University of California Irvine, said there's a more likely explanation, noting that Paxton, who is running for re-election, has "every incentive," politically speaking, to vigorously go after voter fraud, as it's an issue that energizes his party's base.

"He's finding very little of it despite spending a lot of money and using a lot of resources looking for it," Hasen said. "The reason is not that such fraud is too hard to find. Those that commit voter fraud tend not to be brain surgeons. The reason he's not finding a lot of it is because voter fraud is rare."

Multiple academic studies and journalistic reviews have uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud, nor did a wide-ranging investigation of election fraud in 2020 conducted by the U.S. Justice Department.

After Texas' own director of elections Keith Ingram testified to lawmakers in March that the 2020 election was "smooth and secure," the Secretary of State failed to receive confirmation of her appointment by the Republican-majority state Senate and was forced to step down.

In one of the most comprehensive reviews to date, an AP analysis this month reviewed potential election fraud cases in six battleground states contested by Trump and found 475, nowhere near enough to have altered the results of his 2020 loss.

Paxton boasts of more voter fraud cases than ever
The biggest case closed this year by the Texas attorney general's office involved a Medina County resident who allegedly unlawfully assisted 10 voters with mail ballot applications during the 2020 election.

The other two were people in Lubbock and Guadalupe counties who allegedly made false statements on their voter registration applications and voted illegally in the 2018 election, and one of them also in the 2020 election.

In 2016, 2017 and 2019, Paxton's office also closed three cases.

Yet in a tweet in October, Paxton proclaimed that his office was "between pending cases & investigations — working more voter fraud cases than Texas has ever seen."

While it's true that the office has more cases pending this year over last year, 44 up from 38, that's not because of a surge in new prosecutions. It's because the vast majority of cases that were pending around this time last year are still making their way through the court system.

Among the cases pending include that of Hervis Rogers, a Black man from Houston who

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was charged this year with illegally voting while on parole, after he had made national headlines for waiting for six hours to vote in the 2020 primary election.

A new ruling from the state's highest criminal court Wednesday may afford legal relief to Rogers and potentially others, after it found that Paxton's office does not have the constitutional right to prosecute voter fraud without the consent of local prosecutors.

The office is also in the midst of investigating 386 allegations of fraud, according to its website, up by about 150 over what it reported it was looking into last year.

Paxton, members of his office and his supporters often use an unusual metric to tout the election integrity unit as a success, citing the more than 500 counts of offenses filed against defendants in pending cases, as opposed to the number of defendants, about 45.

This can prove misleading: An individual case can involve dozens of counts because the state's lawyers can file many different charges for the same action or set of actions. For example, a social worker in the Mexia State Supported Living Center was charged in October with two election fraud offenses for each of the 67 residents she registered to vote prior to the 2020 presidential election without their permission, landing her a total of 134 counts. No illegal votes were cast.

As has been the trend since the voter fraud unit began its work 15 years ago, the majority of defendants, including the three whose cases were resolved this year, have been entered into diversion programs. Those are alternatives to prosecution for low-risk, typically first-time offenders that often involve some court supervision.

Twenty-seven defendants, or 17 percent, were sentenced to deferred adjudication, which is a form of probation that gives the person a chance to avoid a criminal conviction on their record.

Under a third of defendants' cases ended in a conviction, and of those 46, a little over a dozen spent time behind bars.

The extensive use of these diversion programs makes it difficult for the public to find much information about the situations leading to the alleged crimes, which would typically be uncovered in court documents.

The Republican chairs of the committee in charge of writing the budget in the Texas House and Senate did not respond to questions about why funding increases to the election integrity unit continue to be approved despite its lack of results.

Democratic State Rep. Jessica González, vice-chair of the elections committee in the Texas House, called the spending unacceptable.

"It is clear the Election Integrity Unit receives an absurd level of funding considering their inability to find real cases of voter fraud, and this funding increase only continues to fuel their witch-hunt," González said.

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Lawsuit alleges Harris County Democrat's map disqualifies some voters for six years

Bethany Blankley
The Center Square
December 16, 2021
https://www.inforney.com/texas/lawsuit-alleges-harris-county-democrats-map-disqualifies-some-voters-for-six-years/article_3c985955-ef94-5c4a-8175-d284a759c5ae.html

(The Center Square) – Three Harris County voters and two Republican County Commissioners have sued Democratic Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo and Harris County for a redistricting plan proposed by a Democratic commissioner, alleging it unconstitutionally disenfranchises more than one million voters in next year's county elections.

Harris County is the largest county in Texas with 4.7 million residents, according to 2020 Census data. Roughly half, or 2.48 million residents, are registered to vote, according to the Texas Secretary of State's office, with 1.63 million having voted in the 2020 General Election.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Harris County asks the court to issue a temporary restraining order and/or temporary or permanent injunction against the judge and county from implementing the redistricting plan.

The Commissioner's Court is comprised of four commissioners representing four districts, and the county judge. Two commissioners are Democrats (Precincts 1 and 2), two are Republicans (Precinct 3 and 4) and the judge is a Democrat.

The redistricting map proposed by Democratic Commissioner Rodney Ellis, known as the "Ellis Plan 3," would redraw the lines in such a way to ensure that Democrats would hold a supermajority on the court because it would likely eliminate one of the Republican districts.

Harris County Republicans argue the Democrats' goal is to eliminate a Republican from the court to ensure a Democratic supermajority. One way to do this is to take advantage of a stipulation in the Texas Constitution that states that elections for county commissioners, who serve four-year terms, must be staggered every two years.

Ellis' plan redraws the district lines so much so that it moves 1.1 million voters from even-numbered to odd-numbered voting precincts—thereby eliminating their ability to vote in at least the next election.

For example, under the state constitution's staggered election process, residents of Precincts 2 and 4 will vote in 2022; residents in Precincts 1 and 3 will vote for their commissioners in 2024. Voters in Precincts 2 and 4 would vote again in 2026, and voters in Precincts 1 and 3 in 2028.

Under Ellis' plan, his Precinct 1 would remain largely unchanged.

But Cagle's Precinct 4 would absorb the northeastern portion of the existing Precinct 2, and the northwestern portion of the existing Precinct 3.

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Precinct 4 would include Katy in west Harris County, and Baytown in East Harris County, which are at least an hour apart without traffic.

Some of the Precinct 4 residents would also be moved to an odd-numbered precinct, and not be able to vote until 2024. If the district weren't redrawn, they'd be voting in 2022.

And the newly chopped up Precinct 4, historically a Republican stronghold, would be transformed enough to become a Democratic precinct. Then, the 3-2 Democrat-Republican court would become a 4-1 Democratic-controlled court.

"The Ellis map moves over a million Harris County voters who did not get to vote for commissioner last year to a new precinct where they won't get to vote for commissioner next year, either," Alan Vera, a conservative leader within the Harris County Republican Party and plaintiff in the lawsuit, said in a Houston Public Media report. "Those voters will have gone six years without the right to vote for a county commissioner, when they're entitled to vote for commissioner every four years."

"Democrats on Commissioners Court were so intent on padding their 3-2 majority that they callously and intentionally trampled on our clients' sacred right – the right to elect their government officials and to participate in the electoral process," the plaintiffs' attorney Andy Taylor said in a statement when announcing the lawsuit.

Officials are required to set district lines every 10 years according to new census data, to ensure "one person, one vote" proportionality. County precincts are required to be drawn with no more than a 10% population deviation.

While courts have historically upheld partisan redistricting plans, Taylor argues the districts can't be redrawn "in a manner that violates the constitutional rights of voters in those precincts."

He and the plaintiffs' other attorneys prepared an alternate redistricting map that they argue is constitutionally valid, and only moves a fraction of the number of voters compared to those moved by Ellis' plan.

Judge Hidalgo maintains the plan is legal, as does Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee. He says the county "ran a transparent and thorough redistricting process" and the map the court adopted "complies with Texas law."

Ellis has argued that Harris County was previously gerrymandered by Republicans, and that his map corrects that.

"Our plan seeks to keep communities of interest together and bring together areas that have been split apart for years," Ellis said. "For too long this county has been intentionally divided by precinct boundaries that deny people the opportunity to elect representation that accurately reflects the views of the majority of our communities. The boundaries proposed cease that continued suppression, and allows the voices and views of the people to be reflected by those who represent them."

Republicans argue the opposite.

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If the court grants their request for injunction and directs the commissioners court to go back to the drawing board, and if the commissioner's court fails to adopt an acceptable redistricting plan in time for the March primaries, the county could use the current map or the plaintiffs' map for the 2022 election cycle.

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Redistricting changes raises tension in Texas before elections
Christian Del Rio
KGNS-TV
December 16, 2021
https://www.kgns.tv/2021/12/16/redistricting-changes-raises-tension-texas-before-elections/

LAREDO, TX. (KGNS) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott approved the new political map for redistricting for the State of Texas.

Critics of the new maps say the changes made will benefit Republican candidates keeping them in office for the next decade.

They also believe the new maps could deny the voting rights of Latino and black voters.

The Webb County Democratic Party Chair Silvia Bruni believes it's a move by the Republican Party to hold on to whatever opportunity or advantage they might have, and they particularly targeted counties that have strong democratic demographics.

Bruni encourages everyone to register to vote before it's too late and reminds you to please go out and vote when the time comes.

The new map will be in effect for next year's primary and general elections.

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Texas Democrats eye redistricting fights in state court as federal suits over gerrymandering mount
Sami Sparber
Dallas Morning News
December 16, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/16/texas-democrats-eye-redistricting-fights-in-state-court-as-federal-suits-over-gerrymandering-mount/

AUSTIN — As federal lawsuits over new political maps pile up, some Texas Democrats are focusing on a pair of state court cases, arguing this year's GOP-led redistricting effort violated the Texas Constitution.

The Legislature's GOP mapmakers in October passed new lines that cement Republicans' grip on power for the next decade but blunt the voting strength of nonwhite voters who fueled Texas' population surge.

In two cases heard Wednesday and Thursday, a group of mostly Democratic, Hispanic

lawmakers from both chambers challenged the legality of when and how Republicans drew the boundaries.

“All we’re asking is for Republicans, who claim to be constitutionalists, to start acting like it, and follow the plain meaning and reading of the Constitution,” said Roland Gutierrez, one of two Democratic state senators who are suing Texas.

Focusing on the timing are Gutierrez and Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, who sued to block the Legislature from redistricting in a special session this year. Also at issue are rules for keeping counties intact when drawing Texas House districts.

Similar to a suit they filed in federal court before redrawing began, the senators’ attorneys argued the Texas Constitution requires that redistricting be done in a regular session that won’t happen until 2023.

That makes the newly drawn state House and state Senate plans invalid, argued the legal team for Gutierrez and Eckhardt, of San Antonio and Austin, respectively.

The senators’ lawyers pointed to a provision in the state Constitution that requires the redistricting process to start in the first regular session after the decennial Census has been published, asking the court to block the new plans from being used.

State lawyers argued the provision does not prohibit apportionment at other times, and warned that blocking the map will disrupt the 2022 election process that is already in motion.

“The Legislature … is perfectly free to redistrict whenever it wants,” Will Thompson, the attorney general’s deputy chief for special litigation, said at the Dec. 15 hearing in district court in Travis County.

All parties face a tight timeline for the March primaries. Overseas mail-in ballots are set to go out Jan. 15, and candidate filing ended Dec. 13.

But the court fights are not uncharted territory. The senators’ attorney, Wallace B. Jefferson, pointed out that for decades, every Texas redistricting plan has been either changed or tossed out by a federal court after being found in violation of the U.S. Constitution or the federal Voting Rights Act.

Texas argues “chaos will ensue if the court were to enjoin the maps, but the sky will not fall if that’s what the court decides,” said Jefferson, former Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice and Republican from San Antonio.

The consolidated cases have been assigned a panel of three district court judges, with Democrat Karin Crump presiding, alongside Republicans Emily Miskel and Ken Wise.

Splitting Cameron County

The senators’ legal team also argued the new state House map violated the “county line rule” of the Texas Constitution, which requires that counties with sufficient population be kept intact in drawing Texas House districts.

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The second challenge, mounted by the Mexican American Legislative Caucus in the Texas House, made a similar case that the rule was broken, arguing it was designed to ensure people have local representation.

Both complaints focus on the redrawing of Cameron County in the Rio Grande Valley.

As lawmakers this fall debated the new House lines late into the night, they narrowly adopted a major change in South Texas. House District 37 was redrawn from a seat President Joe Biden won by 17 percentage points, to a seat the president won by only two points over former President Donald Trump in the 2020 election.

That amendment, developed by Kingsville Republican Rep. J.M. Lozano, was denounced by some Valley lawmakers. State Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville, called the change a "disingenuous, last-minute attempt to do a grab."

The plaintiffs' legal team argued the county line rule requires that two districts be wholly contained within Cameron County. Yet Lozano's tweaks give Cameron County just one wholly contained district, with two that connect to adjoining counties.

The state's lawyers argued the new boundaries do not dilute votes in Cameron County, and that Cameron got the number of districts it was constitutionally entitled to. The plaintiffs' attorney rejected that interpretation of the rules.

"There is no doubt that to whatever extent Cameron County voters are a cohesive group … they get to elect the candidates of their choice," said Thompson, one of the state's lawyers.

District 37 Democratic candidate Ruben Cortez Jr. joined the senators' suit, along with political organization Tejano Democrats. The new version of the district was joined with adjacent Willacy County.

"This Republican redistricting scheme is robbing the voice of Cameron County voters," Cortez, also a member of the Texas State Board of Education, said in a news release.

The caucus' complaint asked the court to block the Texas House map from being used in upcoming elections and allow for the creation of alternative boundaries. Both sides discussed a full trial beginning Jan. 10.

It's unclear, if the judges rule in favor of the plaintiffs on the county line rule, whether they would delay Texas House primary elections just for South Texas, or the entire state. The plaintiffs' legal team asked the court to delay the primary to May 24.

Thompson, the state lawyer, said he expects the 2023 Legislature to have to revisit the maps.

In a separate federal suit, MALC has argued the redrawn congressional, Texas House and State Board of Education maps are intentionally racially discriminatory and dilute Latino voting strength, in violation of the federal Voting Rights Act and U.S. Constitution.

The U.S. Department of Justice has joined the federal court fight, suing to block Texas' gerrymandered congressional and state House maps. Several civil and voting rights

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groups, as well as individual voters, are among the plaintiffs in the consolidated federal redistricting cases.

Court challengers say the redrawn congressional, legislative and State Board of Education maps do not reflect the major growth of the Hispanic community, which made up nearly half of the state's population gain since 2020. People of color accounted for 95% of the state's population boom over the last decade, with much of the growth concentrated in cities and suburban areas, census data show.

In the plan for state House elections, the number of majority-white seats increased from 83 to 89, among eligible voters. The number of majority-Hispanic districts grew from 33 to 30, and the number of majority-Black districts dropped from seven to six. Asian voters remain without majority control in any district.

The decennial process following a U.S. Census typically leads to lawsuits in Texas, with the courts largely siding with Republicans in recent years. Lawmakers can draw maps in a way that benefits their party's political future as long as they do not discriminate on the basis of race.

This year, Republican lawmakers have a clearer path toward using the lines they want, as Texas is no longer required to get federal approval on new political maps.

The new maps are generally expected to withstand lawsuits, but battles over aspects of the boundaries could last several years.

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How Out Texas Rep. Celia Israel Put Voting Rights First in 2021
Trudy Ring
The Advocate
December 16, 2021
https://www.advocate.com/exclusives/2021/12/16/how-out-texas-rep-celia-israel-put-voting-rights-first-2021

Celia Israel, a member of the Texas House of Representatives, stood for her principles this year even though it meant personal sacrifice. She was set to marry her partner of 26 years, Celinda Garza, on the House floor July 15, but she ended up leaving Texas for Washington, D.C., three days earlier with more than 50 other House Democrats so there would not be the number of representatives required to vote on a Republican-backed voter suppression bill. They returned eventually, though, and a later version of the bill passed. But Israel doesn't regret her action one bit.

"This summer, I was part of something larger than myself when my colleagues and I broke quorum in defense of voting rights and took the fight to Washington, D.C.," she says. "During a year in which Texas was reeling from the effects of a polar vortex that killed hundreds and a pandemic where nearly 70,000 Texans have needlessly lost their lives, I've stood firm to call out the misplaced priorities of the Texas legislature, where our democratic institutions, reproductive rights, and the LGBTQ community have been targeted."

"I fight for everyone who knows rather than using transgender children as political piñatas

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to placate 5 percent of the electorate, we should be working together on solutions to the gaps in our health care and infrastructure," she adds. "What is happening in our politics today is a stain on the state that I love. What motivates me are the young voters and people of color who know what's happening now in Texas and around the country is not normal and who are making their voices heard."

Israel is now being motivated to seek a different office. She announced in September that she will not seek reelection to the House, where she has represented an Austin district since 2014, and will instead consider a run for mayor of the Texas capital next year. The current mayor, Steve Adler, cannot run again due to term limits. She has formed an exploratory committee with a diversity of members.

And Israel and Garza will have their wedding. They're planning a Texas-size ceremony and party for next spring.

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Arlington approves redrawn council districts that some say dilute Black, Latino voting power
Kailey Broussard
KERA News
December 16, 2021
https://www.keranews.org/government/2021-12-16/arlington-approves-redrawn-council-districts-that-some-say-dilute-black-latino-voting-power

Arlington's new city council districts give slightly more voting power to voters of color, but NAACP and LULAC leaders said they do not reflect its diverse communities.
Arlington city council approved redrawn voting districts this week that some civil and voting rights groups say do not reflect growth in Black, Hispanic and Latino communities.

Council members gave final approval Tuesday to a map that redraws four of the city's five single-member districts to more evenly split Arlington residents. The city-appointed redistricting task force selected the map as the best of five put forward — three from Bojorquez Law Firm, two from residents and community groups.

The approved map moves voters in the area between North Bowen Road, West Sanford Street, Oakwood Lane, and West Randol Mill Road/Westwood Drive from District 1 to District 4. District 3 residents in the boundaries of East Arkansas Lane, New York Avenue, Sherry Street, and East Mayfield Road will become part of District 5. The maps give slightly more voting power to Hispanic and Latino voters in District 1 and to Black and African-American voters in districts 3 and 5.

The 7-1 vote was the last needed to finalize the new districts ahead of municipal elections in 2022 when residents will decide four city council seats. Ruby Faye Woolridge, at-large District 6 council member, voted against the map.

Woolridge applauded the redistricting task force's efforts and formation; the group marks the first time a community board formally advised city council during the redistricting process.

“I’m very grateful for that and I look forward to the future and the progress that will continue to be made,” she said.

Mayor Jim Ross was absent from the meeting.

The final vote followed months of criticism from local NAACP and LULAC chapters, whose leaders claimed the redistricting task force and council upheld districts that dilute voices in communities of color.

“Same old, same old”
Luis Castillo, president of Arlington LULAC, said the city has historically protected incumbents who, until recent years, have been mostly white. Castillo argued the same interests caused the city to gravitate from eight at-large council members to five single-member districts and three at-large members.

“It’s a continuation of the same old, same old,” he said.

Castillo’s group and Arlington NAACP submitted a map that stretched District 4, a majority-white voting district, to cover northwest Arlington, including Viridian, the city’s master-planned community composed of upscale housing developments. The leaders have opposed the task force-recommended map, and defended their submission, drawn in a manner that would give communities of color more voting power in the city’s northern, southeast and eastern regions — districts 1, 3 and 5, respectively.

Alisa Simmons, Arlington NAACP president, told council members Dec. 7 the city’s 8% population growth between 2010 and 2020 was “entirely driven by Arlington’s communities of color.” The 2020 census put Arlington’s population at 394,266, making it the 50th largest city in the United States.

“When combined, these groups can together constitute a majority of the city’s voting age population in possibly three districts,” she said.

Attorney Rezzin Pullum with Bojorquez Law Firm told council the same day the groups’ map did not fall in line with two city-instituted requirements for redistricting: that the new lines do not alter district shape as much as possible or draw sitting council members out of their districts. The NAACP and LULAC map would have cast District 1 Council Member Helen Moise into District 4, a majority-white district.

Stephanie Swanson with the League of Women Voters of Texas
said the NAACP and LULAC map did a better job of upholding section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits practices that discriminate against race, color or languages spoken by voters.

“Preserving incumbency is a very problematic redistricting criteria to adopt,” Swanson said. “There is no federal law stating that incumbents must be protected.”

Bojorquez Law Firm reviewed the concerns Swanson and the groups raised during redistricting and did not find issues that would open the city to legal action, city staff said.

Incumbents' power diminished?

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Moise said the term limits for mayor and council seats that voters approved in 2018 temper concerns that incumbents can leverage redrawn lines. Moise can run for one more council term under limits that confine candidates to 12 years in office, or three two-year terms holding any council seat or serving as mayor.

In her first two races, Moise said, she ran against Black or African-American candidates, and she won support from communities of color for her work to support neighborhoods. Moise was first elected in May 2018 and re-elected in November 2020.

“I love District 1; I’ve lived in it for 38 years,” she said. “In both of my elections, I ran a campaign that said I would serve every single person in my district, and my district listened."

Moise’s seat is one of four voters will decide in 2022, when the new districts go into effect. Raul Gonzalez, who represents southwest Arlington in District 2, announced he will run for re-election. Arlington voters will select two new at-large council members, as Victoria Farrar-Myers, District 7, is being termed out, and Woolridge announced she will run for Tarrant County commissioner’s court.

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Court tells Texas AG, "Nah," On Election Prosecutions
Keith Reed
The Root
December 16, 2021
https://www.theroot.com/court-tells-texas-ag-nah-on-election-prosecutions-1848229952

A high court in Texas smacked down the state attorney general’s argument that he can prosecute election offenses all by himself. The ruling means that Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican Trump supporter, loses a potentially powerful tool in his party’s voter suppression campaign.

The Court of Criminal Appeals, Texas’ highest authority on criminal cases, ruled on Wednesday that Paxton can’t barge in on local criminal cases involving elections, such as possible instances of voter fraud or campaign finance violations, according to the Texas Tribune. Instead Paxton has to get the OK from a local prosecutor before he sticks his nose in.

From News 4 San Antonio

In its opinion, the Court of Criminal Appeals overturned a lower-court ruling that said the election code provision “clearly and unambiguously gives the Attorney General power to prosecute criminal laws prescribed by election laws generally whether those laws are inside or outside the Code.”

Rather, the Court of Criminal Appeals said, “the Attorney General can prosecute with the permission of the local prosecutor but cannot initiate prosecution unilaterally.”

In his tweet, Paxton said the ruling means “Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas.” That is a reference to

George Soros, the Democratic megadonor who has become a force in local prosecutor elections.

In short, Paxton thought he could overrule local district attorneys when he didn't like their decisions on who to haul into court, or who not to, over elections. By an eight-to-one margin, a panel of Republican judges told him no.

It's an important ruling because in Texas and many other states, some GOP officials have passed shady new laws designed to shrink voting rights in the wake of Donald Trump's failed attempt to hold onto the presidency. Those laws were cooked up based on the Big Lie of rampant voter fraud in the 2020 election. Handing Paxton the green light on who to charge with election crimes presented the opportunity use the office to his or his party's political advantage.

Texas is already being sued over new voting restrictions its Republican governor and legislature put in place, as well as a gerrymandered voting map.

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Controversial businessman with Dallas ties sees renewed fame as election 'expert'
Bret Jaspers
KERA News
December 16, 2021
https://www.keranews.org/politics/2021-12-16/controversial-businessman-with-dallas-ties-sees-renewed-fame-as-election-expert

Longtime Dallas businessman J. Hutton Pulitzer once promoted triple-edged wiper blades and a device called the CueCat that found a spot in the Museum of Failure. More recently, he's tried to sell something else – allegations of election fraud.

The New York Times is reporting former President Trump's final chief of staff Mark Meadows submitted a PowerPoint to the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection. That PowerPoint, the Times says, "is similar to a 36-page document available online, and it appears to be based on the theories of Jovan Hutton Pulitzer, a Texas entrepreneur and self-described inventor."

Pulitzer, also known as Jovan Philyaw, attained fame – or perhaps infamy – when he convinced several companies in the late 1990s to invest in the CueCat, a much-derided computer accessory. If you haven't heard of Pulitzer, here are some important things to know:

- **CueCat.** *Time* magazine ranked it Number 5 on a list of the 50 worst inventions of all time. A 2001 article in the Wall Street Journal summed it up: "a hand-held, cat-shaped scanner that attached to a PC. Hold it up to the bar code in an ad or catalog or a can of soup, and your computer whisks you to a web page connected to the product."
-

Radio Shack reportedly invested $30 million; *The Dallas Morning News* invested even

more than that. People didn't take to it, and the legacy of CueCat is that of a humorous, expensive waste.

- **Georgia's 2020 election.** In their efforts to support Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election, conservative legislators in Georgia called Pulitzer as an expert witness. In December 2020, Pulitzer spoke before the Georgia state Senate, according to The Verge.

But the Georgia Secretary of State's office discredited his claim he had hacked into a poll pad, noting Pulitzer provided no evidence. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, excoriated the state lawmakers who invited Pulitzer to speak and described him as a "failed treasure hunter."

"Fake news is hard enough to combat when mainstream media outlets push it out, but when a small cadre of Georgia legislators do it, it's a whole different story," Raffensperger said.

- **Maricopa County's election "audit."** Maricopa County is home to Phoenix and is the second-largest voting jurisdiction in the United States. The Arizona state Senate hired a firm with no prior election experience to conduct a much criticized "audit" of the county's 2020 ballots. The Arizona Mirror reported auditors used Pulitzer's technology to examine the ballots, but Pulitzer said he was unable to discuss his past experience reviewing ballots because of a nondisclosure agreement. County officials said the audit's final report included falsehoods about elections there.

Trump also called on Texas to conduct an audit of the 2020 election, and Gov. Greg Abbott complied.

Experts say claims about election fraud that are not backed up with facts and evidence undermine faith in elections and the voting process.

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Nevada county where Trump won to replace voting machines
Sam Metz
Associated Press
December 16, 2021
https://www.fox5vegas.com/election_hq/nevada-county-where-trump-won-to-replace-voting-machines/article_610271e7-4b6a-5afa-a97b-55852bffbcac.html

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — Local officials in rural Nevada decided on Thursday to replace equipment manufactured by Dominion Voting Systems — a sign that unsubstantiated concerns about election machine tampering are still prevalent more than a year after the 2020 election.

In Lander County, population 5,734, commissioners approved $223,000 in spending for

new ES&S voting machines and $69,000 for maintenance, installation and training. ES&S equipment is federally certified and used throughout the country, including in Carson City.

The equipment will replace Dominion's suite of voting equipment, which was the subject of conspiracy theories in the aftermath of the 2020 election, with Trump campaign attorneys suggesting without evidence that the company's equipment had ties to Venezuela, George Soros and Antifa.

Those claims have been largely debunked. News networks that promulgated them have faced defamation lawsuits. But Lander County residents continued to claim that Dominion's equipment swayed the election results in comments to the commission over the past several months.

The commissioners decided to replace Dominion equipment after outgoing County Clerk Sadie Sullivan, who oversees local elections, told them in October that the company had been a reliable partner. They said their scrutiny of Dominion machines wasn't because they thought Lander's elections was victim to foul play, but because they weren't sure about the machines elsewhere.

Though Trump won nearly 80% of the vote in Lander County, commissioners have considered an Arizona-style voting machine audit and earlier this year floated a proposal to hand-count ballots in future elections.

Sullivan told commissioners that it would be difficult under state law and their contract with Dominion to seize the machines and said hand-counting can lead to inaccuracies and human error.

Commissioners in Elko County are also considering new voting machines. Republicans there also say they're confident in local results, but worry about election tampering in other places where Dominion equipment is used and believe replacing them may rebuild public trust.

Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske has said the results in Nevada — where President Joe Biden won by 33,596 votes — were accurate and reliable.

In Nevada, electronic voting machines are certified by the federal government and required to run on closed systems to prevent hacking and cyberattacks. Touch screen voting machines are required to print a paper audit, which is then scanned and counted by another machine.

Lander County commissioners scuttled their hand-count proposal. Officials also chose Molly Gonzalez, a county employee, to succeed Sullivan, who is among a growing list of local election officials who have announced plans to leave their posts.

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Yes, many noncitizens can now vote in New York City, but only in municipal elections
Mauricio Chamberlin and Kelly Jones
KCEN-TV

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

December 16, 2021
https://www.kcentv.com/article/news/verify/elections-verify/yes-many-noncitizens-can-now-vote-in-new-york-city-but-only-in-municipal-elections/536-cc003481-0648-48e0-8a7f-a2c769d4f998

On Dec. 9, the New York City council voted to allow DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits to vote in the city's municipal elections. The bill passed 33-14 with two abstentions, according to council records.

After the bill passed, the hashtag #OurCityOurVote trended on Twitter, but not everyone was pleased with the approval. New York Senate GOP leader Rob Ortt issued a joint statement with fellow Republican Sen. Andrew Lanza, calling it a "blatant disregard for our Constitution."

After news of the change to New York City voting laws broke, VERIFY audience member Betty emailed: "Is this true? In New York City, the bill — passed 33-14 — will allow almost 900,000 immigrants to vote, including DACA recipients, green card holders, and anyone with a work permit."

THE QUESTION
Can DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits now vote in New York City?

THE SOURCES
- New York City council records
- Joint statement from New York senators Rob Ortt and Andrew Lanza
- Ralina Cardona, League of United Latin American Citizens

THE ANSWER

Yes, it is true that DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits can now vote in New York City municipal elections. This law does not allow these groups to vote in statewide or federal elections, and does not apply to undocumented individuals and people who don't live in New York City.

WHAT WE FOUND
According to records from the New York City council, the bill that passed on Dec. 9 "would provide a process for individuals in New York City who are lawful permanent residents or are authorized to work in the United States to vote in municipal elections." Sources estimate this applies to between 800,000 and 900,000 residents of New York City who are DACA recipients, green card holders or people with work permits.

This bill does not apply to statewide or national elections, such as the presidential election.

The joint statement released after the Dec. 9 vote from New York Republican senators Rob Ortt and Andrew Lanza said the move was a "slap in the face to every law-abiding American citizen who values the sacred right to participate in our democracy, and is the latest attempt by New York Democrats to destroy the sanctity of our elections for their own political purposes."

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It also said they are confident a legal challenge to the bill will be successful.

Ralina Cardona, Northeast regional vice president for the League of United Latin American Citizens, said she would not be surprised if opponents of the bill try to take it to court, but added that right now is an exciting time in history for New York City voters.

“We know many Latinos, many immigrants are essential workers. They kept this city alive, they kept the city fed, they kept the city safe and healthy. So, for me, it is exciting, because that's what this country began on taxation without representation. And they said, ‘Well, wait a minute, we should be able to pick and choose who will be representing us.’ And they pay their Social Security taxes. They go to the supermarket, they're paying taxes on their gas, they're paying taxes on their food, they're paying taxes on everything. So once again, it is exciting,” she said.

New York City isn’t the first major city to allow noncitizens to vote. In 2018, San Francisco became the largest U.S. city at the time to pass a measure allowing noncitizens to vote in local elections, but it also doesn’t apply to statewide or federal elections.

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Biden met virtually with U.S. senators to discuss voting rights bill
Reuters
December 16, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-met-virtually-with-us-senators-discuss-voting-rights-bill-2021-12-16/

WASHINGTON, Dec 16 (Reuters) - President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris met virtually with lawmakers in the U.S. Senate to discuss the voting rights bill on Thursday, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters.

On Wednesday, Biden said no domestic priority is "more important than voting rights," even as the Senate is scrambling to pass his signature social spending bill, raising the stakes for a last-minute push to pass voting rights bills before the U.S. Congress returns home for Christmas.

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Voting rights advocates hold hunger strike near White House
Ellie Silverman
Washington Post
December 17, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/17/dc-protest-hunger-strike-voting-rights/

They tried to do this any other way.

For months, they listened to Democrats talk about passing voting rights legislation over Republican objections. They wrote emails, canvassed and called lawmakers, urging them to protect the country’s democracy. They saw other liberal protesters marching in the nation’s capital all summer, getting arrested to bring attention to their fight.

None of it, they said, seemed to be enough.

So last week in Phoenix, a group of 20 college students and recent graduates stopped eating.

In starving themselves, they hoped politicians at the U.S. Capitol and White House would finally act with the urgency they say this crisis of democracy demands.

“We’d rather suffer through this hunger strike than to suffer the consequences of this bill not being passed,” said Brandon Ortega, a third-year student at Arizona State University who has not eaten since the hunger strike began Dec. 6. “We’re really committed to hold out as long as we can.”

The group planned to stay outside the state Capitol in Phoenix, and focus their pressure on Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) to support passing the Freedom to Vote Act, a federal voting rights bill. But to their surprise, Sinema spoke with them on Day Four. They left that meeting thinking their message needed to be elevated.

On Day Five — Friday — they flew to Washington, where new hunger strikers who heard about their protest joined them outside the White House. The group is demanding that Democrats pass federal voting rights legislation before next year, amid concern over the 2022 midterm elections.

But by Day Nine — Tuesday — their bodies seemed to be shutting down.

Too weak to walk long distances, they used wheelchairs to get to their protest spot at Lafayette Square. One hunger striker said it felt like knives were poking at her stomach. Another said she had lost more than 10 pounds. Others had to stop fasting on the advice of a doctor who checks their vital signs twice a day.

But those who were able to continue kept showing up, encouraging each other to drink water, rest and finish college assignments.

“I think my body’s just kind of like giving up on me a little bit,” said Emma Shockley, an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Pennsylvania. “It’s kind of sad that we have to do what we’re doing, but … we’re willing to do whatever it takes.”

The students are part of un-PAC, which describes itself as a nonpartisan advocacy group launched in March that employs student organizers and whose first campaign has been to pressure legislators to pass federal democracy reform legislation.

As they struggled through Day Nine, the activists received a boost from some Texas state legislators they admire: Reps. Trey Martinez Fischer (D-San Antonio), Gina Hinojosa (D-Austin) and Jasmine Crockett (D-Dallas), who is running for Congress.

“Don’t think people are not paying attention because they are. Don’t think for a minute that you’re not making an impact because you are,” Martinez Fischer told the demonstrators.

He was among the Texas Democrats who broke quorum in May to block the passage of a

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restrictive voting bill. That group flew to Washington to turn up pressure on President Biden and Congress to pass federal voting rights protections to override the restrictions that Republicans in Texas and other states were trying to pass.

“When the history book is written on Freedom to Vote, and on the John Lewis Advancement Act, President Biden is signing those proposals into law, we’re all going to have a chapter in that story,” he said, “and yours is happening right now.”

Kyla Frank, 23, nodded as she listened, her hands clasped atop a pink journal detailing the hunger strike. As she flipped through the pages, she pointed out notes of solidarity from speakers who encouraged the group throughout the hunger strike.

Frank has participated in the hunger strike since Day One and has been drinking about 5 liters of regular water and three bottles of electrolyte-enhanced water per day. By Day Three, she felt like she was “hit by a train.” She has lost 13 pounds.

She said she is motivated to stand up for voting rights after watching her mother work so hard to care for her and her siblings.

“A lot of the struggles that she faced are a direct result of corruption in our politics that prevents our government from protecting people who are most vulnerable,” said Frank, a graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in the District and Virginia State University.

In the last presidential election, she voted for Biden, hoping that he would fix a system she viewed as broken.

“He promised a lot of things,” Frank said. “If any of those promises are going to be seen this year, next year, we need to prioritize voting rights so people can have a pathway to getting those issues across the finish line.”

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Fox’s worst week? Dominion ruling adds to drumbeat of bad news for the network
Brian Stelter
CNN Business
December 16, 2021
https://kvia.com/news/2021/12/16/dominion-voting-wins-key-decision-in-lawsuit-against-fox-news-2/

On Sunday the Fox News Channel’s news facade was chipped away when Chris Wallace decamped to CNN. On Monday the hypocrisy of Fox’s biggest stars was highlighted by a bipartisan House committee. On Tuesday the network belatedly and weakly defended itself. And the week wasn’t even half over yet.

On Wednesday Fox’s social media team was forced to delete an antisemitic cartoon after advocacy groups shamed the network. And today, Thursday, Fox was set back in court in a big way. As Katelyn Polantz reports here, “a judge in Delaware has found that Fox News’ coverage of election fraud after the 2020 election may have been inaccurate, and is

allowing a major defamation case against the right-wing TV network to move forward."

"The ruling will now allow Dominion to attempt to unearth extensive communications within Fox News as they gather evidence for the case, and the company may be able to interview the network's top names under oath," Polantz explains.

For that reason, some media writers are speculating that the network will now try to settle, lest it be subjected to the embarrassment of the discovery process. "Fox loses the key motion; cases often settle at this point," Ben Smith tweeted, "and a settlement here would likely be a big number. It's a very strong case."

On the other hand, Dominion wants to have its name cleared, and a confidential settlement might not seem sufficient.

"At this stage, the court must assume Dominion's claims about Fox News are true," Polantz writes. Still, the judge's 52-page opinion noted that Fox "may have slanted its coverage to push election fraud, knowing the accusations were wrong."

"Sold their souls"
"Wrong" has been a throughline in the outside coverage about Fox this week. As the network's ranks of reporters shrank and conspiratorial ranters grew, Wallace decided not to re-up his contract. Fox's court jester ridiculed him on the way out.

"There's a good chance Wallace had enough of being on the wrong end of conservative wrath," the former Fox analyst Bernard Goldberg wrote for The Hill on Thursday.

Goldberg, who was a regular on Bill O'Reilly's show back in the day, quoted an email from a "wise, conservative friend" of his. The launch of Fox was "great for journalism and great for the country," this person said, but then Fox "sold their souls to … Trump and they're too damn stupid to realize the damage they've done to the conservative cause they claim to espouse."

That damage includes the Big Lie, hyped by some of Fox's biggest stars, and now the subject of Dominion's lawsuit…

A counterpoint about Fox's loyal audience
The Dominion lawsuit is a legitimate and potentially very costly problem for Fox. But all the rest of the noise surrounding the network may be negligible. Fox viewers aren't hearing analysis of Wallace's exit or why it's such a blow to the Fox brand. They aren't hearing criticism of Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham's urgent texts to Mark Meadows on 1/6. They are hearing that Liz Cheney and her Democrat friends are illegitimate. They are hearing that "cancel culture" forces are trying to hurt Fox. Think about it, what will Fox viewers remember about mid-December 2021? That a criminal tried to burn down Fox's artificial Christmas tree. And that Fox proudly lit up a new tree the very next day.

Fox's ratings tell the story: The biggest shows on Wednesday were "Tucker Carlson Tonight," with 3.46 million viewers, and "The Five," with 3.26 million. Both shows have more than ten times as many viewers as Newsmax at the same hour. If I know anything about Fox insiders, based on my reporting work for "Hoax," they would say they are not having a bad week at all, they are having a very successful week…

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Opening of Texas-Mexico border boosts holiday retail in San Antonio
Brian Kilpatrick
Texas Public Radio
December 16, 2021
https://www.tpr.org/business/2021-12-16/opening-of-texas-mexico-border-boosts-holiday-retail-in-san-antonio

Many San Antonians are flush with savings from spending all that time at home and/or receiving some federal COVID relief dollars. But Crawford said more than that, many are fully vaccinated and boostered and ready to get out of the house for their first real holiday shopping excursion since the pandemic began.

She said it's not just locals turning out; there are plenty of out-of-town shoppers flocking back to one of the city's best-known malls.

"The border is open from Mexico and so we are seeing those Mexican National tourists coming in and shopping," Crawford said. "And then also we are seeing the local U.S. tourists that are people getting out and doing a little a bit of traveling as well. People always like to purchase something special when their on vacation."

Crawford said this year, malls are a more appealing option for many shoppers due to a couple of problems associated with online shopping.

"Customers are able to come in and pick up their purchase and leave with it, there are absolutely no shipping delays because their able to take it with them," she said.

Crawford said the mall's merchants, more than 200 according to North Star's website, have not reported any major supply chain issues.

She said the mall's sister shopping center, The Shops at La Cantera near Loop 1604 and La Cantera Parkway on the far Northwest Side, is also reporting brisk business.

Both are managed by Brookfield Properties.

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EXCLUSIVE-Royal Dutch Shell confirms new delay in sale of Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex
Stefanie Esenbacher and Erwin Seba
Reuters
December 16, 2021
https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/exclusive-royal-dutch-shell-confirms-new-delay-in-sale-of-texas-refinery-to-mexicos-pemex

MEXICO CITY/HOUSTON, Dec 16 (Reuters) - Royal Dutch Shell RDSa.Lon Thursday confirmed a Reuters report that the sale of its controlling interest in a Texas

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refinery to Mexican state oil company Petroleos Mexicanos has been delayed until next year.

A review of the deal by theCommittee on Foreign Investment in the United States, an national security group chaired by the U.S. Treasury, had been expected to wrap up this month but has been extended into next year, Shell spokesperson Curtis Smith said.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800-barrel-per-day (bpd) Deer Park, Texas, refinery outside Houston to partner Pemex for about $596 million. The closing was expected this month, officials have said.

"We were hopeful we could conclude the sale before the end of the month, however, it now looks like the full amount of time will be needed," Smith said. "We will continue to cooperate with CFIUS as they review the transaction."

Pemex was not immediately available to comment.

The delay signals CFIUS has moved past its initial 45-day review and into a second, investigative period. The committee is charged with reviewing sales of critical U.S. infrastructure to foreign buyers for national security implications.

The second phase does not signal a potential rejection by the security group. Questions raised during the inital review can be resolved with a letter of agreement or a mitigation agreement, according to a former CFIUS official not involved in the Pemex review.

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Texas has built 6 miles of wire border fencing along Rio Grande under Operation Lone Star
Sandra Sanchez
Border Report
December 16, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/politics/texas-has-built-6-miles-of-wire-border-fencing-along-rio-grande-under-operation-lone-star/

WESLACO, Texas (Border Report) — Since Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in June announced the state would “step up” and erect its own border barrier along the Rio Grande, only 6 miles of wire fencing so far has been completed, some of it just temporary razor fence coils laid on the ground, officials with the Texas Military Department said Thursday.

Lt. Col. Dan Garrison of the Texas Military Department, who is an engineer in charge of the fence-building that is part of Operation Lone Star, said they have secured commitments from private landholders to allow fencing to be built on a total of 62.75 miles in five counties along the Texas-Mexico border. The counties include Val Verde, Maverick, Starr, Zapata and Webb.

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Currently, the Texas Military Department is building on six private properties along the border, Garrison told media during a news conference Thursday at the Texas Department of Public Safety regional office in Weslaco, Texas.

He said the barrier is being put up for the safety of migrants, as well as landowners.

“There’s a big safety aspect in building this barrier. The intent is to stop that crossing in places where people could potentially get hurt,” Garrison said.

Civil rights groups allege Operation Lone Star violates Title VI and unfairly targets Black and brown migrants. On Wednesday, 10 organizations filed a complaint with the Department of Justice requesting an investigation and asking that federal funding associated with the operation be revoked.

Two miles of the fencing has been put up in the past two weeks in rural Starr County east of Rio Grande City.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott plans to visit the site in Rio Grande City on Saturday morning along with Texas General Land Office Commissioner George P. Bush; DPS Director Steve McCraw; Texas Military Department Adjutant Gen. Tracy Norris; and a few state lawmakers, the governor’s office announced Thursday.

The Texas General Land Office gave the Department of Public Safety access to 3,100 acres of farmland to put up temporary border fencing.

But Garrison told Border Report that the wire fencing placed in Starr County is concertina wire, and the coils stand no taller than 4-feet off the ground. It is a temporary barricade that can be moved easily “in case of a caravan.”

He said the razor wire deters and entangles and stops migrants from crossing the Rio Grande and into the United States.

“If there is a need to stop movement quickly, we can surge to any area and literally place (down) miles within hours,” he said.

Abbott has repeatedly supported the operation and criticized the Biden administration for not doing enough to secure the border, in his opinion.

“President Biden’s reckless open border policies have created a humanitarian crisis that is enriching the cartels, smugglers, and human traffickers,” Abbott said in March.

Since Operation Lone Star began on March 4, there have been over 9,000 criminal arrests, and 2,347 criminal trespass arrests and over 167,000 migrant apprehensions, DPS Lt. Chris Olivarez said Thursday.

The operation has involved the placement of giant shipping containers alongside the riverbank near Eagle Pass, as well as a current boat blockade of the Rio Grande near La Joya, Texas, in Hidalgo County. Troopers work alongside National Guard troops and other agencies, and Olivarez said the border barrier is a very visual and effective way of deterring

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migrants from illegally crossing.

National Guard troops also have arrived in Texas from several other states to support the operation.

Currently, the Texas Military Department is negotiating to build temporary wire fencing on nearly 200 additional riverfront miles, Garrison said. Negotiations with half of those miles are with landowners in Zapata County and Webb County, which is home to Laredo.

None of those negotiations currently include land in Starr County, where Abbott plans to visit on Saturday.

The bulk of the fencing — 4.4 miles — has been built in Val Verde County, where a surge of 15,000 mostly Haitian migrants closed down the Del Rio international bridge in September as they crossed from Acuña, Mexico.

Garrison said construction is slow going, bogged down by areas of bedrock and extremely soft soil. They build at a rate of only a half-mile per day.

He says they are only signing agreements that they know they can complete within six months.

“So the faster we’re able to build, the more agreements we’re able to put on the books and the farther we can go,” Garrison said. “We’re trying to build as fast as we possibly can right now.”

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From: Keith Ingram
To: Kate Fisher
Subject: Fw: SOS Morning News Clips 12/20/21
Date: Monday, December 20, 2021 10:55:04 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Monday, December 20, 2021 8:54 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/20/21

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 20, 2021

Election audit looms as Dallas, Tarrant and Collin Counties prepare for primaries, *Dallas Morning News*, December 20, 2021

TDCJ already struggling with recruitment see $4 million of its funding moved to election audit, *CNHI News*, December 17, 2021

Texas This Week: A conversation with Texas Secretary of State John Scott, *KVUE-TV*, December 19, 2021

Garcia: 'An unusual situation' — Secretary of State's office nixes primary election to pick DeBerry's successor, *San Antonio Express-News*, December 18, 2021

Potter County Republican Party will hold own primary using paper, hand counted ballots, *KVII-TV*, December 17, 2021

Texas Primary Draws Contenders in More Partisan House Districts, *Bloomberg Government*, December 20, 2021

Webb County Dems hold drawing for spots on primary ballot, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 19, 2021

Commissioners approve contracts with Democratic, Republican parties, *Greenville Herald-Banner*, December 20, 2021

Making an immediate impact: New Bell County elections administrator brings changes to department, *Temple Daily Telegram*, December 18, 2021

Election Integrity Law at Risk After Court of Criminal Appeals Rules Only County, District Attorneys Can Prosecute Fraud, *The Texan*, December 17, 2021

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Texas lawmaker calls on US Senate to stay in session through holiday to pass voting rights legislation, *WFAA-TV*, December 18, 2021

Trump road show comes to Dallas after weak ticket sales in Florida, *Spectrum News*, December 17, 2021

Republicans resist saying 3 simple words: 'Joe Biden won,' *Associated Press*, December 18, 2021

Texas officially starts construction on border wall, Gov. Greg Abbott says, *Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 2021

Border merchants finally seeing business picking up since travel restrictions were lifted, *Border Report*, December 17, 2021

Massacre in the desert? 13 migrants feared dead in cartel feud along Texas-Mexico border, *Dallas Morning News*, December 20, 2021

'We're working very hard': US Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar visits El Paso, Juarez, addresses border visa backlog, *El Paso Times*, December 17, 2021

'The vote suppressors won 2021': Federal inaction leaves Texas advocates dismayed, *Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 2021

The time for Wolff to appoint an interim county commissioner is now, not later, *San Antonio Report*, December 19, 2021

Former U.S. Attorney General: Republican redistricting maps disenfranchise voters of color, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 2021

Election audit looms as Dallas, Tarrant and Collin Counties prepare for primaries
Philip Jankowski
Dallas Morning News
December 20, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/20/election-audit-looms-as-dallas-tarrant-and-collin-counties-prepare-for-primaries/

AUSTIN — Secretary of State John Scott wants answers soon.

On Monday, his office, which is in charge of state elections, wants to start hearing from the three North Texas counties that are part of a four-county election audit that came amid political pressure from former President Donald Trump.

But some election administrators are still trying to figure out Scott's recent "exhaustive" request for information. They're in talks with county and district attorneys and are gauging how many resources they can dedicate to the effort as March's primaries loom.

On Dec. 10, the secretary of state's office sent a lengthy request to the election administrators in Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris Counties — the four counties Scott is auditing as part of an investigation into 2020′s presidential election.

The 12-page letter, which included more than 180 bulleted items the secretary of

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state is seeking, marked the first formal communications with the election offices subject to the inquiry since it was announced, according to election administrators. The request marked the beginning of “phase two” of the audit, with a report on the findings of phase one expected to be released to the public by the end of the year.

Dallas County election administrator Mike Scarpello said his office is still evaluating the request and that the Dallas County district attorney’s office is reviewing the request to see what information it can turn over to state officials.

Scarpello said the civil division of the district attorney’s office is treating the secretary of state’s request similarly to a request made under the Public Information Act of Texas. However, with the watchful eye of Gov. Greg Abbott behind this latest inquiry into election integrity, Scott’s request is a little different than one made by your average Texan.

Scarpello said the request, which seeks information on mail-in ballots, provisional ballots, election workers and election security, “obviously carries a little more weight” than a typical information request from the public.

“We value this audit,” Scarpello said. “So we’re not dismissing it by any means. We’re being as cooperative as we can be, we just want to make sure we — like every other request — run it through the process of reviewing it with the DA’s office.”

Information requests submitted under the Texas Public Information Act are what make the secretary of state’s request relatively easy, according to Tarrant County election administrator Heider Garcia.

“Some of it we’ve already scanned and have available,” Garcia said. “But again, I think the spirit between the state and us has been of cooperation and just working out a timeline that works best for everyone.”

Dallas and Tarrant Counties’ election administrators both said that the Dec. 10 letter was the first time since initial notification that they had been contacted by the secretary of state’s office about the audit. Harris County election administrator Isabel Longoria said her office has been contacted twice about the audit. Collin County’s election administrator did not return messages seeking comment about the audit.

The secretary of state’s office plans to have on-site inspections of voting facilities in January. Exact dates are expected to be firmed up next week after election administrators respond to the initial inquiry, according to Scott spokesman Sam Taylor.

The office is also nearing completion of its initial findings. Taylor said the office is waiting for information from an interstate cross-check system to confirm if some flagged ballots were cast by people who voted in multiple states.

“That’s the last piece of the puzzle before we’re ready to publish the results,” Taylor said in a text message.

The secretary of state’s office announced the four-county audit in September just hours after Trump released an open letter calling for a full-scale audit of the 2020 presidential election in Texas despite winning the state by nearly 6 points. Trump later criticized the audit as “weak” and pushed for Abbott to add a comprehensive audit to the ongoing special session. Abbott did not acquiesce.

The audit is also part of a recent evolution that has seen the secretary of state’s office shift from an informational resource for county election departments to something

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more akin to an enforcement arm of politically motivated inquiries — less of a teacher and more of a hall monitor.

The office thrust itself into politics with an abortive attempt to purge noncitizens from voting rolls in 2019 that ended after numerous naturalized citizens were found to be targeted, eventually leading to the resignation of David Whitley after he failed to be confirmed.

That came as Trump has repeatedly pushed unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud since he was elected in 2016. In March, the head of the office's elections division, Keith Ingram, called the 2020 election "smooth and secure" — a talking point seized by Democrats hoping to stop new election laws. Their efforts to thwart new laws failed even after House Democrats broke quorum twice and fled the state.

Longoria, the Harris County election administrator, referenced Ingram's comments in a written statement to The Dallas Morning News regarding the audit.

"While the new Secretary of State is focused on revisiting an election from over a year ago, one his office deemed 'smooth and secure' and for which the results have already been accepted, my office is looking ahead," Longoria said, noting that her office is preparing for an upcoming special election in January as well as March's primaries.

And in October, Abbott appointed Scott secretary of state. His selection immediately drew attention to his brief involvement in a lawsuit unsuccessfully challenging 2020's election results in Pennsylvania.

With the controversial election law in effect since Dec. 2, the secretary of state's office has been placed in charge of implementing a host of new election law provisions, including creating guidelines and a curriculum for certified poll watchers, new mail-vote restrictions and changes to voting hours.

Legislators also approved regular audits of the returns in four counties following presidential and midterm elections. Those audits will resemble the ongoing audit, except that the law requires the state to audit two counties with populations greater than 300,000 and two counties each with fewer than 300,000 people.

It means Texas' densest 18 counties, many of which tend to be more favorable to Democrats, will be audited at a much higher rate than the 236 counties that make up their rural counterparts.

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TDCJ already struggling with recruitment see $4 million of its funding moved to election audit
Ali Linan
CNHI News
December 17, 2021
https://www.cnhinews.com/cnhi/article_4de4cb62-5f61-11ec-aba2-2f8d781ec589.html

AUSTIN — Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to reallocate $4 million in Texas Department of Criminal Justice funding to combat election fraud left a budget hole in a department already struggling to fill positions.

On Nov. 19, Abbott announced he approved a legislative budget proposal that would provide funding needed for the Texas Secretary of State's office to establish a new Election Audit Division — a division conducting comprehensive forensic audits of the

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state’s election. This is addition to the $250 million Abbott took from the TDCJ in June to fund the border wall.

The money for the audit was taken from the General Revenue appropriated for Correctional Security Operations in fiscal year 2023 “for the purpose of ensuring election integrity,” documents state.

“Ensuring the integrity of our elections is critical to our democracy, and the Texas Secretary of State's office deserves the resources and support needed to thoroughly complete this ongoing task," Abbott said in a news release. "The people of Texas must have trust and confidence in the election process, as well as the outcomes of our elections.”

Based in Huntsville, the TDCJ manages and operates all state prisons, state jails and contracted private correctional facilities, according to its website.

As of Dec. 17, the TDCJ had 375 job openings. Of those, at least 60 were for correctional officer positions with an average pay of about $49,000 per year. In total, the TDCJ has about 29,300 employees.

“Recruiting and retaining correctional officers remains the agency’s biggest challenge and our highest priority,” said Robert Hurst, TDCJ communications officer. “Before COVID-19, staffing was frequently impacted by economic surges and competing employment opportunities. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues.”

The jobs themselves are inherently difficult and often underappreciated as reflected in their low pay, said Charley Wilkison, executive director of Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, or CLEAT. The starting salary for a TDCJ correctional officer is $36,200 per year.

CLEAT primarily works with jailers at the county level, but Wilkison said issues with staffing are seen across all state and local detention and jail systems.

Wilkison said the issues with understaffing create greater burdens on corrections officers as they are expected to watch over more inmates with fewer resources. Low staffing could also put their safety, and the safety of people incarcerated, at risk should an incident occur and help is not readily available.

“These people are the bravest, most honorable folk that you find,” Wilkison said. “[Correctional officers] take dangerous individuals who can harm the whole community and keep them off the streets and away from society.”

He added: “We don't place a value on these people, their sacrifice or honors. They are no less than any of the rest of the folks that do things to protect the community.”

Hurst said the agency is working to improve salaries and work conditions in order to increase recruiting.

This includes a recent restructuring of its correctional officer career ladder where officers can now receive pay increases earlier in their rise and more frequently as they progress, Hurst said. But to fund the changes, the agency discontinued the recruitment bonus for correctional officers, he added.

The 87th Legislature also approved a 3% pay increase for correctional officers, food service and laundry managers, and ranking correction officers at 23 maximum-security facilities. This is where the TDCJ sees the highest turnover, Hurst said.

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The agency has also closed or idled six facilities within the past year in order to ease staffing burdens, Hurst said.

“We understand that there is no one solution to staffing but we will continue to find new and creative ways to fill critical positions,” he said.

Hurst said the TDCJ is likely to recoup the redirected funding through supplemental appropriation before it is needed, but when that will happen is unclear.

THE AUDIT

On Dec. 10, the Texas Secretary of State office launched phase two of its election audit targeting Tarrant, Collin, Dallas and Harris counties in which all except Collin County voted in favor of President Joe Biden.

Republican leaders continue to insist that widespread voter fraud occurs the state even though the number of voter fraud cases is less than 0.001%, according to reports.

In the 2020 election, 11 million Texans voted. The Texas Attorney General’s Office received 24 complaints where only a handful were prosecuted.

Nonetheless, Texas Secretary of State John Scott said the audit will “restore faith in Texas elections.”

"For the past several election cycles, voters have faced a crisis of confidence in the very system that underpins our representative form of government," Scott said previously.

The state has already conducted partial manual recounts, election security assessments and voter eligibility verification, but Scott insisted there is a need to go further.

The office issued an exhaustive document request of publicly available election materials which it said will cover about 35% of all votes cast in the November 2020 General Election in Texas.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Scott said in a news release.

Texas is not the only state to have funded election integrity initiatives. Wisconsin taxpayers have funded $700,000 worth of initiatives and Arizona taxpayers are funding a continued investigation into the 2020 election.

Even so, Kevin Boyle ,a professor of American History at Northwestern University, said an audit — even if it proves the previously established results to be accurate and Biden is the rightful president — will not strengthen beliefs in a system GOP elected officials are determined to tear down.

Boyle said he believes unless Republican leaders stand up to what is the fundamental truth, that the election was not stolen and there is no widespread voter fraud, Texans will continue to see a push by GOP leaders for more election restrictions.

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“They understand this election wasn't stolen, but they're not saying that they are not standing up to that fundamental lie. That's what needs to happen in the United States,” Boyle said. “Republican leadership sees a political advantage in pushing this lie, and by doing that, they are threatening the democratic system.”

He added: “We need people and there are people in the [Republican] party … to say the nation matters more than your political advantage.”

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Texas This Week: A conversation with Texas Secretary of State John Scott
Ashley Goudeau
KVUE-TV
December 19, 2021
https://www.kvue.com/article/news/politics/texas-this-week/texas-this-week-secretary-of-state-john-scott/269-0a749cdc-32a6-4a40-9b3c-0f69d5b30149

AUSTIN, Texas — In this week's edition of Texas This Week, newly appointed Secretary of State John Scott discuss his new role as the state's chief elections officer.

Texas Secretary of State John Scott discusses his new role
The state's chief elections officer has been on the job for just about two months now. In that time, John Scott has been busy. He's charged with auditing 2020 election results for the state's four largest counties. He's visited election officers across Texas and now is preparing for the 2022 primary election. He sat down with KVUE in one of his first television interviews to discuss his new role and vision for elections in Texas.

Ashley Goudeau: I first want to talk to you about your appointment. You're obviously not new to Texas and not new to Texas government, but to get that call from Gov. Greg Abbott to say, 'I want you to be the Secretary of State,' what was your reaction?

John Scott: "Well, honored in just a simple word. I think it's a lot from a guy that, you know, Granddad was a pipe fitter and his parents, neither one of them went to college. And I mean, it brought some pride to the family. And, I think, so honor is the best word I can use to describe it."

Goudeau: This is an appointment that I think a lot of people, particularly Democrats, were a little nervous to see who would be named to this position. But you've gotten praise from from both sides of the aisle. Is that reassuring for you?

Scott: "I think it raises the expectations that I be fair and impartial. And I think when we talk about the audit, for instance, that is the thing that concerns most people most of the time and I think most of the legislators. And I think that at the end of the day, the work product has to speak for itself and it has to be fair, impartial and evidence-based. And so that's what I can assure everybody on all sides that we're going to produce."

Goudeau: There was a little bit of push-back. Obviously, people pointed to some concern about your appointment because the fact that you, for a business day, represented former President Donald Trump in one of his lawsuits challenging the election in Pennsylvania. Talk to us about that.

Scott: "It was another one of those opportunities. They had an interesting case, set of facts. Went up there and the law changed a little bit because of the Third Court of Appeals, United States Court of Appeals, on an electors clause decision. And so, a lot of the ideas that might have been relevant were no longer that, so I thought it was

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kind of a change of, I guess, goals and I no longer really need to be involved in the case."

Goudeau: Did you trust the results of the 2020 election?

Scott: "I think I was like everybody else. I went and voted. I went and cast my ballot. I went in there and thought that it was going to be a fair election. And in my personal experience, I never saw anything that was anything different than any election I'd ever cast a ballot in. I think my experience up in Pennsylvania, for as brief time as it was, where the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has 67 counties, there were seven counties that used machines to weigh mail-in ballots. And I think that's the part that gave me any concern, not that it altered the overall results of a presidential election, but it was one of those things the election should be done the same way everywhere throughout the state to ensure that it's fair. We don't want the richest enclaves in our state to have one set of rules and the rest of the state, we all have to operate under a different ones. It'd be like Westlake, in a county election, because they've got a lot of money, somehow being able to keep their voting operations 24/7. And the rest of us get, you know, six hours a day because there's not enough money to fund the other voting establishments. So I think you want to make sure that everything stays fair and impartial. And I didn't see any evidence of that in my personal experience up in Fort Worth. When I voted in Tarrant County it seemed great. But at the end of the day, that's what the audit is supposed to evaluate."

Goudeau: While we want it to be fair across the board, it should be fair across the board, we should have a base set of rules. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. Do we not see, though, that different communities in Texas have different needs? And so maybe they should be able to allow some extended voting hours or things of that nature?

Scott: "I think that's where it becomes very difficult to do oversight, and that's one of the jobs that that S.O.S. is tasked with. And if you have one set of standards, we can use Harris County because it was literally one of the, we'll use them as the canary that has identified some issues potentially that brought a lot of the legislation up, I think, which is they did 24-hour, drive-thru voting. And is that something that was available to everybody in every location around the state? No. And it gets back to a little bit about what I was talking about – the places that have enough money to do their elections one way should not have an advantage over another voter who works and lives in another community. And that's, I think, why you need one set of rules of the road for everybody to operate under."

Goudeau: Let's talk a bit about the audits. You were appointed to this position and then sort of this big project kind of fell on you. And it did, I think, have some political undertones, obviously, that we were going to do some audits of the 2020 election. I want you to first talk to us about the fairness of that election. Your predecessor said that in Texas, things ran smoothly. She did not see evidence of widespread voter fraud. Has that been your experience thus far?

Scott: "And I really don't want to speak for former Secretary Hughes, but, I have known her for a while. She's an honest person. I have no reason to doubt what she says. I don't think from our perspective, we're trying to do anything other than evaluate what went on during the election in the four largest counties, something that is about 35% of the voters or votes that were cast in that election will be under an analysis. And we're going to let that decide really what we find and really comment at that point in time. I say comment – we're going to address all of the issues that we find. And we're also going to show if there's been security that everybody should have faith in– here's the evidence of it, that it did work right or here's the evidence where it didn't work right. So we want to make sure that we get to the best practices almost on

all security and bring confidence back into our elections. That's the goal."

Goudeau: But you did say address the concerns that we find. Do you feel like you are going to find some things that are concerning?

Scott: "Well, we've got a first; so we have two phases on this process. And the first phase is looking for people that may have voted in more than one jurisdiction, Texas and another state. Another is, are the counties doing their voter roll maintenance? And so, did all the counties institute the security analysis before the election? So we're trying to make sure, and again give a snapshot of that. And I think there's going to be some findings on those or at least on one of those areas that I think was kind of surprising. Not something that, and again, people need to understand we're not trying to go back. There's no way to go back and change any election, any election results. This is really looking at, are the systems in place that are supposed to be in place, did they work right? It's no different than going to sitting down for a test when we were back in school. We got tested on their knowledge. They're going to be tested, to a certain extent, on did the system work in the way it was supposed to and if there were lapses, what were the net results of those lapses?"

Goudeau: Are you surprised at all, when we look at some of the polling, right, even though it's the same election that people are asked about, they do question the validity of the election. There are Texans who don't necessarily think that it's fair or I know I go out and talk to people when we try to encourage them to come out and vote and they say, 'Well, I don't think it matters.' How are you going to tackle that?

Scott: "I think that's one of the really great points that anyone could make, which is we don't want anyone to have the unintended consequences of dissuading someone to vote because they don't think it's going to matter or their vote's being canceled. And I think that's one of the things that I fear most about when someone says that an election was stolen or somehow fraud took place – what is the net effect on other voters out there? Will it dissuade them from even taking the time to go vote? And so that's why this audit is so important, is to reassure people that we have integrity in our elections process. It's safe. And I think that's the real end goal of this – to bring back confidence in the elections and let the politicians go battle all they want about policy. And hopefully that gets all the people to go out there and vote, and with it takes away at least a new excuse on why they don't vote."

Goudeau: But now Secretary Scott, let me ask you, some of that rhetoric, regardless of what your audit finds, some of this rhetoric is going to continue because while voting should not be political, it is going to be political. How are you going to combat that if those voices about, you know, widespread fraud or widespread issues are coming from within your own party?

Scott: "So I I think the goal is not to address every issue people have. I think there is to, there is, the goal to make sure that federal and state laws relating to elections are fair. And after that, if someone wants to find something, that's going to be a different issue for a different day and somebody besides me. But that cannot be the role of the State or the Secretary of State's Office because we are never going to sway, we're never going to convince everyone that every one of their concerns have been addressed. What we're going to be is someone who tries to make sure that all the federal and state laws in this state are followed and can assure them on that."

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‘An unusual situation’ — Secretary of State’s office nixes primary election to pick DeBerry’s successor
Gilbert Garcia

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San Antonio Express-News
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https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/gilbert_garcia/article/Garcia-Secretary-of-State-s-office-nixes-16712082.php

The race to succeed Trish DeBerry apparently wasn't chaotic, confusing or messy enough.

So, on Friday, the Texas Secretary of State's office scrambled the script just a bit more.

For those of you who've been preoccupied with Christmas shopping, here's the basic chronology for this wild week in Bexar County Commissioners Court politics:

On Monday afternoon, moments before the filing deadline for the March 2022 primary, Republican County Commissioner Trish DeBerry filed to run for county judge.

DeBerry's move required her to resign her Precinct 3 seat and triggered a 2022 election to fill the post.

On Wednesday morning, Keith Ingram, the director of the Elections Division for the Texas Secretary of State's office, informed the Bexar County Elections Department that the Democratic and Republican nominees for Precinct 3 would be elected by voters in the March primary.

Ingram added that prospective candidates had until Monday afternoon to file for the primary.

Friday morning, Ingram reversed his opinion on how the Precinct 3 nominees should be chosen.

"I was wrong on the possibility of ambiguity" in the Texas Election Code, Ingram said in an email to Bexar County Elections Administrator Jacque Callanen.

"The commissioners court vacancy happened too late to be on the primary ballot. The party executive committees will have to make a nomination later this year."

This makes the race to succeed DeBerry a brand new ballgame.

With only a few days to decide on filing for an expected primary election, several potential candidates — including business executives Grant Moody, Preston Woolfolk and Jeff Webster — were unsure about running and none too thrilled about being rushed into a decision.

Under those circumstances, former Councilman and two-time mayoral candidate Greg Brockhouse already was looking like a solid favorite to take the GOP primary in the reliably Republican Precinct 3 on the North Side.

Now, the party nomination rests in the hands of a few dozen precinct chairs. Who knows how many candidates will seek the nomination? Who knows how the precinct chairs will vote?

On Friday afternoon, Brockhouse seemed to have mixed feelings about the latest determination from the Secretary of State's office.

"Hopefully, this is the final call," Brockhouse said. "I was taking a hard look at it

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myself, and I think I would have done exceptionally well in a Republican primary."

Ingram's reversal came after county and state Republican Party officials made the case that under the Election Code, the Precinct 3 vacancy had occurred too late to allow for a primary election.

Sect. 202.006 states that a party's county executive committee should select a nominee if "the vacancy occurs after the fifth day before the regular deadline" to file for the primary election.

John Austin, the chairman of the Bexar County Republican Party, sounded relieved about Ingram's decision to hand the selection process to the party precinct chairs.

Austin said a Precinct 3 primary election would have encountered legal challenges and faced the threat of having its results thrown out in court.

There is some precedent in Bexar County for having precinct chairs pick party nominees for elective office.

In 2010, Larry Click, a retired Bexar County deputy sheriff, won an uncontested Republican primary for the Precinct 4 county commissioner seat. Five months after winning the primary, Click passed away.

GOP precinct chairs selected a retired Air Force major general named Susan Pamerleau to replace Click on the ballot. Although Pamerleau came up short in that November's general election, losing to Tommy Adkisson, she parlayed her strong performance into a winning campaign for county sheriff two years later.

Last year, both major parties had to select nominees for the 144th District Court bench, after Judge Ray Olivarri's death in January 2020. Democratic precinct chairs picked Michael Mery and Republicans chose Melisa Skinner. Mery won the election.

Those precedents speak to what an unusual situation DeBerry created with her late decision to run for county judge. When local precinct chairs have been called on to appoint nominees for general-election races, it has generally been the result of vacancies created by the death of an office holder or a party nominee.

In this case, however, the vacancy was the product of DeBerry's final-day decision to seek higher office. Election officials don't have a lot of practice dealing with that kind of scenario.

"It's an unusual situation," Callanen said. "It doesn't come up that often and it probably rarely comes up when it's so close to the primary filing deadline.

"No one's ever told us that the Election Code is easy to read."

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Potter County Republican Party will hold own primary using paper, hand counted ballots
Morgan Duerden
KVII-TV
December 17, 2021
https://abc7amarillo.com/news/local/potter-county-republican-party-will-hold-own-primary-using-paper-hand-counted-ballots

Amarillo, TX (KVII) — Voters in Potter County will see changes at the polls during the

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March 1st primary. The Potter County Republican Party will administer their own election using all paper, hand-marked, hand-counted ballots.

The decision was made by the party's executive committee, which state kaw says they are welcome to do.

However, there are regulations and laws that every election in Texas must follow.

This will be the first time since the early 2000s that Republican voters will be using strictly paper ballots on election day. A choice Dan Rogers the Potter County GOP Chairman said will lead to a more secure count.

"There is a lot of concerns that voters have whether or not their votes being properly counted with the electronic machines that are being used," Rogers said.

Rogers encouraged the other 253 Republican party chairs throughout Texas to join the movement.

So far though, all have passed on the idea.

Elections are stricly regulated, and the Secretary of State's Office, Rogers and Potter Country Election Administrator Melynn Huntley - who will still be running the Democratic primary - discussed those rules together on Tuesday.

"Usually in Potter County there are about 24 different precinct locations. Our understanding is that the Potter County GOP on Election Day is trying to consolidate that down to four or five precincts," Sam Taylor the Assistant Secretary of State for Communications said.

Decreasing the number of polling locations could result in longer wait times. Depending where a Republican voter lives in Potter County, like near the town of Fritch, their drive to get to the polls could be a long one.

Rogers does plan to hire at least 200 election workers to help run the polling locations and count the ballots after the polls close. This process could take 20 hours but Rogers doesn't believe there is room for human error.

"People keep telling me people can't count," Rogers said. "I trust the voters more than I trust the electronic voting systems."

"By law those paper ballots cannot leave that site," Huntley said. "The judge, the alternate judge, the workers that have been working at the site have to stay and hand count those ballots at that location that night."

The Secretary of State's Office notified Rogers that even during an-all paper election, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires a polling location to have an electronic voting system accessible.

"We will have to secure our own, but it's my understanding, from what I was told is that we only have one person in Potter County that uses that device, and it just so happens that it is my employee's daughter," Rogers said.

"You don't know who is going to vote on Election Day. I don't know how you can say one person is going to vote. Regardless, it's federal and state law," responded Taylor.

It has been recommended to Rogers by the Secretary of State that they use E-poll books during the election.

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Voters sign in on these devices, which communicate to each other, to ensure no one is voting twice or in both the Democratic and Republican primary. Rogers would like to use a paper check-in book but is open to the idea of using both.

“If you don’t follow those laws the candidate or voters or other people involved in election stake holders can actually file a lawsuit and have a court order a new election,” Taylor said.

On Election Day, remember voters in Potter County will not be able to vote at any location like years previous, as the polling locations for each precinct become established, we will let you know where you can vote.

As for early voting which begins on February 14th, the election administration office is going to facilitate the election using electronic voting and the typical voting centers for Potter County.

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Texas Primary Draws Contenders in More Partisan House Districts
Greg Giroux
Bloomberg Government
December 20, 2021
https://about.bgov.com/news/texas-primary-draws-contenders-in-more-partisan-house-districts/

The 2022 House elections in Texas will feature more competition in the March primaries than in November, after Republican redistricting crafted almost all of the 38 districts as one-party bastions.

It’s possible there will be only one highly competitive race next fall in the nation’s second most-populous state. That’s according to a Bloomberg Government analysis of the 2020 election results in the new districts, as well as the slate of candidates who met this week’s filing deadline to compete in the first-in-the-nation congressional primary.

Democrats, who fielded candidates in every Texas district in 2020, will have none running in six districts next year, according to a list compiled by the Texas Secretary of State’s office. Republican Reps. Jake Ellzey, Roger Williams, and John Carter didn’t draw Democratic opposition after being significantly strengthened by redistricting.

Democrats will also be hard-pressed to run competitive campaigns against other Republican incumbents including Michael McCaul, Beth Van Duyne, Chip Roy, and Troy Nehls, who also were bolstered by new district lines after winning by single-digit percentage-point margins in 2020.

The GOP-led redistricting shored up House Republicans after they won 23 of 36 Texas districts in the 2020 election, including 11 with less than 56% of the vote. Donald Trump would have carried 25 of the 38 reconfigured districts in 2020, all but two of them by more than 12 points. President Joe Biden would have carried 13 districts, all but one of them by at least 12 points.

“Unlike 2020 or 2018, there’s not much in the way of competitive races to run in,” said Mark Jones, a political scientist at Rice University in Houston. “Most of the districts have been redrawn in such a way that they are a lock for Republicans or a lock for Democrats.”

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“In 2022 in Texas, I wouldn’t expect much movement. I would look to later cycles,” said Cal Jillson, a political scientist at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

The fast-growing Lone Star state added two districts in reapportionment. The U.S. Justice Department this month filed suit against the new Texas map, alleging that the changes unlawfully dilute the voting power of Latino and Black residents.

Kelly Burton, the president of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, said the map increased the number of white-majority districts after 95% of the state’s net population growth during the 2010s came from people of color.

“What you should see in the map in Texas is an increase in districts where communities of color have an ability to elect candidates of their choice and have the ability to influence the outcome of the election,” Burton said on Bloomberg Government’s “Downballot Counts” podcast.

Republican state Sen. Joan Huffman, the chair of the Texas Senate redistricting committee, said during the legislature’s consideration of the map that districts were drawn “blind to race” and complied with the Voting Rights Act.

Here’s a look at some Texas districts to watch in the March 1 primary. Runoffs, if needed, would be held on May 24. Each district number is followed parenthetically by the vote percentages that Biden and Trump would have received there in 2020.

1st District (Trump 72%-26%): Rep. Louie Gohmert (R) is running for Texas attorney general, and the GOP primary or runoff will determine Gohmert’s successor in one of the nation’s most strongly conservative districts. Republican candidates include Nathaniel Moran, the elected judge in Smith County (Tyler), the most populous jurisdiction in the district.

3rd District (Trump 56%-42%): Rep. Van Taylor‘s (R) district, anchored in fast-growing Collin County north of Dallas, became more Republican after redistricting. Taylor drew several primary opponents including Keith Self, Collin County’s former elected judge and an Army veteran, and Suzanne Harp, an investment bank executive whose son is chief of staff to Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-N.C.). Taylor was one of the 35 House Republicans who voted for a bill that would have created a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

8th District (Trump 63%-36%): The 11-candidate Republican primary is the race to watch in a district enveloping parts of Harris and Montgomery counties in metropolitan Houston. Rep. Kevin Brady, the top Republican and former chair of the Ways and Means Committee, isn’t seeking re-election. Would-be successors include Morgan Luttrell, a retired Navy SEAL backed by former Gov. Rick Perry; Christian Collins, Brady’s former campaign manager and a former aide to Sen. Ted Cruz (R), who endorsed Collins; and Jonathan Hullihan, a lawyer and Navy veteran.

15th District (Trump 51%-48%): On the Biden-Trump numbers, the reconfigured 15th is the most competitive district in Texas—an unusual claim to fame for a border district that’s 81% Hispanic and was reliably Democratic before Republican gains in 2020, when Biden carried it by 2 percentage points and Rep. Vicente Gonzalez (D) was re-elected by 3 points. Redistricting prodded Gonzalez to run for re-election in the more Democratic 34th District next door.

Businessman Monica De La Cruz, who was Gonzalez’s opponent in 2020, is among the Republicans seeking the nomination. She was one of the first candidates endorsed by House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik (N.Y.), who’s

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working to elect more Republican women to Congress. The Democratic candidates include Ruben Ramirez, a lawyer and Army veteran, and Michelle Vallejo, a businesswoman.

23rd District (Trump 53%-46%): Redistricting bolstered first-term Rep. Tony Gonzales (R) in a district that stretches hundreds of miles from San Antonio west to El Paso. John Lira, a Marine Corps veteran, probably is the leading Democratic candidate. Democrats protested the reduction of the district's Latino population percentage to 63% from 68% in redistricting.

28th District (Biden 53%-46%): Rep. Henry Cuellar, a centrist Blue Dog Democrat and the only House Democrat opposed to abortion rights, faces progressive immigration lawyer Jessica Cisneros in a rematch of their close 2020 primary. Tannya Benavides, a former teacher, also is seeking the Democratic nomination.

Redistricting made the 28th marginally more Democratic-leaning, though Republicans could seriously compete here if they build upon their improved 2020 showing with Latino voters—and particularly if Cisneros unseats Cuellar, who has bipartisan appeal and ran well ahead of Biden's performance in the 2020 general election. Cassy Garcia, a former Cruz aide, has the senator's support in the Republican primary.

If Cisneros beats Cuellar, "then that district becomes much more vulnerable, especially if Cassy Garcia ends up being the Republican candidate," Jones said.

30th District (Biden 78%-21%): House Science, Space and Technology Committee Chair Eddie Bernice Johnson (D) is retiring after three decades from a Black-plurality district in the Dallas area, and the crowded Democratic primary is the contest to watch. State Rep. Jasmine Crockett has Johnson's endorsement.

34th District (Biden 57%-42%): Gonzalez eschewed a re-election bid in the competitive 15th District to run instead to succeed Rep. Filemon Vela (D), who's retiring from a border district that's more friendly to Democrats. Gonzalez faces several challengers in the primary. The best-funded Republican is Mayra Flores, a respiratory therapist practitioner who came to the U.S. from Mexico as a child.

35th District (Biden 72%-26%): The open-seat Democratic primary is the key race in a Hispanic-majority district that connects parts of Travis County (Austin) and Bexar County (San Antonio) via Interstate 35. The candidates include Austin councilman Greg Casar, state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, and former San Antonio councilwoman Rebecca Viagran.

Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D) lives in the district, but he's running for re-election in the newly created 37th District, a Democratic bastion dominated by Travis County.

38th District (Trump 58%-40%): Republican mapmakers carved out a new GOP-leaning district in west-central Harris County that 10 Republicans are seeking. They include Wesley Hunt, an Army veteran who ran competitively against Rep. Lizzie Fletcher (D) in the 7th District in 2020. Redistricting shifted more Democrats into Fletcher's district to accommodate the creation of the GOP-leaning 38th.

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Webb County Dems hold drawing for spots on primary ballot
Christian Alejandro Ocampo
Laredo Morning Times
December 19, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/Webb-County-Dems-hold-drawing-for-spots-

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on-16714426.php

The Webb County Democratic Party held its drawing for a place on the 2022 Democratic Primary Ballot on Wednesday at the Laredo Firefighters Local 872 Fireman's Union Hall.

According to Sylvia Bruni, Webb County Democratic Party Chair, the drawing is part of the process set out by the Texas Secretary of State in preparation for the upcoming primary election and the printing of the ballot.

This is the second part of the usual process, and it follows the acceptance of the applications from candidates throughout all counties. According to Bruni, there are 24 Democratic candidate applications in Webb County, all of which are certified by the county party before being sent to the Secretary of State.

There are 27 Democratic counties if one counts multicounty positions such as State Sen. Judith Zaffirini, who represents Webb among other counties.

The drawing then sees local candidates gather to have their positions on the election ballots designated. This is done through a lottery system, in which the candidates for a particular position each have an assigned number picked out of the system for their place on the ballot. Simply put, if three candidates numbered Nos. 1, 2 and 3 are chosen in the lottery as 3, 1 and 2; that is how the ballot will end up looking in the upcoming election.

Currently, Bruni said the process is waiting for all counties in the state to certify their findings. Once finished, Bruni will be reporting the candidates who have opposition on the ballot to the secretary.

"It's very much part of a process that is intended to be very clear cut and very carefully managed so that there isn't any doubt that what they are doing is legal and within very strict timelines," Bruni said.

Like every year beforehand, getting the masses to vote will be a priority, and Bruni said it is important to understand who is on the ballot and for what position they are running for. As an example, in the upcoming governor race, there will be eight Democratic candidates vying for the position.

"It's going to be a pretty busy ballot when it comes down to it. Of course, the challenge is going to be to get people out there and vote. I am hoping there is enough concern and interest, and we'll get a strong showing," Bruni said. "We are going to work on getting the vote out next.

"It's not just going to be Webb County. When Webb County voters go out to vote in March, there are going to be very strong state offices up for grabs, so it's going to be an important primary."

As for research on candidates, campaigns, candidate info and their platforms, those can be found through social media and personal web pages.

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Commissioners approve contracts with Democratic, Republican parties
Brad Kellar
Greenville Herald-Banner
December 20, 2021
https://www.heraldbanner.com/news/local_news/commissioners-approve-contracts-

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with-democratic-republican-parties/article_fb993296-602b-11ec-99cd-5b8bafa92e86.html

The Hunt County Commissioners Court has begun the county's 2022 election cycle.

The commissioners met during Tuesday's regular session with County Civil Attorney Daniel Ray and Elections Administrator Jeannie Ash to review and approve interlocal agreements between local governments and the Hunt County Elections Office for providing next year's elections.

The commissioners also voted to approve a joint resolution authorizing the contracts between the county and the Hunt County Democratic and Republican parties for the March 1, 2022, primary elections.

Although the March 1 primaries will only have GOP contests for candidates on the Hunt County level, there will be multiple choices to be made in both the Democratic Party and Republican Party elections for the statewide and national races.

Early voting for the March 1 primaries begins on Feb. 14. In the event any primary runoff elections are needed, they would be held on May 24.

A complete list of all candidates seeking nominations in their respective parties in next year's primary elections is available online through the office of Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott at https://candidate.texas-election.com/Elections/getQualifiedCandidatesInfo.do

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Making an immediate impact: New Bell County elections administrator brings changes to department
Shane Monaco
Temple Daily Telegram
December 18, 2021
https://www.tdtnews.com/news/central_texas_news/article_e990b96e-6078-11ec-a6d6-c3ff0322c64c.html

Voters can expect to see some changes to local elections next year as the Bell County elections department looks to implement a variety of changes.

During Monday's Commissioners Court workshop, interim elections administrator Shay Luedeke briefed officials on changes he has started to make since taking over the department in November. Many of the changes have focused around modernizing and improving what the department currently does.

Luedeke, who also serves as the county's Tax Assessor-Collector, took over the interim position following the departure of Matthew Dutton, the previous elections administrator.

In improving the department, Luedeke has focused on getting the department better prepared to deal with the county's increasing population in recent years.

"With 217,000 registered voters, we are only getting more and more people wanting to vote," Luedeke said.

One big change for voters in the county, Luedeke said, are plans to add a seventh and possibly an eighth early voting location.

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Currently the county has six early voting locations: two in Killeen, one in Temple, one in Salado, one in Belton and one in Harker Heights. The new location Luedeke hopes to open would be at the Killeen Senior Center at Lions Club Park, 1700 E. Stan Schlueter Loop in Killeen.

Luedeke said he hopes this new location will help cut down on lines across the county, but also hopes to add an additional site in Temple if he can find a space to host it.

Early voting sites in the county need to meet several requirements, including being Americans with Disabilities Act accessible, have enough space and be accessible during early voting. Early voting locations are normally open for the two weeks prior to an election, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the first week and from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. the second week.

This time requirement has previously been one of the main blockages to the department adding more locations, with few facilities able to accommodate them while being in a good location.

Despite the need, officials admitted adding new voting centers would mean increased cost to the county for hiring the needed staff and securing the space.

Bell County Judge David Blackburn said the county will need to look at how expensive it would be to add one or multiple additional voting centers.

“I don’t disagree that we need an additional voting center, it’s pretty bad,” Blackburn said. “And I don’t disagree to targeting where the lines are the longest and where the population centers are.”

Luedeke also has started to work with the county’s technology department to modernize its election map.

The department plans on using existing mapping software used by others in the county to create a precinct map of the county. The software would allow the county to add new roads more easily than they can currently.

“We are currently using a map book from 2009 with hand-drawn precinct line,” Luedeke said. “And every time they have new roads, they hand draw the new road in this map book. So that is why we want mapping software.”

Another piece of software the county plans on using for upcoming elections is one developed during the 2020 election.

The software aims at allowing voters to see where waits at polling places are the shortest during early voting and Election Day. Adam Ward, technology services director, said the software had been finished last year but it was too close to the general election to put out something that was still in the beta testing phase.

Training for election judges, who would have to manually input wait times, was one of the reasons for the county not using the software.

Luedeke said he hopes to put the software into use now so the county can prepare for more intense elections.

“We are going to use it this primary, at lease put it to some practical use,” Luedeke said. “I think (the election) will be low enough volume that we can do that … and use it several times before the next general election.”

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Some smaller changes being worked on by Luedeke include starting a Facebook page for the department to help with transparency and creating an official employee handbook specific to the department.

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Election Integrity Law at Risk After Court of Criminal Appeals Rules Only County, District Attorneys Can Prosecute Fraud
Hayden Sparks
The Texan
December 17, 2021
https://thetexan.news/election-integrity-law-at-risk-after-court-of-criminal-appeals-rules-only-county-district-attorneys-can-prosecute-fraud/

On Wednesday, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, which is composed entirely of Republican judges, ruled in an 8 to 1 decision that a state statute granting the Texas attorney general the authority to prosecute violations of election law is unconstitutional primarily on separation of powers grounds. Judge Kevin Yeary was the only dissenting jurist.
The court, which serves as the final arbiter of adult criminal matters in Texas, handed down its decision two days after the deadline to file for a place on the primary ballot. The only way the ruling could be reversed is in the unlikely event the court grants a rehearing.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who is facing several opponents from both political parties, lashed out at the court and suggested the decision calls into question whether misconduct in elections will be prosecuted.

“Now, thanks to the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals, Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas. This ruling could be devastating for future elections in Texas,” Paxton tweeted.

The ruling jeopardizes the effectiveness of the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021, the GOP’s signature legislative achievement this year partially intended to respond to concerns of fraudulent activity in the 2020 presidential election.

The law relies heavily on the attorney general’s involvement in pursuing potential fraud cases. Enlisting the cooperation of Democratic district and county attorneys for more aggressive election fraud prosecutions will be challenging for Paxton or a Republican successor.

Democrat Christian Menefee, the county attorney of Harris County, tweeted that the ruling was a “big win for local government and Texans who are tired of state officials exaggerating voter fraud claims to undermine elections.”

Though there are provisions in the act that call for civil penalties against entities that violate the law, the onus would be on local prosecutors to file charges against individuals suspected of fraud, illegal voting, or other violations.

At the center of the case is the Democratic sheriff of Jefferson County, Zena Stephens. Paxton charged Stephens in 2018 with one count of tampering with a government record and two counts of making or accepting a contribution in violation of the Texas Election Code.

She allegedly incorrectly filled out campaign finance documents and improperly accepted cash donations.

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During an investigation in a different case, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had contacted the Texas Rangers after discovering Stephens may have committed a crime. The Jefferson County district attorney decided against prosecuting Stephens, instead kicking the case to Paxton's office, according to the Court of Criminal Appeals' ruling.

The statute in question is Texas Election Code 273.021, which delegates to the attorney general the authority to charge individuals with violations of election law.

The whole statute reads as follows: "(a) The attorney general may prosecute a criminal offense prescribed by the election laws of this state.

(b) The attorney general may appear before a grand jury in connection with an offense the attorney general is authorized to prosecute under Subsection (a).

(c) The authority to prosecute prescribed by this subchapter does not affect the authority derived from other law to prosecute the same offenses."

Agreeing with Stephens' argument that the law is unconstitutional, Judge Randy McDonald, the state district judge in Chambers County who is presiding over the case, dismissed the tampering with a government record charge. The First Court of Appeals reversed that decision last year, but the Court of Criminal Appeals ruling on Wednesday reinstated McDonald's decision to throw out the charge.

Justice Peter Kelly, a Democrat, joined Chief Justice Sherry Radack, a Republican, in the First Court of Appeals ruling in 2020 that would have allowed the first charge against Stephens to go to trial. Democratic Justice Gordon Goodman dissented.

The Court of Criminal Appeals based much of Wednesday's ruling on the rationale that each branch of government — legislative, executive, and judicial — should stay strictly in its own lane. The court reasoned that the attorney general is an executive officer, while district and county attorneys are part of the judicial branch.

Unlike the U.S. Constitution, the Texas Constitution contains a provision that explicitly requires each branch of government to avoid encroaching on the duties of another branch.

However, Yeary contended in his dissent, among other arguments, that the Texas Constitution contains language explicitly allowing the legislature to delegate responsibilities to the attorney general in addition to his constitutional role.

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Texas lawmaker calls on US Senate to stay in session through holiday to pass voting rights legislation
Michael McCardel
WFAA-TV
December 18, 2021
https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/politics/inside-politics/texas-lawmaker-calls-on-us-senate-to-stay-in-session-to-pass-voting-rights-legislation/287-a2f76f59-d951-4f7e-975c-9a1e2a6683e8

DALLAS — State Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer thinks members of the U.S. Senate should work as long as it takes to pass two pieces of legislation, even if it means working through the holiday.

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The Democrat from San Antonio recently sent a letter to Senate leadership asking them to stay in session until the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act are signed into law.

More than 200 other state lawmakers from 41 different states and Guam also signed the letter.

“This is a very fluid conversation. And very recent, last couple of days, we’ve all realized that Build Back Better is now sort of moving to the sideline as Senator Manchin and the White House negotiate the finer points. And so you now see an opportunity to maybe put voting rights back in front,” Martinez Fischer said on Inside Texas Politics.

The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act would strengthen voting rights and overhaul the nation’s elections systems. The U.S. House has already passed both measures.

Democrats argue they’re necessary to protect voters after Republicans have change election laws in many states, which they say make it harder for some people to vote, particularly minorities. In his letter, Martinez Fischer says 19 states passed 33 laws this year alone that restrict access to the ballot.

After releasing the letter, Martinez Fischer says he and a few colleagues traveled to Washington, D.C. to once again lobby national lawmakers in person, visiting with some Senators and other voting rights advocacy groups.

“What I’m beginning to realize is things move very, very slow in Washington,” said Martinez Fischer. “I know the inside game in Austin. I legislate behind the scenes. And I know sometimes it takes a while. But in Washington, they have this manana mentality where everything’s going to get done tomorrow.”

Martinez Fischer says many of the folks he meets with express concern with what’s happening in Texas after he explains how high the hurdles are to vote.

And the Democrat says when his group recently visited West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a fellow Democrat, they drove home the point that voting in Texas is much different than voting in West Virginia.

“In West Virginia, if you’re a shift worker, if you’re a nurse or a firefighter, you get to vote by mail. We don’t get to do that in Texas. In West Virginia, if you’re afraid to go stand in line at the polls because of COVID, you get to vote by mail. You can’t do that in Texas. In West Virginia, if you have a DWI and you’re sitting in the county jail, you get to vote by mail. You can’t do that in Texas,” said Martinez Fischer.

Martinez Fischer also filed one of the first lawsuits challenging the state’s new redistricting maps. His lawsuit specifically targets the lines drawn for Congressional District 35, which stretches from Austin to San Antonio, and argues the maps violate the Voting Rights Act and discriminate against Latino voters.

For Martinez Fischer, it’s all part of an overall battle to protect voting rights. And he says he’s not alone.

“Texas Democrats have been very bold on this issue. We find ourselves in the center of the conversation across the country.”

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Trump road show comes to Dallas after weak ticket sales in Florida
Sabra Ayres
Spectrum News
December 17, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/austin/news/2021/12/17/trump-road-show-comes-to-dallas-after-weak-ticket-sales-in-florida

DALLAS — After failing to get the audience numbers in Florida he had hoped for, former President Donald Trump is bringing his “History Tour” roadshow to North Texas this weekend to rally supporters.

Trump will headline two events in Dallas Sunday. The first will be at the downtown First Baptist Dallas Church, where he will take the stage with one of his most ardent supporters on the Christian Right, Dr. Robert Jeffress.

Later in the afternoon, Trump will be at the American Airlines Center with Bill O’Reilly, a former Fox News host, where they will put on their fourth stop in what he’s calling the “History Tour.”

The show appears to be a mix of Trump talking about his administration during his term as president, with a bit of campaigning for a possible second run at the White House in 2024.

“I will be focusing on greatness for our Country, something seldom discussed in political dialogue,” Trump said in a statement promoting the tour. “If we don’t make our Country great again, we will soon no longer have a Country!”

The event comes a few days after a similar Trump event in Orlando, Fla., which only sold about 62% of the 8,700 seats reserved for the event in the city’s Amway Center, according to the Orlando Sentinal.

The paper reported that audience members who purchased less expensive seats were moved down to empty, more expensive seats to make the stadium appear full. The night before, Trump’s roadshow was in Sunshine, Fla., where there was also a smaller-than-expected crowd, the Sentinal reported.

Trump and O’Reilly will be in Houston Saturday, where his tour is scheduled at the 19,000-seat Toyota Center. There appeared to be plenty of tickets left for that show on the Ticketmaster website.

In July, Politico reported that pre-sale tickets were slow to pick up ahead of the tour’s schedule, despite the fact that Trump promised “fun, fun, fun for everyone who attends.”

Tickets for the Dallas show on Ticketmaster showed some seats still available with prices ranging from $106 to $206. The American Airlines Center did not immediately return calls asking about the number of seats allotted for Sunday’s event in Dallas and how many have sold. The stadium, the home court and ice rink of the Dallas Mavericks and Dallas Stars, respectively, can seat 20,000.

Jeffress, the senior pastor at the First Baptist Dallas megachurch, has called Trump the “greatest president of my lifetime” and has frequently defended the former president on Fox News.

Last year, just days after an attack on the Capitol, led by Trump supporters who claimed the 2020 election was stolen, Jeffress hosted a Christmas sermon entitled “How Should Christians Respond to President Joe Biden?"

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Jeffress has condemned the Jan. 6 Capitol riots but remains a strong Trump supporter.

His sermon for this Sunday's Christmas event is themed "What If There Were No Christmas?" Trump is scheduled to speak after in the church's large auditorium on its sprawling, downtown campus.

"President Trump is known for his love for Christmas and what it represents. We are thrilled to have him join us this Sunday morning," the church's website said about the event.

Former Vice President Mike Pence has spoken at the Frist Baptist Dallas Church at least twice.

While Trump won Texas in the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden carried Dallas County and the other large, metropolitan centers in the state. Still, a large number of North Texans have been arrested and charged in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. At least 19 people from the suburbs of Dallas have been charged in connection with the Jan. 6 attack, one of the largest groups involved in the event from any state.

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Republicans resist saying 3 simple words: 'Joe Biden won'
Associated Press
December 18, 2021
https://www.kxxv.com/news/republicans-resist-saying-3-simple-words-joe-biden-won

(AP) — They are just three little words, but they have become nearly impossible for many Republicans to say: "Joe Biden won."

Eleven months after the Democrat's inauguration, Republican lawmakers and candidates across the country are squirming and stumbling rather than acknowledging the fact of Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. In debates and interviews, they offer circular statements or vague answers when asked whether they believe Biden won.

Yes or no?

In Minnesota this week, five GOP candidates for governor came up with 1,400 other words when asked by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt for an answer.

On NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, GOP Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas would only concede: "Joe Biden was sworn into office."

The hazy statements are one measure of election denialism within the Republican Party. Former President Donald Trump's lies about a stolen election have so taken hold among GOP voters that many of the party's candidates either believe them or fear the political repercussions of refuting Trump. That sets up a surreal dynamic for next year's elections, where the toughest question posed to GOP candidates — particularly in primaries — may be one with a one-word answer that they're reluctant to give.

Biden received more than 81 million votes to Trump's 74 million, according to the tally of the Federal Election Commission. The tightest margin was in Arizona, where Biden won by 10,457 votes. More important, he won 306 votes in the Electoral College, more than the 270 required to become president. Trump got 232.

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Even a GOP-led “audit” of votes in Arizona’s largest county came up with a Biden win. Dozens of state and federal courts, as well as the Trump administration’s Justice Department, have dismissed claims of widespread voter fraud.

When The Associated Press set out to count every fraud claim in the states disputed by Trump, it found fewer than 475 potential cases — 15 hundredths of 1% of Biden’s winning margin in those states.

And yet, many Republican candidates may be eying another number: A July Associated Press-NORC Poll found 66% of Republicans said Biden was not legitimately elected president. More than two-thirds of Americans overall said Biden was legitimately elected.

The doubt has been fueled by Trump, who has argued without evidence that the election was “rigged” and has urged his supporters to reject the outcome. He’s set out to oust fellow Republicans who voted to certify the results.

Kansas’ Marshall was among five senators who voted against certifying the electoral votes for Arizona and Pennsylvania in January, the day a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent effort to prevent the final step that sealed Biden’s win.

While Marshall hangs his answer on process, other Republicans go further. Arizona Republican Rep. Andy Biggs, who was part of a group of GOP congressmen who pushed false claims, recently answered a question from a colleague about who won by saying flatly, “We don’t know.”

“There’s the problem,” Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, replied at a hearing of the House Oversight Committee. “Donald Trump refused to accept the results, and unfortunately we have one of the world’s great political parties which has followed him off of the ledge of this electoral lunacy, and it’s dangerous for democracy.”

There are some Republicans who clearly, without squirming, acknowledge Biden’s win. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is among them, along with Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who was the GOP’s 2012 presidential nominee, and Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse, for instance. Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel uttered the words last month.

“Painfully, Joe Biden won the election, and it’s very painful to watch. He’s the president. We know that,” McDaniel told Washington reporters at a breakfast hosted by The Christian Science Monitor.

But it’s clear not all Republicans know. In October, the second-ranking House Republican, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, repeatedly stopped short of disavowing Trump’s claims of fraud, asserting without evidence that “a number” of states “didn’t follow” their election laws.

On Friday, Josh Mandel, a GOP candidate for Senate in Ohio, called for more investigations into the vote in battleground states. “I think Trump won,” he said in an interview on Hewitt’s radio show.

“It is an important question and needs to be framed, I think, as I did. I expect it will be often asked and answered (or not) of many candidates in the year ahead,” Hewitt tweeted after the Minnesota debate.

The answers demonstrate the pressure for Republican primary candidates to appeal

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to, or at least not offend, the vocal Trump wing of the party, strategists say.

“In today’s grim Republican Party, the was-the-election-legit question has become a litmus test for whether you are truly loyal to the Republican Trumpist tribe or not,” said Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican strategist and Trump critic.

It took a while — that is, winning the Republican nomination for Virginia governor — for Glenn Youngkin to get there. In May, he said in an interview, “I mean, the reality is, and I have said this before, Joe Biden was legitimately elected our president.”

But in February, though he stopped short of saying Biden “stole” the election, he was equally hesitant to declare Biden had been “legitimately elected,” according to the nonpartisan political watchdog group Politifact.

Other candidates have moved in the other direction — away from the facts. In Ohio, where Republicans are vying for the nomination for an open Senate seat, candidate Bernie Moreno began airing an ad this week where he is quoted as saying, “President Trump says the election was stolen, and he’s right.”

Yet, just days after the election last year, Moreno urged conservatives on Twitter to “accept the results of the 140+ million votes cast,” and tweeted a congratulatory note to Biden for a “hard fought victory.”

On Wednesday, the discomfort for Republicans played out in full view from the debate stage in suburban Minneapolis.

One-by-one, five Minnesota Republicans running for governor talked around Hewitt’s question: “Did President Biden win a constitutional majority in the Electoral College.”

State Sen. Michelle Benson spilled 240 words recruiting Republican poll-watchers and blasting Minnesota’s Democratic secretary of state before Hewitt bluntly asked again: “Did President Biden win?”

Her answer: “He was certified by Congress as having won the Electoral College.”

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Texas officially starts construction on border wall, Gov. Greg Abbott says
Ariana Garcia
Houston Chronicle
December 18, 2021
https://www.chron.com/politics/article/Texas-starts-construction-on-its-own-border-wall-16710994.php

Gov. Greg Abbott announced Friday that Texas has officially commenced construction on a partial wall to finish work along the state's southern border with Mexico started by former President Donald Trump's administration. The wall's panels, which went up this week on the edge of Starr County in the Rio Grande Valley, are designed to help fill empty sections remaining along the federal border wall.

Photos shared on Twitter by Fox News reporter Bill Melugin show progress being made on the wall, which Melugin explained uses “state land, state money” instead of federal funding. Texas is also using the same contractor deployed by Trump before plans to finish the wall were eventually canceled by President Joe Biden, Melugin says.

“These are the first panels in what will be a 1.7-mile stretch designed to help fill gaps

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where there is no federal wall," Melugin tweeted. "More projects planned." Abbott quote tweeted Melugin Friday, opining that "Biden allows open border policies and refuses to enforce laws passed by Congress to secure the border and enforce immigration laws. Texas is stepping up to do the federal government's job."

The wall project is part of Abbott's "Operation Lone Star" which launched in March to combat the alleged "smuggling of people and drugs into Texas." The effort has been heavily criticized by immigrant and civil rights organizations, including the ACLU of Texas, Civil Rights Project and Texas Defense Project, which on Wednesday, along with seven other groups, filed a complaint with the Department of Justice over the border arrest program's discriminatory nature.

"The true intent of this program is to punish migrants, expand Texas' massive correctional system and deter future migration," Liz Castillo, organizer with the Detention Watch Network, told the Houston Chronicle.

In September, Abbott passed a $1.88 billion spending bill for border security funding to supplement another $1.05 billion the state approved in the spring, according to the Texas Tribune. About $750 million of the bill will go toward the construction of a "border barrier" in addition to $250 million the state approved over the summer as a down payment for the wall. In the meantime, Abbott has used shipping containers, razor wire and, most recently, boats to craft makeshift barriers that deter migrants from entering the state.

In an appearance on Fox Business Network Friday, Abbott said $3 billion of tax payer money has been contributed to border security efforts. He said the wall will cost less than it did for the Trump administration because "unlike the Trump administration, we're not having to devote money to acquire the land…The state of Texas owns [land] on the border itself," he explained. "Secondly, there are property owners of massive acreage on the border who are fed up with Biden's open border policies, and they are donating their land to Texas for us to be able to use that land for free to build a wall on their property."

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Border merchants finally seeing business picking up since travel restrictions were lifted
Salvador Rivera
Border Report
December 17, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/trade/border-merchants-finally-seeing-business-picking-up-since-travel-restrictions-were-lifted/

SAN YSIDRO, Calif. (Border Report) — During recent visits to Carolin Shoes along San Ysidro Boulevard, manager Olivia Campos always had plenty of time to sit down and discuss the pandemic-related financial woes at her store and others in the area.

But as Border Report checked in Friday morning, Campos found herself running back and forth in the store helping customers.

Gladly, our interview would have to wait, and it would have to be quick.

… Finally, she stopped and turned her attention to this reporter.

"We better do it now because I won't have time to stop and talk later," she said.

Since Nov. 8, when essential travel restrictions were lifted to those who are

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vaccinated for COVID-19, merchants just north of the San Ysidro Port of Entry had been eagerly anticipating the return of shoppers from Mexico.

As it turned out, the wait was longer than anyone could've thought.

"I was expecting a lot more people," Campos said.

She admitted that after a few dismal weeks, there is room now for optimism.

"Slowly, slowly I see it getting a little bit better. Last Saturday everything started to pick up," she said.

According to Campos, her store saw a surge in customers two Saturdays ago and it's been steady ever since.

"Hopefully, it keeps going the same way," she said.

And with one more full weekend of shopping before Christmas, she is hoping to finish the holiday season and start the new year on a strong note.

"I hope we can see more, to be honest with you, I really hope so."

Campos told Border Report it looks like things are getting back to normal; she said most of her neighboring businesses were also doing better.

"It's good, I just hope they don't close the border again," she said.

On the west side of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, where there is a large outlet mall, two workers at a shoe store and one at a suitcase discounter said they were seeing a lot more people from Mexico and that their sales were "way up."

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, and essential travel restrictions were put in place, more than 200 businesses in San Ysidro closed their doors permanently due to the lack of customers from Mexico.

The area, according to its chamber of commerce, also sustained more than $1.3 billion in losses.

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Massacre in the desert? 13 migrants feared dead in cartel feud along Texas-Mexico border
Alfredo Corchado and Annie Rosenthal
Dallas Morning News
December 20, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/immigration/2021/12/20/massacre-in-the-desert-13-migrants-feared-dead-in-cartel-feud-along-texas-mexico-border/

OJINAGA, Mexico — Thirteen migrants kidnapped in Chihuahua may have been killed during a turf war between drug cartels — part of an increasingly violent feud between rival gangs over smuggling routes in this northern state bordering Texas, according to Mexican and U.S. sources.

Some of the migrants were headed for the Midland-Odessa and Dallas areas, according to family members and a human rights advocate. They hope the group, all men mostly from the state of Chihuahua, is still alive or at worst, being held for ransom or forced into labor for cartels.

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But a Mexican security official close to the investigation told The Dallas Morning News and Marfa Public Radio that investigators are “looking for bodies, or pieces of them, of what’s been left behind” out in the desert. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, and added, “I can tell you, they’re not alive.”

The mass kidnapping, which happened in late September, is part of a growing pattern of disappearances of migrants in the area between Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, and the town of Ojinaga, across from the small Big Bend community of Presidio. That corridor had until recently been relatively quiet, but has a long history of cartel-related violence.

“It’s like no man’s land,” said Gabino Gómez Escárcega, a veteran human rights activist who works with an organization called Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres.

Last week, Gómez stood with family members of the missing migrants outside the state capitol’s office in Chihuahua to demand answers, holding posters emblazoned with their loved ones faces and signs with messages like: “It’s not just 13; they’re many more disappeared.”

Among those gathered was Sheila Arias, whose nephew, Omar Reyes Lopez, a 20-year-old from Hidalgo who has vision problems, went missing at the beginning of November near the area where the 13 disappeared a month earlier.

“Something is happening in Chihuahua, something is happening on the border, and we can’t close our eyes,” she said.

Veteran security and immigration experts are concerned that the violence is, in part, spurred on by restrictive U.S. immigration policies that have left tens of thousands of migrants in limbo along the border, lingering in dangerous Mexican towns where they can easily fall prey to criminal groups.

The Migrant Protection Protocols, commonly known as Remain in Mexico, require that asylum seekers who arrive in the U.S. turn around and wait in Mexico, often for months, for their U.S. immigration court dates. The Biden administration initially suspended the policy, which began in 2019 under former President Donald Trump, but reinstated it in early December following a court order.

And under the Title 42 policy implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, hundreds of thousands more who arrive in the U.S. are quickly and routinely expelled back to Mexico. Many remain at the border seeking other opportunities to cross back into the U.S.

Critics say such policies have created a booming industry for smugglers. David Shirk, director of the Justice in Mexico program at the University of San Diego, said the policies “add to the number of people who are sufficiently desperate that they’re going to put their lives in the hands of a migrant smuggler.”

Smuggling is no longer a “mom and pop” operation, he said, but an increasingly lucrative industry in which cartels have become more intimately involved.

Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute, sounded a similar alarm, saying, “Drug cartels used to look down on human smuggling because they saw it as a secondary business and a much less lucrative business. And obviously, the numbers are changing. And when the numbers change, it becomes much more attractive to try and control it.”

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Jorge Contreras Fornelli, head of FICOSEC Juárez, a nonprofit clearinghouse of business and community leaders that promotes safety, estimates that in Chihuahua alone, human smuggling brings in nearly $30 million per month.

The takeover of human smuggling in Chihuahua by the cartels means “the consequence, as in the example of the 13 disappeared, is that we think they are no longer alive,” said Contreras, who is also a member of the national security council. “I hope we are wrong, but it has been a long time.”

Across the country, more than 95,000 people have been declared missing by Mexico’s National Search Commission. In late November, following a tour of Mexico to meet with officials and families of victims — including relatives of the 13 missing outside Ojinaga — members of the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances noted that migrants in Mexico are particularly vulnerable to disappearance.

Human Rights First has documented more than 7,000 violent attacks against people returned to Mexico or forced to wait there during the Trump and Biden presidencies under the Remain in Mexico policy. Many more are thought to go undocumented.

While families remain desperate for answers about what happened to relatives who went missing on the journey north, others have evidence of the brutality their loved ones encountered. In February, several Mexican police officers were charged in the massacre of 19 migrants, mostly Guatemalans, in the state of Tamaulipas. The grisly event brought echoes of other brutal killings of migrants — including the murder of 72 migrants by the then Zetas cartel in the same state in 2010.

Along the Chihuahuan desert between Ojinaga and Juarez, Gómez estimates the number of disappeared Mexican migrants at 30 in more than a year, 15 of whom have gone missing within the span of just 40 days this fall — including the group of 13.

Violence isn’t new to the region where the migrants went missing. A splinter group of the Juárez Cartel, known as La Linea, and their rivals, the Sinaloa Cartel, once terrorized this remote region in the state of Chihuahua that extends between Coyame de Sotol and Ojinaga, and up the Rio Grande in what is known as the Valle de Guadalupe, outside Ciudad Juárez.

During the 2008-2010 period, nearly 10,000 people were killed just in Juárez, a result of a turf war over coveted drug smuggling routes. A death squad made up of soldiers operated out of Ojinaga, targeting rival cartel members, said Howard Campbell, a border anthropologist at the University of Texas at El Paso, who documented the violence in his book, Drug War Zone.

The general who led the military garrison in Ojinaga during those years, Manuel Moreno Aviña, was later sentenced to 52 years in prison for the torture, murder and incineration of a civilian in Ojinaga.

Historically, Campbell said, the region around Ojinaga has been under the control of La Linea, “which has been the dominant group in the state with some exceptions.” And for the last decade the area has been relatively quiet — a sign that La Linea was in control.

The Mexican security official described this “quiet period” as a “simulated peace, a purchased peace” adding that the cartel has a stranglehold over the city of an estimated 25,000.

Ojinaga Mayor Andres Ramos denies organized crime exists in his city, which he

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calls “a calm town.”

The city has not taken kindly to the recent increase in migration through the area. Ramos said migrants “bring problems, big and small,” adding that the city receives “not one peso” from the federal government to care for them, and that local resources should be spent on locals.

But most of the men who disappeared in September were from communities surrounding Chihuahua City, almost three hours south of Ojinaga. The group of 13 men left behind wives, parents and children in Chihuahua. Some had decided to make the trip to reunite with family members in the U.S., while others sought jobs that would help them better support those back in Mexico.

Benigno Alvarez, 36, had worked as a delivery person in Chihuahua City. He quit his job over the summer when he heard from a cousin in Arlington who promised him a job in construction, installing sheetrock.

His wife, Rocío Martinez de Alvarez, 33, was reluctant to let him go, insisting they could somehow make ends meet in Mexico. He responded that Mexican wages wouldn’t help them provide for his eldest daughter’s schooling, or pay for his other daughter’s quinceañera. He promised he’d return for Christmas and stay for the birthday party, planned for February, before leaving again. And he vowed in three years he’d return for good with enough money saved to even buy their own home.

“He had dreams,” said Martinez. “He was determined.”

Her husband had faith he’d make it to North Texas, she said. He knew a local guide, a person who would navigate the complicated interactions with a smuggler and eventually members of organized crime.

Alvarez used a severance package to pay the 20,000 peso fee, a down payment charged by organized crime. He waited through months of delays, some because of summer’s monsoon season, before finally leaving Chihuahua City with the rest of the 13, a group organized by the guide, on September 24. He would still owe more than $6,000 for the journey, to be paid after he started work in the U.S., his wife said.

On the evening of September 25, Alvarez called Martinez from a safe house in the town of Coyame, just south of Ojinaga. He said that all was going as planned and that they would lose phone service for the next stretch of the trip.

“He called me and told me, ‘We’re in Coyame, I’m going to turn off my phone and I won’t be able to talk to you until I get there,’” said Martinez.

The men were headed for Interstate 10, where a smuggler awaited them for transportation to the Permian Basin and Dallas. But first they had to go through Lomas de Arena, a tiny Mexican village right up against the Rio Grande, neighboring Hudspeth and Culberson counties in far West Texas.

The U.S. side of the river has seen a stark rise in both apprehensions of large groups and deaths in the desert of migrants from Central America, Ecuador and Mexico, said Culberson County Sheriff Oscar Carrillo. This year, his office has recovered 28 bodies from the desert, compared to what he said “had been the average for years: One.”

By Wednesday, a day after the group was supposed to arrive in North Texas, Martinez still hadn’t heard from Alvarez. Then she got a call from another person with a family member in the group who said that a teenager who’d been traveling with the group had returned to Chihuahua. According to the state prosecutor’s office, the teen

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testified to local authorities that the group had been stopped by armed men who told him “vete” – go – before taking the men away in vehicles. He said he ran toward the U.S., where he was detained by Border Patrol and soon deported back to Juárez.

In early October, Martinez and relatives of other members of the group filed formal missing persons reports with the state attorney general’s office. Martinez said officials collected DNA samples from each of them and promised to begin searching.

The state attorney general’s office is now offering a 200,000 peso reward for “useful and true information” about the whereabouts of several of the missing men.

But Martinez said they have not allowed family members to accompany them, citing the danger of the area.

Unwilling to watch from the sidelines, Martinez quit her job as a factory worker to commit herself fully to the search. She and a group of other wives, mothers, aunts and sisters of the missing men have taken to social media, posting photos of the missing men with messages asking people to send tips anonymously to their page, “13 desaparecidos Coyame-Chihuahua.”

“We beg you who has seen or knows something to help us find them, give us a clue about where they are so we can go search for them,” reads a typical post. “You can be those eyes, those ears, so that they can return home, where a child, a wife, parents are waiting for them.”

The families also requested assistance in the investigation from María Eugenia Campos Galván, known as Maru, the governor of Chihuahua, and Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The president drew their outrage when, during an early October news conference, he said he had not heard about the disappearance of the 13 migrants. But during López Obrador’s recent visit to Chihuahua, the administration promised the group the use of a helicopter to assist with their search.

A spokesperson for the state attorney general’s office says it has carried out “permanent and uninterrupted” searches for them in recent months. Working with several other agencies — including the army and National Guard — the office says it has conducted land and air searches of the municipalities surrounding the area where the migrants disappeared. During those searches, they encountered 60 other migrants, but still have no answers about the missing 13 or Omar Reyes Lopez.

But officials on both sides of the border have privately spoken of a likely version of events: A confrontation between members of the Sinaloa and La Linea cartels the week that the 13 disappeared. According to the Mexican security official close to the investigation, the group had been taken hostage by members of the Sinaloa cartel, who planned to hold them for ransom.

When members of La Linea realized that Sinaloa was encroaching on their territory and interfering with their human cargo, the official said, they brought dozens of trucks to Bosque Bonito, near Lomas de Arena, to “rescue” the migrants. The Sinaloa cartel had fewer people but more weapons, and La Linea retreated. At some point during or after the confrontation, the official believes the migrants were taken elsewhere and killed.

The official said houses around the small community of Bosque Bonito were abandoned, as though the few residents had left in a hurry. In one known stash house, the official said, investigators found bloody fingerprints and other evidence of torture.

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The state attorney general's office confirmed this week that investigators found traces of the conflict, including bullet casings and burned vehicles. Still, they said in a statement, "it cannot be established that [the group of thirteen migrants] was involved in any way, since there is no evidence to determine it."

The state attorney general's office also would not confirm whether investigators have used DNA testing on any of the evidence from the site of the confrontation, nor whether cartels were involved in the confrontation.

The Mexican official, however, was firm in the assertion that the migrants are no longer alive, and has a message for the families: "There are no words I can say to fill the void you feel for your sons, for your husbands, for your fathers. But there's a divine law that can give you comfort."

Contreras of FICOSEC agreed. "I think the important thing is that what we're looking for here is not to have another San Fernando," he said, referring to the 2010 and 2011 massacres of migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. Many say a lack of consequences for those killings has resulted in continued violence. "And to prevent us from having another San Fernando, we need to fight impunity."

Martinez is not ready to conclude that her husband and his companions were killed. "My heart tells me he's still alive, but I can't blind myself to that possibility," she said. "But if that's the case, then where are they?"

Christmas Day will mark three months since the families last heard from their loved ones, and Martinez said each day is more difficult.

"Why shatter the dreams of so many families?" Martinez asked. "Because that's what they were going for, a dream, and they destroy it in an instant."

She said the search will not stop until the men are home. "We're not looking for guilty parties," she said. "We just want to know what happened, where they are. Where the person is that we're waiting for at home."

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'We're working very hard': US Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar visits El Paso, Juarez, addresses border visa backlog
Lauren Villagran
El Paso Times
December 17, 2021
https://news.yahoo.com/were-working-very-hard-us-215034696.html

Working through a backlog of border crossing card applications is a "priority" for the White House, according to U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar.

The U.S. Consulate in Juárez, one of the State Department's nine consulates in Mexico, currently lists a wait time of 701 days for non-immigrant visas, which include the B1/B2 tourist visa available to Mexican nationals that is known as a "border crossing card."

The coveted cards allow tens of thousands of Mexico residents in the Borderland to crisscross to El Paso and southern New Mexico to shop at stores, visit family and friends or travel for tourism. For those unable to renew their border-crossing visas — a staple of life for those able to qualify and afford one — half of the binational community is cut off to them.

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"The pandemic really created huge issues for everybody, including our consulate's ability to process visas," Salazar said in a Friday news conference at the Ysleta-Zaragoza International Bridge. "We have a huge backlog, and that's what's creating the wait time. We're working very hard on it. It's a priority of Secretary of State (Anthony) Blinken and the White House and we will do as much as we can to catch up."

Salazar met with border security, business and education leaders in El Paso and Juárez on Friday as part of a tour of border communities for U.S. government's top diplomat in Mexico.

Salazar was sworn in as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in August 2021.

In Juárez, a visa application or renewal process that used to take a few weeks pre-pandemic has stretched to nearly two years. U.S. consulates in Mexico reduced staffing hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, while many border crossing card applicants put off renewing or applying for visas while restrictions on non-essential travel remained in place for 20 months.

U.S. consulates were hit with thousands of applications after the U.S. lifted the border restrictions for vaccinated foreign nationals in El Paso on Nov. 7.

"We're aware of the problem and we're doing our very best to bring the wait time down, not only for temporary visas — that includes people who want to travel for tourism, people who want to travel for temporary work, people who want to travel as students," said U.S. Consul General in Juárez Éric Cohan.

"We've had some good success in immigrant visas," Cohan said. "Here in Juárez is the only place to get an immigrant visa, and we're working very hard to do both, to bring down the wait time for temporary visas and for permanent resident visas."

In his visit to El Paso, Salazar toured border installations including the Ysleta port of entry and met with U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to discuss border security, according to a spokeswoman for the U.S. Consulate in Juárez .

He met with University of Texas at El Paso President Heather Wilson to discuss student exchanges with Mexico, as well as technology and innovation, and he visited with U.S. business leaders on facilitating cross-border trade.

"We're here because our goal for the United States is to create a modern, efficient, secure border," Salazar said. "That means that we now, coming out of the pandemic, need to make sure that this and other ports of entry are working well for the United States and our partners in Mexico."

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‘The vote suppressors won 2021’: Federal inaction leaves Texas advocates dismayed
Erica Grieder
Houston Chronicle
December 18, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/columnists/grieder/article/The-vote-suppressors-won-2021-Federal-16711366.php

This year’s fight for voting rights has ended with a whimper, rather than a bang.

The U.S. Senate recessed Friday for the winter holidays without having passed the

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John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act or any other major legislation related to voting rights.

The bill would have, among other things, restored a version of the “preclearance” protections established by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, under which states with a history of discrimination had to get federal approval before making changes to voting procedures. That section of the act was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013’s Shelby County v. Holder ruling.

The (supposedly hardworking) men and women of the upper chamber also whiffed on the chance to pass the Build Back Better bill, among other things. And, in fairness, they’ve had a long year, which began with a deadly insurrection at their workplace Jan. 6.

But according to advocates, the U.S. Capitol insurrection — perpetrated by Americans whipped into a frenzy by defeated President Donald Trump and others peddling the “Big Lie” that the election was stolen from Trump — is precisely the kind of horror that illustrates the need for federal voting protections. A fair point.

“There is a spirit of fair play that Democratic leadership is relying on that our opponents are not,” said Lee Merritt, a civil rights attorney who is one of several Democrats vying to challenge embattled Texas Attorney Gen. Ken Paxton, a Republican, next year. “I know they take it seriously, I know they believe it’s urgent, but they’re not willing to do whatever it takes, the way our opponents are.”

“It’s really enraging, and disappointing, and frightening, all at once,” James Slattery, a senior staff attorney at the Texas Civil Rights Project, said Friday. “Voting rights advocates here in Texas and in other states have been working night and day, literally, and sacrificing so much, to just hold the line — and at the end of this year, Congress can’t even manage to pass preclearance or any other federal voting rights legislation?”

In Texas, for example, Democratic members of the Legislature broke quorum twice, decamping to Washington, D.C., for over a month in the second case, in a bid to stall passage of a GOP-led “election integrity” package — and to pressure President Joe Biden and the Democrat-led Congress, to act. The Legislature ultimately passed a package of “reforms” that targeted innovations such as drive-thru and 24-hour voting, placed limits on early voting hours and enacted new requirements for voting by mail.

Some responsibility for the ensuing disappointment is borne by U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. Both are moderate Democrats who support the Senate’s current 60-vote threshold for most measures and apparently don’t see a need to make an exception for voting rights legislation, as some of their colleagues have urged. The Senate is split 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrats holding a narrow majority only because of Vice President Kamala Harris’ tie-breaking vote.

But there’s plenty of blame to go around. Biden, for example, declared voting rights a priority while campaigning in 2020; just this week, he called it “the single biggest issue” facing the country, at least on the domestic policy front. And yet he hasn’t thrown the weight of his presidency behind the cause so far.

Blue-state Democrats, with their access to online voter registration, may not fully appreciate what’s at stake in states such as Texas, Georgia and Arizona, among others. In October, the nonprofit Brennan Center for Justice called 2021 an “unprecedented” year for voting legislation, noting that 19 states had enacted 33 laws “that will make it harder for Americans to vote.”

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Meanwhile, Republicans in states such as Texas are continuing to press false claims about the 2020 election, which Trump lost badly, as well as hyperbolic claims about voter fraud, which is quite rare.

Between October 2020 and September 2021, my colleague Taylor Goldenstein reports, the election integrity unit of Paxton's office devoted more than 20,000 hours and $2.2 million of taxpayer money to investigating reports of voter fraud. It closed a whopping three cases. That's three cases, in a state with more than 17 million registered voters.

Paxton has also thrown the power of his office behind efforts to prosecute Texans such as Crystal Mason, a Black mother and grandmother from Tarrant County who cast a provisional ballot in 2016 without realizing she was ineligible to vote.

"It's clear now that in order to provide support for the baseless lie that Trump won the election, Ken Paxton is using the power of his office to target, primarily, Black and brown voters," Merritt said. "That is going to have a chilling effect."

With that said, he continued, it's worth noting that Paxton has also drawn several Republican primary opponents, including Land Commissioner George P. Bush and longtime Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzmán. And this week, Paxton was dealt a blow by his fellow conservatives: the all-Republican Court of Criminal Appeals on Wednesday issued an 8-1 opinion striking down a state law that gives the attorney general the power to unilaterally prosecute voter fraud and other election-related offenses.

"Now, thanks to the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals, Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas," Paxton tweeted, somehow managing to blame 91-year-old billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros, a favorite target of conservatives.

Merritt, however, said he was cheered by the news.

"I think that is a sign of the times — that even within his own party, this is embarrassing," the Dallas-based Democrat said.

The Texas Civil Rights Project's Slattery, for his part, reckons that this year's attacks on voting rights are particularly ominous because they may be intended to lay the groundwork for efforts to undermine, or overthrow, future elections. The entirely unnecessary "audits" underway in states such as Texas, for example, are nominally focused on the 2020 election but also serve to normalize such audits, in the eyes of the electorate.

"The vote suppressors won 2021," Slattery concluded gloomily.

That will make it easier for them to win, fairly or not, in 2022 and beyond.

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The time for Wolff to appoint an interim county commissioner is now, not later
Robert Rivard
San Antonio Report
December 19, 2021
https://sanantonioreport.org/nelson-wolff-trish-deberry-bexar-county-precinct-3/

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff has built a 50-year record of public service thanks

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in no small part to his keen political instincts and singular ability to shepherd big projects from vision to completion.

No one, however, is infallible. Wolff and the Bexar County citizens he represents would be better served if he would reconsider his decision to “hold over” Precinct 3 Commissioner Trish BeBerry, now a Republican candidate for county judge, in office through February.

State law requires DeBerry to resign from commissioners court to run for another county office. Wolff has 60 days to name a replacement, but the time to replace DeBerry’s interim successor is now, while voters decide in November who should serve out the remainder of her four-year term. There is no overriding reason to justify keeping an actively campaigning candidate in office.

Leaving DeBerry in office, despite the law, creates the perception, if not the reality, that Wolff is putting his thumb on the scales and giving DeBerry greater weight in what promises to be a competitive and hard-fought race as voters prepare to select a new county judge on Nov. 6.

The individual Wolff appoints will serve as an interim county commissioner until the winner of the Nov. 6 race for the Precinct 3 seat is sworn into office in January 2023. In the latest twist to this political drama, the Texas secretary of state’s office issued a new ruling Friday clearing the way for the county chairs of the Republican and Democratic parties to hand-pick candidates for the November ballot. A Wednesday announcement inviting candidates to file by Monday for the March 1 primary is now off the table.

The primary campaigns for the county judge seat Wolff will vacate at the end of his fifth term are already underway. DeBerry is likely to have an easy time leading up to the Republican primary on March 1. Why not enjoy two more months in office while worrying little about her underfunded, largely unknown opponent, Nate Buchanan, who ran unsuccessfully for Precinct 3 Constable in 2016 and 2020?

There are three credible candidates in the Democratic primary. Those candidates deserve to be on an equal footing with DeBerry. That’s why state law forces county-level officeholders seeking higher office to resign. A 2010 opinion issued by then-Attorney General Greg Abbott clearly states that an official candidate announcement by a county commissioner triggers an immediate resignation.

DeBerry has been in office for a scant 11 months, which makes her bid for the county judge seat now seem premature and even grasping. The immediate political cost to her should be losing the right to represent the voters who put her in office.

The “resign to run” law does not apply to state officeholders, so Democratic state Rep. Ina Minjarez is allowed to continue to serve in the Texas House, which is not in session. Prior to his candidacy, Judge Peter Sakai ended his long and distinguished career as a state district court judge and pioneer in the realm of protecting vulnerable children and families. Ivalis Meza Gonzalez, who is seeking elected office for the first time, stepped down as Mayor Ron Nirenberg’s chief of staff after making her announcement to run.

DeBerry should make the moment easier for Wolff by announcing she has reconsidered and will vacate her office immediately.

Wolff’s argument that keeping DeBerry on the court for an extended period is necessary to see through key initiatives rings hollow. The vetting process to appoint a caretaker for the vacant Precinct 3 seat can be handled in a way that assures the

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chosen individual understands his or her obligation to respect projects already underway or nearing completion.

The interim commissioner does not have to rubber-stamp every agenda item, but sound judgment should be a prerequisite for the appointment. Wolff would be wise to assemble a distinguished panel to vet the qualified candidates and not exercise his unilateral power to hand-pick DeBerry's successor.

For voters to make an informed decision, there is one other important step DeBerry can take. She should provide the media and the public with a full list of her public relations and marketing agency's clients, and disclose any contracts they have with Bexar County. She should document her assertion that she no longer has a controlling interest in the agency or its management.

One effective way for candidates to demonstrate complete transparency with voters is to release recent income tax returns. There might not be a precedent for such a measure locally, but Wolff leaves this important administrative and leadership position after 20 years. Bexar County has grown enormously in that time, and with that growth has come a significant increase in tax collections and the power of county judge.

The best start to the campaign to replace Wolff would be a Deberry resignation now and the appointment of a credible interim commissioner, preferably a Republican, to represent the people and interests of Precinct 3 until the November special election leads to the seating of a new county commissioner on the first day of 2023.

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Republican redistricting maps disenfranchise voters of color
Eric Holder
Philadelphia Inquirer
December 17, 2021
https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/redistricting-pennsylvania-state-maps-voters-republican-20211217.html&outputType=app-web-view

Our country is getting more diverse and less rural. This is a fact confirmed by the 2020 Census data which serves as a roadmap for redistricting in every state. If congressional and state legislative maps follow the data we see in the Census, we should see more districts that reflect both the expanding urban population and the growing population of people of color across the country.

But so far in states where Republicans are in charge of redistricting, they are drawing maps that ignore the data altogether.

Republicans have gone out of their way to draw maps that empower rural, predominantly white regions. They do so at the cost of disenfranchising voters in the diverse urban and suburban areas that have seen an increase in population. Republicans have deployed several tactics, but the most egregious are those that purposefully diminish the voting power of the communities of color: "packing" and "cracking."

Both tactics are anti-democratic, and diminish the voting power of communities of color either by reducing the number of representatives they're able to elect or diluting their influence altogether. For example, in Ohio, Republicans packed Black and Latino communities in Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, into just one district, purposefully reducing representation of these communities in Congress. Meanwhile, in the same county, Republicans also split apart Asian American and Pacific Islander communities into separate districts, diminishing their voting power. In

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Texas, despite the fact that 95% of the population growth over the last decade has come from communities of color, Gov. Greg Abbott and the Republican legislature put in place maps that will actually increase the number of majority-white districts and reduce the number of competitive districts in Texas to just one. They purposefully drew these maps to ensure that rural, white areas electorally overpower the vote of more diverse communities.

There is no legitimate justification for these actions. It's evident that Republicans have no qualms about bending or breaking the rules for their own gain and these maps show that. Their actions speak loudly to their unwillingness to implement fair redistricting processes and create fair maps that accurately represent voters, and they must be stopped — in the courts and in the states. Given what we have seen elsewhere in the country, it is essential for Pennsylvanians to pay attention as the map-drawing process reaches the critical juncture of considering draft maps.

Similar to the rest of the country, Pennsylvania is an increasingly diverse state. According to Census data, communities of color have driven the state's population growth over the past decade. While the number of Pennsylvanians who identify as white dropped by more than 541,000, the number of Pennsylvanians who identify as Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Latino increased by more than 532,000. That growth did not just occur in and around urban centers like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh — it also occurred in places like Lancaster County, where minority population growth accounted for more than 71 percent of the county's overall population growth.

Pennsylvania is losing a seat in Congress because of slow population growth, particularly in the central, northern, and western regions. To achieve fairness, the congressional map should eliminate the 15th congressional district in western Pennsylvania, reflecting the movement of voters and statewide population changes. While the total number of state legislative districts will not change, the Census data indicates that three state House districts should move from western to eastern Pennsylvania to reflect the population shift.

An increasingly diverse state should have maps that accurately reflect that trend with congressional and state legislative districts drawn in a manner to empower growing and diverse populations. Yet, Republicans in the state House introduced a draft congressional map that would do the opposite by "cracking" and "packing" communities of color to make Republican seats safer and put as many Democrats as possible into as few seats as possible. That is inconsistent with the Census data and is dangerously anti-democracy.

Pennsylvania's Legislative Reapportionment Commission has a chance to show Pennsylvanians that redistricting can provide appropriate representation to urban neighborhoods and communities of color at the legislative level. Commission Chair Mark Nordenberg has shown a commitment to fairness and has created a direct line of communication between citizens and the commissioners, which is continuing with the 30-day public comment period. If he and the commission listen to all of the public input and allow for a fair process, the final legislative maps they produce will provide appropriate representation to urban and increasingly diverse communities in places like Lancaster, Reading, and Allentown, without "cracking" or unnecessarily "packing" communities of color. No matter who draws the maps, following the best available data and considering public input are each required to lead to a fair outcome. Citizens can and should play a role in a process that reflects the best of Pennsylvania democracy and not the political desires of a party afraid of a changing electorate.

Eric H. Holder, Jr., is the 82nd Attorney General of the United States and chairman of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.

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From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: FW: SOS Morning News Clips 12/23/21
Date: Thursday, December 23, 2021 8:46:32 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Thursday, December 23, 2021 7:47 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/23/21
Sensitivity: Personal



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 23, 2021

Harris County prevails in court challenge over Democratic 'gerrymandering,' *Houston Public Media*, December 22, 2021

Additional details released on purchase of 100 new voting machines, *Brownwood Bulletin*, December 22, 2021

Brown County Commissioners to replace existing voting machines with new hybrid versions, *KTXS-TV*, December 22, 2021

Biden says he supports filibuster carve-out for voting rights, *CNN*, December 23, 2021

US delays intelligence center targeting foreign influence, *Associated Press*, December 23, 2021

Mexico says U.S. approves Deer Park refinery deal, sees completion early 2022, *Reuters*, December 22, 2021

Juarez mayor explains why 1,000 National Guard troops left the city in the middle of a drug war, *Border Report*, December 22, 2021

Column: Getting Ahead, *Rio Grande Guardian*, December 22, 2021

A By the Numbers Look at Voter Suppression in 2021, *Texas Signal*, December 22, 2021

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Harris County prevails in court challenge over Democratic 'gerrymandering'
Andrew Schneider
Houston Public Media
December 22, 2021
https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/politics/2021/12/22/416146/harris-county-prevails-in-court-challenge-to-redistricting-plan/

A Harris County Judge on Wednesday tossed a lawsuit from Republican commissioners and voters over new county maps that favor Democrats.

Judge Dedra Davis ruled in favor of Harris County, finding that Republican commissioners Jack Cagle and Tom Ramsey and three voters did not have jurisdiction to sue.

The Republicans' attorney, Andy Taylor, indicated that he planned to appeal the ruling.

Cagle, Ramsey and the three voters filed the lawsuit against Democratic County Judge Lina Hidalgo and against Harris County last month. The suit alleged that the redistricting map proposed by Democratic Commissioner Rodney Ellis, known as the Ellis 3 plan, amounts to an unconstitutional gerrymander that would deprive more than 1.1 million voters of their right to vote.

Texas election law staggers county precinct elections every two years. All county commissioners serve four-year terms, but commissioners in even-numbered precincts and those in odd-numbered precincts take place at two-year intervals.

The next election for even-numbered precincts is in 2022. The lawsuit alleges that the Ellis 3 plan shifts more than 1.1 million voters from even-numbered precincts to odd-numbered precincts, depriving them of their right to vote until 2024.

"Plaintiffs submit that there is a very simple explanation for why this occurred," the lawsuit reads. "Commissioner Ellis wanted to do whatever it would take to draw a new map that would create three...Democratic seats. Thus, the Ellis 3 Plan does just that."

Specifically, the suit charges, it strengthens Ellis' position in Precinct 1 and Democratic Commissioner Adrian Garcia's position in Precinct 2, and it renders Ramsey's Precinct 3 a more solidly Republican district at the expense of Cagle's Precinct 4.

Ellis himself has argued that the previous precinct maps ratified in 2010 were gerrymandered by Republicans, and his map seeks to correct that by reuniting communities of interest.

The Ellis 3 plan trades much of the territory now represented by Cagle in northern Harris County with territory now represented by Ramsey in the west. The new Precinct 4 is also majority-minority, with a combined non-Anglo population of more than 70%.

The likelihood is that Cagle's seat would flip to a Democrat in 2022, shifting the current 3-2 Democratic majority on the court to a 4-1 Democratic supermajority. That would enable Democrats, among other measures, to push through tax increases that Republicans can currently block by breaking quorum, as Cagle and then-Commissioner Steve Radack did in 2019, and which Cagle and Ramsey again threatened to do in 2021.

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During the commissioners' debate over the Ellis 3 plan, Cagle said he viewed the map as Democrats' revenge for the 2019 quorum break.

"You're inclined to vote for the Ellis 3 because you view that vote as a referendum to the public, in essence on taxes," Cagle told Hidalgo. "You feel because of our disagreement on taxes that you need to move me into a precinct that I have not served, to let me face the public on that referendum of the tax issue."

Hidalgo acknowledged that the tax issue had influenced her decision, particularly because Cagle and Ramsey had recently threatened to break quorum again to block a Democrat-proposed tax cut, forcing a deeper tax cut as well as cuts to county services.

That threat was ultimately averted, when commissioners negotiated a slightly larger tax cut than Democrats initially wanted.

"I am concerned that your party's on a race to the bottom, to literally not be able to pay for life-saving services, when you're rejecting a tax cut so that you can defund the hospital district by $17 million in the middle of a pandemic," Hidalgo said. "I haven't forgotten that."

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Additional details released on purchase of 100 new voting machines
Brownwood Bulletin
December 22, 2021
https://www.brownwoodtx.com/story/news/2021/12/22/additional-details-released-purchase-100-new-voting-machines/8997883002/

Brown County Judge Paul Lilly's office issued the following press release about the county's purchase of new voting machines:

On December 20, 2021 Brown County Commissioners voted unanimously to replace the existing voting machines with new hybrid voting machines that combine use of electronic voting stations and paper ballots to further ensure the integrity of the voting process for Brown County voters and provide additional voting machines to reduce the voters waiting time.

With an expenditure of $647,611.00 voters will see 100 new voting machines along with the variety of companion equipment required. Funds for this project are coming from the 2020 Elect SEC grants, 2020 Elect Fund Matching State funds along with $14,597.70 Brown County matching funds.

Lilly said the new system will provide more security for voters over the previous equipment used in Brown County in that they feature a digital touch screen as well as a paper copy of the voter's selections that the voter can verify before submitting the ballot into a secure on-site ballot box. Lilly stated that the collection of paper ballots and triple data backup allows for easier election audit tracking. The machines will also offer more accessibility for voters, Lilly said, as they feature Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible controls and screen toggling features that make for an easier, faster voting experience. According to Larry Franks, Brown County Elections Administrator, Hart InterCivic Inc. is one of two voting equipment companies certified by the Texas Secretary of State's Office. The county chose Hart InterCivic Inc. due to Brown County’s familiarity with the company and their approval by the “Texas State Buy Board”. Hart InterCivic Inc. is an Austin-based company that designs and

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manufactures its voting machines in Texas.

"My commitment to Brown County voters is to provide an open, transparent and accountable voting process - moving to the new paper based, Hart InterCivic Verity Voting System, does just that by giving Brown County voters a more accessible, secure and verifiable ballot to improve the voting experience for all Brown County voters," Lilly said.

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Brown County Commissioners to replace existing voting machines with new hybrid versions
Sarah Burns
KTXS-TV
December 22, 2021
https://ktxs.com/news/local/brown-county-commissioners-to-replace-existing-voting-machines-with-new-hybrid-versions

ABILENE, Texas — Brown County Commissioners voted this past week to replace the existing voting machines with new hybrid ones that combine electronic voting stations with paper ballots to better ensure voting integrity, and reduce voter waiting times.

According to a press release, a total of 100 new voting machines will be added by an expenditure of $647,611.00 coming from the 2020 Elect SEC grants, 2020 Elect Fund Matching State funds along with $14,597.70 Brown County matching funds.

The new machines will provide higher security and feature a digital touch screen along with a paper copy of the voter's selections that the voter can verify before submitting their ballot, according to Judge Lilly. The collection of paper ballots and triple data backup will allow for audit tracking. In addition to this, the machines will feature Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible controls and screen toggling features to enhance the voting process.

"My commitment to Brown County voters is to provide an open, transparent and accountable voting process - moving to the new paper based, Hart InterCivic Verity Voting System, does just that by giving Brown County voters a more accessible, secure and verifiable ballot to improve the voting experience for all Brown County voters," Judge Lilly said in a statement.

Brown county chose Hart InterCivic Inc. due to its familiarity with the company and their approval by the “Texas State Buy Board”. Hart InterCivic Inc., which is an Austin-based company that designs and manufactures its voting machines in Texas.

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Biden says he supports filibuster carve-out for voting rights
Kyle Blaine
CNN
December 23, 2021
https://kvia.com/news/2021/12/23/biden-says-he-supports-filibuster-carve-out-for-voting-rights/

President Joe Biden says he supports making an exception to the Senate filibuster rules in order to pass voting rights legislation.

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“If the only thing standing between getting voting rights legislation passed and not getting passed is the filibuster, I support making the exception of voting rights for the filibuster,” Biden told ABC News’ David Muir in an interview that aired Thursday morning.

It’s the most direct answer Biden has given on his position on the filibuster and voting rights.

CNN’s Anderson Cooper asked Biden at a CNN town hall in October, “When it comes to voting rights, just so I’m clear though, you would entertain the notion of doing away with the filibuster on that one issue, is that correct?”

“And maybe more,” Biden responded.

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US delays intelligence center targeting foreign influence
Associated Press
December 23, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/south-texas-el-paso/ap-top-news/2021/12/23/us-delays-intelligence-center-targeting-foreign-influence

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia was working to subvert U.S. elections and sow discord among Americans, Congress directed the creation of an intelligence center to lead efforts to stop interference by foreign adversaries. But two years later, that center still is not close to opening.

Experts and intelligence officials broadly agree the proposed Foreign Malign Influence Center is a good idea. The U.S. has lacked a cohesive strategy to fight influence operations, they say, with not enough coordination among national security agencies. Adversaries that tried to interfere in the last two presidential elections continue to bombard Americans with disinformation and conspiracy theories at a time of peril for democracy in the U.S. and around the world.

But the intelligence community and Congress remain divided over the center's mission, budget and size, according to current and former officials. While separate efforts to counter interference continue, a person identified this year as a potential director has since been assigned elsewhere and the center likely will not open anytime soon.

“It really is just giving a gift to Russia and China and others who clearly have their sights set not only on the midterm elections but on ongoing campaigns to destabilize American society,” said David Salvo, deputy director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

The nation's top intelligence official had advocated for the center before taking office. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines last year co-chaired a German Marshall Fund task force supporting it. In a statement, spokeswoman Nicole de Haay said the director's office "is focused on creating a center to facilitate and integrate the Intelligence Community’s efforts to address foreign malign influence.”

But some lawmakers are concerned about further expanding the mission of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. ODNI was originally envisioned as a small coordinating body to address the intelligence-sharing failures preceding the Sept. 11 attacks. It has several centers that critics say are well-meaning attempts to solve problems but end up causing unnecessary duplication.

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Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner said that while he supports the center, there were “legitimate questions about how large such an organization should be and even about where it would fit" with existing government efforts to fight foreign interference.

“We want to be sure that this center enhances those efforts rather than duplicating them or miring them in unnecessary bureaucracy,” the Virginia Democrat said in a statement. “I don’t have any real doubt that we will ultimately stand the center up in the relatively near future, but we need to be sure we get it right.”

It's unclear who would lead the center. Separately, there is also a vacancy for a new election threats executive after the previous executive, Shelby Pierson, ended her term and returned to another intelligence post. Pierson had been in the spotlight last year after giving lawmakers a closed-door briefing on Russia's efforts to intervene in the 2020 election in favor of former President Donald Trump. That angered Trump, who berated the then-director of national intelligence and later replaced him. Trump has promoted falsehoods about elections and pushed Republicans to follow his lead.

Experts on democracy have long warned that what the government refers to as “malign influence” is a national security threat. Social media has helped make disinformation a cheap and powerful tactic for adversaries who can push false or altered stories, videos and images, and amplify falsehoods already circulating among Americans to promote their own interests and create chaos.

U.S. and other Western authorities have accused Russia of spreading disinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines, stealing data from local and state election servers, and pushing false stories intended to exploit divisions over race and civil rights. Intelligence agencies have found that Russia used influence operations to interfere with the 2016 presidential election in favor of Trump's campaign and conducted operations in Trump's favor in 2020.

The U.S. assessed China ultimately did not interfere in the 2020 election, but Beijing has been accused of promoting false theories about the COVID-19 pandemic and trying to sway businesses and all levels of government. Iran was accused of sponsoring emails intended to intimidate Democratic-leaning voters into supporting Trump.

Experts say the new center can warn Americans about interference and produce better information for policymakers. While the FBI, the National Security Agency and several other government agencies have long worked on foreign interference, “we are not organized in a way where we are building a coherent threat picture,” said Jessica Brandt, an expert on foreign interference and disinformation at the Brookings Institution.

But there are risks in the intelligence community ramping up its monitoring of what Americans see and read. The FBI and NSA have been accused of unlawfully spying on Americans. That history contributes to many Americans' distrust of the intelligence community, as do Trump's attacks on intelligence professionals and what he has derided as the “deep state.”

Opponents note the U.S. also has a history of covert interference in other countries and has helped overthrow governments seen as anti-American. A column published by the Kremlin-backed RT.com alleged the proposed center “is just official cover for American intelligence interference in domestic politics.”

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The intelligence community also risks being seen as political or infringing on First Amendment rights if it takes the same untruths spread by Americans and labels them as foreign interference when they're spread by an adversary.

The center “is going to have to figure out this enormous challenge to convey threats to American elections, American democracy, at a time when there seem to be two completely different realities,” said Salvo of the German Marshall Fund.

Congress authorized the center in late 2019 and directed ODNI to create it. Several people who worked in intelligence matters at that time, speaking on condition of anonymity to describe confidential discussions, say they didn't know of any effort by the Trump White House to stop the center. Instead, leaders within ODNI disagreed on how to structure the new center or whether it should be a “virtual center" without an office.

According to one of the people, William Evanina, the former chief of ODNI's counterintelligence center, offered to take the malign influence center under his authority, but the office ultimately did not choose that option. Evanina declined to comment.

After President Joe Biden took office, ODNI presented a plan for a small center with a few dozen staff members to the intelligence and appropriations committees in the House and Senate. But even as Congress required the center's creation, key lawmakers from both parties have expressed concerns about the plan.

A proposal to fund the center this summer failed and it is unlikely to be completed while the government is operating with temporary funding. The center may now be included if a full spending plan is approved in early 2022.

Suzanne Spaulding, an election security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called for the U.S. government to act quickly.

“Time is not on our side,” Spaulding said. “Disinformation is a national security threat and should be treated with the urgency that a national security threat engenders.”

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Mexico says U.S. approves Deer Park refinery deal, sees completion early 2022
Reuters
December 22, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/mexico-says-us-government-approves-deer-park-refinery-deal-2021-12-22/

MEXICO CITY, Dec 22 (Reuters) - The U.S. government has authorized the purchase by Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex) of Royal Dutch Shell's (RDSa.L) controlling interest in a Texas oil refinery in a transaction that should conclude early next year, Mexico's government said Wednesday.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador told a regular news conference that the U.S. government had on Tuesday approved the purchase of the Deer Park refinery stake by state-run Pemex, calling it "very good news."

"The idea is to finalize the purchase during the first weeks of 2022," Pemex Chief Executive Officer Octavio Romero said, speaking alongside Lopez Obrador.

At the same conference, Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard displayed a letter

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showing that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) had concluded there were no unresolved national security concerns regarding the deal.

Last week, Shell said the sale of its Deer Park stake to Pemex was pending CFIUS approval.

Lopez Obrador, who backed the purchase as part of a plan to make Mexico self-sufficient in gasoline, thanked U.S. President Joe Biden for his support during the authorization process.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800 barrels-per-day (bpd) Deer Park refinery outside Houston to its partner Pemex for some $596 million.

CEO Romero told the news conference that the terms of the deal had not changed since May, and that Mexico would pay off the existing debt of both Shell and Pemex in the refinery, which he said amounted to around $1.2 billion in total.

Shell confirmed the CFIUS approval in a message to Deer Park refinery employees.

"In the coming days, we will work on finalizing the closing date for the deal," the oil refinery's general manager, Guy Hackwell, told workers.

A Shell spokesperson was not immediately available to comment.

Once CFIUS completes its investigation, the White House has up to 15 days to approve or reject the recommendation.

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Juarez mayor explains why 1,000 National Guard troops left the city in the middle of a drug war
Julian Resendiz
Border Report
December 22, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/border-crime/juarez-mayor-explains-why-1000-national-guard-troops-left-the-city-in-the-middle-of-a-drug-war/

EL PASO, Texas (Border Report) – Mexico City has recalled nearly 1,000 National Guardsmen from Juarez, but the mayor of that border city says replacements will be sent.

“We are told more will come. I imagine (the recall) has to do with the holidays, but we will be paying attention because (Juarez) needs the support of the (federal and state) governments,” Mayor Cruz Perez Cuellar said.

Mexican news reports set off alarms earlier this week in reporting the departure of most National Guard troops from Juarez, a city where drug-related murders remain rampant. The nonprofit Citizens Observatory reported 1,377 homicides for Juarez so far in 2021. Local authorities say 90 percent of the murders are drug-related.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador shored up National Guard presence in Juarez at the request of former Chihuahua Gov. Javier Corral. The president in August inaugurated new National Guard barracks and said more than 2,000 troops would remain in the city to help local authorities quell crime.

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As of last Sunday, only 300 soldiers were still in the city, El Diario reported.

Perez Cuellar characterized the move as “staff rotation,” meaning the Army periodically reassigns troops to different regions of Mexico.

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Getting Ahead
M. Ray Perryman
Rio Grande Guardian
December 22, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/perryman-getting-ahead/

The latest jobs report for Texas is replete with good news. November data shows strength across the economy and a new record for total state employment. In less than two years, Texas has completely overcome the devastating loss of about 1.5 million jobs that occurred in early 2020.

For November, Texas added 75,100 jobs, the eighteenth gain in the last 19 months, and the unemployment rate has dropped to 5.2%. There are now almost 13.0 million nonagricultural jobs in the state. Topping pre-pandemic employment levels this quickly is quite impressive.

One noteworthy aspect of the increase is that it represents nearly 36% of the national gain for the month (210,000 net new jobs). Other significant increases occurred in Florida (up 51,100) and California (45,700).

It is also notable that every major industry group expanded during the month. In the past, we’ve seen periods where gains in some segments of the economy were offset by drops in others. The COVID-19 uncertainty and measures required to slow the spread caused extreme volatility in sectors such as travel, retail, and energy. There were times when the state added jobs in retail, while core groups such as manufacturing or construction retrenched. In November, expansion emerged across the board.

Additionally, this very positive report comes just as the energy sector is beginning to ramp up. Employment in mining and logging (which is virtually all oil- and gas-related in Texas) was up 3,700 for the month. When you consider all of the linkages across the state, energy accounts for 13-14% of business activity in normal times. As recovery continues with additional rigs added every week (275 as of December 17), the positive patterns in the industry should lead to additional gains across a broad spectrum of businesses and communities.

There are still risks to reckon with, both short-term and long-term. A major surge in serious COVID-19 cases could certainly slow progress (a particular vulnerability as the spread of the omicron variant accelerates), and the lingering supply chain issues will dampen growth in specific industries at times. Long-term Texas challenges include ensuring an adequate workforce for the future through enhancing educational quality and access, providing adequate infrastructure, and assuring inclusiveness.

On balance, however, the state is well positioned to be among the stellar performers. The Texas economy is diverse, with a strong and varied base of production categories as well as ongoing emergence in advanced manufacturing and other technology sectors. The Lone Star State also has a favorable cost structure and premier economic development programs.

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There's indeed a lot to like in the most recent jobs report. As we enter the final weeks of the year, the Texas economy is hitting on all cylinders. Stay safe!

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A By the Numbers Look at Voter Suppression in 2021
Fernando Ramirez
Texas Signal
December 22, 2021
https://texassignal.com/a-by-the-numbers-look-at-voter-suppression-in-2021/

Voting rights experts at the nonprofit The Brennan Center for Justice recently released their roundup of restrictive voting laws passed in 2021.

At least 19 states passed 34 bills into law restricting voting access, including Texas' Senate Bill 1, which banned drive-thru and 24-hour voting, made it more difficult for disabeled Texans to vote, and prohibited election officials from sending out unsolicited mail ballot applications.

At least 49 states saw legislatures introduce some sort of legislation to restrict voting access.

More than a third of all restrictive voting laws enacted since 2011 were passed this year, and they were the most restrictive laws in a decade according to The Brennan Center for Justice.

Texas was also among six states in 2021 to enact politically motivated reviews or audits of the 2020 presidential election.

The Lone Star State continues to conduct an audit of the results, and earlier this year, the Republican-controlled state legislature attempted to pass a provision in their sweeping voter suppression bill that would have made it easier for judges to overturn elections.

Texas also continues to face two federal lawsuits for violating the Voting Rights Act with SB 1 and the state's new district lines. Other civil rights groups and organizations have also filed litigation, bringing the total amount of lawsuits faced by the state to at least 20.

"The department's career voting law experts have accessed Texas' new redistricting rights plans, and determined that they include districts that violate the Voting Rights Act," U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said in December when announcing the department's second lawsuit against Texas.

On Monday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told Democratic colleagues the Senate would consider federal voting rights legislation in early January.

The legislation, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, has been stalled in the upper chamber by Republicans who have blocked their advancement with the 60-vote filibuster rule, which at least two Democratic Senators, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, support keeping in place.

"If Senate Republicans continue to abuse the filibuster and prevent the body from considering this bill, the Senate will then consider changes to any rules which prevent us from debating and reaching final conclusion on important legislation," Schumer said.

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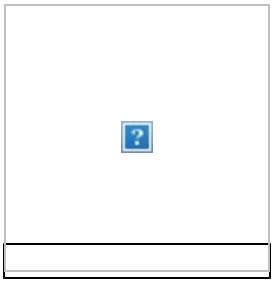
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From:	Melanie Best
To:	Elec Legal
Subject:	FW: Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties
Date:	Friday, December 10, 2021 4:56:50 PM
Attachments:	image001.jpg image002.jpg

From: Texas Secretary of State Press Office <TXSoSPress@public.govdelivery.com>
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:49 PMel
To: Melanie Best <MBest@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties

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Texas Secretary of State

John B. Scott

For Immediate Distribution
December 10, 2021

Contact: Sam Taylor
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
(512) 463-6116

Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties

AUSTIN — The Texas Secretary of State's office today issued an exhaustive document request of publicly available election materials from Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties

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as part of the office's Full Forensic Audit of the November 2020 General Election. The document request, which covers more election materials than any other election audit in the United States to date, includes all documents that county election officials are required to maintain for 22 months following each election under both federal and state law. In total, the full forensic audit of Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties will cover approximately 35% of all votes cast in the November 2020 General Election in Texas.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Secretary John Scott said. "Where there are irregularities or issues discovered, our office will absolutely be fully transparent about our findings, and we have all of the resources we need at our disposal to do so. To the extent that systemic reforms to our election processes are needed, we will report those to the Texas Legislature. To the extent that any criminal activity may have occurred, we will refer any and all information to the Texas Attorney General's office for investigation."

A summary of findings of Phase 1 of the audit will be issued publicly by the end of December 2021.

Read the full request issued to Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties today.

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From: Henry Edwards [redacted]
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 6:21 PM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Fwd: Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties

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A tremendous waste of money time and resources.

Henry Edwards

(210) 867-6248
[redacted]
https://www.bexardemocrat.org/
6606 Walker Hill, Live Oak, TX 78233-5561

---------- Forwarded message ----------
From: Texas Secretary of State Press Office<TXSoSPress@public.govdelivery.com>
Date: On Fri, Dec 10, 2021 at 4:48 PM
Subject: Fwd: Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties
To: [redacted]>
Cc:

Texas Secretary of State

John B. Scott

For Immediate Distribution
December 10, 2021

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Contact: Sam Taylor
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
(512) 463-6116

Texas Secretary of State Issues Document Request for Phase 2 of Full Forensic Audit of 2020 Election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties

AUSTIN — The Texas Secretary of State's office today issued an exhaustive document request of publicly available election materials from Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties as part of the office's Full Forensic Audit of the November 2020 General Election. The document request, which covers more election materials than any other election audit in the United States to date, includes all documents that county election officials are required to maintain for 22 months following each election under both federal and state law. In total, the full forensic audit of Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties will cover approximately 35% of all votes cast in the November 2020 General Election in Texas.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Secretary John Scott said. "Where there are irregularities or issues discovered, our office will absolutely be fully transparent about our findings, and we have all of the resources we need at our disposal to do so. To the extent that systemic reforms to our election processes are needed, we will report those to the Texas Legislature. To the extent that any criminal activity may have occurred, we will refer any and all information to the Texas Attorney General's office for investigation."

A summary of findings of Phase 1 of the audit will be issued publicly by the end of December 2021.

Read the full request issued to Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties today.

###

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From:	John Scott
To:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	Fwd: Letter from Secretary Scott
Date:	Wednesday, December 22, 2021 5:00:36 AM
Attachments:	image004.png image001.png Harris County 12.21.2021 Response to Texas SOS.pdf Harris County 12.21.2021 Response to Texas SOS Attachment.pdf
Sensitivity:	Personal

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From: Longoria, Isabel (Elections) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 9:37:56 PM
To: John Scott <JScott@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Keith Ingram <KIngram@sos.texas.gov>; Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Letter from Secretary Scott

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Please see the attached response.

Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections Administrator
Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net
832.584.1757
she/hers

From: Christina Adkins <CAdkins@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, December 10, 2021 4:32 PM
To: Collin - Bruce Sherbet (bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us) <bsherbet@co.collin.tx.us>; Dallas - Michael J. Scarpello (michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org) <michael.scarpello@dallascounty.org>; Heider I. Garcia <HIGarcia@tarrantcounty.com>; Longoria, Isabel (EAD) <Isabel.Longoria@vote.hctx.net>
Subject: Letter from Secretary Scott
Sensitivity: Personal

Please see the attached correspondence from Secretary Scott.

Thank you,

Christina Worrell Adkins
Legal Director – Elections Division

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Rudder Building, 2nd Floor | Austin, Texas 78701
512-463-9859 (direct) | 1.800.252.VOTE (8683)
elections@sos.texas.gov | www.sos.texas.gov

For Voter Related Information, please visit:



The information contained in this email is intended to provide advice and assistance in election matters per §31.004 of the Texas Election Code. It is not intended to serve as a legal opinion for any matter. Please review the law yourself, and consult with an attorney when your legal rights are involved.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

OFFICE OF ISABEL LONGORIA
ELECTIONS ADMINISTRATOR
HARRIS COUNTY ★ STATE OF TEXAS

December 21, 2021

John B. Scott
Texas Secretary of State
Elections Division
P.O. Box 12060
Austin, Texas 78711-2060

Dear Secretary Scott:

I write in response to your letter dated December 10, 2021, regarding "Phase 2 of the Full Forensic Audit," in which you asked my office to compile a list of responses by December 21, and you provided an almost 8-page list of documents indicating you would like our office to "begin locating the documents listed to prepare for our Forensic Audit Division's on-site examinations, which will be coordinated at a mutually convenient time in January 2022." That is an impossible timeline by which to complete the tasks requested.

Our office is in the process of preparing to hold six elections over the course of the next six months, four of which are countywide elections, some even ordered by the state legislature: a special election in January, the Primary elections in March, a likely runoff for the special election, the May 7 uniform election, the May 24 Primary election runoff and the election for Precinct Chairs, and the likely runoff for the May 7 uniform election. Every day from now until June 2022 there is either voting actively occurring or a critical deadline our office must complete for at least one of those six elections. Thus, it would be cumbersome and potentially irresponsible for us to divert staff and resources away from active elections to host an "audit" of a past, certified election.

Additionally, the extensive requirements of Senate Bill 1 will be in effect, for the first time, for the Republican and Democratic Primary Elections. Planning and executing the implementation of such a wide sweeping legislation is a massive undertaking and requires my staff's full time and attention. Because your office has released little guidance on how to implement these important new provisions, we are left to sort through the logistics on our own in hopes that they meet the undisclosed SOS standards.

In short, taking hundreds of hours from staff time to pull documents listed in your prior letter instead of working toward implementation of SB1, nor preparing for the massive election calendar over the next six months, would be asking us to put the 2022 Primaries and compliance with Senate Bill 1 in jeopardy.

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Since I was sworn into office on November 18, 2020, 15 days after the November 2020 Presidential Election concluded, the Elections Administrator's Office has endeavored to run elections fairly, equitably, accurately, and smoothly. That is why we are doing everything in our power to fully prepare for the upcoming 2022 elections for the sake of Harris County voters.

We attach responses to the questions in your December 10, 2021 letter. For the remainder of your requests, we await your call to discuss the time and resources it would take to go through the documents.

Sincerely,



Isabel Longoria
Harris County Elections Administrator

Attachments:
Attachment 1: Response to Texas SOS December 10 Initial Requests

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Harris County Elections Administrator
Attachment 1: Response to Texas SOS December 10 Initial Requests

1. **A list of Early Voting or Election Day polling locations that had a discrepancy of one percent or more between the number of voters that checked in to the number of votes cast at that location.**
   Our office has gathered information and is in the process of comparing for any percentage discrepancies.

2. **Whether any voting sites were closed or added due to an emergency or other necessity.**
   Yes, three locations were closed for the remainder of a day due to weather-related issues.

3. **Any known procedural or chain of custody defects.**
   Procedural and Chain of Custody documents from the November 2020 Election have been maintained and are available for review to ascertain the existence and nature of any defects.

4. **Any other issues discovered that you would like to disclose now that may be relevant to our audit process.**
   Please see response to no. 3.

5. **A list of complaints received and resolved, with a description of any known investigative steps or known resolution.**
   Our office is in the process of gathering the ADA complaints from Nov 2020.

6. **A detailed accounting of the following:**
   a. **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Requested** 194,566 (does not include FPCA or Emergency ballot applications)
   b. **Total Early Voting Ballots by Mail Sent out** 206,020
   c. **Total Early Voting Ballots requested by FPCA** 12,895
   d. Breakdown of Early Voting Ballots by Mail accepted/rejected
      i. Total received: 180,007
      ii. Accepted: 179,174
      iii. Rejected: 224
      iv. Late ballots: 609
   e. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted in person

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i. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted provisionally in person: 8,337
ii. Total number of mail ballot voters that cancelled their mail ballot without surrendering the mailed ballot and voted regularly in person: 57

f. **Total number of mail ballot voters that surrendered their mail ballot and voted in person:** 45,225

7. **A detailed accounting of the following:**
   a. **Total Number of Provisional Votes Cast:** 13,835
   b. A list of Provisional Voters by reason for voting provisionally: A comprehensive list does not exist. While our office does not currently have the capacity to go through the nearly 14,000 provisional ballot affidavits from the November 2020 election, the provisional ballot affidavits and additional provisional ballot documentation are available for review and our office will provide them to you at a mutually agreed upon time.
   c. **Total Number of Provisional Votes cast for voters lacking ID:** 8,528
   d. **Total number of Provisional Voted Accepted/Rejected:** 5,307

8. **List of entities that conducted recounts or had election contests:**
   Harris County MUD 24 conducted a recount of their November 2020 election.

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From: Christina Adkins
To: Elec Legal
Subject: Fwd: SOS Morning News Clips 12/1/21
Date: Wednesday, December 1, 2021 10:10:13 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Christina Worrell Adkins
Legal Director - Elections Division
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
1019 Brazos Street | Austin Texas

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 1, 2021 9:08 AM
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/1/21



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 1, 2021

He's charged with assaulting police at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Now he's running for office in Texas, *Washington Post*, November 30, 2021

A growing number of Texas Republicans want a fourth special session to pass COVID-19 vaccine mandate ban, *Texas Tribune*, November 30, 2021

McConaughey said he won't run for Texas governor. What does that mean for Beto and Abbott?, *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 2021

Four Republicans running for Senate District 31 seat in Texas Panhandle, *The Center Square*, November 30, 2021

Politics 'Get In The Way' Of 4 HISD Board Members As They Face Runoff Challenges, *Reform Austin*, November 30, 2021

Longtime state Sen. Larry Taylor, best known for his work on education issues, says he won't run for reelection, *Texas Tribune*, November 30, 2021

How Much Are Latinos Shifting Right?, *New York Times*, November 30, 2021

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GOP targets Wisconsin elections system, nonpartisan director, *Associated Press*, December 1, 2021

Texas Hispanic population has become an economic powerhouse, *Spectrum News*, November 30, 2021

Olaguibel: Construction for full cargo facilities will soon begin at Anzalduas, *Rio Grande Guardian*, November 30, 2021

U.S. security review stalls sale of Shell Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex, *Reuters*, November 30, 2021

Mexico to reverse course, give COVID-19 booster shots, *Associated Press*, November 30, 2021

Texas Land Commissioner announces agreement authorizing construction of border wall on state-owned land, *Palestine Herald-Press*, November 30, 2021

Texas Looks to Its Future to Guide Its Past, *Bloomberg Opinion*, November 30, 2021

Editorial: Voters are sending a message with rejection of school bonds, and districts must listen, *Dallas Morning News*, December 1, 2021

Analysis: Betting a Texas election on a weather forecast, *Texas Tribune*, December 1, 2021

American elections are getting less predictable; there's a reason for that, *The Hill*, November 30, 2021

He's charged with assaulting police at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Now he's running for office in Texas
Timothy Bella
Washington Post
November 30, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/30/capitol-riot-mark-middleton-texas-police/

As police struggled to fight off rioters trying to breach the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, Mark Middleton said he was among "the first group to storm the Capitol." He joined the pro-Trump mob in allegedly yelling expletives and striking officers who stood between them and their goal of disrupting the validation of the 2020 presidential election results, according to the FBI.

"No more fooling around!" he said in a video posted to his Facebook page shortly

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after he and his wife, Jalise, were at the Capitol, prosecutors say. “Make America great again! Freedom!”

Even though the couple face multiple federal charges stemming from the deadly Jan. 6 riot, that is not stopping Middleton from running for office as a Republican in his home state of Texas.

Middleton, 52, is running for a seat in the Texas House, months after he and his wife, 51, were indicted on charges of assaulting two D.C. police officers, according to a public filing on the Texas secretary of state’s website. The Texas Republican Party accepted his nomination to challenge state Rep. David Spiller, a GOP incumbent in Jacksboro, Tex., in a March 2022 primary, according to the Dallas Morning News, the first to report the story. Spiller has been in office since March, after winning a special election in February.

The Middletons were arrested in April and charged with several counts, including assault of a law enforcement officer, obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding, disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds and unlawful entry on restricted grounds. The Middletons, from Forestburg, Tex., have both pleaded not guilty and remain free on personal recognizance bonds as they await the start of a trial.

Middleton declined to comment to The Washington Post.

“You are welcome to follow my campaign and meet with me on the trail,” he wrote in an email.

James Wesolek, a spokesman with the Texas Republican Party, confirmed Middleton’s candidacy to The Post.

“Under the Texas Election Code, the party must accept all applications that are correct in form and content,” he wrote in an email Tuesday.

Sam Taylor, a spokesman with the Texas secretary of state’s office, told The Post that state election code notes how a candidate must “have not been finally convicted of a felony from which the person has not been pardoned or otherwise released from the resulting disabilities.”

“An indictment is not the same as a final conviction,” Taylor said. “Middleton is still awaiting trial, and therefore has not been finally convicted of a felony.”

The alleged rioter’s candidacy comes at a time when at least 13 Republicans who traveled to Washington on Jan. 6 to protest the results of the 2020 election ran for office this year. None of them were charged with crimes, and they all denied being part of the mob supporting President Donald Trump that stormed the Capitol in an effort to stop the certification of President Biden’s victory. The attack resulted in five deaths and left about 140 members of law enforcement injured.

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At least seven people who attended the pro-Trump rally that preceded the insurrection at the Capitol were elected to public office this month, winning in states such as Virginia, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Idaho.

At 2:09 p.m. on Jan. 6, Middleton, a volunteer firefighter and pilot who wore a red, white and blue Trump beanie, pushed against the barricade and police line with his body, according to body-cam footage obtained by the FBI.

“Get back!” one of the officers said, according to a statement of facts.

In response, Middleton is heard on video yelling an expletive at the officers as he continued to push against the barricade, prosecutors say. He struggled against the officers “for more than 30 seconds” before grabbing an officer’s left hand or wrist and pulling him forward, according to the complaint.

At the same time, a woman identified as Jalise Middleton, also wearing a red, white and blue Trump beanie, “repeatedly grabs and strikes” the same officer with her hand, prosecutors say. When another officer attempted to defend their colleague from the assault, Mark Middleton struck that officer in the arm as well, the complaint says.

After the couple continued to grapple with the two officers, police deployed chemical spray that forced the Middletons “to retreat back from the barricade line,” investigators say.

Minutes later, the pro-Trump mob eventually breached the Capitol, breaking windows and climbing inside the building, then opening doors for others to follow.

When he was still in proximity of the Capitol, Middleton bragged in a video posted to social media about being “on the front lines” of the riot, according to the complaint.

“We helped push down the barriers,” he said in a Facebook video, prosecutors say. “Jalise and I got pepper sprayed, clubbed, and tear gassed. We had to retreat, but more patriots pushed forward, and they’re taking back our house.”

He went on to post numerous videos, photos and comments to Facebook regarding the riot and the couple’s involvement in it, records show. The Middletons said in Facebook posts that they did not enter the Capitol, even as Jalise Middleton wrote that “we made history and got everyone in,” the complaint states.

On Jan. 21, a tipster whose daughter is an acquaintance of Jalise Middleton alerted the FBI of the social media posts, which were deleted earlier in the month, according to the Justice Department. A second tipster told the FBI in February of the Middletons’ alleged involvement at the riot, helping investigators confirm that the couple had a physical altercation with police, prosecutors say. Investigators found probable cause after comparing the body-cam footage to the recovered social media posts.

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The couple were arrested on April 21 and indicted on May 19 by a federal grand jury in Washington. They were arraigned and pleaded not guilty to all counts on May 27. A trial has yet to be set for them.

Mark Middleton, who lists himself as a Cub Master for the Boy Scouts of America on his LinkedIn profile, last worked in sales for Nortex Communications, an Internet services company, in April — the month he was arrested. He is currently the only primary challenger to Spiller in Texas House District 68, which stretches from the Oklahoma border to counties near Texas Hill Country because of redistricting.

On his campaign website, Middleton's far-right platform calls for Texas to consider leaving the United States.

"To the extent the Union can be saved we should work to that end," his campaign website says. "However, it is past time Texans start seriously exploring our exit from the Union."

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A growing number of Texas Republicans want a fourth special session to pass COVID-19 vaccine mandate ban
Cassandra Pollock
Texas Tribune
November 30, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/30/coronavirus-texas-legislature-vaccine-mandate-ban/

A growing number of Texas Republicans are pushing for lawmakers to return to the state Capitol for a fourth overtime round of legislating to pass laws banning COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

As those calls continue to build, it remains unclear whether Gov. Greg Abbott — the only official with the power to convene special sessions — will order state lawmakers back to Austin and what issues he would include on the agenda.

Lawmakers already met for the biennial regular session that ended in May before convening for three special sessions over the summer and into this fall to tackle redistricting along with a number of GOP priorities, including a law that further tightens the state's election rules.

Abbott last week declined to say whether he intends to call another special session, but he left the door open, reminding reporters at a news conference that one "can be called anytime." On Monday, an Abbott spokesperson, contacted for comment, referred to a previous statement from the governor's office that said "there is no need for another special session at this time."

Still, at least two dozen Republican lawmakers have so far called for a fourth special session, with many focusing on efforts to ban vaccine mandates. Abbott had named it as a late priority in the third special session that ended in October, but legislation that would have banned any Texas entity from mandating the COVID-19 vaccine for employees failed to gain traction in both chambers after business groups rallied against the proposal.

Another Abbott priority — increasing the penalty for illegal voting — also did not pass in the last special session. The governor called for the stiffer penalty weeks after he signed into law a bill that reduced it. Shortly after the Legislature adjourned the third special session,

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Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Republican leader of the state Senate, pushed for another session to focus on that as well as passing an election audit bill.

In September, President Donald Trump, who won Texas in 2020, called for a “Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election” in the state. Abbott resisted adding the item to the special session agenda and instead backed a more narrow review of the 2020 election by the secretary of state’s office, which announced it was conducting a “full forensic audit” in four of the state’s biggest counties. There has been no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Texas in 2020. And earlier this year, an official in the secretary of state’s office called the 2020 election in Texas “smooth and secure."

Meanwhile, House Speaker Dade Phelan, the Beaumont Republican who heads the lower chamber, has not weighed in on whether he supports a fourth session, saying through a spokesperson that the decision to convene a special session is up to Abbott.

Vaccines
While Patrick’s push for another special session last month focused on those elections-related issues, other Republicans in recent weeks have rallied largely around banning vaccine mandates. The lieutenant governor's office did not respond to a request for comment about whether Patrick supports adding the vaccine mandates issue to a potential special session agenda.

In October, Abbott issued an executive order outlawing COVID-19 vaccine requirements by any entity in Texas, including private businesses and health care facilities. The governor has said his order will remain in place until lawmakers pass a bill related to the issue.

In the meantime, the state has sued the Biden administration over its coronavirus vaccine mandates for federal contractors, private businesses and health care workers.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party of Texas, which last month called for a fourth special session, is campaigning on a “Four-Day 4th,” referring to a four-day special session. The group says that short of a stretch would be all that’s needed to address vaccine mandates.

“We know legislators are tired and nobody wants an extended special session,” Texas GOP Chair Matt Rinaldi said in an interview Monday, pointing to states such as Tennessee and Florida that recently passed legislation on vaccine mandates on short timelines.

As of Tuesday, at least 25 GOP state lawmakers have publicly called for a special session related to banning vaccine mandates. While those calls began with members aligned with the further right faction of the party, other Republicans have in recent days also signaled support, including state Rep. Tom Oliverson of Cypress, who tweeted last week that “medical decisions should be made by the individual, not by their employer or the government.”

Oliverson, an anesthesiologist, said Tuesday that lawmakers during the third special session didn’t have enough time to work on the issue or “build consensus around an approach.”

“I think there’s an appetite to do something,” Oliverson said. “I don’t know exactly what that something will be. I don’t think this is a conversation you have quickly — it needs that full process of deliberation, a kind of let the cream rise to the top sort of thing.”

Another House Republican, state Rep. Briscoe Cain of Deer Park, has also called for a fourth special session over banning vaccine mandates, writing in an Oct. 26 Facebook post that he was ready to return to Austin despite spending the past 10 months in the state’s capital.

“While I am happy to be home after three special sessions in Austin,” Cain wrote, “I would happily return to Austin if called upon to protect the rights of my fellow Texans.”

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Cain, a member of the hardline conservative Texas House Freedom Caucus, told The Texas Tribune on Monday that the state could benefit in its legal fight with the Biden administration if it already had a law addressing the issue.

“From a litigation standpoint,” Cain said, “I think it would help the state’s position when claiming that the federal government is interfering with an area of state rights if the state had a law on the books that the feds were interfering with.”

Rinaldi, the Texas GOP chair who’s also a former state House member, said that while legislation to ban vaccines failed during the most recent session, Republicans have since galvanized over the issue.

“When this was put on the special session call during the last special session, the issue was fairly new — people weren’t facing imminent threat of being fired at the time,” Rinaldi said. “I don’t think there’s any way of avoiding it because of the immense damage that these vaccine mandates do, both to individual lives and to our economy.”

State health officials have said that the vaccine greatly reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission. And state data shows that unvaccinated Texans made up 85% of coronavirus cases and deaths from Jan. 15 to Oct. 1, 2021. About 54% of Texans are fully vaccinated.

Abbott is also fielding pressure over banning vaccines mandates by at least two of his GOP primary challengers: former state Sen. Don Huffines and Allen West, a former Florida congressman and Texas GOP chair.

Weary Legislature
To be sure, most lawmakers have not publicly weighed in on whether there should be another session before the Legislature convenes for its next regular session in January 2023.

The last time a governor convened a fourth special session was in 2004, when then-Gov. Rick Perry again ordered lawmakers back after the Legislature had worked overtime from June to October that previous year following its regular session.

This year, members returned to their districts in mid-October weary from the past 10 months that featured some of the most conservative legislating in recent memory. After House Democrats aimed to block a GOP elections bill by walking out of the chamber in the final hours of the regular session that ended in May, Abbott called lawmakers back for another overtime round focused on passing that legislation along with a number of other Republican priorities.

But business stalled over the summer after Democrats again broke quorum over that elections proposal, with enough members flying to Washington, D.C., to prevent lawmakers in Austin from moving any legislation during the first special session.

That impasse lasted for weeks, though once work resumed, the GOP-dominated Legislature passed its elections legislation in a second special session before turning to the redrawing of the state’s political maps during the third.

Some Democrats, such as state Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, say Republicans may try to use another special session to rally their party’s base heading into primary election season.

"Texas taxpayers should not be asked to bankroll another unnecessary special session simply because Republicans want to prolong the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Turner, who chairs the House Democratic Caucus, in an email through a spokesperson. “Republican legislators should explore other strategies to win their primary elections."

Another issue that has gotten attention in recent days is the renewal of Chapter 313, a decades-old law that Abbott was asked about at last week’s news conference in Austin

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announcing that Samsung Electronics Co. will build a roughly $17 billion chipmaking plant in Williamson County.

Chapter 313, one of the state's largest corporate tax break programs, is set to expire at the end of 2022 after the Legislature did not renew it. Under the program, Samsung would save an estimated $250 million in taxes over the next 15 years.

So far, according to Dale Craymer, president of the Texas Taxpayers & Research Association, there have not been any signs to suggest there is interest among leadership at the Legislature to extend the current program in a special session.

"The politics of the issue really haven't changed since the regular session," Craymer said, adding that, "it would be challenging to take extraordinary measures to extend the program at this time."

Craymer, whose group has supported the program in the past but isn't "making a big push to get a temporary extension at this point," said that lawmakers may tackle something related to property taxes during a special session given the state's economic surplus and roughly $3 billion left in federal COVID relief money.

"But I'd be surprised if Chapter 313 is a part of that discussion," he said.

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McConaughey said he won't run for Texas governor. What does that mean for Beto and Abbott?
Madlin Mekelburg
Austin American-Statesman
November 30, 2021
https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/state/2021/11/30/matthew-mcconaughey-texas-tx-governor-greg-abbott-beto-orourke/8797926002/

Actor Matthew McConaughey said Sunday evening that he would not run for governor, ending months of speculation about his political aspirations and clearing the way for a more conventional race for the top job in the state.

McConaughey had teased a run since earlier this year, refraining from indicating whether he'd enter the Democratic primary or the Republican primary or run as an independent candidate. Some polls showed that he would have been a serious contender in a hypothetical matchup against Gov. Greg Abbott and Democrat Beto O'Rourke.'

His decision to stay out of the race clears the field for Abbott and O'Rourke to face off in a more traditional race next November, assuming both are successful in their primary contests.

"Both candidates, they're breathing a sigh of relief," said Brian Smith, political science professor at St. Edward's University. "They won't come out and say it, but both candidates, by McConaughey not running, are very happy."

Abbott is seeking a third term as governor and is facing at least two primary challengers: Allen West, former Texas GOP chairman, and Don Huffines, a former state senator from Dallas.

O'Rourke, a former congressman from El Paso, has emerged as the highest-profile Democrat running for the seat.

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said the fact that McConaughey was polling so well before entering the race is a reflection of the

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growing dissatisfaction people feel with the current state of politics. Given that Abbott and O'Rourke are the favorites to emerge from their primaries, he said both will benefit from McConaughey's decision not to run.

"In a way, they are both better off," Rottinghaus said. "People are frustrated with politics and politicians as usual. Both parties are going to have to grapple with that reality at some point."

A McConaughey candidacy

In a video posted to Twitter late Sunday, McConaughey said he was honored to be considered for political leadership, a "humbling and inspiring path to ponder" but "a path that I'm choosing not to take at this moment." Instead, he said he plans to focus on supporting entrepreneurs, businesses and foundations that he sees as leaders fighting to create "pathways for people to succeed in life."

The prospect of McConaughey entering the gubernatorial race has been a point of fascination for political observers. His superstardom lends him international name recognition and access to serious money that could fund a competitive campaign, but his lack of experience in the political arena made him a wild card of sorts.

With no voting record in Texas since at least 2012, McConaughey's political leanings are largely unknown. In 2020, he said he considers himself to be "in the middle" politically and believes a solution to the nation's political divide lies in being "aggressively centric."

He has avoided weighing in on many issues facing the state, but earlier this month he said he is against a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for kids "just yet" during an interview at The New York Times' DealBook summit. Later he clarified that he was speaking strictly about mandates for children between the ages of 5 and 11.

During an interview with Kara Swisher of The New York Times, McConaughey said he found elements of the state's new, restrictive abortion law to be "a little juvenile" but declined to share his perspective on abortion rights overall.

Should McConaughey have opted to enter the race, he would have been forced to take strong policy positions on any number of issues from the economy to immigration to abortion to gun regulations.

"As an undeclared candidate, he was all things to all people," Smith said. "If he was going to declare, we were going to want to know more about him and his positions — and rightfully so."

Abbott vs. O'Rourke
Early polls showed that McConaughey could have been a serious contender in hypothetical matchups against Abbott and O'Rourke.

McConaughey led Abbott in a September poll from the University of Texas at Tyler and The Dallas Morning News, in which 44% of respondents said they would vote for the actor over Abbott in a hypothetical race between the two men. Abbott polled at 35%, and 21% said they would vote for someone else.

The same poll asked respondents to choose between O'Rourke and Abbott, with 37% of respondents supporting O'Rourke, 42% supporting Abbott and 21% voting for someone else.

In the immediate future, Smith said O'Rourke might feel more relief than Abbott that McConaughey has opted not to run. If he had entered the race as a Democrat, as some had speculated, O'Rourke would have faced an expensive primary battle before facing Abbott and his $55 million campaign war chest.

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His absence from the race also means Abbott won't have to spend money campaigning against a well-known candidate as likable as McConaughey. Now he can focus his energy and money against O'Rourke.

But Rottinghaus said McConaughey's decision also benefits Abbott because they probably would have been targeting the same demographics when trying to turn out voters.

In 2006, incumbent Republican Gov. Rick Perry faced a Democratic challenger and two independent candidates during the general election, including singer Kinky Friedman. Rottinghaus said support for Friedman largely came from younger white men who were not previously registered to vote — a profile Rottinghaus said Abbott hopes to cultivate.

"McConaughey isn't running, but it'd have been a lot cooler if he did," said Smith, quoting McConaughey's character in the film "Dazed and Confused."

"It would have made the race very interesting. The good thing about elections is that there's always another opportunity. For McConaughey, he would do better running in an open-seat election than against a well-known Democrat and an incumbent Republican," Smith said.

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Four Republicans running for Senate District 31 seat in Texas Panhandle
Bethany Blankley
The Center Square
November 30, 2021
https://www.thecentersquare.com/texas/four-republicans-running-for-senate-district-31-seat-in-texas-panhandle/article_e32df988-525e-11ec-912c-4bdeed0e2615.html

(The Center Square) – The field to replace Sen. Kel Seliger's Senate District 31 seat in the Texas Panhandle is growing.

The West Texas legislator announced in October that he was retiring and wasn't running for reelection.

Seliger, one of the most liberal Republicans in the Texas Legislature, repeatedly voted against property tax reform measures, banning taxpayer-funded lobbying, and legislation requiring an audit of Texas elections.

The primarily Republican SD31 includes the West Texas areas of Amarillo, Midland, and Odessa.

The first to declare their candidacies for the position were Midland oil and gas tycoon Kevin Sparks, and Coahoma ISD Trustee Stormy Bradley, both Republicans.

Sparks is considered the front-runner, having already been endorsed by former President Donald Trump and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

"At a time when far-left activists seek to nationalize our elections, indoctrinate our kids with so-called critical race theory, and surrender our southern border to the drug cartels, the hard-working families of Senate District 31 deserve a state senator who will proudly defend our conservative values," he said.

Sparks is president of Discovery Operating, Inc, a family owned and operated oil and gas company in Midland, which employees hundreds of workers and has for nearly 50 years.

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Bradley is the owner of multiple businesses, including Bulldog Steel, a full-service steel manufacturer in Big Spring. As a Coahoma ISD board member, she's "fought to keep anti-American propaganda and critical race theory out of our schools." She also holds a leadership position with the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce Board of Trustees, and recently won a Russ McEwen Community Hero Award.

Most recently, with two weeks of the filing deadline to declare candidacy, two more candidates have thrown their hats in the ring: retired FBI agent Tim Reid and attorney Jesse Quackenbush.

"As an FBI agent, state trooper, police officer, school board member, and foster child, I believe that I am uniquely qualified to represent the citizens of this district," Reid argues. "I will actively work on the issues that we face to strengthen the future of Texas. I have served the people of this district for 28 years and call the Panhandle and all of West Texas home."

Citing education as his top priority, Reid is currently the director of Athletics and Campus Safety and a teacher at Ascension Academy, a private school in Amarillo.

Amarillo attorney Jesse Quackenbush is running for a second time for the seat, after unsuccessfully running for the seat in 2004. Quackenbush recently told the Odessa American that he was against the recently passed Texas Heartbeat Act.

"I'm pro-life, but until Roe v. Wade is repealed, I'm against gratuitously going out there and wasting millions of dollars just to test the waters with a law that is obviously unconstitutional while senselessly adding a severe crisis for women who seek that type of healthcare," Quackenbush said.

Attorney General Ken Paxton, and those who passed the law in the state legislature, and Gov. Greg Abbott, who signed the bill into law, disagree, arguing the bill is constitutional, and legal.

The filing deadline for all candidates seeking to run for any office in Texas in the 2022 Election is Dec. 13. The primary election is scheduled for March 1, 2022.

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Politics 'Get In The Way' Of 4 HISD Board Members As They Face Runoff Challenges
Reform Austin
November 30, 2021
https://www.reformaustin.org/education/politics-get-in-the-way-of-4-hisd-board-members-as-they-face-runoff-challenges/

Early voting began on Monday, where voters will decide four of five Houston ISD trustees that have been pushed into runoffs.

A month ago in re-elections, incumbents; Elizabeth Santos in District 1, Sue Deigaard in District 5, Holly Flynn Vilaseca in District 6, and Anne Sung in District 7, failed to gather at least 50 percent of the ballots cast. The only HISD race decided was for Myrna Guidry in District 9, who won with nearly 61 percent of the vote.

The outcome of the runoffs could shake things up for the board just when they were reaching a sense of stability with new Superintendent Millard House II preparing a multi-year strategic plan and the district considering its first bond referendum in nearly a decade, as reported by the Houston Chronicle.

The match consists of issues that range from local concerns to statewide issues like the potential takeover threat by the Texas Education Agency to national debates over mask mandates and critical race theory.

One of the reasons so many of the current board members are facing tough reelections is payback by voters who are looking to punish incumbents over the dysfunction of years past, referring to the so-called “walking quorum of 2018” that led HISD to the brink of a state takeover.

In 2019, state investigators determined five trustees – including Santos, Vilaseca, and Sung – met in private in an unsuccessful attempt to replace then interim superintendent Grenita Lathan with former superintendent Abe Saavedra.

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle, it appears the district is at a crossroads.

“They are at a point where they are trying to climb out of decades-long troubles,” Rottinghaus said, “and the politics of the current moment are, to some degree, getting in the way.”

This is certainly true with incumbent Bridget Wade, who is running ahead of incumbent trustee Anne Sung heading into the runoff. She sums up her position on critical race theory, saying she believed “we’re all created equal”.

When concerning mask mandates, Wade is on the opposing side, stating that “masking should be a parental choice.”

Janette Garza Linder, who is facing Santos in the District 1 runoff, is also letting the politics get in the way. In an Interview with The Leader newspaper, she stated that if there weren’t new members on the board that she is open to a state takeover.

This raised concerns with parents, like Karina Quesada from the Heights. “”That bothers me very much because as a constituent, as a citizen, as a taxpayer, as a homeowner, I don’t want anybody, that’s OK with taking my ability to elect a representative to represent us, my children, and our teachers in this community,” Quesada said in an interview with Houston Public Media.

Jasmine Jenkins, executive director of the nonprofit Houstonians for Great Public Schools, suggests Republicans and conservatives are trying to stir up parents’ concerns by involving issues such as critical race theory and mask mandates.

“From the right, nationally, we see a bigger movement to get involved in local politics, to get involved in school boards, and so there are probably a lot of conservatives who have gotten involved in this race and who’ve decided to vote in these races who normally just sort of sit school board (elections) out,” Jenkins said, as reported by Houston Public Media.

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Longtime state Sen. Larry Taylor, best known for his work on education issues, says he won't run for reelection
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 30, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/30/larry-taylor-texas-senate-reelection/

State Sen. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, who helped write the law to overhaul school funding in Texas, will not seek reelection.

Taylor chairs the Senate Education Committee and has served in the Legislature since 2003, first as a member of the House. He is also chair of the Senate Republican Caucus.

His decision comes just under two weeks before the candidate filing deadline for the 2022 primary. Within minutes of Taylor announcing his retirement, state Rep. Mayes Middleton, R-Wallisville, announced he had filed for the Senate seat.

"This has been a very difficult decision, as having the privilege of representing my community in the legislature for nearly two decades has been the biggest honor of my life," Taylor said in a statement. "Together, with my colleagues in the Legislature, we have dealt with multiple challenges and worked to secure Texas' future as a leader for our country. I am so proud of our work and so incredibly blessed to have been a part of it."

In the statement, Taylor also acknowledged the sacrifices that public service requires, including a "major commitment of time away from your family and friends."

Taylor's decision creates a vacancy in Senate District 11 in Southeast Texas. The seat favors Republicans.

After news of Taylor's retirement broke, he told a reporter with the Galveston Daily News that part of his decision was due to Middleton's interest in his seat. Taylor told the reporter that he tried to dissuade Middleton, but that he is "ready to go and wanting to spend a lot of money."

Middleton, an oil-and-gas businessman, is the chairman of the conservative Freedom Caucus in the House, where he has been a member since 2019.

Taylor is perhaps best known for his work on education. He was a key player in the 2019 school finance overhaul that lawmakers counted as a top achievement that session. The $11.6 billion measure boosted per-student funding and reduced property taxes, among other things.

Taylor has also focused on coastal issues, like reforming the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association.

Taylor's decision is abrupt. His campaign had said Sunday that he would file for reelection Monday, though it did not appear to happen.

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How Much Are Latinos Shifting Right?
Jennifer Medina
New York Times
November 30, 2021
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/us/politics/latinos-republicans-conservative-vote-gop.html

For years, State Representative Ryan Guillen of Texas was regarded as the most conservative Democratic legislator in Austin. He was one of just a few from the party to vote in favor of carrying handguns without a permit, and the sole Democrat in the House chamber to vote for the state's new law banning most abortions. He remained popular in his Rio Grande Valley district, winning re-election last year by 17 percentage points.

Then came the news this month: He was switching parties.

"After much consideration and prayer with my family, I feel that my fiscally conservative, pro-business, and pro-life values are no longer in step with the Democratic Party of today," Mr. Guillen said.

It's an old saw in politics: I haven't changed, the party has changed. And in the past, it has been fairly applied to both Republicans and Democrats. Mr. Guillen has portrayed himself as part of a trend of Hispanic voters moving toward the Republican Party, especially in South Texas, where Donald J. Trump made major inroads during the 2020 election. But it's too soon to tell just how much of a lasting shift the movement represents.

The Republican Party has been reaching out to Latino voters for decades, particularly in Texas. Former President George W. Bush famously courted them with his "compassionate conservatism." And it was former President Ronald Reagan who told his Hispanic outreach director that he would have the easiest job in the world, because "Hispanics are already Republicans, they just don't know it yet."

Historically, roughly 30 percent of Hispanic voters have chosen to vote Republican in presidential elections, a number that increased slightly in 2020, surprising many Democrats. Republicans, unsurprisingly, celebrated the shift and have portrayed it as a seismic shift that could transform the parties.

"Republicans' enthusiasm and sense of momentum ebbs and flows, and this is a moment of high enthusiasm," said Geraldo Cadava, a professor of history at Northwestern University and the author of the book "The Hispanic Republican." "They want to capitalize on the momentum they feel like they have right now. They really think the energy is on their side, but they have to prove that 2020 wasn't just a blip."

So far, the data remains mixed. While there was some dampened enthusiasm among Latino voters during the recall election of Gov. Gavin Newsom of California, for example, an analysis from the Latino Policy & Politics Initiative at the University of California, Los Angeles, showed that Latino-heavy precincts overwhelmingly backed Newsom's remaining in office.

But in San Antonio this month, Democrats lost another State House seat to a Hispanic Republican, John Lujan.

Now, many Democrats are openly worried, with some calling Hispanics the new swing voter group.

"Democrats have to prove that they can stop their losses, and they have to show these voters they are hearing them and caring about them," Dr. Cadava said.

Of course, perception can drive reality: If Latinos believe that Democrats take them for granted, they are more likely to vote for Republican candidates, according to analysis from Equis Research, a Washington-based firm that focuses on Latino voters across the country.

Mr. Guillen, who did not respond to several messages from The Times, has fiercely embraced his new party, appearing with Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas during his party switch announcement and welcoming an endorsement from Mr. Trump by enthusiastically recalling how his signs "covered South Texas" during the presidential election. (Four years after Hillary Clinton won the district by 13 percentage points, Mr. Trump won by the same margin in 2020.)

"Something is happening in South Texas, and many of us are waking up to the fact that the values of those in Washington, D.C., are not our values, not the values of most Texans," Mr. Guillen told reporters during his announcement. "The ideology of defunding the police, of destroying the oil and gas industry and the chaos at our border is disastrous for those of us who live here in South Texas."

But ideology may not have been the only driver of Mr. Guillen's decision, which came after Republican-controlled redistricting turned his legislative district from a Republican-leaning district into one that would most likely be solidly red.

Mr. Guillen has brushed aside suggestions that he simply switched parties to stay in office,

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telling reporters that his 2020 victory as a Democrat showed his allegiance with voters in the district.

“I have found that my core beliefs align with the Republican Party,” he said. “I am confident that my switch today is the right decision.”

Mr. Abbott, for his part, portrayed Mr. Guillen’s flip as inevitable.

“It’s something that has been, candidly, the worst-kept secret in the Capitol,” he said. “Ryan, we’re glad you finally came out of the closet.”

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GOP targets Wisconsin elections system, nonpartisan director
Scott Bauer
Associated Press
December 1, 2021
https://www.chron.com/news/article/GOP-targets-Wisconsin-elections-system-16663548.php

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin Republicans are working to discredit the bipartisan system they created to run elections in the state after President Joe Biden narrowly won last year's presidential race, making the political battleground the latest front in the national push by the GOP to exert more control over elections.

Wednesday will bring a flurry of election-related developments in the state, with both the Wisconsin Elections Commission and a partisan legislative panel dissecting the 2020 presidential election. At the same time, Republican lawmakers are continuing to attack the state’s well-regarded election administrator in a pressure campaign to have her resign, an apparent attempt to install a GOP partisan in the position ahead of next year's midterm elections.

“This is really just the politics of fear and vengeance,” said Kevin Kennedy, who was Wisconsin’s top elections official for 34 years before retiring in 2016. “This is not about ideas. ... They have effigies they want to burn and that’s it.”

More than a year after the 2020 presidential election, former President Donald Trump and his allies continue to push his false claims that Democrats stole a second term from him. This has manifested in costly and timely partisan election reviews in a handful of states as well as new laws pushed by Republicans adding restrictions to mail voting, which was hugely popular amid the pandemic and embraced by voters of both parties.

Current and former election officials also have warned that the unrelenting attempts to discredit Biden’s win have led to an erosion of public confidence in elections and threats of physical violence against election workers. They worry that longtime election officials will be driven from their jobs, creating a vacuum of experience that in some cases could be filled by partisan actors.

In Wisconsin, elections are overseen by a bipartisan elections commission comprised of an equal number of Republicans and Democrats. The commission administrator is a nonpartisan position currently held by Meagan Wolfe, a 10-year veteran of the agency and its predecessor.

Wolfe was appointed director by the commission in 2019 and confirmed unanimously by the Republican-controlled Senate for a term ending in the middle of 2023.

When efforts to overturn Trump's loss in Wisconsin failed through lawsuits and recounts, Republicans repositioned their attacks to the commission and Wolfe. At least 10

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Republican lawmakers have called for the resignations of her or one or more commissioners.

If Wolfe were to resign, the Republican-controlled Senate would likely name her successor. That person plays a significant role in determining what guidance is issued to the state's more than 1,800 local election clerks who actually run elections.

Wolfe on Tuesday called the attacks against her “baseless” and said she was more determined than ever not to resign.

“I really think the calls are based on folks being upset that I’m not willing to change my behavior; I’m not willing to engage in partisan politics,” she told The Associated Press. “The public recognizes politics when they see it. I think they’re smart enough to understand a lot of the rhetoric around this is motivated by partisan politics.”

A bipartisan group of more than 50 election experts from across the country came to Wolfe's defense, sending a letter to Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos calling Wolfe “one of the most highly-skilled election administrators in the country." Wolfe serves as chair of the national Electronic Registration Information Center and in February will become president of the National Association of State Election Directors.

The attacks against Wolfe and the integrity of the 2020 election make Wisconsin “ground zero for the anti-democratic movement,” said David Becker, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation and Research.

Becker said election workers and civil servants such as Wolfe are being used as scapegoats "because leaders do not have the political courage to tell their supporters the truth of the election. And the truth is that it was objectively the most secure, transparent, verified and scrutinized election in American history by any measure.”

Republican lawmakers ratcheted up their criticism of Wolfe and the commission after a nonpartisan audit recommended dozens of changes in how elections should be run and detailed ways the elections commission didn’t follow some state laws during the pandemic in 2020. The audit did not find any widespread fraud or abuse and did not call into question Biden's victory in the state.

A Trump-supporting sheriff in Racine County recommended felony charges against five of the six commission members for their decision not to send special voting deputies into nursing homes, as required by law, during the pandemic.

Many of those facilities were not allowing any visitors, including families, at the time the commission made the decision. The commission instead called for absentee ballots to be used for residents in such facilities, a move they said was designed to protect their right to vote.

No charges have been filed in any Wisconsin county against Wolfe or any commission member.

In addition to attacking the elections commission, Republicans also are backing an investigation ordered into the 2020 election by Vos, the legislative leader. That effort is being led by a conservative former Wisconsin Supreme Court justice who told lawmakers his probe will include examining the allegations raised by the sheriff.

The elections commission was scheduled to meet Wednesday to discuss the audit. At the same time, the Assembly elections committee is to receive an update on the GOP-ordered election investigation.

Meanwhile, state Republican lawmakers are feeling pressure from U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, who in November told them the Legislature should take control over federal elections in the state. Opponents have said such a move would be barred under decisions by the U.S. and

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state supreme courts. The Republican leader of the state Senate also raised concerns about the legality of doing that.

Republicans can't easily alter the elections commission or change how elections are run in the state because any change in law would have to be signed by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers. He's made clear that he would block any such attempt.

“Wisconsin held a fair, accurate, and secure election under a system Republicans largely created themselves, and the results of our election have been proven over and over again," Evers said in a statement Tuesday. "It’s clear Republicans’ efforts and rhetoric are more about pre-determining our elections and maintaining political power than making our elections more secure.”

Evers is on the ballot next year, and should he lose Republicans would have a clear path to make widespread election changes before the 2024 elections.

One Republican candidate for governor, former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, has been critical of the elections commission and filed a lawsuit in November seeking to suspend the guidance the agency gave to local election clerks amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Attacks against the current commission are similar to ones Republicans made against its predecessor, the Government Accountability Board, which they dissolved in 2015 under a law signed by then-Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican.

The first administrator of the current commission, Mike Haas, was driven out by Republicans because of his work on an investigation into Walker while at the previous agency. Haas stepped down after the GOP-controlled Senate refused to confirm him.

Kennedy, who retired from the state elections post amid GOP criticism, said Wolfe should not expect the pressure on her to let up.

“If she wants it to end, then she leaves,” Kennedy said.

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Texas Hispanic population has become an economic powerhouse
Eric Griffey
Spectrum News
November 30, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/dallas-fort-worth/news/2021/11/30/texas-hispanic-population-has-become-an-economic-powerhouse

FORT WORTH, Texas — New research released Tuesday by Texans for Economic Growth, a statewide 110-member business coalition, underscores the crucial role Hispanic Texans play in the state’s economy and across the major metros of Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio.

Hispanic Texans in the Dallas and Fort Worth area are contributing billions in taxes and consumer spending. In 2019, Hispanic households earned $41.2 billion in income, with $6.3 billion going to federal taxes and $3.6 billion going to state and local taxes, leaving them with $31.3 billion in spending power, the study said.

These numbers are more pronounced, considering Hispanic Texans are helping drive population growth in Dallas and Fort Worth. Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S.-born Hispanic population grew by 33.4%, while the foreign-born Hispanic population grew by 13.5%. In 2010, 27.6% of the overall population in Dallas and Fort Worth were Hispanic, and that number increased to 29.3% in 2019.

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Hispanic population numbers are growing across the state, though 47% of Texas Hispanics live in the state's five biggest counties — Harris, Bexar, Dallas, Tarrant and Travis.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region best illustrates the diverging population patterns among Hispanic and white Texans. Among those five counties, Tarrant County — home to Fort Worth — continues to see the fastest growth of Hispanic residents since 2010. With a 28% growth rate, the Hispanic population in Tarrant grew from roughly 483,000 to nearly 620,000 last year.

Meanwhile, the white population in neighboring Dallas County is shrinking. Dallas' white population has fallen below 2010 levels, dropping from about 787,000 to about 746,000 in 2019.

In 2019, 70.9% of the overall Hispanic population and 72.1% of the foreign-born Hispanic population were active in the labor force, compared with 68.1% of the non-Hispanic population.

"As our business community continues to wade through labor and supply chain challenges, it is imperative that we push date-driven, policy-focused discussions regarding the economic contributions of Hispanics to the forefront," said Anette Landeros, President and CEO of the Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. "Our DFW Metroplex is currently booming with growth and opportunity, and our Hispanic population will play an important role in ensuring that the trajectory is sustainable for years to come."

The uninsured Texans, known as the "working poor," include about 1.4 million hourly or low-wage workers. These people, disproportionately Hispanic (61% of the uninsured) tend to have low levels of education (48% of the uninsured don't have a high school degree), and earn less than $35,000 a year despite typically working full-time, often in jobs such as construction or the service industry.

Hispanic Texans in Dallas & Fort Worth hold substantial voting power. In 2019, there were more than 888,000 eligible Hispanic voters, including more than 191,000 naturalized citizens. Overall, the Hispanic population made up 18.8% of the electorate, including Hispanic naturalized citizens, who on their own made up 4.1%.

"As we prepare for the post-pandemic economic recovery, it is important to know how Hispanics can and will contribute to keep the Texas economy thriving," said J.R. Gonzales, Executive Vice Chair of the Texas Association of Mexican American Chamber of Commerce. "The new data shows Hispanics can demand a seat at the table now that we can show that what we bring to the dinner party is crucial."

The economic benefits of "illegals" far outweigh the cost
Most statewide and national studies on the cost-benefit analysis of illegal immigrants suggest Texas is profiting from illegal immigrants.

For example, a recent Rice University study said the state of Texas made more than $420 million off immigrants living in the state illegally.

The study, which replicated an outdated state comptroller report, finds that for every $1 the Texas government spends on the estimated 1.6 million people living in the state illegally, the state brings in $1.21 in tax revenue.

The Rice study is modeled off a Texas State Comptroller report from 2006, which had similar findings: Immigrants in Texas without legal authorization generated $424.7 million more than they cost the state. The study calculated costs to the state in education and health care services, as well as incarcerations. It measures benefits through state revenues and school property taxes. Local governments, however, shouldered $929 million in uncompensated health care costs and local law enforcement costs not paid for by the state, the 2006 report found.

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The Rice study — which looked at state figures, not local costs — updated it using figures from 2018, estimating that roughly 6% of the total state population that year was in the U.S. without legal authorization. With roughly 65% of those residents working in the labor force and less than 6% unemployed, the study estimated they accounted for more than 8% of the state's workforce.

In 2018, those residents paid some $2.4 billion in state sales taxes, property taxes and consumer taxes on gasoline, vehicle inspections and more, the study estimated. It estimated they cost the state just more than $2 billion in education, health care and prison costs.

In April, Attorney General Ken Paxton said that Texans pay more than $850 million per year on illegal immigration, and the recent surge at the border could cause that amount to surpass $1 billion.

Paxton blamed President Joe Biden's immigration policies for causing the surge of illegal immigration and escalated criminal activity at the Texas-Mexico border.

Paxton's office said "uncompensated care" for those migrants costs public hospital districts between $579 million to $717 million, and between $62 million and $90 million for their inclusion in the state's Emergency Medicaid program.

Housing unauthorized migrants costs $152 million a year, and between $31 million and $63 million a year is spent on education for unaccompanied minors who illegally crossed the border, according to the attorney general's office.

"Texans are hardworking and generous people, but the cost of illegal immigration is an unconscionable burden on the taxpayers of our great state," Paxton said. "If we use the minimum estimated costs for services Texas provides to unlawfully present and undocumented aliens, taxpayers are shelling out an estimated $855 million every year. Texas will always welcome those who legally immigrate, but we cannot continue forcing taxpayers to foot the bill for individuals who skirt the law and skip the line. I will continue to fight for justice, safety, and prosperity for all Texans."

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Olaguibel: Construction for full cargo facilities will soon begin at Anzalduas
Steve Taylor
Rio Grande Guardian
November 30, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/olaguibel-construction-for-full-cargo-facilities-will-soon-begin-at-anzalduas/

MCALLEN, Texas – Juan Olaguibel, superintendent of bridges for the City of McAllen, had an alarm set on his mobile phone for the minute he received hot news from the federal government.

That alarm has now gone off and so construction for full cargo facilities at Anzalduas International Bridge can soon begin.

Olaguibel (pictured above) spoke about the alarm he set during his monthly presentation to the McAllen Economic Development Corporation board of directors.

"With regards to the Anzalduas cargo project, I am happy to say the design is in the final stage. I have an alarm on. As soon as I get that email, this thing is supposed to go off really, really, loud. It is supposed to be really, really, soon. That is what the government says. As soon as we get it, that means that we will be signing the agreement and we will be ready for construction for our full cargo facilities at Anzalduas. I will keep you posted on

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that," Olaguibel told the MEDC board.

Olaguibel will be present on Wednesday, Dec. 1, when an official signing ceremony takes place at McAllen City Hall for a "Donation Acceptance Agreement" for full cargo facilities at Anzalduas International Bridge. The event is slated to take place at 11 a.m. on the 1st.

Anzalduas International Bridge is co-owned by the cities of McAllen, Mission, Hidalgo and Granjeno. The mayors of these four cities, Javier Villalobos of McAllen, Armando Ocaña of Mission, Sergio Coronado of Hidalgo, and Yvette Cabrera of Granjeno, are slated to be at the signing ceremony.

Others VIPs slated to appear at the signing ceremony, include: U.S. Sen, John Cornyn, state Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa of McAllen, state Rep. Terry Canales of Edinburg,state Rep. Sergio Muñoz of Mission, Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez, Hidalgo County Commissioners Eddie Cantu of Pharr and Everardo Villarreal of Mission, McAllen City Manager Roel "Roy" Rodriguez, and CBP Port Director Carlos Rodriguez.

"These facilities will allow full cargo commercial traffic to cross into the United States from Mexico, increasing trade between the two countries.The project cost is $49.9 millionand will be paid by state and local funds," a City of McAllen news advisory states.

Olaguibel told the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service: "After this (signing ceremony) we will be able to construct."

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U.S. security review stalls sale of Shell Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex
Erwin Seba
Reuters
November 30, 2021
https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/shell-deer-park-texas-refinery-174037853.html?guccounter=1

HOUSTON (Reuters) - A U.S. national security review has delayed the sale of Royal Dutch Shell's controlling interest in a Texas refinery to Mexico's national oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), Shell said on Tuesday.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800-barrel-per-day (bpd) Deer Park, Texas, refinery outside Houston to partner Pemex for about $596 million. The closing was expected as early as Wednesday.

Approval by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) is the last hurdle to the transfer of full control of the Texas refinery to Pemex, said people familiar with the matter.

"While we were hopeful we could conclude the sale of the Deer Park refinery earlier in the CFIUS review process, we're still targeting late 2021 as a closing date for the transfer of Shell's interest in the refinery," Shell spokesperson Curtis Smith said.

A spokesperson for CFIUS declined to comment.

One person close to Pemex said CFIUS approval could happen in mid-December.

A person who works at Deer Park said, however, there is no certain closing date. "Could be next week. Could be early next year," the person said.

U.S. Representative Brian Babin, a Republican representing southeast Texas, called on Tuesday for the U.S. government to block the sale, saying "Pemex lacks the technical

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expertise, safety record, and business practices needed to operate a facility of such scale in the United States."

"Allowing a foreign company run by an administration that is hostile toward American energy producers access to our critical infrastructure endangers my constituents and threatens our national security," Babin said in a statement.

Babin has openly criticized the sale since June, when he requested a review by the U.S. Treasury and Energy departments.

Under the sale agreement announced in May, Shell would retain control of the Deer Park facility's chemical plant and the company will have only one refinery in the United States, the 230,611-bpd plant in Norco, Louisiana.

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Mexico to reverse course, give COVID-19 booster shots
Associated Press
November 30, 2021
https://www.registercitizen.com/news/article/Mexico-to-reverse-course-give-COVID-19-booster-16663293.php

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexican officials have reversed their previous position against giving coronavirus booster shots and said Tuesday they are studying a plan to administer third doses to people over 60.

The announcement came as Mexico nears 450,000 deaths from COVID-19. The country has fully vaccinated only about 50% of its 126 million people.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said plans for the boosters are still being drawn up, but added, “It won’t be long, we have the vaccines.”

López Obrador's administration has long resisted adopting measures like mandatory face masks, mass testing and travel restrictions that have been used in many other countries.

Assistant Health Secretary Hugo López-Gatell had said as recently as August that there was no scientific evidence to justify giving booster shots, and suggested they were part of a campaign by vaccine manufacturers to increase sales.

“This proposal is being strongly pushed by the pharmaceutical companies, but it has been rejected by international organizations ... because there is no scientific evidence indicating the need for booster shots," López-Gatell said at the time.

The government also long resisted vaccinating minors, but recently relented and began administering shots to youths between 15 and 17 years of age.

Of special concern are the nation's teachers, almost all of whom got the CanSino Chinese vaccine in the spring. There have been suggestions that single-dose vaccine's protection begins to wane.

Mexico's test-confirmed coronavirus death toll stood at 293,950 on Tuesday, but because the country does so little testing, many people have died without tests. The government's own analysis of death certificates indicates the real toll is about 448,658.

Officials have been downplaying the threat posed by the Omicron variant first identified in South Africa, saying the new strain illustrates the need to get more vaccines to poorer countries.

“It's not that the new variant is terrible,” López Obrador “It's that the poor countries of the

world have been abandoned."

True to form, López Obrador said there would be dance music at a massive gathering he is planning in Mexico City's vast main plaza Wednesday to celebrate his first three years in office. The president, as usual, said face masks would be optional.

“Those who want to wear face masks can do so,” López Obrador said. “We are against authoritarianism.”

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Texas Land Commissioner announces agreement authorizing construction of border wall on state-owned land
Palestine Herald-Press
November 30, 2021
https://www.palestineherald.com/news/texas-land-commissioner-announces-agreement-authorizing-construction-of-border-wall-on-state-owned-land/article_4df4ae4e-5177-11ec-973b-3f1b22644e64.html

WESLACO—On Monday, Nov. 29, Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush announced the signing of a lease agreement between the General Land Office and the Texas Department of Public Safety authorizing the construction of border wall along a GLO-owned farm tract in Starr County.

The signing of this lease agreement is the latest effort by Commissioner Bush to mitigate the immigration crisis following Governor Greg Abbott’s emergency declaration to complete the Texas border wall.

“Washington continues to ignore the Biden Administration’s border crisis, leaving Texans no choice but to take matters into our own hands,” Bush said. “Lease revenue from this land directly benefits the most important asset in Texas—our schoolchildren. As the border crisis continues to escalate, the lives of Texans are being endangered and we are at serious risk of losing revenue generated from leased lands along the Texas-Mexico border. I thank DPS for their partnership on this critical issue, working together, we will secure our border.”

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Texas Looks to Its Future to Guide Its Past
Tyler Cowen
Bloomberg Opinion
November 30, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-11-30/texas-looks-to-its-future-to-guide-its-past

Texans think very highly of Texas. This has always been the case, at least in my experience, but during a recent trip to Austin I noticed a deeper development: Texans are beginning to come to terms with their state’s history — and they are less concerned about past misdeeds than about future achievements.

The relevant “monument” in Austin at the moment is Tesla’s new headquarters and factory, called Giga Texas, which is still under construction. When complete, it is promised to be almost one mile long, and it is already so big it is difficult to see all at once. Meanwhile, about 90 miles southwest and almost 200 years into the past, plans are proceeding for a

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$400 million renovation of the Alamo site, even though the project would disrupt older burial sites, including for indigenous peoples. That too is Texas at work.

I am a fan of Texas and have long been a booster of its prospects. I also live in Virginia, and can't help but notice the difference in the treatment of the historical.

Consider the state flag, which is on display everywhere in Texas. In fact it is reputed to be the best-selling state flag, and can be found on items ranging from bikinis to boots, even though it represents a history every bit as fraught as Virginia's. Texas had slavery both before and after it joined the Union, and the flag dates from 1839. Nor did Texas treat Native Americans well, especially during its period as an independent nation.

The veneration of the Texas flag stands in stark contrast to the flag not only of Virginia but also of the Confederacy, which was once flown prominently in both states but is now socially unacceptable to display anywhere.

Context, however, is all important, so I can accept this difference in flag traditions. As Texas continues to boom, its core story is being retold. The new Texas narrators — such as the startup crowd and real-estate developers — treat the past as bygone and adopt a more forward-looking perspective. They ask which regions and political units, victimized groups included, will do the most for America.

That may feel like dodging crucial questions about historic injustice, but consider Texas's recent record of job creation and inward migration. The Texas approach has passed a market test by attracting and keeping significant numbers of minorities. By one measure, people of color account for 95% of Texas's population growth since 2010. That too is a kind of restitution.

A visitor to Texas also can't help but ponder questions about land rights. It is now common practice for universities and companies, especially in blue states, to make "land acknowledgements," decrying the thefts of their current real estate from indigenous tribes. Yet there is rarely serious talk about giving those lands back — never mind giving indigenous peoples a share in Harvard's hedge fund income or Microsoft's dividends. This supposed acknowledgement mocks the powerlessness of those victimized groups while displaying the arrogance of power.

The Texas approach is more honest. Implicitly at least, the state recognizes that none of its land will be returned to indigenous peoples — but it offers the descendants of those groups the opportunity to shape its future and share in its prosperity, if only by working or owning property there.

If you go to BookPeople, an Austin book store emphasizing many left-wing titles (and where virtually everyone wears a mask, a rarity in the city), you will find prominently displayed T.R. Fehrenbach's monumental "Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans." The book proudly defends the broader sweep of Texas history, including the taking of Texas from Mexico and then the absorption of Texas into the United States, a sequence not without its share of chicanery.

I don't agree with every moral judgment in that book. But I am glad to see it has not been cancelled, even in the bluest part of the state. Arguably Texas pride is part of what is helping Texas build a better future. This emphasis on the future over the past is being strengthened by the arrival of so many out-of-state migrants, including well-to-do Californians from the technology sector.

None of this is to say that all historical discourses should mirror those now playing out in Texas. There is no single best answer or response to the rise of wokeism. But one thing the pandemic has made clear is that public messaging is a lot cruder and a lot simpler than one might wish.

So should we talk about "the future" or obsess over "the past"? The state of Texas is

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making a pretty good case for a marginal revolution — for a little less self-excoriation and a little more self-visualization.

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Voters are sending a message with rejection of school bonds, and districts must listen
Editorial Board
Dallas Morning News
December 1, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2021/12/01/voters-are-sending-a-message-with-rejection-of-school-bonds-and-districts-must-listen/

Texas voters have a long habit of rubber-stamping school bond packages. And, for the most part, that's been a good thing.

But as we recently highlighted in Allen ISD, and as reporter Corbett Smith laid out in more detail in a recent story, it isn't as easy these days for school boards to get their whole wish list out of voters. And that's a good thing, too. Officials need to know that voters are looking at their spending carefully and are ready to send a message of financial accountability and fiscal restraint.

In the past year, multimillion dollar propositions in Dallas, Fort Worth, Allen, Azle and White Settlement have all been rejected. Smith reports that, across the state, only 47% of 110 district-led propositions passed on the November ballot.

That pushback from traditionally easygoing voters has raised questions about what political dynamics are at play locally and statewide.

We can't know why individual voters decided the way they did, but we see a pattern in the outcomes of North Texas school bond elections. Voters are rejecting projects that they see as spending on areas beyond core education, and they're often saying no for good reason.

Allen voters have twice turned down spending on athletic facilities since 2020 but approved $214 million in campus infrastructure and technology improvements. Last fall, Dallas ISD voters funded repairs and upgrades to more than 200 campuses along with technology spending but rejected three propositions focused on expensive new facilities for the fine arts and athletics. Similar scenarios played out in the Fort Worth and Azle school districts this November.

Meanwhile, White Settlement ISD voters balked at a $115 million package to expand schools, from classrooms to playgrounds to fine arts spaces, but approved a tax increase to boost counseling and teacher salaries.

In Allen ISD, a conservative political action committee takes credit for mobilizing voters, but we cannot ascribe the bond failures in other North Texas communities to the same movement.

It would also be too easy to attribute this broad voter rejection of school bonds to incendiary national politics. Rockwall ISD can offer some perspective on this. In the spring, this predominantly conservative community spurned school board candidates critical of masking mandates or guidelines in schools, and in the fall, it approved bond funds for new schools and technology.

People are keenly aware of their growing property tax bills, and the days of letting

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school boards borrow to the hilt might be over. We don't see voters rejecting education spending. We see them holding local governments accountable for how their money is spent.

State lawmakers gave voters a hand in 2019, when they required that districts separate out the construction of stadiums, swimming pools, theaters and other special facilities from general construction propositions. This requirement allows voters to review projects more carefully. It was the right thing to do.

Arts and athletics are important aspects of our children's education, and we don't think voters are asking that they be tossed aside. But as financial pressures grow on families, it's understandable that they want schools to focus on the meat and potatoes. It's a message that officials must heed.

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Analysis: Betting a Texas election on a weather forecast
Ross Ramsey
Texas Tribune
December 1, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/01/texas-election-winter-storm/

In spite of the confident assurances from Texas officeholders, there's still a risk that your power will go off in the face of a big winter storm in the next few months.

Sure, this is politics. The problem, as Austin energy consultant Doug Lewin told The Texas Tribune's Mitchell Ferman, is not with technology, or even with the way electric plants are operated. It's regulatory. This is exactly the sort of problem politics and government were made for — one that can be fixed in Austin.

It's a question of who the state government is working for at any given time. Was it the electric utilities? The natural gas producers who fuel so many electric plants? Commercial and industrial electric customers willing to weather a few blackouts here and there if it means cheaper electric rates? Was it residential customers who want light and heat and water, even (or especially) when it's freezing cold?

Lobbyists are in power when the Legislature is writing laws, the governor is appointing regulators and the state agencies are writing rules. Voters are in power in election years.

Winter is coming, and so is an election year. It doesn't matter whether someone is a great fundraiser, an incumbent, a movie star or someone who flashes a skateboard in a Whataburger parking lot late at night. The job people like that are seeking starts with keeping Texans safe.

Texas failed to do that in February. The Legislature passed some bills on the subject. Some think they came up short. The governor has said that everything that could be done was done, that there's nothing to see here, that the risks are gone.

"I can guarantee the lights will stay on," he told Austin's Fox 7 News last weekend. He said he's "very confident" and said he had signed "almost a dozen laws that make the power grid more effective."

Hope he's right. So do his many supporters and donors — not to mention the Texans who suffered through the last storm.

Those laws include getting electric generating plants ready for winter. The natural gas providers who fuel many of those plants aren't required to winterize yet; the Texas Railroad Commission won't have those requirements written into the rules until after this winter.

There's still a lot to do.

The risk for Abbott and the rest of the elected class is that voters, who expect and demand results to the problems with the Texas electric grid, have the right to toss anyone who doesn't deliver.

Voters have the power to be as tough as the state itself was earlier this year, when it dumped the people at the top of ERCOT and the Public Utility Commission.

The reasons are different. The elected people ran out the appointed people as a kind of political sacrifice, feeding the regulators to an angry public before those voters fixed the blame on the elected class.

So far, that's been enough. Republicans are betting the voters will stay warm this winter, and that will be that.

Meanwhile, the Democrats harping on the chances of a repeat disaster are doing so in self interest. President Joe Biden's popularity is down. National issues — immigration, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and so on — play into Republican hands. Republican lawmakers drew the election maps during this year's redistricting.

It'll take something big to topple the Republican advantage in the state this year. Like a blackout or a bad reaction to the Texas Legislature's very conservative work this year. Without something surprising that moves voters, Texas Democrats start the election cycle at the bottom of a steep hill.

And voters might not be thinking about any of this when the general election rolls around in November. It probably won't be that cold at that time. It's a good distance from February to the election, and voters could be making their decisions on the basis of other issues.

But the electric grid remains a sore spot, even after the bills passed by the Legislature and then signed and bragged on by the governor. In a University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll in October, 60% of voters said they disapproved of lawmakers' response to February's blackouts — including 78% of self-identified Democrats, 46% of Republicans and 61% of independents.

The incumbents on the ballot are forging ahead, watching the political polls and the weather forecasts and hoping the governor's confidence is rewarded.

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American elections are getting less predictable; there's a reason for that
John Opdycke
The Hill
November 30, 2021
https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/583435-american-elections-are-getting-less-predictable-theres-a-reason-for-that?rl=1

Much has been written about the recent elections in Virginia and New Jersey and what they mean for the Democratic and GOP brands heading into the midterms. Most share two core assumptions: The Red vs. Blue paradigm is still the most accurate way to understand political outcomes, and the increasingly unpredictable gyrations of voters are but a natural pendulum within two party political life.

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Polls are routinely wrong — by wide margins. Voters seem to be acting and reacting to a new set of rules and concerns. Political analysts should be asking “What’s going on? Do we need new ways and new tools to understand voters? Is something happening in America that we don’t quite get?” But that’s not what’s happening.

Case in point is how the analyst community relates to independent voters.

The largest and fastest growing segment of the electorate is now independent voters: 40 percent to 45 percent of American voters are registered to vote or identify themselves as independents, a trend that is on the uptick in red, blue and purple states. This includes 50 percent of younger Americans. In the 30 states that register by party, “no-party-affiliation” voters are on track to be the largest or second largest group of registrants by 2030.

Most political scientists and analysts consider this trend to be unimportant, not worth studying or understanding.

Some go so far as to insist that independents are not really independents. They are “party leaners.” It is standard practice among polling firms to ask people how they identify themselves, and then to ask people who say “independent” which party they lean towards. Thus, an electorate that is 40 percent independent, 30 percent Democratic and 30 percent Republican magically becomes an electorate that is roughly 50 percent Democratic and 50 percent Republican.

Political science insists that the voters should fit the analysis, not the other way around.

It’s a clever trick. And it works in the short term. You simply reclassify independent voters as Democratic or Republican fellow-travelers and then feed their views and opinions into the existing algorithms and analytical frameworks. You generate end-product that seems to make sense: “Democrats need to distance themselves from woke extremism;” “Republicans should emphasize small business recovery and less regulation.” It works.

And yet it doesn’t.

We live in an era of insurgencies. Outsiders like Ross Perot, Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, AOC, Andrew Yang and Donald Trump (to name a few) dominate the political landscape. They tap into ... something. A desire for disruption, a hunger for cross-ideological (even contradictory-ideological or non-ideological) forms of political expression, a craving for authenticity over platform consistency. I won’t slap on convenient labels nor attempt to link these disjointed uprisings into one cohesive narrative — but it seems obvious to me that an analytical approach that insists upon ignoring significant shifts in how the American people identify themselves is going to miss the mark when it comes to understanding this current/emerging era of insurgency and disruption.

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In Virginia, independent voters, who supported Biden by 19 points over Trump in 2020, supported Republican Glenn Youngkin over Democrat Terry McAulliffe by 9 points — a 28-point swing. Many young people — the majority of them independents — stayed home. Insisting that independents are “partisans lite” covers over a very fluid and dynamic situation. What a missed opportunity to dig deeper into what’s going on.

The decision to register to vote as an independent has consequences. It makes you a second-class citizen in many states, unable to vote in primaries, serve on boards of elections, or even work the polls. You are legally barred from running for judge in Delaware if you are not a Democrat or Republican. Despite the costs, Americans are increasingly choosing this identity.

My experience, as someone who has led dozens of campaigns to give independents full voting rights in primary elections, is that voters who identify and/or register to vote as independent do so for concrete reasons, ranging from the mundane to the profound. Political analysts should be jumping over each other to dig deeper into this emerging phenomenon. Instead, independents are — poof — disappeared with the click of a button, magically to reappear as partisan leaners. Problem solved. Opportunity missed.

There is something going on in American politics. Understanding that it starts with listening to the American people, millions of whom are going independent would be a start. They have a lot to say. And we have much to learn.

John Opdycke is the President of Open Primaries, a national election reform organization.

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From: Sam Taylor
To: John Scott; Joe Esparza; Adam Bitter
Subject: Love Letter from Sen. West
Date: Thursday, December 23, 2021 10:56:51 AM
Sensitivity: Personal

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https://texasmetronews.com/23333/our-voices-voting-foxes-and-guarding-the-hen-house/

OUR VOICES: Voting, Foxes And Guarding The Hen House
By Sen. Royce West

All but the most strident non-believers have conceded that Joseph R. Biden was elected President of the United States on November 3, 2020. The deposed, 45th POTUS became the first incumbent to lose the presidency since George H.W. Bush in 1992. But Joe Biden didn't win Texas. In fact, 1.2 million more Texans voted for the Republican incumbent in 2020 than when he won election in 2016.

I'll admit that the reality that Texas is among the reddest of red states in the U.S. has agonized me for 20 years, despite my and other's efforts to stem the tide. Ann Richards, Bob Bullock, Dan Morales and John Sharp were respectively, the last-elected Democratic Texas Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General and Comptroller. There hasn't been a Democrat elected to the Texas Supreme Court since 1994. Fact is, a Democrat has not been elected to a statewide office since 1994.

Indulge me in getting to the point that with all their electoral successes, including the November 2020 election that saw Republicans hold their majorities in the Texas House and Senate, only one factor can help explain the need for an election audit to take place in Texas. It's the Big Lie! The continued, unfounded, babbling of massive election fraud that's been perpetuated by the former President and his loyalists.

It persists despite the fact that more than 60 judges, both Democrat and Republican, former U.S. Attorney General Ken Barr and others, have found no evidence of fraud at a level that would impact the outcome of any election, in any state, nationwide.

But in September, the Texas Secretary of State's office announced there would be a "full and comprehensive forensic audit" of the 2020 election days after a publicly, released letter was sent to Texas Governor Greg Abbott by the former President, who has been known to create his own "alternate facts." He still chided Abbott because the audit was not added to the agenda of the third Special Session.

A month later, Abbott announced his nominee to fill the vacant office of Secretary of State, whose responsibilities include oversight of all elections held in Texas. His choice is Fort Worth Attorney John Scott, who has held other state government positions under Abbott, including CEO of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and time as a Deputy Texas Attorney General, under the also former state AG.

What sets Scott apart more recently is his brief stint as one of the attorneys for the person many

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fault with inspiring the January 6 insurrection in his attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 Election. Scott quickly withdrew from the case following an unfavorable ruling by a Pennsylvania appellate court.

Scott was also one the state's attorneys who defended an early version of Texas' Voter ID law in 2014 that a district and federal courts ruled to be intentionally discriminatory and unconstitutional. Even the 5th Circuit had concerns that led to the law being rewritten.

The forensic audit that is now underway will review election results in four of Texas' 10 largest counties: Dallas, Harris, Tarrant and Collin. Dallas County has voted Democrat for more than a decade. Harris County is now blue. Biden won in Tarrant County by less than 2,000 votes. More people voted for the former President in Collin County than in any other county in the state. He won Texas by 631,221 votes. What's the problem?

The office of Secretary was vacant for five months after a confirmation vote was never brought to the Senate floor for former SOS Ruth Hughs during the Regular Session that ended in May. Some say Hughs' fate was sealed when her staff failed to toe the election fraud company line, instead saying the November election was "smooth and secure."

Scott was appointed after the last Special Session ended in September where his selection could have been challenged. He will oversee the 2022 Midterm Elections and will likely not face confirmation until the Legislature convenes again in 2023. Hughs was chosen by Abbott after her predecessor, David Whitley could not be confirmed.

I joined Senate Democrats to successfully block his confirmation. He resigned following a botched voter purge effort where Whitley issued a list to local elections offices that challenged the citizenship of thousands of voters who were correctly found to be naturalized citizens. The issue landed in federal court where the state was forced to settle and end the probe.

Arizona, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania have launched 2020 election audits. None have discovered rampant voting irregularities.

Abbott has stoked voter fraud theories that say illegal immigrants are on state voter rolls. The Lt. Governor called for another special session to include a voting audit and tougher penalties for illegal voting. Attorney General Ken Paxton's crusade against voter fraud has successfully prosecuted fewer than 200 people since 2005, while nearly 84 million votes have since been cast.

Now, our new Secretary of State was part of a case to overturn election results in a state won by the rightful President. He defended a Texas Voter ID law that was ruled discriminatory. He says an audit is needed to help instill confidence in voters who polls say already think state election results are accurate. Which of these 'folks' do you trust to guard your near-sacred right to vote?

Royce West was first elected to the Texas Senate in November 1992. He represents the 23rd Senatorial District on behalf of the citizens of Dallas County.

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From: Mindy Travillian
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Please stop these election audits
Date: Saturday, December 11, 2021 9:11:41 PM

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Mr. Taylor,

I am on the list to receive updates from the Secretary of State office. I am quite annoyed that the office is continuing to waste taxpayer money on election audits. I see Harris County is in the latest request for a 'forensic audit'. For my part, I was so pleased with the process Harris County used in the last election and the innovative ways they allowed people to safely vote in a pandemic. Any audit you are doing is just a partisan ploy. This office should have more integrity that they are showing.

Mindy Travillian
5219 Imogene St.
Houston, TX 77096

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Anne Allensworth
To: Adam Bitter
Cc: Joe Esparza
Subject: Re: Audit Funds
Date: Thursday, December 2, 2021 1:38:17 PM

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Let's do a call. Talk to you soon.

On Dec 2, 2021, at 10:35 AM, Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov> wrote:

Thanks, Anne. Yes, our office is in the Capitol—we are in 1E.8, just across from Senator Nelson's office. Feel free to stop by there at 3:00 today if you would like to meet in person; or we can use the conference line that I sent around on Tuesday.

Best,

Adam

From: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Thursday, December 2, 2021 10:26 AM
To: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Audit Funds

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Adam-

Stacey had a conflict come up so it'll just be me. Do you office in the building? I'm not sure yet whether it'll be possible to do in person (I might be at home).

Thanks,

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Anne

From: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 5:51 PM
To: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Audit Funds

Anne,

We can use the call-in line information below. Alternatively, if you all are in the office and would prefer to meet in person, that works fine for us. Both the Deputy and I plan to be here on Thursday.

(877) 226-9790
Access Code: [redacted]

Best regards,

Adam

From: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 1:11 PM
To: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Audit Funds

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Actually, can you send a meeting announcement or a call in line? My Committee Director, Stacey Gilliam, will be joining.

From: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 29, 2021 8:06 PM
To: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Re: Audit Funds

3:00 Thursday is great. My direct line is 512-463-0228.

On Nov 29, 2021, at 7:55 PM, Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov> wrote:

Thanks, Anne. I am in conferences for parts of the next few days. Are you available at 3:00 pm on Thursday? The Deputy SOS and I will join from our end, but we can have our Elections or Finance folks available (for this discussion or a subsequent one) if need be.

Best,

Adam

From: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 29, 2021 3:43 PM
To: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Audit Funds

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My apologies for just now responding to this.

I am free tomorrow afternoon (30th), anytime Wednesday, or Thursday afternoon. Just let me know your preference and we will get something on the calendar!

Best,

Anne

From: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 5:47 PM
To: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Cc: Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Audit Funds

Anne,

Thanks for your email. Yes, we can discuss at your convenience after Thanksgiving. So far, I am pretty opening the afternoon on Monday the 29th; I should also have some time on Thursday afternoon or Friday if

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

later that week would be better for you.

Best regards,

Adam

Adam Bitter
General Counsel
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
(512) 475-2813
abitter@sos.texas.gov

From: Anne Allensworth <Anne.Allensworth@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 4:00 PM
To: Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Audit Funds

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Adam-

Could we set up some time the week after thanksgiving to discuss the audit program and related funding?

Anne

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Kristi Hart
To: Vincent Houston
Subject: RE: Election Audit
Date: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 2:14:51 PM
Sensitivity: Personal

No, these are for replacements for our staff and for additional staff we are hiring now. We also are going to need to order some more desk chairs.

I will make sure when I submit prs for audit related purchases that I indicate that in the pr title.

From: Vincent Houston <VHouston@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 12:15 PM
To: Kristi Hart <KHart@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Election Audit
Sensitivity: Personal

Hello Kristi.

I just approved the Headset order PR 763. Are these for the Election Audit new staff or not? Could you all let us know if any Purchases are for Election Audit? We are working to track those items and keep separate from Elections.

Let me know if any questions.

Thanks Kristi.
Vince

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Vincent Houston
To: Kristi Hart
Subject: RE: Election Audit
Date: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 2:40:31 PM
Sensitivity: Personal

Okay. Thank you Kristi. ☺

From: Kristi Hart <KHart@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 2:15 PM
To: Vincent Houston <VHouston@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Election Audit
Sensitivity: Personal

No, these are for replacements for our staff and for additional staff we are hiring now. We also are going to need to order some more desk chairs.

I will make sure when I submit prs for audit related purchases that I indicate that in the pr title.

From: Vincent Houston <VHouston@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 12:15 PM
To: Kristi Hart <KHart@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Election Audit
Sensitivity: Personal

Hello Kristi.

I just approved the Headset order PR 763. Are these for the Election Audit new staff or not? Could you all let us know if any Purchases are for Election Audit? We are working to track those items and keep separate from Elections.

Let me know if any questions.

Thanks Kristi.
Vince

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Daniel Friend [redacted]
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 2:54 PM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Re: Election Audit Division Funding

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Thank you; that is much appreciated!

On Fri, Nov 19, 2021 at 2:31 PM Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov> wrote:

> Hi Daniel,
>
> Yes – I've attached both letters here and you can attribute the following statement to me/the Texas Secretary of State's office:
>
> **"We thank Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Speaker Phelan, Senator Nelson and Representative Bonnen for approving critical funds to support the Texas Secretary of State's Forensic Audit Division. In order to complete our ongoing full forensic audit of the 2020 General Election and conduct subsequent audits as required by SB 1, our agency will be using these funds to dedicate additional staff to oversee audit activities, including: verifying counties' removal of ineligible voters from the rolls, meticulously reviewing each county's election materials for our comprehensive document examination, and ensuring compliance with state and federal election laws. These resources are essential for maintaining the integrity of Texas elections and identifying issues that must be fixed in order to restore voters' confidence in our state's election systems."**
>
> Best,
>
> **Sam Taylor**
>
> *Assistant Secretary of State for Communications*
>
> Office of the Texas Secretary of State
>
> smtaylor@sos.texas.gov

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Office: 512-463-6116

Cell: 512-538-5293



From: Daniel Friend [redacted]>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 1:28 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Election Audit Division Funding

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Hi Sam,

Are you able to provide any additional background information and/or statement regarding Rep. Greg Bonnen's announcement that he signed approval of $4 million of funding for forensic election audits?

Additionally, do you know if it would be possible to obtain copies of the letters sent regarding the subject between Gov. Abbott and lawmakers that was reported by the *Dallas Morning News*?

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If you're able to respond this afternoon, that would be greatly appreciated.

Thanks,

Daniel

--

Daniel Friend

Reporter, *The Texan*

C: (918) 316-2703

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: GeneralCounsel
To: [redacted]
Cc: GeneralCounsel; Elections Internet
Subject: RE: Election Audit Information:2020 Election
Date: Tuesday, December 14, 2021 9:55:19 AM

Good morning,

Thank you for contacting the Office of the Texas Secretary of State (the "Office"). Your email was forwarded to the General Counsel for response.

The Public Information Act does not require a governmental entity to answer factual questions, create new information in responding to a request, or comply with a continuing request to supply information on a periodic basis as information is prepared in the future. *See* Tex. Gov't Code §§ 552.002, .021, .227, .351; *A&T Consultants, Inc. v. Sharp,* 904 S.W.2d 668, 676 (Tex. 1995); *Fish v. Dallas Indep. Sch. Dist*., 31 S.W.3d 678, 681 (Tex. App.—Eastland 2000, pet. denied); Tex. Att'y Gen. Op. JM-48 at 2 (1983); Open Records Decision Nos. 605 at 2 (1992), 563 at 8 (1990), 555 at 1-2 (1990), 534 at 2-3 (1989).

If you wish to obtain specific documents from this Office, please submit a request for information under the Public Information Act. We will process any such request in accordance with Chapter 552 of the Texas Government Code.

Kind regards,

Jennifer Williams
Legal Assistant to the General Counsel
Office of the Texas Secretary of State

-----Original Message-----
From: t c [redacted]>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 2:03 PM
To: Elections Internet <Elections@sos.texas.gov>
Cc: info@gregabbott.com; donna.campbell@senate.texas.gov; bryan.hughes@senate.texas.gov
Subject: Election Audit Information:2020 Election

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Good afternoon;

I understand that Gov Abbott approved $4million to support an election audit in 4 counties. I would like information about how, when, where and whom will conduct these audits. Have they started yet? Please plan to inform Texans about the process, goals, and status—by county.

Thank you
Theodore Croy
San Antonio TX

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

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From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 6:37 PM
To: 'Randy Samuelson'
Cc: Joe Esparza
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Hi Randy,

Thanks so much for passing this along. The EAC certified the voting system in question before it was brought for certification before our office - and the Attorney General's office, which also certified the system. Texas requires the EAC certification number before they can even apply for Texas certification. The EAC has publicly clarified that Pro V&V was an accredited lab the whole time, including through the years 2017-2021:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fvoting-system-test-laboratories-vstl%2Fpro-vv&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=dHcW5s8NU51ykw%2BXDgo8%2BUSP9nW3NuOCLINa7mSJAhU%3D&reserved=0

Furthermore, the EAC made clear that Pro V&V completed all requirements to remain in god standing with the EAC's Testing & Certification program:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_system_test_lab%2Ffiles%2FPro_VandV_Accreditation_Renewal_delay_memo012721.pdf&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=SI11y1U5dfl2K%2FuZjqGR19ACWYOc9%2Fk6doH6q%2F%2BV3zs%3D&reserved=0

In other news - Collin County has responded to our initial audit survey (the first one to do so), as has Tarrant -- both counties are being extremely transparent and cooperative:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Ftwitter.com%2FTXsecofstate%2Fstatus%2F1473405167068397579&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=RRWSyV3zCt1VEFG1pLURPC2t0bgs26TUvZUSczTmulw%3D&reserved=0

Should the issue of ES&S machines or any issues relating to them arise in our on-site document examinations in Phase 2, that will certainly be included in the final report.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

-----Original Message-----
From: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 21, 2021 4:03 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

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Sam,

Mr. and Mrs. Lindstrom provided me some additional information on the ES&S certification. Here are portions of what they would like to have verified and reviewed in the audit of the certification of the ES&S vendor and equipment.

"From 2017 to 2021, the VSTL (Pro V&V) for ES&S (the vendor of Collin county's election machines) was not accredited. There has been no evidence of certification other than a note on the latest certificate with a note that says that the certificate of accreditation was not revoked and therefore it is still valid. The problem is that the HAVA Act is a Congressional Law that requires that the EAC follows certain procedures including expiration dates every two years and a process to renew the accreditation that was not followed. In addition, the State of Texas has laws that require Federal certification from an accredited VSTL.

Not only is there a federal requirement, but the state of Texas also has its own process for certification. The Texas Secretary of State (SoS) office went through its certification of ES&S 6.1.0.0, and in April of 2020, it "certified" the machines. But for an unknown reason, they missed the critical fact that Pro V&V (the certifying lab) was not accredited. They apparently took the EAC at its word, without verification, and certified the election systems for the state of Texas. This may have been intentional or just negligence - but the result is that Texas was violated by the EAC. Did the SOS miss this critical step in the certification or is the documentation available for the public to review?

The SOS then communicated to Collin County that our machines were certified for use."

--
Randy A. Samuelson
Chief of Staff, Senator Angela Paxton
512-463-0108

-----Original Message-----
From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 12:32 PM
To: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Thanks for passing along, Randy. These are the types of certifications (along with cybersecurity assessment) we'll be including in the Phase 1 progress report, which we're hoping to have ready for release before the holidays.

In order to be used in Texas elections, voting systems have to be both EAC certified and certified by the state -- for the EVS 6.1.0.0 system that Mrs. Lindstrom references in citation #6 below, that system was certified by the State of Texas on April 24, 2020, with the report available here:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Fforms%2Fsysexam%2FEVS-6100-certification-order.pdf&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=XKG0kX15Ax1xdo9K6M5TJR%2F8RSHaGVEcQIMvJNH2gio%3D&reserved=0

You can also feel free to point constituents to our certification page, with all of the reports and findings for each round of certification, on our web site here:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Flaws%2Fcertinfobyvendor.shtml&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=BO4hMFnb6D9Br9b2ObLPgI30iTSvRbPeqyYrzvwAg5o%3D&reserved=0

Note that Dominion systems are no longer in use in any Texas counties, and have been denied certification by the State of Texas:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sos.texas.gov%2Felections%2Flaws%2Fdominion.shtml&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=a9GdhBj5ZWf8sM9JkPmyGqKK0bGZAa8LEnY1PN8admU%3D&reserved=0

Hope this is helpful, and thanks again to you and the Senator for having the Secretary on for the town hall -- very positive feedback on the conversation from those who have seen it.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications Office of the Texas Secretary of State smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

-----Original Message-----
From: Randy Samuelson <Randy.Samuelson@senate.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 11:46 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: FW: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

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Sam,

I hope you had a good Thanksgiving.

I am passing along a summary of an email from Mrs. Debbie Lindstrom who contacted our office by phone and followed up with an email this morning regarding the certification of the voting machines in Collin County. This has been an ongoing question/concern from some Collin County residents this year.

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I let Mrs. Lindstrom know that the certification of the voting systems and machines, the cybersecurity of the machines, and accuracy of the voting machines is all going to be reviewed in phase 1 of the forensic audit in Collin County. Once we have audit findings, appropriate actions can then be taken by the Secretary of State and Collin County. If there is information I can update her (and other interested residents on), I'll be happy to pass it along.

--
Randy A. Samuelson
Chief of Staff, Senator Angela Paxton
512-463-0108

-----Original Message-----
From: [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, November 30, 2021 10:22 AM
To: District8 Paxton <District8.Paxton@senate.texas.gov>
Subject: INETMAIL: Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

First Name: Debbie
Middle Name:
Last Name: Lindstrom
Suffix:
Title:
Business:

Address line 1: 14055 RED WOOD CIR N
Address line 2:
City: MCKINNEY
State: TX
Zipcode: 75071-6138
Phone: 469-387-5560
E-mail: [redacted]

Subject:
Voting Machines -lack of certification ES&S

Summary of Message:
I called this morning and left a message about the issue of a lack of certification of the ES&S voting machines used in Collin County and throughout the state of Texas.

The EAC machines have not been certified since 2017 and excuses were made for "critical failures."

Citations from Mrs. Lindstrom:

Link from the above video.

1. EAC website:
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2F&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=zQDXhObTxg3RMTTL8AwnJFP1f%2FZOxoJL%2BE4DSlDV5To%3D&reserved=0

2. Testing and Certification Manual Version 2.0 (page 1, 19)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Feac_assets%2F1%2F28%2F&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8

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eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=B8S0BFVJoQ1WTwSzSiejdxIzAaaln2hStIMv65UuD%2BU%3D&reserved=0
Cert%20Manual%207%208%2015%20FINAL.pdf

3. State Requirements Manual (page 51)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2FTestingCerti&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=NOw9Jl0X6s4Lve%2FWzM08Ov9jeZ0ukhxvDDcR5E5%2FTLY%3D&reserved=0
fication/State_Requirements_for_Certification09042020.pd f

4. Voting System Test Laboratory Program Manual Version 2.0 (p 38- 39)
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Feac_assets%2F1&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=iisqT3KncPiBB7XiWA%2FyN9X%2FpZaxqrsBul1XiTUhQVk%3D&reserved=0 /28/VSTLManual%207%208%2015%20FINAL.pdf

5. VSTL Definition https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fvoting-system-test-
&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=ZuM%2FwQ34VtvqbcOYJC%2FWIhmRf4bsiRB7nuxxnD2ogfQ%3D&reserved=0 laboratories-vstl

6. Collin county used ES&S EVS 6.1.0.0 during the Nov 3, 2020 election.
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fvoting-equipment%2Fevs-
&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=98IGU9MH79NLEvTnQeeeccBumNr97qo5yVUe1ijt%2BN4%3D&reserved=0 6100

7. Pro V&V Certificate of Accreditation 2015- 2017
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=F5qjUB%2BnAeA5%2F7mMg6FjVVT5EVmrJlcxeOU%2FFASwwGk%3D&reserved=0
em_test_lab/files/Pro_VandV_accreditation_certificate_20 15.pdf

8. Jerome Lovato Memo
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=F5qjUB%2BnAeA5%2F7mMg6FjVVT5EVmrJlcxeOU%2FFASwwGk%3D&reserved=0
em_test_lab/files/Pro_VandV_Accreditation_Renewal_delay_ memo012721.pdf

9. Pro V&V Certificate of Accreditation Feb 1, 2021
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_syst&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=F5qjUB%2BnAeA5%2F7mMg6FjVVT5EVmrJlcxeOU%2FFASwwGk%3D&reserved=0
em_test_lab/files/Pro%20V%26V%20Accreditation%20Certific ate.pdf

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

10. 52 USC § 20971
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.law.cornell.edu%2Fuscode%2Ftext%2F52%2F20971&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=SrNo6mw6ce%2BaSiETmJlzqR7nZnvruJqWNi2A76MjKs8%3D&reserved=0

11. EAC Letter - Unsigned
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.eac.gov%2Fsites%2Fdefault%2Ffiles%2Fvoting_&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=AIH3bxYm1pciIxJ%2FgK%2FdEZTgMRa%2BqEkou%2BEbXUAXj1k%3D&reserved=0
system_test_lab/files/VSTL%20Certificates%20and%20Accred itation.pdf

12. Texas Election Code § 122.001
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatutes.capitol.texas.gov%2FDocs%2FEL%2Fhtm%2FE&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=RPOWklVPdB65yK5MaqGCw6a2jUeUpceK1zocqcJQIgo%3D&reserved=0 L.122.htm

13. Texas Administration Code §81.60
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.law.cornell.edu%2Fregulations%2Ftexas%2F1-Tex-
&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=G5J%2FTLrQzHETQCp2%2FkJDyz0AjQZ2Qkxn%2FG8HHfiRp7E%3D&reserved=0 Admin-Code-81-60

14. Texas Constitution Article 6 § 2(c) and Article 6 § 4
https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fstatutes.capitol.texas.gov%2FDocs%2FCN%2Fhtm%2FCN.6.ht&data=04%7C01%7CJEsparza%40sos.texas.gov%7C96182583be404f25a32f08d9c4e336dd%7C760188c0f63443a096dfec1b8eca6719%7C0%7C0%7C637757302445187876%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=Amhke0uGhGx4KwdbSv2VoJRr%2Bc7hofWfBZdqcL4eZfM%3D&reserved=0 m

ComputerIP: 172.58.109.1

From: Sam Taylor
To: "Riccardi, Nicholas"
Subject: RE: Interview request
Date: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 5:46:56 PM
Attachments: image001.png
image002.jpg
image003.jpg

Hi Nick,

We're still evaluating that and looking through those specific records to determine how many had voting history in recent elections. That number will be included in our forthcoming phase 1 progress report of the full forensic audit of the 2020 General Election.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Riccardi, Nicholas [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, December 8, 2021 10:58 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Interview request

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Another question – do you know if any of the 278 confirmed noncitizens voted in any recent elections/

Thanks.

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Sent: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 4:54 PM
To: Riccardi, Nicholas <[redacted]
Subject: Re: Interview request

[EXTERNAL]

Correct - that's statewide.

From: Riccardi, Nicholas <[redacted]>
Sent: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 5:45 PM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: RE: Interview request

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Just to clarify, the 11,737 records are the number of voters that have to date been flagged?

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 4:27 PM
To: Riccardi, Nicholas <[redacted]>
Subject: RE: Interview request

[EXTERNAL]

Hi Nicholas,

This process was initiated on September 9, 2021 in accordance with the parties' settlement agreement in LULAC v Whitley from 2019. Sounds like you've already seen this advisory, but just passing along a link to it here: https://www.sos.texas.gov/elections/laws/advisory2021-11.shtml

Per the settlement agreement, county voter registrars are authorized to send a notice of examination to any registered voter who registered to vote before the date on which the voter indicated he or she was a non-U.S. citizen to the Texas Department of Public Safety.

To date, our office has provided **11,737** records to all 254 counties statewide.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Voters who do not provide proof of citizenship to their county voter registrar within 30 days of receiving the notice of examination will have their registration cancelled, with the opportunity to be reinstated if the voter later provides proof of citizenship, including at the polling place.

A voter can prove U.S. citizenship in several ways, including by presenting a copy of:

- U.S. birth certificate;
- Consular Report of Birth Abroad of a Citizen of the United States issued by the United States Department of State;
- U.S. passport;
- Certificate of naturalization of the voter;
- Certificate of naturalization of the voter's parent (along with the voter's foreign birth certificate) that allowed the voter to become a U.S. citizen while he or she was a minor; or
- Any other form prescribed by the Secretary of State.

To date, **2,327** voter registration records have been cancelled through this process, **278** of which are cases in which voter registrars were able to verify that the registered voters were not U.S. citizens. The rest were cancelled because they did not respond to the notice of examination within the 30-day window.

Here's a statement attributable to me/the Texas Secretary of State's office, if needed:

"In accordance with the terms of the 2019 settlement agreement, the Texas Secretary of State's office is undertaking its constitutional duty to maintain an accurate list of qualified registered voters in the State of Texas. This process, agreed upon by all parties and stakeholders, will ensure that only qualified U.S. citizens remain on the voter rolls in Texas' 254 counties."

Let me know if you have any additional questions.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293



AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Riccardi, Nicholas [redacted]
Sent: Tuesday, December 7, 2021 3:36 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Interview request

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I'm trying to get more information about list maintenance involving potential non-citizens. I saw the directive your office sent in September on this issue and wanted to know how many potential non-citizens have been identified, how many removed from the rolls and how many turned out to be citizens.

Happy to talk or correspond by email. I'm at 720 470-4319.

Thanks,

signature-96

Nicholas Riccardi
Western Political Writer

[redacted]
www.ap.org

1120 Lincoln Street
Suite 901
Denver, Co 80203

Office: 303-825-0123
Cell: 720-470-4319

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From:	John Scott
To:	Sam Taylor; Joe Esparza; Adam Bitter
Subject:	Re: Love Letter from Sen. West
Date:	Thursday, December 23, 2021 11:25:59 AM
Sensitivity:	Personal

I was not familiar with Texas Metro News

Get Outlook for iOS

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Thursday, December 23, 2021 10:56:48 AM
To: John Scott <JScott@sos.texas.gov>; Joe Esparza <JEsparza@sos.texas.gov>; Adam Bitter <ABitter@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Love Letter from Sen. West

https://texasmetronews.com/23333/our-voices-voting-foxes-and-guarding-the-hen-house/

OUR VOICES: Voting, Foxes And Guarding The Hen House
By Sen. Royce West

All but the most strident non-believers have conceded that Joseph R. Biden was elected President of the United States on November 3, 2020. The deposed, 45th POTUS became the first incumbent to lose the presidency since George H.W. Bush in 1992. But Joe Biden didn't win Texas. In fact, 1.2 million more Texans voted for the Republican incumbent in 2020 than when he won election in 2016.

I'll admit that the reality that Texas is among the reddest of red states in the U.S. has agonized me for 20 years, despite my and other's efforts to stem the tide. Ann Richards, Bob Bullock, Dan Morales and John Sharp were respectively, the last-elected Democratic Texas Governor, Lt. Governor, Attorney General and Comptroller. There hasn't been a Democrat elected to the Texas Supreme Court since 1994. Fact is, a Democrat has not been elected to a statewide office since 1994.

Indulge me in getting to the point that with all their electoral successes, including the November 2020 election that saw Republicans hold their majorities in the Texas House and Senate, only one factor can help explain the need for an election audit to take place in Texas. It's the Big Lie! The continued, unfounded, babbling of massive election fraud that's been perpetuated by the former President and his loyalists.

It persists despite the fact that more than 60 judges, both Democrat and Republican, former U.S. Attorney General Ken Barr and others, have found no evidence of fraud at a level that would impact the outcome of any election, in any state, nationwide.

But in September, the Texas Secretary of State's office announced there would be a "full and comprehensive forensic audit" of the 2020 election days after a publicly, released letter was sent to Texas Governor Greg Abbott by the former President, who has been known to create his own "alternate facts." He still chided Abbott because the audit was not added to the agenda of the third

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Special Session.

A month later, Abbott announced his nominee to fill the vacant office of Secretary of State, whose responsibilities include oversight of all elections held in Texas. His choice is Fort Worth Attorney John Scott, who has held other state government positions under Abbott, including CEO of the Texas Health and Human Services Commission and time as a Deputy Texas Attorney General, under the also former state AG.

What sets Scott apart more recently is his brief stint as one of the attorneys for the person many fault with inspiring the January 6 insurrection in his attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 Election. Scott quickly withdrew from the case following an unfavorable ruling by a Pennsylvania appellate court.

Scott was also one the state's attorneys who defended an early version of Texas' Voter ID law in 2014 that a district and federal courts ruled to be intentionally discriminatory and unconstitutional. Even the 5th Circuit had concerns that led to the law being rewritten.

The forensic audit that is now underway will review election results in four of Texas' 10 largest counties: Dallas, Harris, Tarrant and Collin. Dallas County has voted Democrat for more than a decade. Harris County is now blue. Biden won in Tarrant County by less than 2,000 votes. More people voted for the former President in Collin County than in any other county in the state. He won Texas by 631,221 votes. What's the problem?

The office of Secretary was vacant for five months after a confirmation vote was never brought to the Senate floor for former SOS Ruth Hughs during the Regular Session that ended in May. Some say Hughs' fate was sealed when her staff failed to toe the election fraud company line, instead saying the November election was "smooth and secure."

Scott was appointed after the last Special Session ended in September where his selection could have been challenged. He will oversee the 2022 Midterm Elections and will likely not face confirmation until the Legislature convenes again in 2023. Hughs was chosen by Abbott after her predecessor, David Whitley could not be confirmed.

I joined Senate Democrats to successfully block his confirmation. He resigned following a botched voter purge effort where Whitley issued a list to local elections offices that challenged the citizenship of thousands of voters who were correctly found to be naturalized citizens. The issue landed in federal court where the state was forced to settle and end the probe.

Arizona, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania have launched 2020 election audits. None have discovered rampant voting irregularities.

Abbott has stoked voter fraud theories that say illegal immigrants are on state voter rolls. The Lt. Governor called for another special session to include a voting audit and tougher penalties for illegal voting. Attorney General Ken Paxton's crusade against voter fraud has successfully prosecuted fewer than 200 people since 2005, while nearly 84 million votes have since been cast.

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Now, our new Secretary of State was part of a case to overturn election results in a state won by the rightful President. He defended a Texas Voter ID law that was ruled discriminatory. He says an audit is needed to help instill confidence in voters who polls say already think state election results are accurate. Which of these 'folks' do you trust to guard your near-sacred right to vote?

Royce West was first elected to the Texas Senate in November 1992. He represents the 23rd Senatorial District on behalf of the citizens of Dallas County.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Lesli Fitzpatrick
To: Kim Bergmann
Subject: Re: Opportunity to meet new Secretary of State John Scott
Date: Friday, December 3, 2021 8:34:46 AM

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Dear Ms. Bergmann,

I just wanted to reach back out to see if we can schedule a meeting for me to meet SOS John Scott in person. I would like to have this opportunity before the end of this month if possible. Please let me know if I can get on his schedule. I am not available next week but could meet with him the week of the 13th if his schedule allows. And thank you for your assistance.

Best regards,

Lesli R. Fitzpatrick
Attorney at Law
512-426-5993

On Monday, November 22, 2021, 12:03:04 PM CST, Lesli Fitzpatrick [redacted] wrote:

Dear Ms. Bergmann,

After we spoke on Friday, I learned that Governor Abbott transferred money from the Texas budget to the Secretary of State's Office to set up an Election Audit Division. I am VERY interested in talking to our new Secretary of State John Scott about working with him in this newly created division. I am hoping we can schedule something very soon for this discussion to occur. Please let me know and thank you again.

Best regards,

Lesli R. Fitzpatrick
Attorney at Law
512-426-5993

On Friday, November 19, 2021, 02:34:42 PM CST, Lesli Fitzpatrick <[redacted]> wrote:

Dear Ms. Bergmann,

Thank you for the opportunity to schedule an appointment to meet the new Secretary of State John Scott. I am passionate about Election Integrity in the State of Texas and would love to visit with Mr. Scott along these lines. I have attached my resume for his review. I know next week is a short week with Thanksgiving and all so maybe we can meet some time at the beginning of December. Please let me know if this is possible. Thank you again for your time today.

Best regards,

Lesli R. Fitzpatrick
Attorney at Law
512-426-5993

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Hanson, Blake <[redacted]>
Sent: Thursday, December 30, 2021 2:37 PM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Re: Phase 1

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Great, thanks so much.

Blake Hanson
Reporter & Anchor, KDFW/Fox 4
469.818.9105
[redacted]

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Thursday, December 30, 2021 2:09:34 PM
To: Hanson, Blake <[redacted]
Subject: RE: Phase 1

Hi Blake,

Should be releasing the summary before COB tomorrow. The Secretary of State's office technically closes at noon, so likely tomorrow morning, if not early afternoon. I've added you to our press release list so you'll receive it when it's released.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Hanson, Blake <[redacted]
Sent: Thursday, December 30, 2021 1:16 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Phase 1

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Hi Sam,

I wanted to check in and see when we can expect to get the summary of findings from Phase 1 of the election audit?

Blake Hanson
Reporter & Anchor, KDFW/Fox 4
469.818.9105
[redacted]

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From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Monday, December 13, 2021 5:35 PM
To: 'Clayton Neville'
Subject: RE: QUESTION-WBAP/KLIF

Hi Clayton,

Sorry I missed you earlier – have been on the road with the Secretary today and left you a message from my personal cell, but happy to call in and record anytime if you're still looking for sound for a package. Let me know and I'll be happy to hop on!

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Clayton Neville <[redacted]>
Sent: Monday, December 13, 2021 9:17 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: QUESTION-WBAP/KLIF

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Sam,

Are you of someone with the Sec of State Office available for a quick pre-recorded phone call regarding the latest on the election audit that was sent out Friday? We'd like to include in our newscasts.

Clayton Neville
Reporter/Anchor WBAP/KLIF
Westwood One News Correspondent
Cumulus Radio Station Group | Dallas / Fort Worth
O: 214.765.5296

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

M: 469.487.6772

3090 Olive Street, Suite 400, Dallas, TX 75219
[redacted]
cumulusmedia.com

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From: Cassandra Pollock <[redacted]
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 3:20 PM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: Re: Texas Tribune inquiry

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Thank you! Appreciate the quick response.

On Fri, Nov 19, 2021 at 3:19 PM Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov> wrote:

> Hi Cassi,
>
> Yes – you can attribute the following statement to me/the Texas Secretary of State's office:
>
> **"We thank Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, Speaker Phelan, Senator Nelson and Representative Bonnen for approving critical funds to support the Texas Secretary of State's Forensic Audit Division. In order to complete our ongoing full forensic audit of the 2020 General Election and conduct subsequent audits as required by SB 1, our agency will be using these funds to dedicate additional staff to oversee audit activities, including: verifying counties' removal of ineligible voters from the rolls, meticulously reviewing each county's election materials for our comprehensive document examination, and ensuring compliance with state and federal election laws. These resources are essential for maintaining the integrity of Texas elections and identifying issues that must be fixed in order to restore voters' confidence in our state's election systems."**
>
> Best,
>
> **Sam Taylor**
>
> *Assistant Secretary of State for Communications*
>
> Office of the Texas Secretary of State
>
> smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
>
> Office: 512-463-6116

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Cassandra Pollock <[redacted]>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 3:18 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: Texas Tribune inquiry

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Hi Sam, it's Cassi with the Texas Tribune. Hope you're doing great.

Wanted to see if there was a statement from the SOS we could include about the emergency transfer of funds to the agency, announced this afternoon by Gov. Greg Abbott and other GOP leaders.

Please call anytime with questions: 972-358-8659.

Thanks,

Cassi

--

--

THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Cassi Pollock
Reporter

919 Congress Avenue
Sixth Floor
Austin, TX 78701
www.texastribune.org

M (972) 358-8659

@cassi_pollock

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THE TEXAS TRIBUNE

Cassi Pollock
Reporter

919 Congress Avenue
Sixth Floor
Austin, TX 78701
www.texastribune.org

M (972) 358-8659
@cassi_pollock

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 5:16 PM
To: 'Mankad, Raj'
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections

Sensitivity: Personal

Thank you, have a great weekend!

Best,

-Sam

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 5:11 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Thanks. We're good to go.

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 5:09 PM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Hi Raj,

No problem! See below in bold for references requested. Let me know if this works, and feel free to give me a call if needed and I'll be here to chat through any additional changes needed!

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 4:29 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Sam,

Sorry to send these edits so late before the weekend. The yellow underlining represents cuts or notes. The blue represents added language. When do you think you can get back to me?

Raj

Full forensic audit will restore faith in Texas elections

By John B. Scott

For the past several election cycles, voters have faced a crisis of confidence in the very system that underpins our representative form of government. Whether it was the specter of foreign interference in our elections or allegations of widespread mail ballot fraud during the pandemic, voters have been hit with a barrage of reasons to doubt not trust the system.

And, unsurprisingly, it's starting to take its toll on their faith in the integrity of our elections.

According to a Pew Research Center poll released earlier this year, large shares of Americans of both parties believe there is cheating in elections, with 79 percent indicating candidates engage in illegal activity at least sometimes duringswings elections.√ [NOTE: "36% of Americans say candidates often do illegal things…43% say this happens sometimes]

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This is why, in order to restore voters' confidence in the strength and resilience of our election systems, Texas is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the 2020 General Election.

Over the next several months, the Texas Secretary of State's office will complete a top-to-bottom examination of election records in the two largest counties with Democratic Commissioners Courts — Harris and Dallas — as well as the two largest counties with Republican Commissioners Courts — Tarrant and Collin — accounting for [NOTE: Please share math on 35 percent?]**[The overall turnout statewide in 2020 was 11,315,056. The vote totals for the four counties being audited were as follows: Harris – 1,640,818, Dallas – 919,504, Tarrant – 834,697, Collin – 490,856. Those four counties combined had 3,885,875 votes cast, which is 34.3% of the 11.3 million statewide turnout figure. These are all available on our election results portal here: https://results.texas-election.com/county]** 35 percent of all votes cast in the historically high-turnout election in Texas last year. Commissioners Courts oversee each county's elections administrators, with whom our office will be working closely to obtain the materials and information we need to complete the full forensic audit.

While counties[NOTE: Just to clarify, who has already conducted these three things?] **[the county election officials conduct partial manual counts of all races in at least 1% of election precincts within 72 hours after the polls close in order to ensure the accuracy of the tabulation of electronic voting machines, per Sec. 127.201 of the Texas Election Code. Have added a word to distinguish between these partial manual counts and the full manual recounts referenced below]** **partial** manual recounts, election security assessments and verification of voters' voter eligibility verification havehas already been conducted, the Texas Forensic Audit goes well beyond any other legislative election audit proposals or models in other states. Our audit examines, among other items: chain of custody records of voted ballots and voting equipment, audit logs from electronic voting systems, and materials from Early Voting Ballot Boards and Signature Verification Committees to ensure that mail ballots were not subjected to tampering and match the list of voters who requested them.

Importantly, this will be the only truly [NOTE: Pennsylvania says it is conducting a forensic audit. How is that not a true one?]**[Pennsylvania's forensic audit only involves a subpoena of voter registration records as well as e-mails between county election officials and the PA Secretary of State between November 2020 and May 2021 – it does not examine actual election records, voting machines, logic and accuracy tests of those machines, etc. and therefore does not go as far in detecting potential illegal activity as Texas' forensic audit]** "forensic" audit of the 2020 election, using analytical tools to examine the literal nuts and bolts of election administration to determine if any illegal activity may have occurred. Using the authority given to our agency by the Texas Legislature, we will conduct additionala **full** manual recounts of any and all precincts affected by election irregularities[NOTE: The previous paragraph states that manual recounts have already been done.]. **[As noted above, the manual recounts conducted automatically after each election only represent 1% of all precincts, whereas our office's authority to conduct a full manual recount of any number of votes in any**

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

number of precincts allows us to cover 100% of all ballots cast in those affected precincts. Texas Election Code Sec. 127.202]

We will follow the facts, follow the evidence, and ensure any cases of illegal voting or election crimes are investigated by the proper law enforcement authorities, including the Texas Attorney General's Ooffice.

Texans should be encouraged by the dedicated county election officials who work cycle after cycle to conduct elections with the integrity and professionalism that voters deserve.

But voters also need peace of mind — they need assurances that Texas election law and federal laws protecting the rights of legal, eligible voters are being followed at every step in the process. When irregularities occur, no matter how inconsequential they may seem, it takes a concerted effort to restore voters' faith in elections among voters.

For example, afterwhen a recount in a 2019 Midland ISD bond election flipped the results, showed that more than 800 ballots were unaccounted for, our office worked meticulously to retrace the steps of local election officials and a box of 836 uncounted ballots was discovered that ended up flipping the election again.√ Our office worked meticulously to retrace the steps of local election officials. We were able to determine exactly how they were misplaced and implement targeted training to fix any deficiencies that led to the election-changing irregularity.√

Using those same methods and techniques, the Texas Secretary of State's Ooffice will endeavor to deliver the same peace of mind to Texas voters and ensure that any irregularities that compromise the integrity of our elections are uncovered, fixed and not repeated in future elections.

We will work to investigate claims of irregularities in Harris County, such as the allegation that the county initially reported 1,884√ more votes than voters who checked in across several drive-thru locations during the 2020 General Election.

Most importantly, we are conducting this forensic election audit without any preconceived notions about what we are going to find. We will separate evidence from hearsay, facts from rumors, and empirical data from unverifiable theories.

Ultimately, we want to make sure every single eligible Texas voter — regardless of political affiliation — knows that voting in our state is fair and secure, and that only legal votes are cast and counted in Texas elections.

Any crack in the confidence of our elections is a crack in the foundation of our democracy. We must restore confidence in the integrity of our elections before the entire structure crumbles under the weight of mistrust.

John B. Scott is the 114th Texas secretary of state.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 3:27 PM
To: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Of course! Just wanted to make sure we were still set for publication this weekend and resolve any additional edits needed to the piece. Appreciate it!

Best,

-Sam

From: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 3:25 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Thanks for that update. Can you give me about 30 more minutes?

Raj

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 3:06 PM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Hi Raj,

Just wanted to flag that the legislature has approved $4M in additional funds for our agency to conduct the election audit, both for the 2020 General Election and for election audits as required under SB 1. This makes the piece all the more timely for Sunday's opinion section. Let me know if any additional changes are needed or if there's additional feedback from your editorial team.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 11:34 AM
To: 'Mankad, Raj' <[redacted]
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Hi Raj,

That's exactly the type of claim that our audit will investigate and, if not true, debunk and, if true, provide a full detailed report of what happened. We haven't been given access to the documents yet. And, as HC has reported, the Harris County Commissioners court has openly opposed complying with the audit or our request for documents, so we're weighing our options on how to obtain these documents in order to verify/debunk this claim in our audit findings.

To be fair, can we characterize it as a claim? Such as:

"We will work to investigate claims of irregularities in Harris County, such as the allegation that the county initially reported 1,884 more votes than voters who checked in across several drive-thru locations during the 2020 General Election."

Let me know if that works better. Don't want to get ahead of our audit findings and provide a possible explanation or theory of how that number came to be, because we haven't been provided the documents yet, which include the sign-in sheets for those drive-thru voting locations in Harris County.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 11:22 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Hello Sam,

I'm still expecting one more editor to read the piece.

I do have one concern with the added claim on Harris County: "We will work to determine why, for example, Harris County recorded 1,884 more votes than voters who checked in across several drive-thru locations during the 2020 General Election."

The only source for that 1,884 number is Bettencourt. The Chronicle article that notes that claim from Bettencourt doesn't provide any detail. I would either like to cut that sentence or for the secretary of state's office to provide some explanation of how that number came to be. Are there official tallies that you can point me to that show that discrepancy?

Best wishes,
Raj

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 19, 2021 11:07 AM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Morning Raj,

Just wanted to check back in to see if there were any additional edits on the Secretary's op-ed that we need to review. As long as they are not too substantive, we can probably sign off very quickly. Let me know and I'll make sure to give them a look today. Thanks!

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Thursday, November 18, 2021 9:13 AM
To: 'Mankad, Raj' [redacted]>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Sure, no problem! Let me know when you have additional changes to review and we'll be happy to sign off when ready. Thank you for your time!

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Sent: Thursday, November 18, 2021 9:11 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Hello Sam,

I think it's a stronger piece with the changes. I'm planning on publishing it Sunday. I will likely have some additional edits for you to review, hopefully before the end of the day.

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Thanks for your patience and persistence as well. We're pulled in a lot of directions and I wish I could get back to everyone more efficiently.

Best wishes,
Raj

Raj Mankad
Op-Ed Editor
Houston Chronicle

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, November 17, 2021 4:04 PM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]
Subject: [EXTERNAL] FW: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Afternoon Raj,

Let me know if y'all are interested in publishing the updated version of the piece (attached here). This is still being offered as an exclusive to the Chronicle if you choose to publish it. Thanks again for your time, feedback, and consideration.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, November 17, 2021 11:22 AM
To: 'Mankad, Raj' <[redacted]>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Thank you for the feedback, Raj. Attached, please find an updated version of the piece addressing your comments.

To answer your first question, the theme of the piece is restoring confidence among a voting public that has voiced diminished faith in our election systems. Nevertheless, we added a notable example in Harris county that specifically

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involves a discrepancy in the number of votes cast vs. the number of voters who checked in at drive-thru locations in Harris County in 2020. This is an example of the type of irregularity that, while maybe not nefarious in nature, does diminish voters' confidence in the integrity of elections if it is not resolved and explained by an objective third party – which is the role our agency is taking on through this election audit.

To your second question about 'why these four counties?' – as noted in the updated piece, these are the two largest counties with Democratic and Republican Commissioners Courts, who oversee the elections offices in each county. It is only fair that we examine the two largest Democratic and two largest Republican counties, rather than choosing the four largest counties by population, which would undoubtedly be panned as a partisan 'witch hunt' against Democratic-leaning counties only. If you'd like that clarified more in the piece, we're happy to make adjustments as needed.

Thanks again for your time to carefully review and consider the piece, and please let me know ASAP if you'd like to publish the attached version.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]
Sent: Wednesday, November 17, 2021 9:15 AM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Hello Sam,

I'm open to publishing this piece but there are a couple of counter arguments that I'd like the op-ed to anticipate.

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One is that there haven't been specific allegations of irregularities in Texas. The Texas AG devoted considerable resources to look for fraud and found almost nothing, and nothing that would impact the integrity of the elections. Why should there be an audit here? The previous secretary of state said that the election in Texas was secure.

And why just those four counties? I think our readers will be quick to point out that the one example of an election-changing irregularity cited in the piece took place in a county that's not being audited.

Best wishes,
Raj

Raj Mankad
Op-Ed Editor
Houston Chronicle

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 16, 2021 10:05 AM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Hi Raj,

Just checking back in on this submission. Feel free to give me a call on my direct line if any questions – 512-463-6116.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Sam Taylor
Sent: Monday, November 15, 2021 3:12 PM
To: 'Mankad, Raj' [redacted]>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Got it – let me know if any questions in the meantime. Thanks!

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Best,

-Sam

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Sent: Monday, November 15, 2021 2:58 PM
To: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

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Hello Sam,

I need a little more time to finish reviewing it.

Best wishes,
Raj

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Monday, November 15, 2021 12:10 PM
To: Mankad, Raj <[redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] Re: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Hi Raj,

Circling back on the Secretary's op-ed submission. Have you/your team had an opportunity to review it yet? Let me know, thank you!

Best,

Sam Taylor
Texas Secretary of State's office
512-463-6116

From: Mankad, Raj [redacted]
Sent: Friday, November 12, 2021 9:01 AM
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: RE: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections

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Good morning,

I've received the op-ed and will be back in touch early next week.

Best wishes,
Raj

Raj Mankad
Op-Ed Editor
Houston Chronicle

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 12, 2021 8:45 AM
To: Mankad, Raj [redacted]>
Subject: [EXTERNAL] FW: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Good Morning Raj,

Passing this along to you because I received an out-of-office reply from Lisa.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

From: Sam Taylor <SMTaylor@sos.texas.gov>
Sent: Friday, November 12, 2021 8:42 AM
To: 'viewpoints@chron.com' <viewpoints@chron.com>; 'outlook@chron.com' <outlook@chron.com>
Cc: [redacted]>
Subject: Op-Ed Submission: John B. Scott, Texas Secretary of State: Full Forensic Audit Will Restore Faith in Integrity of

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Texas Elections
Sensitivity: Personal

Good Morning,

On behalf of Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott, I am submitting the attached op-ed on our agency's full forensic audit of the 2020 Election. In the op-ed, Secretary Scott makes clear that the purpose of the audit is to restore voters' confidence in the integrity of our election system – which has been brought into question by critics on both sides of the political aisle since 2016. Contrary to narratives published in the Chronicle and elsewhere that Secretary Scott's previous representation of former President Trump disqualifies him to run an independent and objective audit, the piece makes clear that our agency approaches this election audit with no preconceived notions regarding what the results and conclusions will be. Secretary Scott's legal career has been defined by following the evidence and the facts, which is exactly what the Texas Secretary of State's office is doing in undertaking the full forensic election audit in Harris, Dallas, Tarrant and Collin counties.

We'd like to submit this piece **exclusively** to the Houston Chronicle for publication. Please let me know if you are interested in publishing this piece early next week, as I understand we may have missed the deadline for a Sunday opinion publication.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Best,

Sam Taylor
Assistant Secretary of State for Communications
Office of the Texas Secretary of State
smtaylor@sos.texas.gov
Office: 512-463-6116
Cell: 512-538-5293

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 1/5/22
Date: Wednesday, January 5, 2022 8:19:13 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
January 5, 2022

Analysis: Texas enters 2022 with a bang — and some whimpering, *Texas Tribune*, January 5, 2022

Paxton to Court: Reconsider Ruling on Election Fraud Enforcement, *Texas Scorecard*, January 3, 2022

Former 4th Court justice appointed to fill Bexar County commissioner's seat at least through 2022, *San Antonio Express-News*, January 4, 2022

County gives OK for new voting system, *Goliad Advance-Guard*, January 4, 2022

New voting rules are in effect for upcoming primaries, *Amarillo Globe-News*, January 4, 2022

Elections Office no longer sending mail applications for voting, *The Brownfield News*, January 4, 2022

League of Women Voters of Texas Preparing Voters for the March 1st Primary Election, *Gilmer Mirror*, January 5, 2022

End of an era: DeBeauvoir ready for new challenges, *Austin Monitor*, January 5, 2022

Voting boss Barrow elects retirement, *Orange County Record*, January 4, 2022

Three Republicans Vie to Replace Outgoing Tarrant County District Attorney, *The Texan*, January 4, 2022

Dallas, Arlington, DeSoto mayors urge U.S. Senate to support new voting rights laws, *Dallas Morning News*, January 4, 2022

Court asked to require accredited lab in GOP 'investigation,' *Associated Press*, January 4, 2022

U.S. Prevails Over Canada in Dairy Dispute Under New Trade Deal, *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2022

Mexico COVID-19 infections up, especially at tourism centers, *Associated Press*, January 4, 2022

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US manufacturing activity slows to 11-month low in December, *Associated Press*, January 4, 2022

The January 6 Insurrection Isn't Over, *Brennan Center for Justice*, January 4, 2022

Trump Isn't the Only One to Blame for the Capitol Riot, *New York Times*, January 4, 2022

Election fraud isn't really a thing, part infinity, *CNN*, January 4, 2022

Editorial: The Big Lie isn't dead, despite heaps of evidence. Voters must be ready in 2022, *Houston Chronicle*, January 4, 2022

Texas Republican Primaries Begin Test of Trump's Influence, *Bloomberg*, January 4, 2022

Texas and other state audits should restore voter confidence in our elections — but will they?, *The Hill*, January 4, 2022

Analysis: Texas enters 2022 with a bang — and some whimpering
Ross Ramsey
Texas Tribune
January 5, 2022
https://www.texastribune.org/2022/01/05/texas-2022-election-audit/

The governor's ballyhooed audit of the 2020 elections in Texas resulted in a preliminary report issued as quietly as possible on the last day of 2021. The verdict? The election had some minor glitches, but it was about as fair and clean as elections get.

That's a decent opening for a new year and a new election season — or would be, if only the people who demanded an audit were willing to accept the results. The state is vaulting into party primary elections. Finance reports are imminent. Early voting starts on Valentine's Day. Election Day is fewer than 60 days away. TV ads are already running.

Doubt is high, too.

The effects of a year of bleating about the outcome of the 2020 election set the stage for suspicion about this coming vote. The anniversary of the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol is this week. Democrats in the U.S. Senate are threatening to change the rules of debate if they don't get a vote on federal legislation that would upend voting suppression efforts in Texas and other states with Republican legislative majorities.

One of the Republican candidates for governor, former state Sen. Don Huffines of Dallas, is already misrepresenting the results of the election audit — before more people inside or outside of government have even scanned it — to throw shade on his almost certain defeat in March.

"This report confirms what most of us have known for years — our elections are not secure," he said in a news release after the audit came out. In Dallas County, where Huffines lives, the Texas secretary of state's report noted recent security enhancements to the voting system: "The combination of features provide for an end-

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

to-end, highly secure encrypted environment to transport voter registration data."

Later, the report addressed handling of people on the voter registration lists who've died or who shouldn't be there at all.

"Please note that removal of ineligible and/or deceased voters from the statewide voter registration list in and of itself does not indicate that any illegal votes were cast," the auditors wrote, in a section that was in underlined, bold type.

"These maintenance activities are prescribed by state law to ensure the integrity and accuracy of the statewide voter registration list," they wrote. "Voter list maintenance is performed on a regular and ongoing basis in Texas to prevent ineligible voters from casting ballots and to prevent individuals from casting ballots using another person's voter registration information."

Endless efforts to find widespread fraud in Texas elections have fallen short. This latest one did, too. Auditors found relatively minor discrepancies between electronic and hand counts of ballots and nothing close to numbers that would flip any election results.

Those auditors have another round of work underway in their attempt "to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward."

As with the first phase, they're looking at four of the state's biggest counties: Harris, Dallas, Tarrant and Collin.

It'll be useful in helpful and unhelpful ways. It's great to know whether the system is working right: whether dead people are taken out of the voter rolls, whether there's a way to scrub out people who shouldn't be registered at all and whether people who've left Texas have also left its voter rolls.

It also keeps questions about election integrity alive, a boon to those Republicans who don't believe Donald Trump lost the 2020 election — and who don't believe it so deeply that they wanted an audit of a Texas election that the former president won by 5.6 percentage points. One of those is Trump himself, who publicly called for a Texas audit in September.

The Legislature addressed Republican questions about voting in Texas last year, passing a set of laws that have been challenged in court by the U.S. Department of Justice, by Democrats and by voter advocacy groups who say the new Texas laws will suppress voting.

Those laws passed after Democrats in the Texas House left Austin for Washington, D.C., delaying the proceedings here and trying to lobby Congress to pass a federal law that would reverse what Republicans here and in other states were trying to do. That didn't work, but congressional Democrats are working on the project now, threatening to change U.S. Senate rules to their advantage if Republicans continue to block consideration of their voting bills.

That's where we begin this 2022 election year in Texas — pretty much the way we ended the 2020 elections, with sore losers, insurrections, fruitless challenges to election procedures and results, and audits of elections in states where those sore losers actually won.

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The first part of the 2020 election audit is done, and no foul play has been detected. Republicans who might benefit from doubt about the system are shouting their questions. Democrats are in court and in Congress trying to shut them down. Voters are trying to figure out who should be running their governments at this time next year.

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Paxton to Court: Reconsider Ruling on Election Fraud Enforcement
Texas Scorecard
January 3, 2022
https://texasscorecard.com/state/paxton-to-court-reconsider-ruling-on-election-fraud-enforcement/

Last month, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, the state's highest criminal court, **ruled** that the Office of the Attorney General did not have the authority to prosecute election fraud cases. The court asserted that under the state constitution, district and county attorneys have exclusive authority to prosecute criminal cases.

This week, Attorney General Ken Paxton has filed a "Motion for Rehearing" with the Court of Criminal Appeals. He is requesting that the court reconsider its decision stripping the Legislature of its power to assign the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) authority to prosecute criminal election law violations.

In a press release, the OAG noted that lawmakers granted the office that authority "approximately 70 years ago" and that the Supreme Court of Texas "has previously and consistently" said it was consistent with the Texas Constitution.

"The Court's decision to suddenly remove our authority to prosecute election fraud can only empower dishonest campaigns to silence voters across the state," said Attorney General Paxton in a statement. "This decision is not only wrong on legal grounds, but it has the effect of giving district and county attorneys virtually unlimited discretion to not bring election law prosecutions. Last year's election cycle shows us that officials in our most problematic counties will simply let election fraud run rampant. I will continue to oppose this decision that diminishes our democracy and misconstrues the Texas Constitution."

The OAG's **motion for rehearing** can be **found online**.

The nine justices on the Court of Criminal Appeals are Sharon Keller, Barbara Hervey, Bert Richardson, Kevin Yeary, David Newell, Mary Lou Keel, Scott Walker, Michelle Slaughter, and Jesse F. McClure III. All nine are Republicans.

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Former 4th Court justice appointed to fill Bexar County commissioner's seat at least through 2022
Scott Huddleston
San Antonio Express-News
January 4, 2022
https://www.expressnews.com/politics/article/Appeals-justice-appointed-north-side-san-antonio-16748988.php

Former 4th Court of Appeals Justice Marialyn Barnard took an oath Tuesday to serve as Bexar County's interim Precinct 3 commissioner, representing the North Side.

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Barnard, a Republican, will serve at least through 2022 in place of Commissioner Trish DeBerry, who resigned last month to run for county judge. Barnard did not rule out the possibility of running in the fall as the GOP nominee to serve the remainder of DeBerry's term in 2023 and 2024.

County Judge Nelson Wolff, who is not running for re-election, said he selected Barnard out of 27 people who applied because of her experience in the private sector and her work as a teacher and a judge.

"I wanted someone with independence and leadership qualities," Wolff told reporters at a news conference.

Barnard, who was sworn in by Chief U.S. District Judge Orlando L. Garcia, said she was "deeply moved" by the selection. She had worked as a briefing attorney and law clerk under Garcia in the early 1990s.

"Your faith and your confidence in me is overwhelming," she told Wolff. "I promise to hit the ground running."

"I look forward to learning more and taking action on the immediate needs and priorities of Bexar County," Barnard said.

DeBerry, who was consulted on the appointment, said she believes Barnard will do a good job representing the county's fast-growing northern quadrant. DeBerry's staff immediately began a transition Tuesday to prepare Barnard to be seated on the dais at the next regular commissioners' meeting, Jan. 11.

Barnard has held numerous legal positions at the state and federal levels and held corporate posts related to the law, including corporate counsel and business intelligence executive at CPS Energy from 2001 to 2005. She served on the 4th Court as an appointee of Gov. Rick Perry from 2009 to 2018 and was vice president of product development for TXdocs Innovative Legal Software from 2019 to 2021.

After working as a social worker with the Texas Department of Human Services for two years, she was a high school teacher in the North East and Lackland independent school districts from 1985 to 1989. She serves as a board member of the Christus Santa Rosa Children's Hospital Foundation and was board president of the Rotary Club of San Antonio from 2015 to 2016.

Barnard's appointment is the latest development in a chain reaction that began when DeBerry filed to run for county judge in the March 1 Republican primary, just before the Dec. 13 deadline and less than a year into her first four-year term as commissioner.

Wolff initially said DeBerry could hold over for 60 days. That opened the door to criticism directed at Wolff that DeBerry would have the political power of incumbency, sitting on the dais through February, while running for county judge. On Dec. 21, Wolff accelerated the appointment process. He announced a Dec. 31 deadline for applications and said he hoped to appoint an interim commissioner in early January.

Barnard did not rule out the possibility Tuesday of running in the fall to serve as commissioner through 2024. Former City Councilman and mayoral candidate Greg Brockhouse also is among several prospective candidates interested in seeking the Republican nomination to run for commissioner in the Nov. 8 general election. Meanwhile, former Councilman Reed Williams has been the first to get his name out by announcing he'll run for the seat as an independent candidate.

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The party appointment process for the November election for Precinct 3 commissioner is unusual because it typically has been used only to replace a sitting judge or party nominee who died. The Texas secretary of state's office initially said primaries could be held so voters could elect Democratic and Republican nominees.

But the state office reversed that decision two days later. Under the Texas Election Code, because the vacancy was created less than five days before the filing deadline for the primary, an executive committee of precinct chairs in each party will make a nomination for the general election.

"If I would be asked or selected by the (Republican) precinct chairs, I would be honored," Barnard told reporters.

Wolff said the county's Democratic and Republican parties are expected to make nominations for the Precinct 3 seat in June after new voter precinct chairs are elected. He said DeBerry told him the day before she filed that she would seek to succeed him Jan. 1, 2023. Wolff has served as the county's top elected official since 2001.

"I just told her that I thought the pathway may be there, but it would be a challenge. You never know what happens politically," Wolff said.

In the race for county judge, DeBerry faces Nathan Buchanan in the Republican primary. The Democratic primary features four candidates, including state Rep. Ina Minjarez, former District Judge Peter Sakai and mayoral adviser Ivalis Meza Gonzalez.

Wolff said he wasn't sure if he'll endorse a candidate in the election for his successor.

"Right now, I don't plan to. I want to see how the primaries go," he said. "I think we'll have a lot of choices."

Wolff said he didn't intend to slow down one bit during his final year before he'll retire from public office at age 82. Commissioners will begin work in February to develop a plan to spend remaining funds from a $388 million federal stimulus package and discuss capital improvements. They also may consider an initiative to place before voters in November on use of hotel-motel tax revenues for "nonprofits that engage in sports activities," Wolff said.

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County gives OK for new voting system
Matthew Tamez
Goliad Advance-Guard
January 4, 2022
https://www.mysoutex.com/goliad_advance_guard/news/county-gives-ok-for-new-voting-system/article_afc9b19e-6d71-11ec-8ef2-cb82606588af.html

The Goliad Commissioners Court heard a proposal to replace the current voting system that the county of Goliad has with a more secure voting system. The new system would be secured with military grade encryption, making it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for a person to tamper with the electronic management system workstation. This system would provide a paper trail to fall back on in case issues such as recounts arise.

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This equipment would not be connected to the internet, instead being stand alone machines. The paper ballots are also secured by a weighted paper. This weighted paper would make false ballots unviable. There would be a number of checks and balances to keep the integrity of votes intact.

The machine will use a USB drive as a memory device that collects scanned data from the paper ballots. These USB drives are also encrypted and any attempt to replace the USB drive with another drive would result in an error from the software.

Results would be received from these USB drives faster than they would with the current machines.

After hearing this proposal, the commissioners unanimously moved to approve this new proposal. Training on the new system will be included so no issues may arise through use of unfamiliar technology.

Generally, however, the average voter will not notice any difference in the way they vote.

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New voting rules are in effect for upcoming primaries
Michael Cuviello
Amarillo Globe-News
January 4, 2022
https://www.amarillo.com/story/news/local/2022/01/04/new-voting-rules-effect-upcoming-primaries/9080419002/

As we spring into a new year with electoral primaries of all types around the corner, there are some changes to voting in the state of Texas that residents should be aware of.

Even though state officials proclaimed that the 2020 election had been “smooth and secure,” there was a massive push to make more changes that would create new requirements for mail-in voting and other measures.

“In spite all the circumstances, Texas had an election that was smooth and secure,” Keith Ingram, Texas director of elections, told lawmakers in March, referring to the effect of the pandemic. “Texans can be justifiably proud of the hard work and creativity shown by local county elections officials.”

The resulting fallout of these comments left former Texas Secretary of State Ruth Hughs without confirmation, and she was eventually replaced by Fort Worth attorney John Scott. Previously, Scott had briefly been a part of the council that was challenging the 2020 presidential election in the state of Pennsylvania.

Special Bill 1, which is currently being challenged in court by the United States Department of Justice, is still in effect for the upcoming primary elections. The bill makes seven significant changes to voting laws in Texas.

The seven significant changes are as follows:

1 - Bans 24-hour voting.
2 - Bans drive-thru voting.
3 - Imposes new mail-in voting requirements.
4 - Bans officials from mailing unsolicited mail-in ballot applications.

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5 - Allows for free movement of designated poll watchers outside of watching voters cast their ballot.
6 - New requirements for assisting voters that may be impaired.
7 - Added monthly voter check rolls to purge voters that are not eligible to vote.

Sonya Letson, co-president of the Amarillo League of Women Voters, spoke about some of the challenges of the new laws for many voters. Letson specified that the older population could be the most significantly impacted, since this segment is the majority of those who generally vote by mail.

One of the most significant changes is that applicants must include an identifying number, such as a driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number. Her concern is that it must match the original numbers that were submitted on the initial registration. So, if a driver's license number was submitted and the original was something else, it could impede their ability to vote by mail.

"Many of the people that vote by mail submitted this information quite a while ago, so for them, it may be difficult to remember which number they originally submitted," Letson said. "This makes it extremely important that people submit their application as early as possible in case there is an issue."

Letson stated that voters who are not sure of their original numbers should contact their local election administrator to verify the initial documentation provided. She said that prospective voters should know that the form is new and that this is a new process.

Regarding court challenges, Letson said that voters should be aware and try to comply with the current rules in place and familiarize themselves with all changes that may affect them.

As for further improvements that she thinks would have the greatest impact to make voting more accessible, it would be the ability to register to vote online.

"We do so much online today, including banking and other activities that are quite secure, and yet we still have not made this possible to aid the voters," Letson said. "The misinformation that our elections are not accurate is disturbing. The election process is safe and secure, borne out by the recent Amarillo mayoral election audit. Please do not delay registration or voting."

Letson stated that the earlier that voters register or vote, the more opportunity to fix any discrepancies that arise.

The Texas deadline to be registered to vote in the upcoming primary elections is Jan. 31. Citizens can decide which primary to vote in for the forthcoming election as voters, regardless of party affiliation. The only restriction is that you can vote in one party's primary.

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Elections Office no longer sending mail applications for voting
Michell Garcia
The Brownfield News
January 4, 2022
https://www.brownfieldonline.com/article/elections-office-no-longer-sending-mail-applications-voting

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Texas Senate Bill 1 will change the way Texans vote from now on. The bill will make voting by mail more difficult. In the past, local election officials would send a mail ballot application to every voter on file, as a courtesy to give voters the option to vote by mail. However, Senate Bill 1 has changed that. If you want to vote by mail in upcoming Texas elections, you are going to have to do your homework.

Per statutes.capitol.texas.gov, the Texas Election Code 84.001 states that applications are required and the following must be followed:

> (a) To be entitled to vote an early voting ballot by mail, a person who is eligible for early voting must make an application for an early voting ballot to be voted by mail as provided by this title.
> (b) Subject to Section 1.011, an application must be submitted in writing and signed by the applicant using ink on paper. An electronic signature or photocopied signature is not permitted.
> (c) An applicant is not required to use an official application form.
> (d) An application must be submitted by mail to the early voting clerk for the election who serves the election precinct of the applicant's residence.
> (d-1) A timely application that is addressed to the wrong early voting clerk shall be forwarded to the proper early voting clerk not later than the day after the date it is received by the wrong clerk.
> (e) An applicant for a ballot to be voted by mail may apply for ballots for the main election and any resulting runoff election on the same application. If an application for the main election and any resulting runoff is not timely for the main election, it will be considered timely for any resulting runoff if received not later than the deadline, determined using the date of the runoff election, for submitting a regular application for a ballot to be voted by mail.
> (f) A person who has not made an application as provided by this title is not entitled to receive an early voting ballot to be voted by mail.

So, as stated above, voters will have to initiate the process to receive a ballot by mail. The application process can be started in four different ways, in person, by calling, emailing, or faxing your local voting clerk, printing an application at home from https://webservices.sos.state.tx.us/forms/5-15f.pdf, or writing an informal request.

Please remember that requests must be received between January 1, and February 18 to receive a ballot by mail for the March 1 primary, anything faxed or emailed must be followed up by the original being mailed in within four days, and you must be registered to vote in Terry County to receive a ballot by mail.

If you have any questions or concerns please contact the Terry County Elections Administrator, Krystal Valentin, at 806-300-8965 or kvalentin@terrycounty.org

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League of Women Voters of Texas Preparing Voters for the March 1st Primary Election
Gilmer Mirror
January 5, 2022
https://www.gilmermirror.com/2022/01/05/league-of-women-voters-of-texas-preparing-voters-for-the-march-1st-primary-election/

Deadlines to Vote in the March Primary Election are approaching! The League of Women Voters of Texas provides information on new voting processes.

Vote by Mail

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January 1st was the first day Texans could apply to vote by mail in the 2022 elections.

Voters who are over 65 or disabled and wish to vote by mail must apply every year. Voters who will be absent from the county during early voting and Election Day must apply for each election in which they want to vote by mail. The application deadline is February 18th for the Texas Primary Election.

Voters must use the NEW Application for Ballot by Mail (ABBM) available at their County Election Office or from the Texas Secretary of State's website votetexas.gov. Alternatively, voters may print the Vote by Mail application in English or Spanish. Applications must be received (not postmarked) at your County Election Office by the application deadline, which is February 18th for the Primary Election.

Who is eligible to vote by mail in Texas?

- 65 years or older
- Sick or disabled
- Out of the county during early voting and election day
- In jail or Involuntary Civil Confinement but otherwise eligible to vote

NEW! Expecting to give birth within three weeks before or after election day.

It is important for voters to read the application carefully and to provide their contact information on the application..

NEW! Counties may contact voters if there is an issue with their application or ballot.

NEW! Look for a new vote by mail tracking system, which will be made available by the Texas Secretary of State.

Voter Registration

The last day to register to vote for the 2022 Texas Primaries is January 31st! Voters may check if they registered to vote with their County Voter Registrar or at votetexas.gov "Am I Registered?".

New! There is a new voter registration application that eligible Texans may print, fill out and turn in to their County Voter Registrar to register to vote.

New! Voters who are already registered to vote in Texas may update their voter registration online if they moved within the state or changed their name. The voter will need a Texas Drivers License or Personal Identification Card, their Social Security Number and Voter Registration Card VUID (Voter Unique Identifier) number. Voters may find their VUID number on their voter registration card, by calling their County Voter Registrar or at votetexas.gov "Am I Registered?" by inputting in their name, county and date of birth.

New! Texans who apply for a Texas Drivers License may apply to register to vote at the same time. When Texans update their driver's license online, they may update their voter registration at the same time.

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Learn more and find voter education videos at lwvtexas.org.

The League of Women Voters is one of America's oldest and most trusted civic nonprofit organizations. Formed in 1919, the Texas League represents more than 13,500 grassroots advocates and 34 local Leagues across the state. The League never supports or opposes candidates for office or political parties. The League encourages the informed and active participation of citizens in government. The League also seeks to influence public policy through education and advocacy. Membership is open to people 16 years and older.

League of Women Voters of Texas: lwvtexas.org

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End of an era: DeBeauvoir ready for new challenges
Jo Clifton
Austin Monitor
January 5, 2022
https://www.austinmonitor.com/stories/2022/01/end-of-an-era-debeauvoir-ready-for-new-challenges/

Travis County Clerk Dana DeBeauvoir, who has served as the county's chief elections officer as well as the overseer of numerous county records, including deeds and marriage licenses, announced in November that she would not seek reelection. After nearly 36 years in the post, DeBeauvoir said it's time to do something else. The Austin Monitor spoke with her about how elections have changed and what she has observed since she first started overseeing the process in Travis County.

"One of the little secrets about election administration is that most of us who are in this job fall into it," she said. When DeBeauvoir first took office in 1987, there was no school for learning how to administer elections. Now there is, of course, and she has a certificate showing her training at Auburn University. She also has experience conducting elections for years and serving as an official observer for elections around the world. She notes that few people paid much attention to the way elections were conducted until 2000, the year the U.S. Supreme Court decided Bush v. Gore, putting George W. Bush in the White House.

"And then suddenly the whole United States woke up," DeBeauvoir said, and people began to realize that elections were not the simple matter they had appeared to be. People began to realize "that there were a whole bunch of laws and people working behind the scenes," and "I do really credit that with the progress that we've made." However, she added, "I think it will always be a fight to keep the ground that we've gained."

DeBeauvoir had a fight of her own with Attorney General Ken Paxton after the November 2020 election, when he tried to have her indicted for obstructing a poll watcher. DeBeauvoir recently told the Statesman she spent $75,000 of her own money on attorneys to defend against Paxton's unsuccessful attempt. The allegations followed DeBeauvoir's efforts to protect election workers from close contact with anyone who might have Covid-19. The grand jury no-billed her, declining to pursue the charge, and the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals has issued a ruling prohibiting Paxton from prosecuting elections law violations unless the local prosecutor requests it.

"The hardest part was I couldn't fight back," DeBeauvoir said, recalling the ordeal. "So what I had to do was trust the grand jury and my attorneys … and the grand jury saw

the photos of the (poll) watchers inside with me. It was false to allege that they could not see or hear."

DeBeauvoir, a staunch Democrat, told the Monitor she is very concerned about recently enacted restrictions on Texas voters, specifically Senate Bill 1, the elections bill approved by the Legislature last summer at the behest of Gov. Greg Abbott.

In addition to other restrictions placed on voters and those trying to help them, the bill initially criminalized the act of offering water to people waiting in line to vote. That part of the bill was removed before passage. "You treat a dog better than that," DeBeauvoir said. "Voters don't deserve that."

DeBeauvoir announced her retirement early enough to give those who might be interested in the job time to think about filing. She said the job requires someone who loves public service, has strong administrative skills and is good at public relations. In addition, this job needs "somebody with a spine (who can) stand up when other people try to take advantage of voters."

Two Democrats, Dyana Limon-Mercado and Kurt Lockhart, have filed to run in the Democratic primary. A lone Republican, Susan Haynes, has also filed for a spot on the ballot.

DeBeauvoir said she would ask Travis County commissioners to appoint her deputy, Adana Hess, as the interim county clerk to serve until the new clerk is elected. As a result of the Help America Vote Act, or HAVA, whoever takes over the job will not only be overseeing elections for Travis County and the city of Austin, but assisting 142 other local jurisdictions in conducting their elections.

Looking back over her years at the helm of Travis County's elections apparatus, DeBeauvoir described the four voting systems Texas has used during her time in office. Her first year, 1987, the state was using punch cards, "and I was pretty upset about what I saw behind the scenes. I really couldn't believe that was how we counted ballots. So I immediately started working to get a different kind of voting system. And I didn't know very much back then, I was very green, very new, but it took me three years to get Travis County to get an optical scan, hand-marked, central-count voting system." The ballots were hand-marked because there was not another way to do it at that time.

The central count was the cheapest alternative for the county, so every ballot was counted in one place. The central count is a "planned bottleneck. We very quickly got too big to make that low-tech operation work for us, and as a result we commonly issued election results between midnight and 2 a.m." No one was happy about that timing. She began working on the next voting system, and thanks to HAVA, Travis County was able to purchase a new electronic voting system. "It was perfect for people with disabilities. And the fact that we were all voting the same way I found very heartwarming."

But then the electronic voting wars started, "and voters got pounded on the internet with how terrible and unreliable electronic voting was. It was so bad there was no countering it with a rational explanation … we had about 12 years of electronic voting, then we switched to electronic voting with a paper trail. That has been a really big help," giving voters greater confidence in their ballots, DeBeauvoir said. "What you don't want is a scribbled ballot. That's just asking for mistakes."

DeBeauvoir will not actually leave office until after the Jan. 25 election to fill the spot being vacated by Council Member Greg Casar, who is running for Congress in the

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Democratic primary, currently scheduled for March 1. Her 68th birthday is on Jan. 28, so, “If everything goes smoothly, that will be my planned departure date.”

While she’s not quite sure of all the things she wants to do in 2022 and beyond, she definitely wants to continue to volunteer as an elections observer. She’s also looking forward to spending more time with David Wahlberg, who as district judge declared the law preventing same-sex marriage to be unconstitutional. After the U.S. Supreme Court struck down laws banning gay marriage in 2015, DeBeauvoir’s office issued a record 310 marriage licenses in one day.

DeBeauvoir and Wahlberg enjoy sailing together and spending time with their two “fur babies,” a blue heeler and a Catahoula hound.

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Voting boss Barrow elects retirement
Dave Roger
Orange County Record
January 4, 2022
https://www.therecordlive.com/story/2022/01/05/news/voting-boss-barrow-elects-retirement/31077.html

In an average year, Orange County puts on only three or four elections.

But Tina Barrow and her three-person Elections Administration Office have no problem staying busy the other 250-odd workdays.

That's because they have 54,000 local bosses – the registered voters – and a few hundred more in Austin.

The Texas Legislature is always fine-tuning its voting rules and regulations.

"We work year-round," Barrow said. "It takes like three months to prepare for an election, maybe longer.

"You have to hire election judges and clerks, secure your voting locations, get your voting machines in order, prepare and order ballots and supplies.

"You have to keep up with all the candidates' paperwork and filings. And you have to keep up with the election laws.

"Here lately, we have a lot of new laws to keep up with."

Barrow is the only Elections Administrator Orange County has had since the position was created in 2005 via the Help America Vote Act.

She has run all the county, state, national, school district and city elections in Orange County – except for the City of West Orange – for the past two decades.

But that will change next month.

Barrow is retiring from the county Feb. 4 so "I can spend more time with my children and grandchildren and ride my horses," she said.

The Beaumont native has been in Orange County since 1980. She has five children, Latouia DuBois, Jamie Barber, Brittany Elmore, Tiffany Greer and Craig Leverett. Her

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husband is Jarvis Barrow.

Barrow hired on part-time with the county first in 1997, but has worked full-time on elections since 1999, when she went to work for former County Clerk Karen Jo Vance.

Donna Alford was promoted Tuesday by Commissioners Court to move from Assistant Administrator to the office's top job in February.

Cheryl Broussard, the third 17-year employee in the Elections Administration department, is staying on.

"I've worked with Donna and Cheryl since 2005," Barrow says. "I did elections in the past in the County Clerk's office. Donna did voter registration in the Tax Office. Cheryl was one of our election judges, and I brought them all together in this office."

Voter registration is a full-time job, the women agree.

"Cards come in daily. Anybody that goes to the DMV now, their card comes to us. We have to check them on our lists every year against the deceased lists, felon notices and change of address cards," Barrow said.

Barrow is staying on until Feb. 4 to help Alford and Broussard prepare for the March 1 party primary elections.

Ever the customer servant, she wants to be sure all mail-in voters are aware that they must send in a new application to vote by mail for 2022 and then for each year after.

Only those who are 65 and older, disabled, or plan to be out of town for both early voting and election day, may vote by mail.

Applications are on the county's website under the Elections Administration department page at https://www.co.orange.tx.us/departments/ElectionsAdministration . Telephoning 409-882-7973 or dropping by the office at 206 Border Street during weekdays are other options.

Barrow said the first election her office worked was in 2005, days after Hurricane Rita. Only the four early voting sites were able to be used for election day.

In 2008, after Hurricane Ike, "it was people you couldn't find," Barrow said. "We couldn't find our election judges.

"Every storm that's come through hits at the end of August, or in September, right when we're preparing for elections. Each disaster we've had caused problems because people were displaced."

Of course, the county had only paper ballots back when Barrow started. And it hasn't been able to completely abandon them yet, because all the storms have tied up the money intended to buy more voting machines.

As it is, Barrow's budget has purchased about three dozen DS200 digital scanning voting machines, enough so that each voting precinct has one available to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act requirements of the HAVA law.

"This office was created because the HAVA law required you to have one ADA compliant machine at each voting site," Barrow recalled. "All the schools and cities

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came together. They wanted this office."

The county bills the school districts and cities for the work of Barrow and her staff.

There have been some long nights, even some tense recounts. But Barrow says she will miss those days.

"We've come a long way, but I've loved this job," she said. "I'm very thankful to Karen Vance, the county clerk who rallied for me to get it.

"I'm blessed that God has given me this job to help support my children."

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Three Republicans Vie to Replace Outgoing Tarrant County District Attorney
Kim Roberts
The Texan
January 4, 2022
https://thetexan.news/three-republicans-vie-to-replace-outgoing-tarrant-county-district-attorney/

The three Republican candidates for Tarrant County District Attorney (DA) — Matt Krause, Phil Sorrells, and Mollee Westfall — participated in their first candidate forum, hosted by Cowtown Republican Women on Monday, January 3.

The forum allowed each to highlight their experience and priorities for the office should they be elected to replace retiring DA Sharen Wilson.

Experience

Matt Krause, who has served as the state representative for House District 93 for 10 years, highlighted his policy experience. He said that the position of DA is more policy and administrative in nature and that he has experience leading on policy and fighting for conservative positions. While acknowledging it was not an official endorsement, he said Wilson told Tarrant County GOP chair Rick Barnes that she wanted Krause to replace her because he has good leadership qualities and is honest. Texas Right to Life and Texas Values Action have endorsed Krause in the race.

Phil Sorrells, who has been a county criminal court judge for 25 years and was a prosecutor for five years, highlighted his experience working in the criminal justice system. He believes he is the candidate who is the most conservative with the most experience, and that he could help train young prosecutors with the skills needed to succeed. Sorrells has been endorsed by former Governor Rick Perry and State Republican Executive Committee member David Wylie.

Mollee Westfall was an assistant district attorney in Tarrant County for 10 years before becoming a felony district court judge in 2006. She recently left that position to run for Tarrant County DA. She highlighted her judicial leadership, having been appointed to leadership positions by the Supreme Court of Texas, and managing some of the county's most high-risk offenders through her court. Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, among others, has endorsed Westfall.

Priorities

The candidates were also asked about what their priorities would be in their first few months in office.

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Sorrells highlighted that the restrictions on court action during 2020 due to COVID-19 has created a backlog of cases and warrants. He would make it a priority to solve the docket issues, he said.

Westfall also pointed to the docket backlog and said she'd set up special courts with retired judges to get the docket caught up. She also mentioned the recent rise in violent crime in the county and said she'd place a high priority on making Tarrant County safer by holding violent criminals accountable.

Krause said he would start by making personnel his priority and by getting the right team in place to operate well. He emphasized that prosecuting election integrity issues would be a priority for him, given the recent Court of Criminal Appeals decision that DAs are responsible for prosecuting election fraud.

Handling Plea Bargains

When asked about how to properly balance the use of plea bargaining with full prosecutions, all the candidates agreed that plea bargains are a necessary tool. Westfall said that Tarrant County typically has 20,000 cases in the felony system each year, and the courts can only try about 500. She said prosecutions must focus on the worst of the worst.

Krause acknowledged it is a tough issue to deal with. He said that bond and bail reform can help and that one must have trusted assistant DAs working within a framework that keeps the community safe.

Sorrells compared dealing with cases to emergency room triage – evaluations must be made to decide which cases to prosecute. He emphasized that plea bargains are a necessary tool, but that the DAs office must "have the right people to make the proper evaluation."

Measuring Success

Krause said he would measure the success of the DA's office by whether consistent, fair justice was meted out. "We can give no favor and can place no targets on anyone," he said, adding that he would pursue due process while keeping the community safe.

Sorrells agreed that keeping the community safe would be a measure of success. He would use various statistics about the DA's impact on crime for accountability. He also would evaluate those working in the DA's office to see if they are considered leaders in the state in their particular prosecutorial arena.

Westfall said she would measure success by "seeking justice in every case, but also reducing crime by holding offenders accountable."

Individual Questions

Each candidate was also asked a question individually. Krause was asked about his experience as a state representative and his qualification to serve as the Tarrant County District Attorney. He said that his policy experience actually gave him more experience with many of the issues now faced by the DA.

In facing decisions about how to handle difficult situations that might arise such as riots or a police shooting, Krause said the conservative principles he has followed as

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a policymaker would guide him. “I have not been swayed or intimidated,” he said. He also pointed to his work on various criminal justice efforts and leading investigations in the Texas House of Representatives as an important part of the experience he brings to the office.

Sorrells was asked about his support for the police and how that would be balanced with holding the police force accountable. He was unapologetic for supporting law enforcement in the county. “The police have to know the DA has their back,” he stated emphatically. He acknowledged that they are human and can make mistakes and even commit crimes. He said they’d be held accountable if that were the case.

Police need feedback about what happens to their case, Sorrells added, and they need to be educated about how they can improve the preparation of a case the next time.

Westfall was asked about how she would deal with offenders with mental health issues in the Tarrant County jail. She acknowledged that mental health must be considered and weighed as part of prosecutorial discretion. In more serious cases, mental health issues weigh less, but with less serious offenses, like criminal trespass by homeless people, she supports a diversion center. She said that the jail wants help handling people with mental health issues also.

The primary election for Tarrant County District Attorney will be March 1.

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Dallas, Arlington, DeSoto mayors urge U.S. Senate to support new voting rights laws
Sarah Bahari
Dallas Morning News
January 4, 2022
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/elections/2022/01/04/dallas-arlington-desoto-mayors-urge-us-senate-to-support-new-voting-rights-laws/

The mayors of Dallas, Arlington and DeSoto were among more than 140 mayors nationwide who signed a letter Monday urging the U.S. Senate to pass new voting rights legislation.

Mayors of Houston, San Antonio and Austin also signed the letter, which urged the Senate to pass the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act.

Fort Worth was the most populous Texas city to have a mayor not sign the letter. Mayor Mattie Parker did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday.

“American democracy is stronger when all eligible voters participate in elections,” the letter reads. “Yet voting rights are under historic attack and our very democracy is threatened.”

The mayors — including Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson, Arlington Mayor Jim Ross and DeSoto Mayor Rachel L. Proctor — pointed to recent legislation passed in 19 states that make it more difficult to vote, as well as incidents of state and local election administrators receiving threats or intimidation.

If passed, the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act would restore and update the 1965 Voting Rights Act that was written to protect people of color. Over the past

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decade, the U.S. Supreme Court has rolled back some of that landmark law's provisions.

The Freedom to Vote Act would require states to offer early voting and no-excuse mail voting and make Election Day a holiday. It would also ensure voting access for people with disabilities and promote a national standard for states with identification requirements.

"Voting is essential to maintaining and preserving democracy and is one of the most important rights and responsibilities that U.S. citizens have," the letter reads.

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Court asked to require accredited lab in GOP 'investigation'
Associated Press
January 4, 2022
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Court-asked-to-require-accredited-lab-in-GOP-16748364.php

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Dominion Voting Systems has asked a court to restrict any inspection of its voting machines as part of what Republican lawmakers call a "forensic investigation" of Pennsylvania's 2020 election to a laboratory that has specific credentials.

The Denver-based voting-system manufacturer filed paperwork in court Monday evening as Republican lawmakers move to inspect Dominion's machines and software in southern Pennsylvania's sparsely populated Fulton County using an unaccredited contractor that has no election experience.

In its court papers, Dominion requested an order requiring that any inspection be conducted by a federally accredited voting system test lab or a national laboratory used by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

Fulton county heavily backed former President Donald Trump, whose baseless claims about election fraud in 2020's presidential election have propelled various Republican endeavors to search for fraud in states Trump lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

A Commonwealth Court judge has separately given state and county officials until Jan. 10 to work out an agreed-upon set of rules for an inspection.

A lawyer representing Fulton County has said the Republican senator in charge of the " forensic investigation " wants to determine if the county's voting system was the same equipment as was certified by the state of Pennsylvania for use in 2020′s election.

Fulton County is cooperating.

Dominion's voting equipment has been at the center of conspiracy theories about the presidential election and it has filed defamation lawsuits against right-wing broadcasters and Trump allies.

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U.S. Prevails Over Canada in Dairy Dispute Under New Trade Deal
Josh Zumbrun

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Wall Street Journal
January 4, 2022
https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-prevails-over-canada-in-dairy-dispute-11641318427

WASHINGTON—Canada will be forced to end tariffs on U.S. dairy products under a milestone decision Tuesday that could allow American dairy farmers to increase sales to Canada by more than $200 million annually.

The ruling came in the first-ever use of a new dispute resolution panel established by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement. The U.S. contended that Canada used a complex set of tariff-rate quotas to reserve a share of the dairy market exclusively for Canadian dairy processors in violation of the 2020 pact.

“Today’s decision is an important victory for U.S. dairy farmers,” said Jim Mulhern, the president of the National Milk Producers Federation. “The United States and Canada negotiated specific market access terms covering a wide variety of dairy products, but instead of playing by those mutually agreed upon rules, Canada ignored its commitments.”

Canada didn’t commit to a specific course of action but acknowledged the Feb. 3 deadline to resolve the matter. In a joint statement, Canada’s ministers of trade and agriculture said they “continue to stand up for its dairy industry, farmers and workers and the communities they support.”

If Canada doesn’t come into compliance by the deadline, the U.S. could begin the process of initiating tariffs or other countermeasures.

Although Canada said aspects of the ruling were in its favor, the panel’s report contained only one ultimate finding—that Canada’s practices were inconsistent with its obligations in the trade deal.

“This is a big deal because it gives credibility to a recent trade agreement at a time when the current administration has expressed doubts about the benefits of trade agreements and has not initiated any new negotiations,” said Jessica Wasserman, a longtime Washington trade attorney and partner at WassermanRowe LLC.

The Trump administration filed an initial complaint about Canada’s dairy quotas in December 2020, leading to discussions between the two nations but no resolution.

In May of 2021, the U.S. escalated that complaint and triggered the dispute resolution process of the USMCA for the first time. The three-member dispute resolution panel was chaired by Elbio Rosselli, a diplomat from Uruguay, under USMCA rules to ensure that panelists are independent and have expertise in international law and trade treaties.

Canadian dairy had been omitted from 1994’s North American Free Trade Agreement, the precursor to the USMCA.

“This historic win will help eliminate unjustified trade restrictions on American dairy products, and will ensure that the U.S. dairy industry and its workers get the full benefit of the USMCA to market and sell U.S. products to Canadian consumers,” said U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, the Biden administration’s top trade negotiator.

Rep. Kevin Brady (R., Texas), the Republican leader of the House Ways and Means Committee, which has jurisdiction over trade deals, applauded the USTR.

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“I commend USTR for using USMCA’s new enforcement mechanism to achieve this important result,” he said. “Canada must now do the right thing and come into full compliance with its obligations on dairy.”

Canada’s dairy producers have long fought against opening their market. The country has around 11,000 commercial farms that hold substantial political sway because they are located in a politically important region: rural central Canada, especially French-speaking Quebec.

To protect those interests, Canada uses a quota system it calls supply management. Supporters say the system helps to stabilize prices and domestic capacity of a nutritional necessity.

The U.S. also has a long history of stabilizing and supporting its domestic dairy industry via a complex set of subsidies and regulations controlling the price. Dairy proved to be one of the most difficult issues during the final stage of negotiations between the U.S. and Canada over the trade deal.

The U.S. industry has long argued that Canada’s practices go too far, and almost immediately after the USMCA went into effect, voiced concerns that Canada was violating the deal.

Even with the restrictions in place, Canada is typically the No. 2 market for U.S. dairy exports, after Mexico, so further opening of its market could be a win for U.S. producers. According to the International Trade Commission, the USMCA—if implemented as negotiated—would boost U.S. dairy exports to Canada by $227 million.

Dairy exports to Canada have climbed by about $56 million, compared with when the USMCA took effect, according to Trade Data Monitor, which compiles global import and export data.

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Mexico COVID-19 infections up, especially at tourism centers
Alejandra Zuniga
Associated Press
January 4, 2022
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Mexico-COVID-19-infections-up-especially-at-16748777.php

LA PAZ, Mexico (AP) — COVID-19 infections are rising across Mexico, especially in two states home to major tourism destinations on the Caribbean Sea and Pacific Ocean that were busy during the holiday season.

According to data from the federal government, Quintana Roo, where tourists flock to Cancun, Tulum and other spots along the Mayan Riviera, and Baja California Sur, which draws beachgoers to the twin Pacific resorts that make up Los Cabos, are both experiencing some of their highest infection totals since the start of the pandemic.

During the holidays, the waterfront and beaches in La Paz, the capital of Baja California Sur perched on the Sea of Cortez, were packed with tourists. Early in the pandemic they had been closed.

Farther south in Los Cabos, hotels were at 75% of their capacity during the week of

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Christmas, according to the federal Tourism ministry.

“In December, January, tourism took off,” said Isrrael Coto, manager of a hotel-restaurant in La Ventana, about 20 miles south of La Paz. “People are tired of the confinement.”

Infections shot up too. Baja California Sur saw 700 new infections Dec. 29, compared to a previous high in July of fewer than 600.

On the opposite coast, Quintana Roo, went from 27 cases Dec. 20 to 484 eight days later, though that remained below its single-day high of 574 in August.

“This new variant (omicron) is very contagious, but fortunately it is not requiring hospitalization, nor do we have cases of rising deaths,” President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Tuesday.

Mexico experienced its worst moments of the pandemic a year earlier when hospitals were overwhelmed and test-confirmed COVID-19 deaths were above 1,400 daily. The real numbers were surely even higher because of limited testing.

However, the summer wave that peaked in August with more than 25,000 new infections in a single day was even higher.

At no time did Mexico close its borders or require negative test results for arriving tourists. Airports did require travelers to fill out a health form and many for a time were checking temperatures. Only at the shared border with the United States was cross-border traffic limited to the essential until November.

Coto considered the return of tourists to the beaches positive, but recognized there was concern over the rise in infections.

“There's a little nervousness,” he said. “The vaccine helped a little to give some certainty, but even so.”

Daniela Yepiz, a stylist in La Paz, said concern seemed to grow after infections rose in the days after Christmas, citing a lot of cancelations. “The people stopped coming,” she said.

Health Secretary Jorge Alcocer said, recent studies appear to indicate that even though there are new variants, the prevalence of vaccines could begin to mitigate the most serious effects of the virus. He emphasized that that was still just a hypothesis.

Mexico has vaccinated 88% of adults and has started giving a third dose to the elderly, health workers. Teachers will begin receiving the booster in the coming days.

“We are not as worried as before because most people are vaccinated,” said Arturo González Ledesma a doctor at Ajusco Medio Hospital in Mexico City, which has specialized in COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic. “Only in the unvaccinated do you see the face of terror.”

González encouraged people to remain careful. “We shouldn’t say we’re going to come out of it yet.”

The increase in infections led a dozen states of Mexico’s 32 to delay the return to classes after the holidays. While many of the country’s students returned to school Monday, those other states, including Quintana Roo and Baja California Sur, delayed

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the start to Jan. 17.

Meanwhile, local governments are once again stepping up their testing efforts. In La Paz this week, long lines were visible outside COVID-19 testing centers. Mexico City announced Tuesday that it was expanding testing hours at health centers and re-opening testing kiosks around the city in an effort to double capacity to about 23,400 tests daily.

Major population centers including Mexico state, which contains many of the capital's suburbs, as well as Guadalajara and Monterrey are also seeing rising infections. Mexico is nearing 300,000 test-confirmed COVID-19 deaths, though the real number of COVID-19 deaths is closer to 450,000, according to the government.

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US manufacturing activity slows to 11-month low in December
Martin Crutsinger
Associated Press
January 4, 2022
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/US-manufacturing-activity-slows-in-December-16748107.php

WASHINGTON (AP) — Growth in U.S. manufacturing slowed in December to an 11-month low with companies still combating supply chain problems.

The Institute for Supply Management, a trade group of purchasing managers, reported Tuesday that its index of manufacturing activity fell to a reading of 58.7 in December, 2.4 percentage points below the November reading of 61.1.

Any reading above 50 indicates growth in the manufacturing sector which has recorded 19 straight months of growth going back to the spring of 2020 when the pandemic hit. The December reading was the lowest since a matching 58.7 in January 2021.

The slowdown in December reflected a decline in both new orders and in production.

While the December performance still reflected strength in manufacturing, there were concerns that the current global surge in COVID-19 cases, largely the highly infectious omicron variant, could further depress manufacturing in coming months.

Omicron was only identified in late November and quickly became the dominant virus.

"The surge in domestic virus cases to more than 1 million per day could deal a more significant blow to manufacturing output as significant numbers of workers are forced to stay home," said Andrew Hunter, senior U.S. economist at Capital Economics.

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The January 6 Insurrection Isn't Over
Michael Waldman
Brennan Center for Justice
January 4, 2022
https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/analysis-opinion/january-6-insurrection-isnt-over

On the evening of December 7, 1941, President Franklin D. Roosevelt summoned his

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secretary and dictated a speech to be delivered to the nation the following day. Roosevelt intoned steadily, puffing on his cigarette and specifying punctuation marks as he spoke. “Yesterday, December seventh, 1941, a date which will live in world history…” When he received the typed draft, the president scratched out “world history” and scribbled “infamy.”

December 7, 1941. November 22, 1963. September 11, 2001. These events scarred our national psyche, and the mere mention of the date is enough to recall the trauma. This Thursday marks the one-year anniversary of another such date: January 6, 2021.

Like these other infamous dates, our understanding of the events of January 6 continues to develop. A year ago, we knew that Donald Trump had spurred the insurrection, with his Big Lie of a stolen election, his summoning of supporters to a “wild” protest, and the demand that his followers march up Pennsylvania Avenue and “fight like hell.” Today we know there was more to it: that Trump and his aides had a scheme, far-fetched as it was, to use chaos and doubt to throw the election to the House of Representatives, where it could be stolen for him. “Just say that the election was corrupt + leave the rest to me and the R. Congressmen,” notes from his call with the acting attorney general recorded.

Also like the other infamous dates, we now recognize January 6 not as an isolated event, but as part of a historical movement. This movement did not start with Trump. And this wider antidemocratic rebellion is far from defeated. To the contrary, it has made staggering progress. In 2021, legislatures across the country considered bills to grant themselves the power to overturn or nullify election results. Some are trying to legislate courts out of the voting process. Many are threatening to punish elections officials who attempt to ensure equal access to the ballot.

History’s searing days often served to rally public emotion, for better or worse. In World War II, soldiers fought to “remember Pearl Harbor.” 9/11 briefly unified the country but was used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

Will January 6 similarly inspire and rally? Congress is finally poised to act to protect American democracy. The Freedom to Vote Act and the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act are the most important voting rights bills in over half a century. They would stop the wave of restrictive voting laws, combat racial discrimination, establish strong national standards for elections. They would counter the antidemocratic impulse behind January 6. As the Senate returns this week from recess, they are the first item of business.

What does January 6 mean? What the Senate does — or fails to do — will provide the answer.

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Trump Isn’t the Only One to Blame for the Capitol Riot
Osita Nwanevu
New York Times
January 4, 2022
https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/04/opinion/capitol-riot.html

In December 1972, the critic Pauline Kael admitted that she’d been living in a political bubble. “I only know one person who voted for Nixon,” she said. “Where they are, I don’t know. They’re outside my ken.”

A pithier version of her remark (“I can’t believe Nixon won. I don’t know anyone who voted for him.”) has been used to exemplify liberal insularity ever since, both by conservative pundits and by the kind of centrist journalists who have spent the past several years buzzing in the ears of heartland diner patrons, looking for clues about Donald Trump’s rise.

The most important fact about the Trump era, though, can be gleaned simply by examining his vote tallies and approval ratings: At no point in his political career — not a single day — has Mr. Trump enjoyed the support of the majority of the country he governed for four years. And whatever else Jan. 6 might have been, it should be understood first and foremost as an expression of disbelief in — or at least a rejection of — that reality. Rather than accepting, in defeat, that much more of their country lay outside their ken than they’d known, his supporters proclaimed themselves victors and threw a deadly and historic tantrum.

The riot was an attack on our institutions, and of course, inflammatory conservative rhetoric and social media bear some of the blame. But our institutions also helped produce that violent outburst by building a sense of entitlement to power within America’s conservative minority.

The structural advantages that conservatives enjoy in our electoral system are well known. Twice already this young century, the Republican Party has won the Electoral College and thus the presidency while losing the popular vote. Republicans in the Senate haven’t represented a majority of Americans since the 1990s, yet they’ve controlled the chamber for roughly half of the past 20 years. In 2012 the party kept control of the House even though Democrats won more votes.

And as is now painfully clear to Democratic voters, their party faces significant barriers to success in Washington even when it manages to secure full control of government: The supermajority requirement imposed by the Senate filibuster can stall even wildly popular legislation, and Republicans have so stacked the judiciary that the Supreme Court seems poised to overturn Roe v. Wade, an outcome that around 60 percent of the American people oppose, according to several recent polls.

Obviously, none of the structural features of our federal system were designed with contemporary politics and the Republican Party in mind. But they are clearly giving a set of Americans who have taken strongly to conservative ideology — rural voters in sparsely populated states in the middle of the country — more power than the rest of the electorate.

With these structural advantages in place, it’s not especially difficult to see how the right came to view dramatic political losses, when they do occur, as suspect. If the basic mechanics of the federal system were as fair and balanced as we’re taught they are, the extent and duration of conservative power would reflect the legitimate preferences of most Americans. Democratic victories, by contrast, now seem to the right like underhanded usurpations of the will of the majority — in President Biden’s case, by fraud and foreign voters, and in Barack Obama’s, by a candidate who was himself a foreign imposition on the true American people.

But the federal system is neither fair nor balanced. Rather than democratic give and take between two parties that share the burden of winning over the other side, we have one favored party and another whose effortful victories against ever-lengthening odds are conspiratorially framed as the skulduggery of schemers who can win only through fraud and covert plans to import a new electorate.

It doesn’t help that Republican advantages partly insulate the party from public

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reproach; demagogy is more likely to spread among politicians if there are few electoral consequences. This is a recipe for political violence. Jan. 6 wasn't the first or the deadliest attack to stem from the idea that Democrats are working to force their will on a nonexistent conservative political and cultural majority. We have no reason to expect it will be the last.

And while much of the language Republican politicians and commentators use to incite their base seems outwardly extreme, it's important to remember that what was done on Jan. 6 was done in the name of the Constitution, as most Republican voters now understand it — as an eternal compact that keeps power in their rightful hands.

Tellingly, during his Jan. 6 rally, Mr. Trump cannily deployed some of the language Democrats have used to denounce voting restrictions and foreign interference. "Now it is up to Congress to confront this egregious assault on our democracy," he said. "I know that everyone here will soon be marching over to the Capitol building to peacefully and patriotically make your voices heard. Today we will see whether Republicans stand strong for the integrity of our elections."

The mainstream press has also had a hand in inflating the right's sense of itself. Habits like the misrepresentation of Republican voters and operatives as swing voters plucked off the street and the constant, reductive blather about political homogeneity on the coasts — even though there were more Trump voters in New York City in 2016 and 2020 than there were in both Dakotas combined — create distorted impressions of our political landscape. The tendency of journalists to measure the wisdom of policies and rhetoric based on their distance from the preferences of conservative voters only reinforces the idea that it's fair for politicians, activists and voters on the left to take the reddest parts of the country into account without the right taking a reciprocal interest in what most Americans want.

That premise still dominates and constrains strategic thinking within the Democratic Party. A year after the Capitol attack and all the rent garments and tears about the right's radicalism and the democratic process, the party has failed to deliver promised political reforms, thanks to opposition from pivotal members of its own Senate caucus — Democrats who argue that significantly changing our system would alienate Republicans.

Given demographic trends, power in Washington will likely continue accruing to Republicans even if the right doesn't undertake further efforts to subvert our elections. And to fix the structural biases at work, Democrats would have to either attempt the impossible task of securing broad, bipartisan support for major new amendments to the Constitution — which, it should be said, essentially bars changes to the Senate's basic design — or pass a set of system-rebalancing workarounds, such as admitting new states like the District of Columbia. It should never be forgotten that fully enfranchised voters from around the country gathered to stage a riot over their supposedly threatened political rights last January in a city of 700,000 people who don't have a full vote in Congress.

Jan. 6 demonstrated that the choice the country now faces isn't one between disruptive changes to our political system and a peaceable status quo. To assume that choice is to indulge the other big lie that drew violence to the Capitol in the first place. The notion that the 18th-century American constitutional order is suited to governance in the 21st is as preposterous and dangerous as anything Mr. Trump has ever uttered. It was the supposedly stabilizing features of our vaunted system that made him president to begin with and incubated the extremism that turned his departure into a crisis.

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Election fraud isn't really a thing, part infinity
Chris Cillizza
CNN
January 4, 2022
https://www.kake.com/story/45577661/election-fraud-isnt-really-a-thing-part-infinity

If there was any consistent thread throughout the presidency of Donald Trump, it was his unswerving belief that widespread election fraud was happening and needed to be wiped out.

Obviously we all know that Trump has spent the last year disputing the results of the 2020 election, wrongly insisting that it was stolen from him. But, you may not remember that Trump established a group -- the Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity -- early in his presidency aimed at flushing out the allegedly myriad examples of fraud in voting.

The problem for Trump -- then and now: There is simply no evidence of any widespread election fraud in American elections. It just isn't a thing.

Two recent examples make the point.

1. In Texas, an audit of the 2020 vote in the four most populous counties in the state produced a whole lot of nothing. As the Texas Tribune noted: "According to the state's review of the counties' partial manual counts, which they are already required to conduct under state law, there were few differences between electronic and manual ballot tallies — and counties were able to justify those inconsistencies." That the initial phase of the report was released on New Year's Eve tells you how much attention the Republicans who pushed for the audit wanted these initial findings to garner.

2. In Georgia, election investigators found 4 ballots that had been cast by people who were deceased -- out of almost 5 million total votes cast. Those four dead votes comprise .00008% of the total votes cast in Georgia in 2020. And, while no dead people should be allowed to vote, the Georgia investigation revealed that in all four cases a relative of the deceased person had cast the vote, meaning that this was no sort of coordinated effort. And those four votes are a far cry from the 5,000 dead people that Trump claimed had voted illegally in Georgia during a phone call after the election with the state's top election official.

These two latest findings are consistent with scads of other research done over the years into election fraud.

One study by Loyola Law School professor Justin Levitt, tracking US elections from 2000 to 2014 in search of voter fraud -- or, as he put it, "specific, credible allegation that someone may have pretended to be someone else at the polls" -- found 31 such instances out of more than a billion votes cast. Thirty-one! A five-year study on voter fraud commissioned by the George W. Bush administration reached that same conclusion back in 2007. The New York Times wrote at the time: "The Justice Department has turned up virtually no evidence of any organized effort to skew

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federal elections." And there's lots more!

The basic point is this: Yes, on occasion dead people cast a vote. And, yes, some people try (and succeed) at casting ballots in two different states. But, there is ZERO evidence that these rule-breakers are doing so in any sort of coordinated way. And, the sheer paucity of people who even attempt voter fraud is so small (as compared to the overall number of ballots cast in a given state or district) as to make the Trumpian obsession with it laughable.

Of course, Trump is so far down the election conspiracy rabbit hole that the latest developments in Texas and Georgia won't sway his views one bit. When you believe in a conspiracy theory, you can rationalize anything and everything as being part of that conspiracy -- no matter how outlandish it looks in the light of day.

The scarier thing for me is not that Trump will continue to push his election conspiracies, but rather that a majority of Republicans appear willing to go along with this farce despite all available evidence pointing to the fact that the 2020 election was both free and fair. That sort of willful ignorance is hugely damaging to our democracy and makes me worry about where we are headed in 2024.

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The Big Lie isn't dead, despite heaps of evidence. Voters must be ready in 2022
Editorial Board
Houston Chronicle
January 4, 2022
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/editorials/article/Editorial-The-Big-Lie-isn-t-dead-despite-16746420.php

As we approach the first anniversary of the Jan. 6 siege of the U.S. Capitol, one of the most grievous and shameful events in our nation’s history, it’s heartening to explore the findings of a year-end review by the Associated Press of every potential case of voter fraud in the six battleground states former President Donald Trump continues to dispute. His perpetuation of the Big Lie fueled the attempted insurrection.

The AP’s comprehensive review involved contacting hundreds of local election offices around the country. Taking nearly a year to complete, the review found — surprise, surprise — that the cases of potential fraud were so surpassingly few that they could not have made a difference in the 2020 presidential election. The report confirmed the findings of numerous election officials in battleground states (many of them Republicans), as well as Trump’s former Atty. Gen. William Barr, more than 80 federal judges and election experts representing both parties.

Americans in the six battleground states cast 25.5 million votes for president in 2020. Out of that vast number, AP’s researchers found fewer than 475 potential cases of voter fraud. Not 475 thousand, just 475.

There was no collusion, no vast, labyrinthine conspiracy, no sophisticated voting-machine computer manipulation. Nearly every one of the 475 possible cases was an individual acting alone to cast additional ballots. Some were Democrats, some Republicans. Some were elderly voters, some were former inmates, others were seeking to vote on behalf of dead relatives.

A Wisconsin man mistakenly thought he could vote while on parole, for instance; an Arizona woman was suspected of mailing a ballot for her dead mother; and a Pennsylvania man and Trump supporter tried to vote twice, once for himself and the

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second time for his son (after disguising himself by donning sunglasses). Almost all the 475 potentially fraudulent votes were tossed out. In cases where the intent to vote illegally was clear, prosecutors have brought or are considering charges. But the alleged instances of fraud never amounted to enough to sway local or state results, much less the presidential election as Trump and his supporters continue to claim.

Try to picture the two numbers from the battleground states — 475 and 25.5 million. Imagine the potential fraudsters in one line and the total number of voters in another, with a space of about five feet between each person in line (or six feet, just to be socially distanced). The fraud line would stretch about half a mile, from, say, City Hall to maybe a couple of blocks east of Minute Maid Park. The line of voters? All 25.5 million of them standing five feet apart would circle the globe.

Yes, we know that vote fraud happens. At least since colonial times, when Americans indicated their choice by tossing little colored balls into boxes, groups, political parties and individuals have tried to manipulate election outcomes. It happens.

It goes almost without saying that we do not condone any kind of vote fraud, no matter how innocuous, no matter who benefits. Messing with the system strikes at the heart of a functioning democracy and should be dealt with harshly. Nobody, however, stole the 2020 presidential election.

Messing with the system works both ways, though. Every American should resent being taken for a fool by perpetrators of the Big Lie. Despite his clamorous claims, continuing to this day, the former president lost to Joe Biden. He knows that and so do most Americans, even those who insist otherwise.

Trump was braying about ballot fraud, even before he won in 2016. The reason he can't be laughed off more than a year after he lost in 2020 is that too many Americans in his thrall believe him. And too many Republican lawmakers mimic his Big Lie to hamstring democracy, regardless of whether they actually believe Trump's absurd claims. They have used those claims to justify costly and time-consuming partisan state-level reviews. Some of them — Arizona in particular — have been laughably inept.

As the Associated Press noted, the tiny handful of cases that came to light in the 2020 battleground states underscore the fact that suspected fraud is almost always detected and exceptionally rare. That fact hasn't stopped Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and 15 other GOP governors from working to control who gets to vote in their state.

"Voter fraud is virtually non-existent," George Christenson, election clerk for Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, told the AP. In Wisconsin, five people statewide have been charged with fraud out of nearly 3.3 million ballots cast for president. "I would have to venture a guess that's about the same odds as getting hit by lightning," Christenson added.

Of course, we don't need a Milwaukee County election official to tell us that. Our own AG could have. In the past year Trump's Texas toady spent more than $2 million taxpayer dollars rooting about the state for voting fraud. He found basically nothing.

"There is a very specific reason why we don't see many instances of fraud, and that is because the system is designed to catch it, to flag it and then hold those people accountable," Amber McReynolds, a former director of elections in Denver, told the AP. Texas is no exception. The system works here, as well.

With midterm elections in the offing, voters should carefully scrutinize the fitness for

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office of any candidate who has helped perpetuate the Big Lie.

We would urge voters to educate themselves about the process as a way of inoculating themselves against election falsehoods. We're less prey to myth, lies and rumors when we're familiar with how the process works, either as a voter or a volunteer election worker.

The truth, we've been told, will make us free. With Trump and his Big Lie minions busily laying the groundwork for undercutting the legitimacy of elections in '22 and '24, voters need to be ready. All of us — Republicans, Democrats, independents — need to be aware that truth in 2022 is likely to face its sternest test in our lifetimes.

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Texas Republican Primaries Begin Test of Trump's Influence
Jonathan Bernstein
Bloomberg
January 4, 2022
https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/texas-republican-primaries-begin-test-of-trumps-influence/2022/01/04/3a8f9fa0-6d63-11ec-b1e2-0539da8f4451_story.html

It's an election year — and Americans will be voting sooner than many people may realize. The first primary election is in Texas on March 1, fewer than two months away.

While there will be a handful of important Democratic primaries, the big news is coming on the Republican side for several reasons. For one thing, with Republicans expected to have a good year, their nominees simply matter more, since they're more likely to be elected and share the power of the majority. For another, one of the things that can stop Republican majorities is the possibility of extremely poor candidates winning nominations in competitive seats. Control of the party is at stake, and that's currently a lot more of a contentious question on the Republican side.

Texas does not feature any of the dramatic contests in which a challenger endorsed by former President Donald Trump is trying to unseat an incumbent Republican. For that, we'll have to wait until May, when 13 states choose their nominees. In Idaho (May 19) and Georgia (May 24), Trump-endorsed candidates are taking on sitting Republican governors and, in Georgia, the Republican secretary of state who refused to help the president overturn the 2020 election results, Brad Raffensperger. We can be sure that such challenges will be interpreted as tests of Trump's influence within the party.

But Trump's clout will get an earlier test in some complicated primaries in Texas, where he has endorsed incumbents.

Governor Greg Abbott is being challenged by two even more radical Republicans, former U.S. Representative Allen West of Florida and former State Senator Don Huffines, both of whom are claiming that Abbott is insufficiently conservative. (A few other minor candidates are on the ballot as well, including one named Rick Perry. He's not the former governor, but his name could attract a few votes anyway). Abbott is favored to win the nomination, but if he falls below 50% on March 1 he'll be forced into a runoff, and that will surely be looked at as a sign of weakness even if he ultimately prevails.

Abbott has dominated the polling so far. Should he win while Trump-backed challengers win elsewhere, Trump would have a good argument that his endorsement

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was decisive. On the other hand, if Abbott gets dragged into a runoff, it would suggest that winning Trump challengers elsewhere might be successful not because of Trump in particular, but because of the general direction of the party.

The attorney general contest in Texas is even more complicated. Scandal-ridden incumbent Ken Paxton is seeking a third four-year term despite having been under indictment for most of his first two terms, and having much of his staff resign and charge him with corruption in an unrelated case during the current term. All of this has earned him three significant challengers: Current land Commissioner George P. Bush, former Texas supreme court Justice Eva Guzman and House Freedom Caucus stalwart Louie Gohmert. Trump endorsed Paxton, although Bush has broken from his family and supported the former president, and the Freedom Caucus members have been Trump's closest allies in the U.S Congress. Paxton, for his part, was a leader in lawsuits asking the courts to overturn the 2020 election. It's unclear what will happen, but Paxton's renomination doesn't appear to be a sure thing.

The winners are likely to prevail in November and govern the nation's second-biggest state. Perceptions about the outcomes matter, too, because they will influence what happens elsewhere. Only a fraction of Republican party actors are enthusiastic Trump supporters, and a smaller (and apparently shrinking) fraction are flat-out Trump opponents. Most Republican party actors, including politicians, will support him if they think they need to. And nothing is interpreted as showing a politician's clout — or lack thereof — as much as the fate of those he or she has endorsed.

If Abbott and Paxton dominate on March 1, Republicans in other states will be more inclined to scurry for Trump's favor before their own elections. If not? Fewer candidates will care about his support, and even those in the May primaries who already have it might be less likely to center their campaigns around it.

The tests of Trump's hold on Republicans are sometimes subtle and will take some time to sort themselves out. But it all starts soon, in Texas.

This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

Jonathan Bernstein is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist covering politics and policy. He taught political science at the University of Texas at San Antonio and DePauw University and wrote A Plain Blog About Politics.

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Texas and other state audits should restore voter confidence in our elections — but will they?
Merrill Matthews
The Hill
January 4, 2022
https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/588137-texas-and-other-state-audits-should-restore-voter-confidence-in-our?rl=1

Former President Trump has been pushing states, including Texas, to audit their 2020 election results in the hope of exposing voter fraud that he claims cost him the election. But the states that have done those audits have confirmed the accuracy of their election results. And Texas just provided the most recent evidence.

Election-related bills were all the rage in state legislatures in 2021. The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), an association of sitting state legislatures,

reports that 3,676 election bills were introduced in state legislatures last year, the highest number since NCSL started tracking that issue in 2001. But only 285 of those bills actually became law in 42 states, close to the historical norm for odd-numbered years. Several of those laws included a requirement for an election audit.

An “election audit” can refer to several types of actions. According to NCSL, “Most states, use a traditional fixed percentage audit, in which a small percentage of precincts or machines are selected for a comparison of the official count to a hand tally.” Texas has just announced the Phase 1 results of its election audit. And the findings should calm some people’s fears.

On Dec. 31, the office of Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott released the results in the “Phase 1 Progress Report.” The report focused on four counties: Dallas, Tarrant (Fort Worth), Collin (just north of Dallas) and Harris (Houston).

Three of those counties (Dallas, Harris and Tarrant) voted for Joe Biden in 2020, though historically Republican Tarrant County went for Biden by only 0.2 percentage points. Except for San Antonio and Austin, and some counties in the South and West, Texas is a very red state, and Trump easily won it.

According to the secretary’s report: “In Collin County, precincts 126, 209 and 66 were chosen for the partial manual count. Among these three precincts, the results provided to the SOS office showed a 17-vote discrepancy between electronic and hand counts.”

In Dallas County, the discrepancy between the electronic and hand counts in seven precincts was 10 votes. The Harris County audit included 10 precincts, and the discrepancy was five votes. And Tarrant County had seven precincts in its audit and the vote discrepancy was zero. State officials, not the counties, picked the precincts to be examined.

To be clear, “discrepancy” does not necessarily mean fraud. In fact, the three counties with discrepancies provided general explanations, which included human error in the initial counts.

The secretary’s report also outlines the state’s other election-related efforts, which include assessing the accuracy of voting machines, checking the statewide voter registration list, checking for ineligibility due to death, felony conviction or lack of citizenship, and other issues such as being registered to vote in another state.

All are important tasks that states can and should be doing on a regular basis.

But Texas is not the only state to do an audit. Arizona and Michigan have also enacted GOP-led audits. The Arizona audit of Maricopa County, the state’s largest, found that Biden won, and by 360 additional votes.

The Michigan audit, conducted by Republicans in the state’s Senate, released their report last June. The lead author of the report, Oversight Chairman Ed McBroom (R-Vulcan) included a statement with the report asserting, “This committee found no evidence of widespread or systematic fraud in Michigan’s prosecution of the 2020 election.” McBroom concedes that the committee did find several issues that needed addressing.

Of course, the state of Georgia conducted a hand recount of the presidential contest that confirmed its election results. Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger (R) never found the nearly 12,000 votes Trump encouraged him to find.

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With Texas weighing in with its Phase 1 results, the effort to prove widespread election fraud that might have changed a state's presidential election outcome is zero for four. And note that the legislature in all four states mentioned above is controlled by Republicans. That's also true of the other two states accused of widespread fraud that cost Trump the election: Wisconsin and Pennsylvania.

These election audits should alleviate some of the concerns expressed by voters, especially Republican voters. But, apparently, they haven't so far.

Yes, there is voter fraud, but thankfully such cases are typically limited to one or a handful of people. Even that small number can make a difference in tight elections, primarily in low-turnout local and runoff races. But it has very little impact on statewide elections.

With November midterm elections coming – and as we approach the anniversary of the Jan. 6 riot – it's critical that voters feel confidence in the basic accuracy and security of their state election systems. The really good news is that all the evidence so far indicates they can.

Merrill Matthews is a resident scholar with the Institute for Policy Innovation in Dallas, Texas. Follow him on Twitter @MerrillMatthews.

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 2/8/22
Date:	Tuesday, February 8, 2022 8:15:30 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
February 8, 2022

Early voting for the Texas Primary starts on Feb. 14; North Texas election officials are ready for the increased workload, *WFAA-TV*, February 7, 2022

Early Voting for Texas Primary Election Starts Feb. 14, *KXAS-TV*, February 8, 2022

What you should know about changes to voting by mail, *Texas Standard*, February 7, 2022

Gov. Abbott Holds Burning Cash in Billboard Campaign Calling to End 'Sham' Audit, *Dallas Observer*, February 7, 2022

Civil rights groups sue Texas secretary of state over voter purge program, *Spectrum News*, February 8, 2022

The man who brought drive-thru voting to Texas wants to be Houston's next mayor, *Texas Tribune*, February 7, 2022

What the Electoral Count Act is — and why some argue reforming it can protect future elections, *CNN*, February 7, 2022

Supreme Court sides with GOP in Alabama election map case, *Associated Press*, February 7, 2022

The RGV is at a Political Crossroads, *Texas Observer*, February 7, 2022

16 bodies found in street and warehouse in disputed territory in central Mexico, *Associated Press*, February 7, 2022

Early voting for the Texas Primary starts on Feb. 14; North Texas election officials are ready for the increased workload
Scoop Jefferson
WFAA-TV
February 7, 2022
https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/vote/early-voting-for-the-texas-primary-starts-on-feb-14-north-texas-election-officials-are-ready/287-7172bb02-6077-42c7-8c8a-

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TARRANT COUNTY, Texas — Troy Havard serves as the Tarrant County assistant elections administrator.

"When you have more people, you're going to have more registered voters," said Havard.

Havard and Tarrant County election workers have spent weeks preparing to serve more voters than ever before -- the Lone Star State has grown leaps and bounds.

"People are moving to Texas from other states. So, we're getting demographics from all over the United States, moving to Texas," said Havard.

Havard wants every voter to have the information they need to go to the polls. Election workers would love for Texans to prepare before early voting starts on Valentine's Day. That includes printing a sample ballot ahead of time.

"You can actually take that sample ballot with you to the polling location. Use that to make your choices as you vote," said Havard.

Havard said that will also cut down on how much time you spend at the polls. Election workers will use clean-pens between each voter, and they want residents to feel free to wear their masks, but it's not required.

"No one will be turned away from a polling location for not having a mask," said Havard.

Right now, the election office is also getting hit with all kinds of questions from voters.

"What the hours are for early voting, where the early voting locations are," said Havard.

One of the most asked questions is where to vote. Tarrant County participates in county-wide vote centers, which allow people to vote at any location during the primary and general elections. Many more counties have joined the growing list of counties with voting centers.

"Any registered voter in Tarrant County can go to any polling location to vote. And it doesn't matter if it's a primary election or a runoff or a general election," Havard.

Right now, all of the voting centers can use more volunteers. People who sign up to help at the polls undergo training. They look mostly for people willing to travel and accept assignments at locations that need help the most.

Voters can check on their registration, obtain a sample ballot, learn voting dates and hours and sign up to volunteer at the Texas Secretary of State website: https://www.sos.state.tx.us/index.html.

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Early Voting for Texas Primary Election Starts Feb. 14
Julie Fine
KXAS-TV
February 8, 2022
https://www.nbcdfw.com/news/politics/lone-star-politics/early-voting-for-texas-primary-

election-starts-february-14/2882417/

Voters will head to the polls soon for the March 1 Texas primary election. Early voting starts on Feb. 14 and will run for two weeks until Feb. 25.

Local election officials told NBC 5 Monday the in-person voting experience will be very similar to what they are used to.

“You are going to see the normal locations still being used. Inside the polling place you are going to see the procedures being probably close to identical to what they were last year or the year before,” said Collin County Elections Administrator Bruce Sherbet.

For larger counties, early voting locations must be open for nine hours on weekdays during the first week, 12 open hours on Saturday, and six open hours on Sunday. During the second week of early voting, 12 open hours are required each day. Specific hours are set by the counties.

You can cast an early ballot at any location in your county.

The Tarrant County elections administrator strongly suggests voting early and taking a look at a sample ballot before you go (see below). Things may have changed due to redistricting.

“After redistricting some people are going to be in a different precinct, in a different senate district, house district, JP district, whatever might have changed. So it’s very important that you don't assume that you are voting for the same representative you might have had in the past or the same district,” said Tarrant County Elections Administrator Heider Garcia.

The same identification requirements that have been in place in the past will also be in place for this election. However, some voters have noticed changes in the mail-in ballot application. A driver’s license number or a state-issued ID number or a social security number is now required.

“We can’t say enough please include both because those numbers have to match up what we have on file, so if you include your social security but on file is your driver’s license it could get rejected,” said Nick Solorzano, Dallas County Elections Department Communications Director.

Applications for mail-in ballots must be received, not postmarked, by Feb. 18.

The Texas Secretary of State's Website has more information; you can find it here. You can also check with your local county.

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What you should know about changes to voting by mail
Shelly Brisbin
Texas Standard
February 7, 2022
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/what-you-should-know-about-changes-to-voting-by-mail/

Changes made to Texas election law last year as part of Senate Bill 1, along with increased interest in voting by mail, have resulted in confusion about how the process

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works and what voters must do to verify their eligibility to cast a mail-in ballot.

County officials say that early in the current primary season, they were forced to reject up to 50% of vote-by-mail applications when the ID information on those applications did not match the number a voter had used when they had first registered to vote in Texas. The Texas secretary of state's office, which administers Texas elections, now provides a tracking site where voters can check and correct their application for a mail-in ballot.

To address questions and confusion about the vote-by-mail process, Texas Standard spoke with Sam Taylor, assistant secretary of state for communications. Listen to an extended version of the interview in the audio player above, or read the interview transcript below.

This interview has been edited lightly for clarity.

Texas Standard: In order to cast a ballot by mail in Texas, you have to meet some very specific eligibility requirements and then apply for a ballot. Can you walk us briefly through what that process is like?

Sam Taylor: First, it's important for voters to know that in order to vote by mail in Texas, you've got to meet certain criteria. Either you are 65 and older, you're disabled, [or] you are going to be out of the county during the early-voting period and on Election Day. And actually, a new qualification that was added under SB 1 is that if you're expected to give birth within three weeks of Election Day, you can also vote by mail, and then folks who are incarcerated but otherwise eligible to vote can also vote by mail.

So first, you have to meet those qualifications. And then one of the new requirements is that on the actual application for ballot-by-mail, as well as the carrier envelope that your actual ballot goes into, you have to provide an identification number issued by [the Texas Department of Public Safety] or the last four digits of your Social Security number, or if you haven't been issued one of those, you just have to check a box saying, I've not been issued one of those two, then the early-voting clerk will compare that to your voter registration record. And as long as that information matches what is on your voter-registration record, then you'll get sent a ballot by mail and your ballot-by-mail will count, once you put that identifying number on the carrier envelope itself.

That DPS identification number of some sort would mean your driver's license. What else would fall into that category?

Either your driver's license or your state ID. If you're not a driver, you can get those issued by DPS. Or there's another type of ID called the Election Identification Certificate, which issues to people specifically to have a photo ID to vote.

Let's turn to some listener questions here. One listener wanted to know if a voter who has an active case of COVID-19 is eligible for a mail-in ballot.

That's a great question, and I know that there was a lot of confusion about that back in in 2020. Essentially, if you have some sort of disability or physical condition that prevents you from going to the polling place without injuring yourself, then you are eligible to vote by mail. But for those voters, we also want to let them know that there is still the curbside voting option. A lot of people have seen headlines about 24-hour and drive-thru voting being banned, but that didn't do anything to the curbside voting, which is still available to folks who are disabled, who cannot get out of their car. They can actually request that a machine be brought to them and they can vote from their

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car curbside if they're disabled.

Under the new election law, voters need to indicate on their ballot application whether they used a driver's license or state ID number or Social Security number when they first registered to vote. For lots of folks, that could have been many years ago. What happens if you honestly don't remember which you used. Is there a way to be sure they can get a ballot?

Sure. So there's actually been a lot of misconception about that. An early version of SB 1 said that it had to be the same number that was on the voter's original registration record. Of course there was a quorum break, and what eventually became SB 1 went through multiple changes, and where it ultimately ended up is that it just has to identify the same voter. So it doesn't actually have to be the same exact number that you originally registered with. It just has to match the number that's on your voter-registration record.

Now, we've got about 17.1 million registered voters in Texas, and of those 17.1 million voters, The vast majority – about 96% – have both numbers in their record. So you actually don't have to remember what you originally registered to vote with. You just have to put a number that matches what's on your voter-registration record.

What we're recommending – county officials and our office – is that if you're unsure, if you only have one on your record, then go ahead and put both. And as long as one of them matches, you will get a ballot by mail.

So, just play it safe and but put both numbers there?

It's not required, but it can't hurt.

So we heard early in this cycle from county officials who said they had to reject a great many ballot applications. I think up to 50% was what we were hearing because a voter wasn't able to indicate which number they used to register. And then your office began adding ID information to voting records provided to counties. Is that right? And has the process of adding driver's license and Social Security information to database actually been completed now?

Yes. That has helped a lot. That's the process that we've been doing with the Department of Public Safety over the past several months. And actually, the reason why we saw those high rejection rates initially is because a lot of people were using the old forms that didn't even have a field for that ID information. So folks were using old forms, maybe sent to them by campaigns or third-party groups who hadn't gotten the updated form for whatever reason. So folks were sending it in and either leaving that section blank or they were just filling out the old version of the form. So they had to be rejected.

Over time, folks, realized that the new form is what's in place. They started correcting that. And counties got more direction from our office, and we provided some additional guidance on how to process those. We've got a new ballot tracker online. The counties have been entering data into that ballot tracker, and as of last Friday, the statewide rejection rate was about 6.7%, so down significantly from what we saw initially because I think a lot of folks were using those old forms or just not putting down an ID number.

What happens if an application to vote by mail is rejected? Under the new law, county officials are limited in the ways they can communicate with voters. So how can the voter actually learn their status, add needed information to their

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application and reapply?

There's a couple different ways. So first of all, when the county rejects it, they're required to send you a Notice of Rejection. And that includes all the instructions on how you can cure that rejection, meaning, add the missing or incorrect ID information that was on the original application. So you'll get a letter in the mail with that. But if you don't want to wait for that letter in the mail, you can always go votetexas.gov and click on "Track My Ballot." And then when you enter the ballot tracker, you enter the information that's required on that screen. You can actually see where your application is in the process, and if it's been rejected, you can click "Review" and then "Correct," and it will add that information to your application for ballot by mail so that the county early-voting clerk can process it correctly and send you a ballot.

I know that there were some delays in getting that site up and running in fully populated. What's the status now and what can people learn when they actually go there?

Votetexas.gov is kind of our clearinghouse for all voting information. We're actually in the process of updating it and making it a lot more user friendly. So we're going to be rolling out a new votetexas.gov layout this week. And it's going to have all the information that folks need to know for voting in person, voting by mail, what kinds of ID requirements there are for both, and then some other frequently asked questions such as: "How do I become a poll worker?" "How do I become a poll watcher?" "How do I become a student voting clerk?" And all kinds of different ways that you can get involved and get the resources of training through our office.

If a voter isn't able to go online for whatever reason, how can they first get an application for a mail-in ballot, and, second, check to see when they can expect to receive it?

The best thing to do in that situation would be to contact your [county's] early-voting clerk. And the early-voting clerk is going to handle all the applications for ballot by mail and the ballots. In some counties, the early-voting clerk is in the county clerk's office. Some are within what's called an elections administrator's office. Now, that's different from voter registration in some counties. Some counties, like Travis County, have a tax assessor collector who handles registration and a clerk who handles actual voting. So you'll want to check and call your county office to see if they've got an election administrator or if they've got a county clerk that handles that office.

That's where you would request an application for a mail-in ballot by phone, right?

Correct. And under the new law, you have to proactively request an application for a mail-in ballot. County officials don't just proactively send mail-in ballot [applications] to people who are over 65 anymore – that, under the new law that is prohibited. However, campaigns and third-party organizations are welcome to send those mail-in ballot applications to folks who are over 65 who automatically qualify for voting by mail. Just make sure it is the right form because we've had an issue with some campaigns and third-party groups sending out the old form. So look in the top-right corner of that application and make sure there's a field to put that ID information, so that you're filling out the right form and it won't get rejected.

And at the time in which you request that application, I presume you can ask the county officials when you can expect to receive the application?

Yes, absolutely. The counties are really good about sending out those applications

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that day, if not the next day. Counties are making sure that they get those out as quickly as possible because it's important for voters by mail to know that that application has to be received by Feb. 18. It's not a postmark deadline, like the voter-registration application; it's actually a receipt deadline. So you want to get that in as early as possible so that it's received by Feb. 18, so that the county can process that application and send you your ballot.

I suppose we should remind people of the deadlines related to voting in the upcoming primary elections. When's the deadline to submit a vote-by-mail application? And when does that completed ballot need to be returned?

Vote-by-mail applications need to be into your county early-voting clerk by Feb. 18. And just a helpful reminder: that's the first Friday of the early-voting period. And then, in terms of the actual ballot getting back to your county early-voting clerk, that has to be postmarked by 7 p.m. on Election Day and received by 5 p.m. the day after Election Day.

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Gov. Abbott Holds Burning Cash in Billboard Campaign Calling to End 'Sham' Audit
Simone Carter
Dallas Observer
February 7, 2022
https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/republicans-for-voting-rights-unveil-12-billboards-in-texas-slamming-gov-abbott-for-sham-audit-of-2020-election-13350910

First, they came for former President Donald Trump. Now, that same group of pro-voting rights Republicans is attacking another politician via billboard: Gov. Greg Abbott.

Last week, the Republicans for Voting Rights (RVR) initiative launched a billboard campaign to remind the governor that there's no need for an audit of the 2020 election. The former president won the Lone Star State by a comfortable margin, after all.

Still, Trump asked for one last September, and hours later, he received.

Commuters in Dallas-Fort Worth can catch a glimpse of the signs, which feature a beaming Abbott holding a flaming stack of cash. "STOP WASTING TAXPAYER MONEY," they read. "GOV. ABBOTT, END THE SHAM AUDIT."

Texas ran a good election that its leaders should be proud of, and they should stand by the results, said RVR Director Amanda Carpenter.

"It is extremely disheartening to see Governor Abbott cast aspersions on his own election in order to soothe Donald Trump's ego," she said. "There was a time for audits, there were a time for lawsuits to challenge the results. That time is over. It is now 2022 and Republicans should be looking forward, not backward."

Twelve billboards appear throughout the state and will stand through Feb. 14. In addition to Dallas-Fort Worth, they can be seen in Corpus Christi, Amarillo, Laredo, Austin, Lubbock, San Antonio and Midland-Odessa.

Last fall, the pro-voting initiative was also behind the "TRUMP LOST" billboard that sprouted up in Dallas. That sign depicted the former president hunched over and

similarly urged his supporters to drop the needless audits.

“We want to be out there advocating for the conservatives out there that actually believe in the right to vote, and believe in the right for everyone to vote, and want to support that and protect it,” Olivia Troye, a Republicans for Voting Rights spokesperson, told the Observer late last year.

Texas isn’t the only state that sought to reexamine the 2020 election results. Carpenter notes that similar efforts are “bubbling up” everywhere; one in Arizona actually found that Trump had lost by a wider margin than previously thought.

Even if these audits don’t reverse any outcomes, experts fear that they’re working to chip away at trust in the democratic process. Some warn that such moves could pave the way for future election challenges when a candidate again won fair and square.

In Texas' case, such a statewide probe may be costly, with one estimate saying it could amount to some $250 million in taxpayer money. In November, $4 million was drained from the state prison system to help fund county election audits.

Texas serves as a role model for other states, Carpenter said. Soon, Republicans elsewhere could try to replicate the audit, which is bad for the system overall.

Many pro-Trump officials have already failed to upend the 2020 election results, she said. If there were any systemwide problems, they would have certainly been uncovered by now.

“This is nothing but a messaging tool to try to keep the ‘Big Lie’ alive,” she said. “It’s effective because when people hear there’s an investigation, they think there’s something wrong. But there’s not.”

But during an interview with FOX last fall, Abbott defended the audit as legitimate. "Why do we audit everything in this world, but people raise their hands in concern when we audit elections, which is fundamental to our democracy?" he said.

Local leaders, meanwhile, have largely disagreed.

Texas focused the audit on four counties: Dallas, Tarrant, Harris and Collin. President Joe Biden won in three, including in historically red Tarrant, but was bested by Trump in Collin.

Even still, Republican Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley doesn't see a need to dredge up the past. “The conspiracy theorists who want to come up with all these ways or reasons why this election wasn’t right — they might very well find something else,” he told The Texas Tribune last year. “It’s time to move on.”

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Civil rights groups sue Texas secretary of state over voter purge program
Marissa Mizroch
Spectrum News
February 8, 2022
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/austin/politics/2022/02/08/civil-rights-groups-sue-texas-secretary-of-state-over-voter-purge-program

TEXAS — A group of civil rights organizations is suing the Texas secretary of state over a so-called “voter purge” program.

The suit, led by the American Civil Liberties Union Foundation of Texas and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, alleges the secretary of state is violating the National Voter Registration Act by refusing to turn over documents related to the program.

“The Texas secretary is once again improperly trying to purge voters from voter rolls [and is] ensnaring a ton of naturalized citizens in its efforts,” said Ashley Harris, a lawyer with the ACLU of Texas. “[They are] targeting largely communities of color in Texas who have just as much of a right to vote as everyone else.”

The elections law passed last year by the Legislature requires the secretary of state to do regular sweeps of the voter rolls to verify voters’ citizenship status.

This new iteration of a voter purge program follows a similar attempt made in 2019. That program was halted after it came out that the office was relying on out-of-date records and would have wrongly canceled thousands of voter registrations of legal Texas voters. The groups suing say they cannot determine if the secretary of state’s office is following the rules set by the 2019 settlement without the documents.

“The question here is whether the state is following the procedures it says it is,” said Harris. “And if it is, why are so many naturalized citizens being [wrongfully removed]?”

The secretary of state’s office declined to comment on the lawsuit but did point to documents on its website detailing the citizenship verification process.

About 11,000 voters have been flagged as potential non-citizens this time around, and about 2,500 registrations were canceled as of Dec. 31, 2021.

Federal law prohibits any registrations from being canceled 90 days before an election, so any purges are on hold until after the March 1 primaries.

Click the link above for the full interview with Ashley Harris.

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The man who brought drive-thru voting to Texas wants to be Houston’s next mayor
Joshua Fechter
Texas Tribune
February 7, 2022
https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/07/harris-county-elections-houston-mayor-collins/

Chris Hollins, the former Harris County elections chief who pushed measures aimed at expanding ballot access during the November 2020 election, announced Monday that he’s running for Houston mayor in 2023.

“The challenges that we’re facing as Houstonians are becoming more and more complex,” Hollins, 35, said in an interview with The Texas Tribune. “And to overcome those challenges, that job demands innovation, that job demands effective leadership. And so we need a mayor who has a vision for Houston, but who also has the skills and attributes necessary to achieve that vision.”

Hollins, a Texas Democratic Party official who temporarily served as Harris County clerk in 2020, rose to prominence two years ago by championing efforts intended to

make it easier for people to vote during the pandemic, including 24-hour drive-thru voting and a bid to send applications for mail-in ballots to more than 2 million registered voters in Harris County.

Those efforts drew a legal battle and a decisive rebuke from state Republican lawmakers, who passed a sweeping voting restrictions bill last year that outlawed the measures Hollins put in place.

Now, Hollins is looking to use his brief seven-month tenure as county clerk to catapult him into the mayor's office — where he would oversee a $5.1 billion budget and 23,000 municipal employees. He's running to replace Mayor Sylvester Turner, who will step down next year after serving two four-year terms; the city has term limits that prevent him from running again.

Hollins is the second major candidate to announce for mayor, following state Sen. John Whitmire, a longtime Houston Democrat with deep ties to the city's police and fire unions and an $11 million war chest.

Top of mind for Hollins is public safety. Like many other major U.S. cities, Houston has seen a substantial increase in the number of homicides during the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year's 469 killings represented one of the highest homicide rates in decades, according to the Houston Chronicle. And in one week last month, one Houston-area law enforcement officer was fatally shot, another was killed by a driver and another three were wounded in a shootout.

Last week, Turner announced a $44 million plan to combat the rise in violent crime.

Hollins, who grew up in southwest Houston and whose father was a Houston police officer, said he wants to see "a few hundred [more officers] at minimum" added to Houston Police Department's authorized strength of 5,429 sworn officers, as well as investments in "crime-fighting technology." But boosting safety extends beyond policing, Hollins said.

"Our community at large cannot thrive unless we're safe and, just as important, we feel safe in our city," Hollins said. "So whether that means addressing issues of crime, flooding, housing or the pandemic, Houstonians have to be able to trust that our mayor is committed to protecting residents and to fostering a safe community."

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What the Electoral Count Act is — and why some argue reforming it can protect future elections
Paul LeBlanc
CNN
February 7, 2022
https://kvia.com/your-voice-your-vote/politics/cnn-us-politics/2022/02/07/what-the-electoral-count-act-is-and-why-some-argue-reforming-it-can-protect-future-elections/

The Electoral Count Act proved to be a vital safeguard for democracy when former President Donald Trump sought to overturn the 2020 presidential election in his favor.

Though the 19th-century law is vague, it makes clear that the vice president cannot overturn the result of a presidential election as Trump had hoped then-Vice President Mike Pence would do while presiding over the count of Electoral College votes in Congress.

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“Look, I understand the disappointment many feel about the last election. I was on the ballot,” Pence said last week. “But whatever the future holds, I know we did our duty that day.”

Still, Trump’s effort to exploit the law has prompted lawmakers from both parties to take a look at updating it for future elections.

Here’s what you need to know:

What is the Electoral Count Act?

The 1887 law focuses on what happens after Americans vote, setting out the process Congress uses to certify the Electoral College votes submitted by states.

Why do some lawmakers want to reform it?
While it’s an important part of the vote certification process, the Electoral Count Act is exceedingly vague.

Election law experts and those urging reform have repeatedly warned that, in light of the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, the law needs to be updated and strengthened to ensure that a losing party can never subvert the results of the Electoral College.

What reforms are being considered?
A number of proposals have been floated to reform the law.

Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska told CNN last month that the bipartisan group of lawmakers working to update the law is moving “aggressively” to draft reforms, but did not give an exact timeline.

Meanwhile, a Democratic group — made up of independent Sen. Angus King of Maine, who caucuses with Senate Democrats, and Sens. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Dick Durbin of Illinois — has released a discussion draft of their proposal to update the legislation.

According to a summary of the proposal, the measure would, among a number of provisions, “clarify” that the vice president does not have the authority to reject a state’s electors. It would establish “specific and narrow grounds” for objections to electoral votes or electors.

And it would “raise the thresholds for Congress to consider objections” while also making it more difficult for objections to be sustained without widespread support in both chambers.

Could reforms to the law actually pass?
“Absolutely,” says Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

There is serious interest from both Democrats and Republicans in updating the law, and talks are gaining momentum. But the effort is still in its early stages, and drafting legislation and finalizing a bill could take weeks if not months.

“I think absolutely it’ll pass. Now, there will be some people saying it’s not enough. There will be some people saying it’s more than what we should do or we don’t need it. And what we’ll do is try to bring them all together and say, ‘Listen, this is what we should do because this is what caused the problem. And it’s what we can do. So let’s do that,'” Manchin told CNN’s Jake Tapper in a joint interview with Murkowski on

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“State of the Union” on Sunday.

Murkowski told Tapper: “We’re going to take the Goldilocks approach here. We’re gonna try to find what’s just right. … And it’s not going to be just right for everybody, but will it be a step ahead? Will it be important for the country? Yeah.”

How does Trump fit in?
The former President has added urgency to the election reform push by continuing to spread lies about the 2020 election in a preview of the kind of message he could make the centerpiece of a future campaign if he runs again.

Specifically, Trump has falsely claimed that the bipartisan group of lawmakers working to reform the Electoral Count Act proves his claim that Pence had the power to overturn the 2020 election.

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Supreme Court sides with GOP in Alabama election map case
Mark Sherman and Jessica Gresko
Associated Press
February 7, 2022
https://www.kxan.com/news/political-news/supreme-court-sides-with-gop-in-alabama-election-map-case/

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court put on hold a lower court ruling that Alabama must draw new congressional districts before the 2022 elections to increase Black voting power. The high court order boosts Republican chances to hold six of the state’s seven seats in the House of Representatives.

The court’s action, by a 5-4 vote announced Monday, means the upcoming elections will be conducted under a map drawn by Alabama’s Republican-controlled legislature that contains one majority-Black district, represented by a Black Democrat, in a state in which more than a quarter of the population is Black.

A three-judge lower court, including two judges appointed by former President Donald Trump, had ruled that the state had likely violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the political power of Black voters by not creating a second district in which they made up a majority, or close to it.

Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Samuel Alito, part of the conservative majority, said the lower court’s order for a new map came too close to the 2022 election cycle.

Chief Justice John Roberts joined his three more liberal colleagues in dissent.

The justices will at some later date decide whether the map produced by the state violates the landmark voting rights law, a case that could call into question “decades of this Court’s precedent about Section 2 of the VRA,” Justice Elena Kagan wrote in dissent.

That decision presumably will govern elections in 2024 through the end of the decade in Alabama and could affect minority political representation elsewhere in the country, too.

Alabama lawmakers redrew the state’s congressional districts following the results of the 2020 census. Several groups of voters sued, arguing that the new maps diluted the voting power of Black residents.

In a unanimous ruling in late January, the three judges said that the groups were likely to succeed in showing that the state had violated the Voting Rights Act. As a result, the panel ordered lawmakers to redraw the districts so Black voters would be a majority, or close to it, in two districts, not one. The ruling ran more than 200 pages.

The panel wrote that “we do not regard the question … as a close one.”

Alabama asked the Supreme Court to put the ruling on hold while it appeals and the justices agreed. The state argued that it drew the new map guided by race-neutral principles and that the new map is similar to past maps.

More than a dozen mostly Republican-led states had filed a brief urging the justices to side with Alabama and allow it to use the maps it originally drew.

Deuel Ross, a lawyer for Alabamians who sued, called the state’s congressional districts “a textbook case of a Voting Rights Act violation” and said the high court’s decision to intervene is disheartening.

But the facts are clear, Ross, a lawyer with the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, wrote in an email to The Associated Press. “Alabama’s current congressional map violates the Voting Rights Act,” he said. “The litigation will continue, and we are confident that Black Alabamians will eventually have the congressional map they deserve — one that fairly represents all voters.”

Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall called the order a victory for the state and said he believes the state will “ultimately prevail” in the ongoing litigation.

Marshall’s office argued the state’s congressional districts are similar to those in use, and approved by the courts, since the 1990s.

Roberts, who typically votes against consideration of race, wrote that he shares some of Alabama’s concerns, but still would have let the redrawn districts govern the 2022 election and have future elections governed by the ultimate outcome in the case.

Kavanaugh, writing to explain his vote, stressed that the court has repeatedly declined in the past to change the rules close to an election.

“When an election is close at hand, the rules of the road must be clear and settled. Late judicial tinkering with election laws can lead to disruption and to unanticipated and unfair consequences for candidates, political parties, and voters, among others. It is one thing for a State on its own to toy with its election laws close to a State’s elections. But it is quite another thing for a federal court to swoop in and re-do a State’s election laws in the period close to an election,” he wrote in an opinion Alito joined.

Taking issue with Kavanaugh, Kagan noted that the lower court ruled months before any votes will be cast.

She criticized the conservatives for using the emergency application process known as the shadow docket “to signal or make changes in the law, without anything approaching full briefing and argument.”

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The RGV is at a Political Crossroads

Gus Bova
Texas Observer
February 7, 2022
https://www.texasobserver.org/the-rgv-is-at-a-political-crossroads/

The Rio Grande Valley, the border region comprising Texas' southern tip that some 1.4 million residents call home, is known for a certain brand of politics. Essentially a one-party territory, Valley Democrats typically coast on low voter turnout through November elections. The winners are often referred to as "South Texas Democrats"—which is to say, conservatives on issues ranging from guns to fossil fuels to abortion. Though not unique to the border, the area regularly hosts family dynasties and public corruption. Now, this political status quo appears in flux; with surprise retirements, redrawn political maps, and insurgents from both right and left, Valley politics look rife with possibility.

"It's exciting times; it's like a crossroads," said Danny Diaz, organizing director at LUPE Votes, an organization cultivating candidates in the Valley to run on a Bernie Sanders-esque platform. "We're trying to break through that mold of traditional establishment Democrats down here."

Diaz's organization is targeting a McAllen-based congressional seat, which is being vacated by Democratic incumbent Vicente Gonzalez after Republicans redrew the district to be more conservative. Gonzalez is now running in a neighboring U.S House district to succeed five-term incumbent Filemon Vela, who's retiring. In Brownsville, the Lucios—a long-serving father-son duo—are stepping down too, freeing up a state Senate and state House seat. Upriver, Congressman Henry Cuellar, who represents a western chunk of the Valley, is facing a tough primary and an apparent FBI investigation, and 10-term state House member Ryan Guillen switched parties from Democrat to Republican in November.

Amid all the change, the Valley is seeing an unprecedented crop of viable women candidates running in both parties. Some 60 years ago, Latinos began replacing Anglos in many of the region's elected offices, but the representatives have been overwhelmingly men. Next year, it's conceivable that women could hold all three congressional seats covering the Valley, and the Brownsville state Senate seat—a potential first in all cases.

Republicans, typically a non-factor outside of some local races, will be fighting hard for Valley voters too after the area swung toward Trump in his second presidential bid.

In November 2020, turnout rates in the Valley rose to levels not seen in 30 years. Typically, Democrats expect to benefit from a boost in Latino voting, and Joe Biden did win the Valley by about 15 points, carrying both urban counties, Hidalgo and Cameron, and both rural counties, Starr and Willacy. But just four years prior, Hillary Clinton had won the region by more than twice Biden's margin. This trend, of Trump outperforming 2016, played out all along Texas' 1,254-mile border.

The 2020 results set off a frenzy of national media attention, as reporters and pundits leaped to ask how so many Hispanics could defect to such an openly xenophobic president. Some headlines exaggerated the results, implying Trump had won the Texas border; some stories trumpeted Trump's victory in Zapata County, downplaying that it accounted for less than 4,000 total votes; and a number of journalists failed to fact-check basic aspects of local geography. Nevertheless, a real shift did occur, one that should concern Texas Democrats, who've long pinned their statewide hopes on supermajority Latino backing.

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Explanations vary for Trump's 2020 bump, and there's evidence available for politicos of all stripes to make their case. Perhaps a more progressive nominee like Bernie Sanders, who carried every populous Texas border county in the primary, would have performed better. Maybe the GOP finally tapped into a population more attuned to their messages on the oil industry, religion, and law enforcement. Or perhaps it was just Trump's attention-grabbing personality—after all, many Trump voters selected Democrats down-ballot. Most observers, though, agree on one thing: Dems largely got the grade they earned. Leery of COVID-19, the party eschewed crucial in-person door-knocking, and the Biden campaign never prioritized the region anyway.

"Democrats spent almost no money in the Valley talking to Latinos while the Republicans were organizing on the ground through the Libre Initiative and through other organizations," said political consultant Chuck Rocha, exaggerating somewhat. President of the consulting firm Solidarity Strategies, Rocha worked on Sanders' 2020 presidential campaign and is working for a number of Texas candidates this cycle. "You reporters, you ideologues, you people who don't run campaigns, you think it's about the candidate's message; the candidate's message don't matter a fuck if you're not spending money to go tell voters."

Whatever the cause of Trump's support, the GOP hopes to prove it wasn't a one-off event. Governor Greg Abbott announced his reelection bid in McAllen—one of numerous visits he's made to the region, invariably to scaremonger about refugees—and his campaign has said he hopes to win the Texas Latino vote this year. The Republican National Committee has set up a Hispanic community center in McAllen. The local GOP maintains a "strike force" to phonebank and knock doors, and the party hosts a suite of regular events including law enforcement appreciation days and toy and coat drives.

"When I first said I was Republican back in 2011-12, I lost friends and people thought I was crazy," said Adrienne Peña-Garza, chair of the Hidalgo County GOP and daughter of Aaron Peña, a former state representative who switched from Democrat to Republican a decade ago. "Now people are asking us: 'When's your next Lincoln-Reagan Dinner? When's your next Get out the Vote event? When's your next Guns and Cake event?'"

Plenty of conservative Democrats are appealing to Valley voters this year, too, setting up at least three electoral paths forward. Two races, in particular, serve as microcosms of the region's political moment.

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT 15

CD-15 is a tall candlestick of a district stretching from the Rio Grande to the outskirts of San Antonio, with its heart in the McAllen-metro, the Valley's biggest urban center. In last year's redistricting, the Legislature rejiggered CD-15 to include more of rural western Hidalgo County, changing it from a district that Trump lost by two points to one he would have won by two. That revision sent the incumbent congressman, Democrat Vicente Gonzalez—who won reelection in 2020 by a scant three points—scurrying east to run in a neighboring district that covers Brownsville, the Valley's other major city. In its 120-year history, the seat has never been held by a Republican.

Monica De La Cruz, an insurance agent and the Republican who nearly toppled Gonzalez last election, is running again this year with the backing of House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy. Despite some bad headlines stemming from a messy divorce, De La Cruz's fundraising remains robust: Last year, she pulled in some $1.5

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million. Her closest competitor, Mauro Garza, the owner of a gay nightclub in San Antonio who's making his third bid for Congress, raised half a million, with the rest of the field lagging much farther behind.

In a recent forum, it was hard to distinguish between the messages of the Republican candidates for CD-15, who all said they were running primarily to address border security. But De La Cruz may have topped them all in message discipline. Asked how she would address the Valley's disproportionate rates of diabetes and other preexisting conditions that have helped make COVID so fatal in the region, De La Cruz replied without missing a beat: "Number one … our medical hospitals, our doctors, are being clogged again by the illegal immigration that is happening here."

On the other side, a scrum of Democrats are scrambling to build name recognition and play financial catchup. Two men aiming for the centrist lane lead the pack financially according to the most recent filings: John Villarreal Rigney, with $150,000 that he loaned himself, and Ruben Ramirez with just over $100K. Eliza Alvarado, who previously worked for Congressman Ruben Hinojosa and both DHR Health, the influential Valley hospital network, and its political arm the Border Health PAC, ended last year with $75,000.

Michelle Vallejo, who co-owns a flea market in the McAllen-area, is running as perhaps the most progressive of the serious candidates. Vallejo, who reported raising $66,000, was recruited by LUPE Votes, a new spinoff 501(c)(4) of La Union Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE), a longstanding community organization in the Valley that fights for things like farmworker protections and infrastructure in colonias. The turn toward direct political campaign work is new for the organization, making Vallejo's run as much a personal test as a test of LUPE's ability to become a consistent force pushing South Texas politics left. Vallejo has adopted LUPE's platform, which includes Medicare for All, a $15 minimum wage, and an anti-war foreign policy.

"I would not be where I am without LUPE," Vallejo said, noting the group has 6,000-8,000 members in the 15th. "I think traditionally these races are based on who has the most purchasing power when it comes to mailers, signs, and media, and I'm so grateful that for my campaign that's not the only thing we're focusing on, and I love that it started with the energy of having a ground game."

Whoever emerges from the CD-15 primaries will find themselves part of a national fight for control of the U.S. House in November, as Democrats struggle to defend their meager majority against a Republican offensive.

STATE SENATE DISTRICT 27

For three decades, voters in the Brownsville-based SD-27 have sent Democrat Eddie Lucio Jr. to represent them in the Texas Capitol's east wing. A bête noire for the party's liberals, Lucio rose to power by successfully primarying incumbent Democrats from the right. He championed tort reform, a movement that successfully cut the fundraising legs out from fellow Dems by defanging trial lawyers; he consistently voted against organized labor, reproductive healthcare, and LGBTQ rights; with some frequency, he provided the GOP an extra needed vote. Nevertheless, no Democrat could oust him, and he retires this year of his own volition to attend to family matters.

Three serious Democratic contenders are vying for the chance to succeed Lucio: Sara Stapleton Barrera, a trial lawyer who pushed Lucio to a runoff in 2020; Alex Dominguez, a current state representative; and Morgan LaMantia, the scion of a local and politically connected beer dynasty. In November, Lucio told the Observer that he hoped his successor would share his anti-abortion views. Barring an unlikely

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Republican upset, that won't happen: All three Dem candidates are pro-choice and support LGBTQ rights.

Nevertheless, Lucio has picked a horse. "I will be supporting and endorsing Morgan Lamantia. I've known their family for years and years; her grandfather was on my campaign committee back in 1990," he told the Observer in a phone call. Asked about LaMantia's pro-choice views, Lucio replied: "It's a very important issue, but I guess I'm old-fashioned, me gusta devolver la copa—in other words, when somebody helps you, gives you a good turn, you return the favor—the LaMantia family has always been with me."

LaMantia, an attorney who's never held public office, is the in-house counsel for her family's Anheuser Busch wholesaler L&F Distributors. LaMantia has swiftly taken a commanding fundraising lead, pulling in more contributions than either of her opponents, along with receiving $1.25 million in family loans since November—an intimidating haul for a state Senate race. Her contributions include $25,000 from Texans for Lawsuit Reform, a pro-tort reform group that also backed Lucio, along with thousands from the beer lobby and $1,000 from Energy Transfer Partners, the 2021 Texas freeze's biggest profiteer. In the past, LaMantia has donated to both Democrats and Republicans.

"I respect a lot of things Senator Lucio has done, especially bringing a medical school down here," Lamantia told the Observer. "But I have my own perspective … investing in our public schools, raising teacher pay, respecting the autonomy of women."

At least five state House members from the Valley have endorsed LaMantia, a surprising snub of state Rep. Dominguez, given that Texas legislators usually stick clannishly together when one of their own seeks higher office. Dominguez, a fairly standard-issue Democrat, climbed from Cameron County commissioner to the state House in 2018 and was considering a run for Congress last year until Congressman Gonzalez jumped over to the Brownsville-based district that Dominguez would have sought. In the meantime, Dominguez found his home drawn out of his current state House district during redistricting. Now, he's fighting to avoid falling out of public office altogether.

Stapleton Barrera likely occupies the race's leftmost lane. She opposes a trio of liquefied natural gas projects in the Brownsville-area that Dominguez backed, and she's an open critic of the tort reformers that support both Lucio and LaMantia. In 2020, she nearly toppled Lucio in the runoff, despite raising very little money outside of some loans from her husband. This year, her fundraising looks the same, and without Lucio on the ballot, her campaign is drawing less attention from statewide pro-choice and pro-LGBTQ groups. But she should at least have name recognition from her prior run. "Back in 2020, nobody was willing to take on the biggest and the baddest senator in the State of Texas," she told the Observer. "And I was really just a nobody that had the courage to do it, and that's what we need."

The three candidates occupy distinct ideological lanes—"a great reflection of the party as a whole," said Rocha, who's consulting for Dominguez—but the election of any one would constitute a major break from the Catholic-reactionary social views of Lucio.

For Monica Clua Losada, a political science professor at UT-RGV, the Valley's 2022 political shakeup is symptomatic of deeper changes.

"There's kind of a tradition of considering politics something that's just been done by a few people … like 30 Valley families control everything," she said. "That is now being

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put in jeopardy because there's a new generation coming through who also want to have a say, and part of that comes also from the rapid socioeconomic development of this place particularly since NAFTA."

Since 1990, the Valley has doubled in population, and the import-export industry swelled after the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement. The creation of UT-RGV and the expansion of the healthcare sector have incentivized college-bound locals to stay in the area and attracted educated migrants. At the same time, jobs in law enforcement have exploded: The Border Patrol has quintupled in size in 30 years, and the Valley hosts cops of all varieties on various border security assignments. In a still-poor region, the Border Patrol offers a quick path to middle-class wages, and lately the agency's union has become an active backer of Trumpian candidates.

"We are seeing particularly in the last few years law enforcement is acquiring a very particular type of political consciousness, one that is, at the most innocent level, 'Blue Lives Matter,' but at other levels is perhaps more far-right," Clua Losada said. It may seem contradictory—Clua Losada describes the Valley as the type of place where Border Patrol agents employ undocumented maids—but many locals are now materially invested in border militarization and a right-wing agenda.

The Rio Grande Valley has generally backed Democrats since the 19th century. There have been exceptions—the Bushes sometimes fared quite well—but they're rare. This means the region backed the party in both its Southern segregationist and post-civil rights phases, both when the area was run by Anglo political machines and in recent decades. Texas Democrats have long assumed better turnout in the Valley would benefit their side; 2020 has cast that into doubt. The GOP relishes the thought of flipping a seat or two in the area, not just for practical vote-counting reasons but also to prove symbolically that their political brand appeals to Hispanics.

With its blend of rural and urban areas and distinct history, the Valley can't really be lumped into a monolithic "Latino vote," or even combined with the rest of the Texas border. But its nearly 1.5 million voters are a crucial ingredient in any statewide political calculus. This year, the region could redefine what a "South Texas Democrat" looks like, or a South Texas Republican for that matter. All Texans may want to pay attention.

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16 bodies found in street and warehouse in disputed territory in central Mexico
Associated Press
February 7, 2022
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/border-crime/16-bodies-found-in-street-and-warehouse-in-disputed-territory-in-central-mexico/

Ten bodies were found wrapped in blankets lying in the streets of a town in Mexico's Zacatecas state on Saturday attributed to a territorial dispute between rival drug cartels.

Police had cordoned off roads in Pardillo III outside the city of Fresnillo where the bodies were discovered.

Authorities said the reporting of six bodies hanging inside a warehouse in the Pánfilo Natera municipality some 120km (75 miles) southeast from Fresnillo was linked.

Violence in Zacatecas has escalated throughout the last 12 months with the public hanging of bodies from bridges and other public places becoming frequent.

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Last month a van containing the corpses of eight men and two women was left outside the state government office.

Authorities and analysts have attributed the rise in deadly violence to clashes between the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nueva Generación cartels.

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 11/22/21
Date: Monday, November 22, 2021 9:04:07 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
November 22, 2021

Secretary John Scott: Full forensic audit will restore faith in Texas elections, *Houston Chronicle*, November 21, 2021

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Full forensic audit will restore faith in Texas elections
John B. Scott
Houston Chronicle
November 21, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Opinion-Full-forensic-audit-will-restore-faith-16636561.php

For the past several election cycles, voters have faced a crisis of confidence in the very system that underpins our representative form of government. Whether it was the specter of foreign interference in our elections or allegations of widespread mail ballot fraud during the pandemic, voters have been hit with a barrage of reasons to doubt the system.

And, unsurprisingly, it's starting to take its toll on their faith in the integrity of our elections.

According to a Pew Research Center poll released earlier this year, large shares of Americans of both parties believe there is cheating in elections, with 79 percent

indicating candidates or campaigns engage in illegal activity at least sometimes during elections.

This is why, in order to restore voters' confidence in the strength and resilience of our election systems, Texas is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the 2020 General Election.

Over the next several months, the Texas Secretary of State's Office will complete a top-to-bottom examination of election records in the two largest counties with Democratic Commissioners Courts — Harris and Dallas — as well as the two largest counties with Republican Commissioners Courts — Tarrant and Collin — accounting for 34 percent of all votes cast in the historically high-turnout election last year. Commissioners Courts oversee each county's elections administrators, with whom our office will be working closely to obtain the materials and information we need to complete the full forensic audit.

While county election officials have already conducted partial manual recounts, election security assessments and voter eligibility verification, the Texas Forensic Audit goes well beyond any other legislative election audit proposals or models in other states. Our audit examines, among other items: chain of custody records of voted ballots and voting equipment, audit logs from electronic voting systems, and materials from Early Voting Ballot Boards and Signature Verification Committees to ensure that mail ballots were not subjected to tampering and match the list of voters who requested them.

Importantly, this will be the country's most comprehensive "forensic" audit of the 2020 election, using analytical tools to examine the literal nuts and bolts of election administration to determine if any illegal activity may have occurred. Using the authority given to our agency by the Legislature, we will conduct additional full manual recounts of any and all precincts affected by election irregularities.

We will follow the facts, follow the evidence and ensure any cases of illegal voting or election crimes are investigated by the proper law enforcement authorities, including the Texas Attorney General's Office.

Texans should be encouraged by the dedicated county election officials who work cycle after cycle to conduct elections with the integrity and professionalism that voters deserve.

But voters also need peace of mind — they need assurances that Texas election law and federal laws protecting the rights of legal, eligible voters are being followed at every step in the process. When irregularities occur, no matter how inconsequential they may seem, it takes a concerted effort to restore voters' faith in elections.

For example, after a recount in a 2019 Midland ISD bond election flipped the results, a box of 836 uncounted ballots was discovered that ended up flipping the election again. Our office worked meticulously to retrace the steps of local election officials. We were able to determine exactly how they were misplaced and implement targeted training to fix any deficiencies that led to the election-changing irregularity.

Using those same methods and techniques, the Secretary of State's Office will endeavor to deliver the same peace of mind to Texas voters and ensure that any irregularities that compromise the integrity of our elections are uncovered, fixed and not repeated in future elections.

We will work to investigate claims of irregularities in Harris County, such as the

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allegation that the county initially reported 1,884 more votes than voters who checked in across several drive-thru locations during the 2020 General Election.

Most importantly, we are conducting this forensic election audit without any preconceived notions about what we are going to find. We will separate evidence from hearsay, facts from rumors and empirical data from unverifiable theories.

Ultimately, we want to make sure every single eligible Texas voter — regardless of political affiliation — knows that voting in our state is fair and secure, and that only legal votes are cast and counted.

Any crack in the confidence of our elections is a crack in the foundation of our democracy. We must restore confidence in the integrity of our elections before the entire structure crumbles under the weight of mistrust.

Scott is the 114th Texas secretary of state.

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, GOP leaders shift $4M to pay for election audits called for in new state law
Bob Garrett
Dallas Morning News
November 19, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/11/19/texas-gov-greg-abbott-gop-leaders-shift-4m-to-pay-for-election-audits-called-for-in-new-state-law/

AUSTIN — Saying state lawmakers didn't budget enough money, Gov. Greg Abbott and GOP legislative leaders on Friday cited an honest-elections "emergency" as they shifted $4 million from the state prison system to the secretary of state's office to pay for county election audits required by the new Texas elections law.

The secretary of state's office, under Abbott's effective control, would create an Election Audit Division to conduct the randomized county audits the new law calls for after the next midterm and presidential elections – and thereafter, every two years.

That's an important step "to stop voter fraud," Abbott said in his money request to top Republican lawmakers.

Implicit but unstated in Abbott's Thursday letter, and the leaders' hasty proposal Friday for the fund transfer, which the governor approved, is that the $4 million for hiring, training and deploying election auditors presumably would beef up the rigor – and credibility – of a backward-looking audit the secretary of state's office already is formulating. It'll study results of the November 2020 election in four counties.

Officials in Republican leadership offices at the Capitol said Abbott's move is aimed primarily at an "audience of one" – former President Donald Trump, who has belittled the four-county audit as "weak." Even though Trump carried Texas by nearly 6 percentage points, he demanded that Abbott push through a law requiring a statewide look-back at the 2020 general election.

Abbott did not add election audits as a topic for any of three overtime sessions of the Legislature he called this year.

On Friday, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Greg Bonnen got in front of the leaders' fund-shift announcement with a tweet that called it "critical funding" for

the secretary of state's office "so they can conduct the important work of making certain every vote counts."

Bonnen, R-Friendswood, was silent on whether the money bolsters the special 2020 audit under way.

Late Friday afternoon, Abbott issued a statement acknowledging the $4 million transfer and referring to the current, look-back audit as "the largest forensic audit in the country."

He tweeted that the review of four counties' 2020 results "will be the most comprehensive forensic audit in the country. Ensuring the integrity of our elections is critical to our democracy."

Sam Taylor, spokesman for the Texas secretary of state's office, said in an email that the money would pay for costs to conduct both current and ongoing election audits required under law passed by the Legislature. The money would go to hire new staff and pay for travel for the ongoing audit of the four counties, but Taylor could not say how much that audit and the ones required by the new elections law known as Senate Bill 1 would cost.

"In order to complete our ongoing full forensic audit of the 2020 General Election and conduct subsequent audits as required by SB 1, our agency will be using these funds to dedicate additional staff to oversee audit activities, including: verifying counties' removal of ineligible voters from the rolls, meticulously reviewing each county's election materials for our comprehensive document examination, and ensuring compliance with state and federal election laws," he wrote.

"These resources are essential for maintaining the integrity of Texas elections and identifying issues that must be fixed in order to restore voters' confidence in our state's election systems."

On Sept. 23, the then-leaderless secretary of state's office announced the audit was under way in four populous counties – Dallas, Harris, Tarrant and Collin counties. The announcement came just hours after Trump issued a statement pressing for a statewide review of the 2020 vote.

That same day, House Democratic Caucus Chairman Chris Turner ladled out the scorn, attributing the move by the secretary of state's office to a governor worried about winning a third term next year.

"Pitiful yet predictable that (Abbott) has capitulated to Trump yet again," Turner tweeted.

Common Cause Texas Associate Director Stephanie Gómez said the money could be used for better purposes.

"We're heading into winter again," said in a written statement. "Maybe some of that money could be used for the electricity grid? Or made available for health care? Or our school system? But no, Governor Abbott has his priorities. And they don't have anything to do with Texas."

'Trust and confidence'

On Thursday, writing Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, Abbott said Senate Bill 1 will help build "trust and confidence" in electoral processes

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and outcomes.

Lawmakers passed the “election integrity” measure in the second special session. Abbott signed it on Sept. 7.

Democrats and voting rights advocates have said SB 1 will reduce participation by minorities and encourage mayhem by partisan poll watchers at voting places.

The controversial new law, which takes effect Dec. 2, requires the secretary of state’s office to audit four random Texas counties after each midterm and presidential election and review not only that contest, but all elections from the previous two years in what could be a massive and costly undertaking. At least two of the audited counties must have 300,000 residents or more, meaning the state’s 18 largest counties will be checked far more regularly than the rest.

The secretary of state’s office’s Sept. 23 announcement picked the same number of counties for the retrospective audit as the bill calls for prospectively – four. But they’re all highly populous counties.

Even though lawmakers met in a third special session that lasted through Oct. 19, Abbott’s money-request letter makes a sudden declaration that “the SOS needs resources to establish an Election Audit Division. However, the SOS does not currently have the budget authority to adequately accomplish the goals sought by the Legislature.”

In their letter of response, Patrick, Phelan, Senate Finance Committee Chairwoman Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, and Bonnen, the House’s chief budget writer, said the secretary of state’s office wasn’t given enough money in the current two-year budget cycle “to ensure election integrity.”

The leaders continued, “This insufficiency of funds creates an emergency.”

While Trump has said “Texans know voting fraud occurred in some of their counties” in 2020, the Texas secretary of state’s office has called the election here “smooth and secure.”

Nationally, experts have said vote fraud is rare and has posed a threat of altering outcomes only in relatively small, local contests. Voting rights advocates and Democrats have said that by perpetuating a “big lie” that last year’s presidential election was tainted, Trump and Republicans who bow to his will have weakened Americans’ trust in one of their signature democratic institutions – free and fair elections, and peaceful transfers of power.

The fund shift comes as Abbott is under fire from Republican challengers in the March 1 primary, including former Dallas state Sen. Don Huffines and former state GOP chairman Allen West. Like Trump, Huffines and West have bandied about accusations of election improprieties – without offering evidence.

The fund shift also comes just more than eight weeks after Abbott resisted Trump’s entreaties for the governor to ask the Legislature to pass an election-audit bill. Though Abbott balked, in the year’s final two special sessions, the Senate passed bills by Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, that would have required an audit of the 2020 election and created a process in which party officials could trigger state audits of suspected future irregularities.

Patrick, who is Trump’s top political ally in Texas, is the Senate’s presiding officer.

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Though Patrick urged the House also to pass the bills, House members did not.

In Friday's letter pulling money from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice and giving it to the secretary of state's office, now led by longtime Abbott aide John Scott, the leaders didn't specify how many employees the newly created Election Audit Division will have.

Novel 'budget execution' approach

The $4 million transfer of the requested funds was done under a process known as "budget execution authority."

Under state law, the governor and the Legislative Budget Board, a 10-member group of key lawmakers that is co-chaired by the lieutenant governor and House speaker, can move around money already appropriated if they find there's an emergency. Usually, they publish the proposal in the Texas Register and then hold a board meeting to ratify the decision.

Friday's hurry-up transfer occurred without the customary formalities, and came after Abbott spent several days at a meeting of the Republican Governors Association in Phoenix.

On Aug. 6, the leaders used a similar process – a letter, not a meeting – to restore an additional month of funding for the legislative branch. In June, Abbott had line-item vetoed $316 million of the $410 million budgeted for the Legislature and its support agencies after House Democrats broke quorum in the regular session to halt passage of the election bill. "No pay for those who abandon their responsibilities," Abbott tweeted in late May. In the year's second special session, lawmakers restored the funding.

The money would come from the state prison system – as did $250 million last summer that was transferred to jump-start Abbott's border barrier. In their overtime gatherings this fall, lawmakers restored the money. Prisons didn't sustain cuts.

In distributing $13.3 billion of federal American Rescue Plan money in a bill they sent to Abbott on Oct. 19, lawmakers gave the Texas Department of Criminal Justice nearly $360 million in federal funds for employee pay and benefits, to use instead of state discretionary money. So the prison system is flush with general revenue, ripe for more transfers like the one to the secretary of state.

Beyond the flood of federal COVID-19 relief aid, in the two-year budget cycle that ends Aug. 31, 2023, Texas can expect to have nearly $25 billion of unspent state funds – a sum that dwarfs the $4 million being applied to election audits. However, to use any of that money, lawmakers would have to be in session.

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New Secretary of State Updates Texans on 2020 Election Audit
Erin Anderson
Texas Scorecard
November 19, 2021
https://texasscorecard.com/state/new-secretary-of-state-updates-texans-on-2020-election-audit/

Texas' newly appointed chief election official provided voters in Collin County with a

progress report this week on the state's ongoing partial audit of the November 2020 election—efforts bolstered by $4 million in funding announced today for a new Election Audit Division within the Texas secretary of state's office.

In a virtual town hall meeting Wednesday hosted by State Sen. Angela Paxton (R–McKinney), Texas Secretary of State John Scott described the steps involved in the audit, what progress has been made, and why it's important.

"It's a huge undertaking, but one that's necessary to restore confidence in our elections," Scott told Paxton's constituents in the meeting focused on election integrity.

Scott was appointed secretary of state in October, following a five-month vacancy in the position. At the time, he said his top priority was completing the internal audits.

Paxton's Senate District 8 lies mostly within Collin County, one of the four counties included in the ongoing audit. She said election integrity was the most frequent topic of communications her office received this legislative session.

In September, prior to Scott's appointment, the secretary of state's office announced it had launched a "full and comprehensive forensic audit" of the 2020 general election in four Texas counties: Collin, Dallas, Harris, and Tarrant.

A week later, the office provided more details of exactly what the audit would entail and said it was being conducted in two phases.

Scott said Wednesday the first phase is "well underway."

Phase 1 includes voter list maintenance, a routine process required by state and federal law of regularly removing ineligible people from voter rolls, including deceased voters, people who have moved away or are registered in multiple places, and non-U.S. citizens.

The process is enhanced this year with data from the Electronic Registration Information Center, a nationwide voter roll crosscheck program Texas joined in March 2020 that helps identify people who are improperly registered in the state or voted here illegally.

The first audit phase also included testing voting machine accuracy with partial manual recounts of paper ballots (also done routinely under current law) and a cybersecurity assessment of all counties' election systems.

Scott said he expects a report on Phase 1 by the end of the year, adding his office would be "fully transparent with the public" about the audit process and findings.

Phase 2 is "much more detailed" and includes "a 13-page list of items to be examined" for each of the four counties, Scott said, such as mail ballots, in-person ballots, voting machines, and more.

He said auditors would be looking at "a multitude of issues" beyond the risk-limiting audits already done, documenting information for almost 4 million votes—a third of all Texas votes cast in the 2020 presidential election.

The "forensic" aspect of the audit will reveal any issues that rise to the level of criminal activity, so they can be turned over to the attorney general's office to investigate and potentially prosecute.

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The audit will also allow problems within the election process to be identified so specific recommendations for fixes can be made to the Legislature, and will offer a comparison of how effectively different county election offices operate.

“What we learn from these four counties can be extrapolated,” Scott said.

“The purpose of the audit is to bring election integrity and restore confidence among voters that our elections are secure, only eligible voters are voting, and counts are not altered,” he added.

“The public must have confidence in the outcome of elections,” Paxton said. “To do that, they must have confidence in the procedures and accuracy of the process.”

But some election integrity advocates say the ongoing audit isn’t enough.

Last month, the Collin County Republican Party adopted a resolution calling for a full forensic audit of the 2020 election in Texas.

Unlike the audit Scott’s office is now overseeing, grassroots activists want an independent third-party review of the 13 largest counties in the state.

Collin Republicans’ resolution said the state’s current efforts are “not adequate to create confidence and answer all questions related to election integrity and the possibility of election fraud from the 2020 elections.”

In a move that bolsters Scott’s work, Abbott announced Friday an “emergency” budget transfer of $4 million to establish a new Election Audit Division within the secretary of state’s office:

“The people of Texas must have trust and confidence in the election process, as well as the outcomes of our elections, which is why the state of Texas will transfer funding needed so that the Texas Secretary of State can create a division dedicated entirely to this important issue.”

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Commissioners to consider countywide polling locations
Jess Huff
Lufkin Daily News
November 22, 2021
https://lufkindailynews.com/news/local/article_9b9ded61-1a3c-54e1-ae0b-00d00454cc5c.html

Angelina County Commissioners at 10 a.m. Tuesday will consider supporting election administrator Elizabeth Hawkins’ push for the latest election to be considered successful in order to establish countywide polling places.

Hawkins was approved by the Texas secretary of state to test out the countywide polling locations at the 2021 Constitutional Amendment Election. Now she needs to request the secretary of state consider the election successful to ensure the countywide polling locations can be utilized in the March 2022 Primary Elections.

Commissioners will permit a public hearing on the matter preceding discussion over whether the county wants to continue the program and authorizing Hawkins to move forward.

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The court also will meet in executive session to discuss two items listed as personnel matters.

The court also will consider:

■ Interlocal agreements with Huntington, Diboll, Zavalla and Hudson for the countywide EMS contract with Allegiance Mobile Health.

■ Moving the commissioners court from the Angelina County Courthouse Annex to Courtroom #5 in the Angelina County Courthouse.

■ Advertising the open human resources director position.

■ Appointing Phil Huber as the Angelina County Veteran Services officer.

■ Approving final plats of: the Hunnicutt's Stephenson Brown Road Subdivision in Precinct 1 and the FM Highway No. 58 Place Subdivision No. 1 in Precinct 4.

■ The October monthly treasurer's report.

■ Permitting Angelina County Airport manager Gary Letney to pursue contracts for three hangars.

■ A contract between the airport and Air Methods Corporation.

The county also will consider budget transfers of:

■ $7,000 from the repair and maintenance of facilities and $6,000 from the repair and maintenance of radios in the sheriff's office budget to the repair and maintenance of radio towers ($13,000).

■ $600 from dues and publications and $1,500 from training personnel in the county tax office to office supplies ($2,100).

■ $1,000 from capital outlay to water and sewage at the Angelina County Landfill

■ $4,000 from training personnel and $1,961.52 from office supplies at the county clerk's office to capital outlay ($5,961.52).

■ $300 from printing and forms, $1,000 from office supplies, $200 from trial expenses, $200 from trial transcripts and $300 from the rental or leasing of equipment at the county attorney's office to dues and publications ($2,000).

■ $250 from permanent records, $500 from printing and forms and $400 from training at the Justice of the Peace Precinct 1 office to dues and publications ($1,150).

■ $800 from training personnel, $600 from printing and forms, $1,000 from utility electric and $880 from water and sewer utility at the Justice of the Peace Precinct 4 office to office supplies ($3,280).

■ $1,000 from visiting court reporter to office supplies at county court at law No. 1.

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Luedeke appointed interim Bell elections administrator

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Eric E. Garcia
Temple Daily Telegram
November 19, 2021
https://www.tdtnews.com/news/central_texas_news/article_f70e5076-498d-11ec-b286-1f0321ff1144.html

BELTON — The Bell County Elections Commission on Friday appointed an elected county official to serve as the interim elections administrator.

Bell County Tax Assessor-Collector Shay Luedeke replaces elections administrator Matthew Dutton, who was appointed to the position in March but resigned to take a position in another county. Dutton served as interim elections administrator for six months following the departure of previous administrator Melinda Luedecke in August 2020.

The Commissioners Court is scheduled to accept Luedeke's appointment at a special meeting scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Monday at the Bell County Courthouse, 101 Central Ave.

County spokesman James Stafford said the interim appointment will be revisited by commissioners sometime in 2022.

Shay Luedeke, a Holland Republican, was first elected to the tax assessor-collector position in 2016 and won a second term in 2020.

Luedeke, 46, serves on the Elections Commission with Bell County Judge David Blackburn, County Clerk Shelley Coston, Republican Party chair Nancy Boston and Democratic Party chair Chris Rosenberg.

During a meeting Friday, the commissioners noted that both Blackburn and Coston will be up for reelection in 2022, making Luedeke the only member available for appointment, he said.

"The Republican chair and the Democratic chair could not be the interim elections administrator," Luedeke said.

Luedeke has a bachelor's degree in business administration from Texas A&M University and more than 20 years of experience in the technology industry.

In his role as tax assessor-collector, he has emphasized customer service as a top priority to make the office run more efficiently to serve the public. Luedeke is mostly responsible for vehicle registrations and titles. Bell County has contracted property tax assessment and collection to the Tax Appraisal District since 1991.

As interim elections administrator, Luedeke said he met with elections staffers Friday afternoon and is learning about day-to-day operations with the help of Elections Department Chief Deputy Jeannette Compean.

The Elections Department has a small staff, Luedeke said, so he aims for a smooth transition.

"I just want to help out," he said Friday, adding that his goal is to run smooth elections in 2022.

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Bolstering confidence and participation in Travis County elections
Daniel Van Oudenaren
The Austin Bulldog
November 19, 2021

Q&A with retiring county clerk Dana DeBeauvoir

Dana DeBeauvoir, Travis County Clerk for the past 35 years, announced last week that she won't seek reelection. She plans step down before her term ends, likely at the end of January. "It's time," she said.

DeBeauvoir oversees elections and acts as the county's chief custodian of public records, supervising a staff of 145, as well as hundreds of poll workers. First elected in 1986, she oversaw the digitization of massive troves of public records and spearheaded a years-long collaboration between computer scientists and election officials to make elections more secure—an effort that won national recognition.

Travis County currently employs voting machines that combine touchscreen technology with an auditable paper trail—a method widely regarded as the gold standard for election security.

As recently as August 26, DeBeauvoir had told the Bulldog that she would seek reelection. In an interview, she reflected on election security, turnout, and public confidence in the electoral process. In a follow-up November 16, she explained why she had a change of heart about running again and elaborated on the qualities she'd like to see in her successor. We publish excerpts of those interviews below, edited for length and clarity.

DeBeauvoir, 67, said that a mix of things led to her decision, including conversations with friends and her partner, a recent illness, and a vacation that got her thinking about making a change. "I said to myself, maybe I need to start learning to live a life not on adrenaline. I had several close friends who had been pounding on me, 'Come on, Dana, you've been at this long enough, you need to give yourself a break'…It kind of happened at the last minute. I had every intention of running and then all of a sudden it was like you know what, I really could make some other choices."

After retiring from public office, she hopes to pursue other passions, including international elections monitoring.

Like most other elective offices in Texas, county clerks are chosen in partisan contests, with their party indicated on the ballot next to the candidate's name. That has helped DeBeauvoir, a Democrat, sail to victory every four years since 1986 when she first unseated a 16-year Democratic incumbent. Yet despite the partisan nature of these elections, the position of county clerk is largely a technical one, requiring mastery of local systems and practices as well as state rules. As clerk, DeBeauvoir adopted the decidedly noncontroversial mantra, "Be competent."

She said of her job, "It's important to take your partisan hat off…This is not a policymaking office, this is an administrative office. It's basically a CEO position." The county clerk is paid a salary of $141,000 per year, according to 2020 data.

DeBeauvoir's successor will be chosen in a primary March 1, 2022, followed by the general election November 8, 2022. In the meantime, DeBeauvoir plans to recommend that the commissioners court appoint her chief deputy Adana Hess as interim successor to serve out the remainder of her term.

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One candidate had already declared for DeBeauvoir's position before she announced her retirement. Democrat Kurt Lockhart told the Bulldog that he wants to improve voter turnout and raise poll worker wages. He is also advocating for combining the Voter Registration Division, which is in the County Tax Office, with the Elections Division in the County Clerk's Office, into a single office under an appointed official. DeBeauvoir commented on these proposals in the Q&A published below, expressing openness to the idea of combining the functions of voter registration and elections, while rejecting the idea of an appointed elections administrator.

Let's start by talking about turnout in our elections. How has that changed since you first took office in 1987?

The first year I took office was the first year Texas implemented early voting. I embraced it and I thought it was fabulous and we immediately started finding ways to help make it even better. So Travis County was among the very first to turn early voting into retail early voting. We had voting at the mall, for example. So we've always looked at ways to make access to the ballot box as easy and convenient for people as possible.

I really have always pushed for a big turnout in Travis County, and Travis County has pretty much every November election beat the pants off of every other county in the state. In 2007 and 2008 the secretary of state at the time, Roger Williams, gave out an award called the Steven F. Austin Championship Award for best turnout among the counties for November elections. Travis County won it both years for highest turnout, and after that the secretary discontinued it because Travis County's always going to win it. So we've always just done well in terms of turnout. This is a smart community, they pay attention, they read their mail, they care.

What have you done to make voting more accessible?

Travis County has used extra voting hours and countywide vote centers since 2011. We were one of the very first counties in Texas to do that. And vote centers have been the most helpful for voters in terms of making sure that they can have access to the polls. Countywide vote centers mean that no matter where you live in the county, or wherever you are on any given day, you can vote anywhere you see a 'Vote Here' sign. You can just go right in and vote, and they'll have your home ballot ready for you there.

What steps have you taken to make elections more secure?

Travis County has been a leader nationally in exploring ways to protect the security of the ballot box and foster voter confidence in the integrity and the outcome of the elections.

My attitude has always been that any business model, any computer, can be disrupted or interfered with. If you want to use the term 'hacked' you can do that, though I think that's an inartful term because there's everything from being thrown on the floor and broken, to stolen, to more high-level infiltration. And we have to be prepared for any and all of it.

Regular paper ballots are extremely vulnerable to theft, to fire, to people scribbling all over them, or to people just trying to make extra marks on them that would cancel out the marks on the ballots. So, having lots of people watching over shoulders was the important protection and mitigation used for paper ballots.

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During my time as clerk we've also used punch cards, optical scans, DRE (direct-recording electronic voting), and now we have paper trail. There's lots of different ways to conduct elections and each one of those methods carries its own level of detail, its own risks, and its own mitigators.

Could you tell me more about the voting machines currently in use?

The current paper trail voting machines look a whole lot like STAR-Vote, which I spent years developing with a group of computer security and statistical folks. The community of vendors paid attention to what we developed. And what Star Vote was all about was that we'd like to have open source software that allows voters to mark their own ballot and verify it in a way that is not scribbly—what you would call an ambiguous mark—and is counted in a way that a third party can come in and verify.

That's done through a mathematical process of auditing. I can get very technical but the easiest thing to do is read the WIRED magazine article about how we developed STAR-Vote.

We're very happy with the machines. With the expense and the level of training that is needed to implement any new voting system, you only get to buy a new voting system once every 15 or 20 years. So this is it for a while.

What would you say to somebody who believes that an election official such as yourself could tamper with the results? What safeguards are in place to prevent that from happening?

First of all, in any business—take banking, for example—no one person is allowed to do a whole bunch of tasks. Tasks are split up and done by different teams of people. That kind of separation of duties is commonplace and is found in all election offices that are big enough.

It's practiced in a way that allows you to assign certain tasks to certain individuals and then when they complete their tasks the next stage of the work gets passed to somebody else. The basic rule is no one person ever does any one job. It's always at least two people so you always have somebody watching over your back.

There are air gaps between computers in the offices. I do not allow anybody to bring in any removable media to put into the computers—no games, no extra software, no downloads, none of that is ever allowed in the computers in the Elections Division. That's a fireable offense if you do that and we have ways of checking to make sure everything's clean, and those kinds of audits are done before, during, and after our elections.

Additionally, personally I don't have access to the vaults where the actual paper ballots and the electronic versions of those copies are kept. I don't know the combinations and never have. Only certain people are allowed to get into those, and they are under security cameras and vault locks.

Thanks for explaining that. What do you think of the proposal to merge the election functions in the clerk's office with the voter registration functions in the tax office?

Travis County Tax-Assessor-Collector Bruce Elfant and I have talked about this for years. He loves voter registration, and it functions pretty well with the two of us cooperating together, so I have never made any kind of a power grab or anything like that against Bruce. But the truth is it would be a better arrangement if the two offices were together.

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On the other hand, what I think is a terrible idea is to take these jobs away from both of the independently elected officials and place it under one appointed official. One of the good things about being county clerk is that I can have a spine, I can stand up to the legislature, I can have the voters' best interest at heart at all times and I'm not going to be threatened or fired because I stood up for voters, whereas an appointed official is governed by a five-person board. Those elections administrators get told to sit down and shut up all the time and they're fired often if they say anything that displeases their board.

A candidate for your position is campaigning on a pledge to raise poll worker pay to $15 per hour. What do you think of that idea?

I've been in commissioners court almost every year asking for increases in pay. And I have to say that Travis County have done a good job paying people as much as their budget will allow. But it's not just up to Travis County—it's a whole bunch of jurisdictions involved, and everybody has to agree to the budget increase. When the local jurisdictions conduct elections—the City of Austin and AISD and ACC, for example—they pay for it. All of the jurisdictions together pay something like $12 to $14 depending on what your job assignment is. But the state is still stuck at $7.25. So they're the ones that need to get their act together and improve poll worker pay. The state has just been notoriously stingy about increasing the pay for their own primary election workers.

Let me ask you about the political environment more broadly. After the 2020 election, we obviously went through a very contentious post-election season. Do you think we're in a downward spiral in terms of public trust or was 2020 kind of a one-off?

I think once we got the paper trail we were moving back toward having better voter confidence. But the social media misinformation campaigns have not served voters well. I think they have hurt voters and likewise their confidence. A lot of voters are beginning to catch on to the fact that you can't trust what's on social media. They're figuring out that they've been handed a lot of malarkey and a lot of baloney.

So I think we're getting a smarter electorate, I think we're going to have to all live through the consequences and the fallout from the 2020 election, but I don't see it as an insurmountable thing, especially if voters keep their paper trail and pay attention to it. That's their big safety point in making sure that however it is they voted goes into the ballot box the way they wanted. I think that's going to go a long way to getting us past this moment.

There have been reports that some county clerks elsewhere have faced harassment from 2020 election skeptics, driving them out of office. Was that a factor at all in your decision to step down?

It is absolutely a concern nationally. It wasn't for me. This attack on elections administrators is very concerning and we need for voters and everybody else to stand up and defend them. So I am concerned about that—but no, nobody ran me out of town.

What qualities do you hope to see in your successor?

This is not a policymaking office—this is an administrative office that is basically a CEO position. So we need somebody who's very smart and very competent. Everybody focuses on elections but this office is so much bigger and more complex. All the businesses in Travis County have to be able to count on the county clerk to

keep this office functioning smoothly and to streamline procedures—the title companies, attorneys, bankers, mortgage companies.

We need somebody who's overseen an agency possibly, overseen a large budget—that would be very helpful—somebody who has skills and experience with public relations so that they're good at talking to the public, somebody who knows multiple areas of public service. And knowing something about courts would be very helpful.

What will you miss most about your job as county clerk?

All the people that I've been working with all these years.

In elections you have to take off your political hat and serve everybody. So that was one of the great things about it is I've worked with folks across the spectrum all these years, and that's something I'll miss. Getting to see everybody and talk to everybody from all walks of life—what they need, what they want to be able to participate in an election.

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Most Texans oppose gerrymandering but tuned out this year's GOP-led redraw, News/UT-Tyler poll finds
Sami Sparber
Dallas Morning News
November 21, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/11/21/most-texans-oppose-gerrymandering-but-tuned-out-this-years-gop-led-redraw-newsut-tyler-poll-finds/

AUSTIN – Following this year's GOP-led redistricting effort, most Texans still oppose gerrymandering, with 50% disagreeing that a party in power should be able to intentionally draw political maps to its favor, according to a poll released Sunday by The Dallas Morning News and the University of Texas at Tyler.

On the other hand, 22% of Texans of all political stripes agreed the majority party should call the shots. But 73% of those who responded to the poll said they rarely or paid little attention to updates on mapmakers' work during the past year, so it's not top of mind among issues voters care about.

The poll, conducted Nov. 9-16, surveyed 1,106 registered voters and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points. It surveyed Texas voters on a wide range of state and political issues.

GOP majorities in the Legislature passed new political maps in October that cement Republicans' grip on power for the next decade but blunt the voting strength of nonwhite voters who fueled Texas' population surge.

The poll showed 49% of voters thought the redraw very much favored the Republican Party; only 22% thought Democrats got some fair representation.

"The new map affected how people view politics not only from the trust some people have in state government, but also how they see the future of redistricting, now that the state has more control without federal preclearance," said pollster Mark Owens, who teaches political science at UT-Tyler.

This year, Republicans have a clearer path toward drawing and using the lines they

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want, as Texas is no longer required to get federal approval on new political maps. For decades, every Texas redistricting plan has been either changed or tossed out by a federal court after being found in violation of the Voting Rights Act.

“People who think Texas is on the wrong track were two times more likely to see the new maps of districts as unnaturally favoring one party compared to fairly benefiting both parties,” Owens said. “Those who thought Texas is headed in the right direction did not have a clear preference.”

While the public was tuned out to the process, Democrats were more attentive than Republicans. The poll found 35% of Democrats fairly often or frequently paid attention, compared to 24% of Republicans.

Most voters were ambivalent about how the recent round of redistricting impacted their trust in the state government, the poll found. Half said it had no effect, but 19% more of the electorate was concerned about the outcome than those who were pleased with it.

Attitudes hadn’t changed much since a September DMN/UT-Tyler poll conducted around the time the Legislature started the process. Texans still preferred an independent commission to draw the maps, the new poll showed.

Asked whom they would trust most to determine the district boundaries when redistricting is done again, 39% of voters preferred an independent commission and 18% preferred the state Legislature.

“In a lot of cases, no one is now more trusting in the Legislature to draw these maps,” Owens said.

Among voters who most trusted the independent commission — which Texas does not have – 34% preferred, of the other available options, a panel of federal judges to draw the maps. The Legislature was favored by 14% of those voters, with 22% preferring a board of statewide elected officials.

The redistricting court fights have already begun, with challengers saying the redrawn congressional, legislative and State Board of Education maps whitewash the major growth of the Hispanic community, which made up nearly half of the state’s population gain since 2020. People of color accounted for 95% of the state’s population boom over the last decade, with much of the growth concentrated in cities and suburban areas, census data show.

The poll found 46% of Texans feel the state should not be limited from redrawing districts mid-decade. Meanwhile, 21% of voters opposed allowing Texas to revise the redistricting plan adopted this year, before the next 10-year census.

On this issue, the public’s support was 3% higher compared to the last poll, while opposition was 10% lower.

Methodology

The Dallas Morning News/UT-Tyler Poll is a statewide random sample of 1,106 registered voters conducted between November 9-16. The mixed-mode sample includes 244 registered voters surveyed over the phone by the University of Texas at Tyler with support from ReconMR and 866 registered voters randomly selected from Dynata’s panel of online respondents. The margin of error for a sample of 1,106 registered voters in Texas is +/- 2.9 percentage points, and the more conservative

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margin of sampling error that includes design effects from this poll is +/- 3.2 percentage points for a 95% confidence interval.

The online and phone surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. Using information from the 2020 Current Population Survey and Office of the Texas Secretary of State. The sample's gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, metropolitan density and vote choice were matched to the population of registered voters in Texas.

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U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson announces retirement after almost 3 decades in Congress
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 20, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/20/eddie-bernice-johnson-2022-retirement/

Longtime U.S. Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson, D-Dallas, announced Saturday she is not running for reelection after serving nearly three decades in Congress.

"I have gone back and forth … the whole time because of the pleading and the asking, but as of January … the year after next, I will step down," Johnson said during an event in Dallas. "I will retire, and let me assure that I will also recommend to you whom I feel is the best to follow me."

Johnson added she is looking for a "female that is qualified."

First elected to Congress in 1992, Johnson, 85, is among its most senior members — the longest-serving member from Texas — and serves as dean of the Texas delegation. She chairs the House Committee on Science, Space, and Technology.

A former state legislator, Johnson is known for breaking barriers. She was the first Black woman ever elected to public office in Dallas when she won a state House seat in 1972. She went on to become the first registered nurse to ever serve in Congress.

Speaking Saturday surrounded by family, Johnson emphasized her longtime advocacy for funding for Dallas Area Rapid Transit, the city's public transit agency, calling it "my baby from the first day that I got there." She also highlighted her role in helping flip Dallas County for Democrats in 2006.

"I'm proud of what I've done because there is no Texan in the history of this state who has brought more home," Johnson said, reflecting on how she had to work across party lines during long stretches in the minority. "As much as we trash the names of some of the Republicans. they were some of the same ones that helped me be successful."

The decision Johnson announced Saturday is consistent with what she told constituents in 2019 — that her current term would be her last. However, since winning reelection last year, she had declined to confirm that, fueling speculation about whether she would reverse herself in recent months.

Democrats began to circle her seat as questions about her 2022 plans persisted. In May, Jane Hope Hamilton, a former top staffer for Joe Biden's campaign in Texas, launched an exploratory committee for the seat, suggesting she would run if Johnson chose not to seek reelection. And last month, Abel Mulugheta, the former chief of staff to state Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, announced an outright campaign for the seat.

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Jessica Mason, a Navy veteran and progressive activist, is also running for the Democratic nomination.

Both Hamilton and Mulugheta issued statements Saturday afternoon praising Johnson's tenure, with Mulugheta saying he "hope[s] to represent the constituents of CD-30 with her same dedication and progressive vision." Mason, who has been in the race for months, wrote on Twitter that "our community's needs have evolved, and I appreciate [Johnson's] ability to recognize that it's time for a new approach."

One potential candidate to succeed Johnson, state Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Dallas, also released a statement lauding Johnson. Crockett told The Texas Tribune that she will "evaluate things over the weekend" with regards to a possible run.

State Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, has previously been seen as a likely candidate to replace Johnson when she retires, though he filed for reelection to his current seat days ago. He confirmed to the Tribune after Johnson's announcement Saturday that he would run for another term in the Texas Senate.

Within hours of Johnson's announcement, a former Dallas City Council member, Vonciel Jones Hill, filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission to run for the 30th District as a Democrat.

Toward the end of her speech Saturday, Johnson was emphatic that she would endorse in the race to replace her, saying "I would appreciate you appreciating my judgment."

"Anybody that's been already been rejected in this district, they will not be receiving my endorsement," Johnson said, a likely reference to Barbara Mallory Caraway, who has repeatedly challenged Johnson in primary elections over the years.

Johnson’s 30th District is set to remain one of the bluest congressional districts in the state after redistricting. It will also stay anchored in Dallas, spreading to the southern edge of the namesake county.

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Zaffirini files for re-election early on as 2022 election looms
Jorge Vela
Laredo Morning Times
November 21, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/Zaffirini-files-for-re-election-early-on-as-2022-16639526.php

One of South Texas’ most prominent legislators just filed for her re-election bid this week amid the looming 2022 midterm elections.

Texas State Sen. Judith Zaffirini announced her re-election bid earlier during the week, as she is one of the first to do so amid the upcoming elections. Her decision to run was based on the fact she wants to continue pushing for agenda items she says matter to her constituents and people throughout the state.

“When I ran for the Senate the first time, I was the first to file at the Texas Democratic Party headquarters in Austin, as I was last Saturday for the 2022 election,” Zaffirini said. “Since then, it’s been my tradition to file early during the candidate filing period. This is consistent with my practice of always being prepared, responding timely and working hard for the families of Senate District 21.”

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Zaffirini continues to point out that her running for the office is to demonstrate that experience matters when it comes to legislating and that is what she wants to bring to the table.

“My record of working hard to represent the families of Senate District 21, of prioritizing their needs and interests, of responding timely and of making a difference for their better future is part of the platform from which I ask constituents to continue to support me,” Zaffirini said. “Experience matters, and I use it to benefit our communities.”

“What's more, I prioritize constituent services by responding to every constituent letter, telephone call and meeting request. My staff and I embrace the motto I learned from the Ursuline nuns, namely, ‘Serviam!’ (I shall serve).”

According to Zaffirini, as being the state legislator with more bills passed than any other legislator in the history of the State of Texas and being the highest bill-passer for four consecutive sessions, this reflects her effective bipartisanship ability to excel as a Democrat in a Republican-dominated legislature.

“No issue is too big or too small for my attention: If it impacts my constituents, I care about it and will address it,” Zaffirini said. “I respectfully request them to vote for me because I will continue to use my experience, knowledge, insight and ability for their best interest.”

As she aims to win another term as she announced her re-election bid, Zaffirini already said she has a wealth of goals she would like to get done in the next legislative session in 2023.

“I hope to continue passing legislation that saves lives, strengthens families and has a positive impact on our district and state,” Zaffirini said. “Our children and grandchildren deserve first-class education and health systems, a safety net that protects the most vulnerable Texans, clean air and water, a strong job market including oil and gas jobs, and safe neighborhoods, which includes reducing crime, supporting law enforcement appropriately and doing our part to secure a safe border. Equally important, I will continue to prioritize the needs and interests of the families I represent and to respond timely to their requests for assistance.”

In terms of priorities she will aim for, the state senator says her priorities will continue to be to put education in general as her top priority. She will try to focus on early and higher education and health and human services in general, with a focus on the very young, the very old, the very poor, persons with disabilities and veterans.

Her goal in the 2022 election is the same as always: to run a positive campaign and listen to and collaborate with SD 21 residents so she may continue to represent their needs in the Texas Senate.

“When the Legislature convenes in January 2023, I will file bills expanding access to affordable healthcare to millions of Texans, supporting public and higher education, promoting open government policies, preserving the environment, protecting families, strengthening and reforming our judicial system, including by eliminating or at least reducing cronyism and corruption and addressing other priorities for District 21 residents, including those who suffer from abuse at home, in facilities or under guardianship,” Zaffirini said. “I also will continue to support tax reform, including by providing property tax and sales tax relief.”

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During her announcement with LMT, Zaffirini also went on to discuss the recent change of party by her longtime Texas Legislature Colleague Ryan Guillen — who represents Texas State House District 31 south of Webb County — as he changed from the Democratic party to the Republican party.

“Like all good Democrats, I am disappointed that my longtime friend, Rep. Ryan Guillen, decided to run for re-election as a Republican,” Zaffirini said. “The redistricting process often forces many elected officials to make difficult decisions, and Rep. Guillen's House District 31 is now 62% Republican. After serving as a Democratic state representative for 18 years, his changing parties clearly increased his likelihood of a general election victory in his new district.

“Consistent with my record of bipartisanship, I hope to continue to collaborate with Rep. Guillen and with other Republican colleagues to pass meaningful legislation for our constituents. My ability to work with elected officials from both parties has enabled me to be the highest bill-passer in the Republican-controlled Texas Legislature for four consecutive sessions, and all of us must work tirelessly with members across the aisle to develop solutions to the most pressing issues facing Texans today.”

Amid her colleague switching parties, Zaffirini says she would never do such a thing and has no plans to do so ever in her legislative career.

She says the Democratic Party prioritizes the issues most important to Texans, which to her include fostering economic growth, making education and health care accessible and affordable, and ensuring the border communities remain among the safest in the country.

“Democrats continue to win down-ballot elections in South Texas — including in the one border county in Senate District 21 that voted Republican in the last presidential election — because local Democratic leaders share South Texans’ values,” Zaffirini said. “We support law enforcement, oil and gas jobs, and a safe and secure border — always have, always will.”

As for any challengers, so far no one has announced their intention to run against the state senator. Pastor Frank Pomeroy ran against her last time around, with Zaffirini claiming 60.1% of the vote.

Constituents may call either Zaffirini’s Capitol or Laredo office via 512-463-0121 or 956-722-2293 respectively, or email judith.zaffirini@senate.texas.gov.

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State Rep. Alex Dominguez will run to replace retiring state Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr. in high-stakes Democratic primary
San Antonio Express-News
November 19, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/politics/article/State-Rep-Alex-Dominguez-will-run-to-replace-16636366.php

State Rep. Alex Dominguez is running for Texas Senate, hoping to succeed retiring Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr., a fellow Brownsville Democrat, in a race filled with implications for Texas Democrats and the Rio Grande Valley.

“I think that our office is perfectly situated to take on the next generation of leading South Texas and” Senate District 27, Dominguez said in an interview.

Dominguez said his platform would center on improving health care access, workforce training and infrastructure. And he made clear he would run on his experience as a two-term House member and former Cameron County commissioner, noting Lucio also had that résumé before getting elected to the Senate.

Lucio announced earlier this month that he was retiring after serving three decades in the upper chamber. He become well-known for breaking with his party on some major issues — most notably abortion — and the race to fill his seat is set to test voters' appetites for continuing his legacy.

Already, the primary challenger who forced Lucio into a runoff last year, Sara Stapleton Barrera, has announced she is running for the open seat.

Dominguez said he wanted to continue Lucio's legacy of focusing on the Valley's educational needs. But he suggested he would be different from Lucio in at least a couple ways, including on abortion.

"I think people know that we come from two different generations," Dominguez said. "I'm a great deal more inclined to to let women make educated decisions about their own bodies and, more importantly, allow that personal responsibility and decision to lie in their hands and remove government meddling when it's not necessary."

Lucio is a devout Catholic, and Dominguez noted he grew up as Catholic but said he does not believe it is the job of policymakers to "use that religion to influence other people's views."

Dominguez also pointed out that he and Lucio had different approaches to the battle earlier this year over the GOP's priority elections bill. Dominguez was among the dozens of House Democrats who fled to Washington, D.C., in protest of the legislation, and while Lucio voted against it, he declined to join most other Senate Democrats when they briefly visited the nation's capital to support their House colleagues.

"The difference is I'm willing to bring the energy needed to do what we have to do as Democrats to preserve the rights of all Texans," Dominguez said.

Even before Lucio announced his retirement, Dominguez started exploring a run for the Senate seat.

Last month, he filed a campaign treasurer appointment for the seat with the Texas Ethics Commission. His treasurer is Wendy Davis, the 2014 gubernatorial nominee and former state senator known for her 2013 filibuster against anti-abortion restrictions.

The Democratic primary to replace Lucio could also feature Morgan LaMantia, a McAllen lawyer whose family runs the L&F beer distribution company. She told the Tribune last week that she "has been having a lot of conversations with people throughout the District and feedback has been very positive."

Dominguez cast doubt on whether LaMantia would legislate as a Democrat given her record of donating to members of both parties, which includes a $10,000 check to Republican Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller in 2018. And regardless of who else runs, Dominguez said it would be a mistake to nominate someone without policymaking experience, especially following the "vacuum" that Lucio's leaving would create.

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Whoever the next Democratic nominee is, they could have a competitive general election on their hands. Redistricting has made Lucio's seat less solidly Democratic, and Republicans are making no secret they want to make fresh inroads in South Texas after President Joe Biden's underwhelming performance there in 2020.

Dominguez said he is prepared to run for the seat in November with bipartisan appeal. While Dominguez may be a different kind of Democrat from Lucio, Dominguez said he is not a "far-left progressive" and has a record of working with Republicans.

Dominguez cited the bill that he and former Gov. Rick Perry successfully pushed earlier this year to study psychedelic drug therapy for veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder. And Dominguez pointed out that he is the vice chair of two committees and the only Valley Democrat on the powerful Appropriations Committee, calling it a sign of the trust that House GOP leaders have in him.

Dominguez currently represents House District 37, which he was drawn out of during redistricting and which is now a new battleground district in the Valley.

Dominguez previously considered a run for the 34th Congressional District, where U.S. Rep. Filemon Vela, D-Brownsville, is retiring. However, those deliberations were complicated by the decision by U.S. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, D-McAllen, to seek re-election in the 34th District rather than his current district, which was redrawn to be more favorable to the GOP.

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GOP dominates early candidate filings in Comal County
Will Wright
New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung
November 19, 2021
https://herald-zeitung.com/community_alert/article_c00f0072-49a4-11ec-986e-539e51ea7ae9.html

Democratic party chairs in Comal and Guadalupe counties are maintaining optimism despite the likelihood they'll be able to muster any candidates for local positions in next March's party primaries.

"Four congressional districts in New Braunfels? That's just nuts," said Marilyn Aden, Comal County Democratic chair of portions of U.S. House Districts 15, 21, 28 and 35 within city limits. "We're being heavily gerrymandered here."

Short of the federal courts overturning redistricting maps set by the Republican-dominated Texas Legislature, there's little for local Democrats to cheer — other than the entry of El Paso's Beto O'Rourke in the race for Texas governor.

"I haven't heard of anyone trying to file for the county positions, so it doesn't look like this will be a breakthrough year," Aden said. "We're sort of disappointed, but we'll have to see."

On the flip side, Sue Piner, Comal Republican chair, expects the party to maintain its 25-year-long grip on all major statewide and local positions for another two years.

"We are solid, conservative Red in Comal County — and are very well served by our elected officials," she said.

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Last Saturday, filing opened for Democratic and Republican candidates to appear on the ballot in the March 1 primary elections. In addition to governor, six other top state slots are up for re-election, along with every U.S. House and Texas House seat and half of the seats in the Texas Senate.

Other statewide seats up for election include lieutenant governor, attorney general, comptroller, land commissioner, agriculture commissioner and railroad commissioner. Also up are three justiceships on the state Supreme Court and three on the Court of Criminal Appeals.

Comal and Guadalupe seats up in 2023 include county judge, commissioners in precincts 2 and 4, criminal district attorney (Comal), treasurer, county courts at-law judges, district and county clerks, all four justices of the peace, and three district court judges.

Piner said eight GOP candidates have filed with her for reelection, including Criminal District Attorney Jennifer Tharp, County Court at-Law No. 1 Judge Randy Gray and challenger Marilee Hazel; Treasurer Renee Couch, County Clerk Bobbie Koepp, District Clerk Heather Kellar, Precinct 2 Justice of the Peace Rick Walker, and Mike Britt for Precinct 4 Justice of the Peace.

Piner wouldn't comment on "the other side" but did offer some insight into the statewide races.

"I think the Texas elections are going to be well attended, with a lot of people voting, because we have a lot of interest in the governor's race and we have a challenge for lieutenant governor," she said, referring to state secessionist advocate Daniel Miller of Nederland, who has filed to face two-term incumbent Dan Patrick.

Also interesting, Piner said, was District 1 U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert entering a widening field of candidates seeking to topple Attorney General Ken Paxton, another two-term incumbent.

"Even though we heard about it ahead of time, that was a big surprise," Piner said.

Aden and Guadalupe County Democratic Chair Duane McCune are still holding out hope for candidates will file for local positions. The lone elected official serving both counties is Rebecca Bell-Metereau, who won the District 5 State Board of Education seat in 2020.

GOP redistricting now has her facing reelection two years sooner in a much more conservative District 20, which wraps from Seguin and New Braunfels, northwest and then northeast around Austin and into the Bryan-College Station area.

Bell-Metereau and District 73 Texas House hopeful Justin Calhoun are the lone Democrats.

"It's going to be an interesting election," Aden said. "Hoping there's not going to be a lot of trouble with voting. And I don't think there will be, but we just don't know."

McCune, who will be stepping down after five, two-year terms as Guadalupe party chair, says there's a lot of time before the filing period ends at 6 p.m. on Monday, Dec. 13.

Two longtime Texas Senate incumbents filed this week — Donna Campbell, a New

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Braunfels Republican seeking her third full term representing District 25, and Judith Zaffirini, a Laredo Democrat seeking her 10th Senate term representing District 21.

Roy announces for third term

On Monday, District 21 U.S. House Rep. Chip Roy announced for reelection.

“I’m running for reelection to stop Joe Biden from destroying this country,” he said in a statement. “America is under assault on every front. We must stand for America, stand for Texas, preserve our God-given rights, and secure the border, so that we may once again enjoy the blessings of liberty and leave for our children a country that is strong, proud and free.”

Roy, from Austin, is in his second term and currently serving on the House Judiciary and Veterans Affairs committees, on the executive board of the House Freedom Caucus, and was recently named chair of the Republican Study Committee’s Healthcare Task Force.

Isaac, Green formally file for District 73

As expected, Carrie Isaac of Dripping Springs recently filed for Texas House District 73, which also formally added former New Braunfels City Council Member George Green to the fray on Friday.

“Our state desperately needs fearless conservative leaders, and I’m running to give our values the powerful voice they deserve in the Texas Capitol,” she said in a statement.

“Texas must unapologetically stand firm for the principles that have made our state a beacon of hope for the nation and the world — not follow the path of big government and progressive social ideology.”

Isaac, “a conservative Republican,” promised to “work to secure the border, cut property taxes, empower parents to have control over their children’s education, ban liberal indoctrination of students in public school, defend — not defund — our law enforcement, and protect the Hill Country.”

Isaac is a fourth-generation Texan. She’s married to former state Rep. Jason Isaac, who came in third to Roy in the 2018 GOP party primary for House District 21. Also seeking the D73 GOP nod is former New Braunfels Mayor Barron Casteel.

The last day to register to vote is Monday, Jan. 31; the early voting period runs from Monday, Feb. 14 through Friday, Feb. 25. For election information and updated candidate filings, visit the elections link at the Texas Secretary of State’s website, www.sos.state.tx.us.

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As Gerrymanders Get Worse, Legal Options to Overturn Them Dwindle
Michael Wines
New York Times
November 21, 2021
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/21/us/redistricting-gerrymandering-republicans.html

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Voting-rights advocates are in a North Carolina state court in Raleigh this month, arguing in three lawsuits that Republican gerrymanders of the State Legislature and the state's 14 seats in the House of Representatives are so extreme that they violate the state Constitution.

Only two years ago, some of the same lawyers were arguing that remarkably similar Republican gerrymanders of the same legislature, drawn a decade ago, violated the same clauses of the constitution. That trial ended with a resounding verdict in their favor, but only after the gerrymandered maps were used for almost a decade.

Winning those kinds of cases, however belatedly, now appears much more of a long shot. Experts say that even as gerrymanders become ever more egregious, the legal avenues to overturn them are becoming narrower.

"The good news is that litigation will probably go a little faster than in the last decade," Richard L. Hasen, an election-law expert at the University of California, Irvine, and a longtime critic of gerrymanders, said this past week. "The bad news is that it will progress faster because the plaintiffs will lose."

More and more states — mostly Republican like Ohio and Texas, but now Democratic ones like Illinois — are drawing maps that effectively guarantee that the party in power stays in power.

North Carolina underscores how high the stakes and how weak the legal guardrails are.

With a Democratic governor, two Republican senators and a split record in recent presidential elections — the state voted for Barack Obama in 2008 and Republicans narrowly since then — North Carolina voters are as evenly divided as any in the nation. But legislative and congressional maps approved this month by the Republican-controlled Legislature lopsidedly favor Republicans.

According to PlanScore.org, a nonpartisan website, if the North Carolina vote under the new maps were split 50-50 between the two parties following recent voting patterns, it would give Republicans a 64-56 edge in the State House and a 32-18 margin in the State Senate.

The new congressional map is even more tilted, giving Democrats an advantage in only three of the state's 14 House seats, down from the five they hold now.

The racial impact of the maps is sweeping. The government accountability watchdog group Common Cause said a quarter of the 36 state legislative seats held by African Americans, all Democrats, would be likely to flip Republican. The district containing the seat that a Black congressman, Representative G.K. Butterfield, has occupied since 1992 also lost much of its Black constituency, and he chose to retire at the end of this term.

"The Legislature handed us a map that's an extreme political gerrymander and an extreme racial gerrymander," Mr. Butterfield said last week. "It's unconscionable, and it's unconstitutional."

North Carolina Republicans say they used neither racial nor political data in drawing the maps. Asked whether the State Senate map was a partisan gerrymander, the Republican co-chairman of the Senate redistricting committee, Senator Paul Newton, replied, "The courts will decide that." But, he added, "No, it's not. It is fair, and should

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be a fair and legal map."

Democrats and voting-rights advocates strongly disagree.

Under Voting Rights Act rules in place before the Supreme Court gutted the law in 2013, "the Justice Department wouldn't have approved these maps," said Allison Riggs, the co-executive director of the Southern Coalition for Social Justice, which is representing plaintiffs in one lawsuit.

But that is not the only legal avenue constricted in recent years.

The Supreme Court in 2019 ended a decades-long debate over the constitutionality of partisan gerrymandering, saying it was up to Congress, not the courts, to fix politically skewed maps.

The court also has made it harder to prove that political districts were drawn to reduce minority voters' clout, a violation of the remaining rules of the Voting Rights Act. A 2018 Supreme Court ruling in a Texas case said that a state's record of racial discrimination in redistricting — long a factor in such cases — couldn't override the assumption that lawmakers were acting in good faith, even when they drew districts that clearly locked in their own power."

That ruling, with the green light for partisan gerrymandering, is prompting lawmakers to try to dodge lawsuits with a new argument: Maps that dilute minority votes aren't racially biased. They're just efforts to neuter political rivals.

Beyond that, legal challenges face a much less sympathetic federal bench remade by the 226 right-leaning judges and three Supreme Court justices confirmed during the Trump administration. Mr. Trump's choices flipped the partisan balance of three of the 13 appeals courts and filled about one in four district court seats.

The onslaught of gerrymanders would further shrink an already minuscule number of competitive seats in state legislatures and the House of Representatives. Even before the latest maps, partisan advantages were so one-sided that four in 10 seats in state legislatures were uncontested. In the House of Representatives, gerrymanders could reduce the number of competitive districts — now perhaps 51 of the chamber's 435 seats — by a quarter, said David Wasserman, the chief expert on the House at the Cook Political Report.

"It used to be the people's House, elected every two years to make it the most responsive," said Edward B. Foley, a constitutional law scholar and director of Election Law at Ohio State University. "By eliminating competitive districts, you're making it the least responsive."

In North Carolina, gerrymanders and lawsuits opposing them are a constant. Suits contesting Republican-drawn maps were filed in 2011, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2018 and 2019. Republicans grudgingly redrew them under court order in 2016, 2017 and 2019.

This year is different in one key respect: All three suits have been filed in state court, the only courts left to contest partisan gerrymanders — and the courts that gave plaintiffs their rare victory in 2019.

In one, the N.A.A.C.P. and Common Cause claim new maps of the State House and State Senate break state rules aimed at complying with the Voting Rights Act. Another, by the state League of Conservation Voters, an environmental advocacy

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group, argues that both the legislative and congressional maps are racial and partisan gerrymanders.

In a third, 13 North Carolina Democrats, financed by a Democratic Party affiliate, call the new House of Representatives map a partisan gerrymander. Under state law, two of the cases will go to three-judge panels and then, if appealed, to the state Supreme Court.

Given the long odds facing federal lawsuits, the switch to state courts may become a trend. “There’s a surprising number of opportunities for these state constitutional challenges,” said Marina K. Jenkins, the director of litigation and policy at the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, an arm of the Democratic Party.

The reason is that states offer a clear avenue to attack unfair maps that is absent in federal lawsuits. Forty-nine state constitutions enshrine a right to vote (Arizona, the exception, has an implicit voting-rights guarantee), and 30 require that elections be free or “free and equal.” The federal Constitution contains neither clause.

Both a North Carolina three-judge panel in 2019 and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 2018 cited guarantees of free and equal elections in rulings striking down partisan gerrymanders. That could guide other states in interpreting similar clauses, said Joshua A. Douglas, an expert on state election laws at the University of Kentucky law school.

As a result, some legal challenges to gerrymandered maps could come down to the political complexion of state courts, which the nonpartisan website Ballotpedia estimates tilt Republican in 27 states and Democratic in 15. A few high courts, most notably the Texas Supreme Court, have reputations as graveyards for voting-rights suits.

North Carolina’s does not. But a decision by the Republican Legislature in 2018 to elect Supreme Court justices by party affiliation, scrapping nonpartisan elections, has made politics central to many cases. That could have a significant impact on gerrymandering suits, starting with the League of Conservation Voters filing.

That suit, like all redistricting suits, will be heard by a three-judge panel appointed by the chief justice of the Supreme Court. And that chief justice, Paul Newby, is a Republican who in November defeated the Democratic incumbent by 401 votes out of nearly 5.4 million cast. On Friday, he named two Republicans and one Democrat to the panel.

That could well bode a reversal of the panel’s earlier rejection of partisan map-drawing.

Mr. Butterfield said more is at stake in the House lawsuit than the partisan balance in the state.

“What they’re doing in my state, they’re doing in Texas and Georgia and Ohio,” he said. “It’s seismic. It’s monumental. It’s a gerrymandering epidemic that’s not just going to damage the Democratic Party. It will inflict damage on our democracy.”

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The Austin Law Firm Battling Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell Over the “Big Lie”

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Peter Holley
Texas Monthly
November 19, 2021
https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/big-lie-austin-law-firm/

When Charlie Cain, Steve Skarnulis, and several other members of their Austin-based law firm stepped inside Rudy Giuliani's Manhattan office on a blazing hot morning in mid-August, they found that the building's air-conditioning system was shut off. The office—packed with enough American flags and patriotic-themed paraphernalia to fill a Statue of Liberty gift shop—had the feel of a steam room. To compensate for the heat, the 77-year-old Giuliani, who sat near a life-size blowup of his "Person of the Year" cover from the December 2001 issue of Time magazine, passed out chilled Coca-Colas and pressed one of the cans to his forehead. It was a friendly, if slightly awkward, gesture, and the last hint of camaraderie before both sides took their places inside a conference room to begin a three-hour deposition that would pit the Texas attorneys against one of the most pugnacious members of former president Donald Trump's inner circle.

Cain, Skarnulis, and their team were representing Eric Coomer, a former employee of Dominion Voting Systems, a company that manufactures voting machines and tabulators, who had found himself at the center of a conspiracy theory about the election. A few days after the presidential race was called for Joe Biden last November, a right-wing podcaster, Joe Oltmann, alleged that Coomer had tampered with the company's machines to steal the election from Trump. Oltmann claimed to have infiltrated an antifa conference call in which Coomer could be overheard discussing his plans to upend American democracy. Days later, Giuliani began to spread the conspiracy tale. During a televised press conference on November 19, 2020, Giuliani cited the supposed antifa recording with Coomer. "The man is a vicious, vicious man," Giuliani said, adding that on the recording Coomer "specifically says that they are going to fix the election."

Coomer, who occasionally posted about his disdain for Trump on Facebook, has no association with the antifa (short for "anti-fascist") movement and denies participating in the group phone call cited by Oltmann and Giuliani. Neither of those two have produced any evidence of the alleged call. Giuliani didn't respond to multiple requests for an interview. Oltmann's lawyer, Andrea M. Hall, said her client stands by his allegations. "He has never lied and he 100 percent believed that it was Eric Coomer on that antifa phone call," she said.

Coomer is suing Giuliani for defamation. His suit also targets conservative publications and other prominent figures who served the Trump campaign, including Sidney Powell, a conspiracy-touting Dallas lawyer who briefly represented Trump in election lawsuits. Last week, Coomer filed a separate suit against a Colorado media figure and a conservative radio broadcasting company who are also accused of promoting the Coomer conspiracy. Coomer's team says it hasn't calculated the exact damages it's seeking at this stage of the suit, but the number will be in the millions and will include "exemplary damages," which are typically awarded to make an example of those who commit reckless and harmful behavior.

Giuliani, like all defendants except for the conservative website and cable channel Newsmax, has not retracted his claims about Coomer. The mid-August meeting was part of the discovery process in the suit. Despite the oppressive heat inside the office, the lawyers from Cain & Skarnulis said Giuliani seemed to be in good spirits as they set up a video camera and began their deposition. "I think Giuliani does want to charm at first," Skarnulis told me on a recent afternoon back in his Austin office. "I think he was playing to the video and liked having a camera there."

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The onetime Mafia crime fighter's apparent affability, however, was short-lived. A few minutes after the meeting began, the lawyers repeatedly asked Giuliani whether he'd instructed President Trump's inner circle to prematurely declare victory on election night, as reported in the recently released book, I Alone Can Fix It by Washington Post journalists Carol Leonnig and Philip Rucker. Giuliani grew increasingly combative, denying the allegation under oath before demanding to know whether an audio recording of him advising declaring premature victory existed. "Tell me who said I said that!" Giuliani can be heard demanding in video footage shown to Texas Monthly. "Someone has to have said, 'Rudy Giuliani said—pffft!' I didn't say that so I'm trying to figure out who's lying!" Cain responded by pointing out that Giuliani hadn't produced an audio recording of Coomer promising to tamper with the 2020 election, despite on multiple occasions having suggested he had one. Cain wanted to know why Giuliani thought his situation demanded a higher threshold of evidence, attempting to box the former prosecutor into a position that would likely strike a jury as hypocritical. "A totally different thing!" Giuliani shot back.

The intense exchange was one of many that have taken place during recent depositions with some of the most vocal proponents of the "big lie," the baseless conspiracy theory that the election was stolen from Donald Trump. For more than a year now, the conspiracy has animated the Republican party, to the point that a majority of Republicans tell pollsters they believe Trump won the election. Proponents of this fabrication have preemptively sowed doubts about next year's midterm election and the 2024 presidential contest. But prosecution of those who have spread the lie has been slow. To date, the U.S. Department of Justice has yet to prosecute White House officials who might have known of plans for the January 6 Capitol riot, and a congressional committee investigating the insurrection has, in many critics' eyes, been successfully stymied by subpoena-defying witnesses, such as Trump strategist Stephen Bannon, who are using the slow-moving court proceedings to their advantage.

Civil courts have become one the few places where "big lie" promoters are being held to account. Defamation cases, pursued by Coomer and voting machine companies including Dominion, have become an unlikely weapon in the fight against authoritarianism. Coomer's lawyers believe his case could become one of the most important before the 2024 election. It already has resulted in revealing depositions that have begun to shine a light into Trumpworld disinformation, allowing outsiders to begin mapping the big lie's origins and revealing how the fabrication was hand-fed to the conservative media ecosystem.

Peter Salib, an assistant law professor at the University of Houston who studies constitutional issues relating to false online speech, said he expects the legal world to closely watch the Coomer case and other similar ones. He said they could be difficult to win: courts have traditionally aimed to preserve as much free speech in the public domain as possible. For Coomer's case to succeed in court, his lawyers will have to demonstrate "actual malice" on the defendants' part and will not only have to show that their client's reputation was damaged by false statements, but that those statements were made intentionally, with a "reckless disregard for the truth." To meet that standard, it will not be enough to show that Giuliani merely made no effort to verify Oltmann's claim, according to Salib. Rather, lawyers must show he had some reason to doubt it and then performed no follow-up investigation before citing it. "If Giuliani did indeed say that Coomer was on some kind of antifa call where he said he was going to change votes, that sounds like the kind of claim that most people would naturally doubt, absent some verification," Salib said. "If that's right, then it might well be actual malice to do no further investigation."

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Going to battle with some of Trump's closest allies was never the plan, according to Cain and Skarnulis, whose scrappy Austin law firm has, over the past decade, primarily tried cases involving construction and insurance companies, or East Texas oil and gas disputes. But, by chance, Cain met Coomer in 2019, while celebrating the verdict of another defamation case, completely unrelated to the election, at a bar in Salida, Colorado, where the firm has a second office. A little more than a year later, as the big lie began to germinate within the right-wing media ecosystem, first implicating Dominion and then, days later, singling out Coomer specifically, the 51-year-old remembered the chance encounter and decided to give Cain and Skarnulis a call. He had begun receiving death threats, and in fear for his life was hiding at a friend's cabin in the Rocky Mountains. "When Dr. Coomer called us I remember him saying, 'Are you sure your firm is able to handle this kind of thing?'" Skarnulis recounted during an interview inside his office in downtown Austin this month. "I said, 'Well, no, but I don't know that anybody has any experience with this and if we can't do it, Charlie and I will be the first to tell you that we need to bring in other help.'"

The decision to take the case was a tough one. Before doing so, both lawyers spoke to their families about the potential risk associated with antagonizing the increasingly violent elements of America's political culture. Their fears have been substantiated. The firm's lawyers have been singled out on Parler and Telegram, two alternative social-media platforms with limited moderation that have become breeding grounds for extremist right-wing rhetoric. The firm has removed public signage from its Salida office and hired private security guards who accompany them to court appearances, as well as online security experts. Unlike many plaintiffs' lawyers involved in the public spotlight, they've made a point of declining most interview requests.

Coomer's lawsuit is currently pending in a Colorado court, where the defendants, including Giuliani, are attempting to have the case dismissed using Colorado's anti-SLAPP law, a rule that is designed to protect journalists from frivolous lawsuits. Should the case proceed, it is likely headed to the Colorado Supreme Court next year. The firm has an arrangement with Coomer, who is not paying out of pocket, to take a set percentage of any damages he is awarded. In the interim, to cover expenses, which are "significant" according to the lawyers, the firm may introduce a crowdfunding campaign.

Taking on the case has proved to be a heavy lift, one that has required more than one third of the firm's seventeen lawyers working full time. Still, their staff has found itself heavily outnumbered. At a recent hearing about whether the case should move forward, Cain & Skarnulis's six-person team faced off against a group of about thirty lawyers, who packed not only the defense table but also the jury box. Cain said the importance of confronting the big lie—at a time when it's still being nurtured politically and financially—has overridden any concerns about the case's difficulty. Having a front-row seat has reinforced for him how dynamic and dangerous the conspiracy theory remains. "I liken it to a rising sea: it's not going away, and the only way we'll be able to combat this mass movement is by moving to higher ground and shining a light on what's going on," he said. "This case is going to help, but if we're not vigilant in this country things are going to rapidly deteriorate."

Coomer's case might provide a model for understanding how lies about the election were legitimized by Republicans in office and by conservative media outlets. Not long after Oltmann made his claim on YouTube about Coomer, without calling him to verify it, according to the lawsuit, other conservative media outlets began to use Oltmann as a primary source. Gateway Pundit, a conservative news outlet, appears to have published the first article about Coomer. Accusations then rippled across the conservative media landscape, the lawsuit maintains, and eventually were cited in a tweet by Donald Trump's son Eric that reached some 4.5 million social media users.

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At no point, the suit says, did any media outlet publishing stories about Coomer seek a comment from him.

The lawyers, who have assigned a full-time staffer to monitor and track newly arrived conspiracies involving their client, say they've been shocked by the number of potential defendants—a list that continues to grow—as well as by the speed with which misinformation spreads. "Just when you think it's been completely disproven, somebody else pops up with an interview on a podcast or cyber symposium where they end up talking about Dr. Coomer and making the same allegations despite an absolute lack of proof," Skarnulis said. Many appear to be pushing the conspiracy to attempt to overturn the election results, others to attract an audience.

Until consequences manifest, both lawyers said, the proponents of the big lie are likely to view their efforts—no matter how reckless and ill-conceived—as risks worth taking. Giuliani's law license was suspended in New York after a court ruled he made "demonstrably false and misleading statements" as he led Trump's challenges of the election results. But the potential consequences of promoting unverified conspiracy theories at Coomer's expense still appear to have been of little concern. "It's not my job, in a fast-moving case, to go out and investigate every piece of evidence that was given to me," Giuliani said, more than an hour into the August deposition, when Cain asked him to explain why he considered Oltmann credible. "Otherwise, you're never going to write a story. You'll never come to a conclusion."

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Republican answers 'call of duty' with Biden election job
Rachel La Corte
Associated Press
November 19, 2021
https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/news/article/Republican-answers-call-of-duty-with-Biden-16635127.php

OLYMPIA, Wash. (AP) — Washington state's Secretary of State Kim Wyman is the last statewide-elected Republican on the West Coast and as she readies for a new election security job in the Biden administration she says she'll approach it with her core philosophy: "Party politics aren't as important as our country's elections."

Wyman, who battled misinformation from some within her own party during the 2020 election, will serve as the election security lead for the Department of Homeland Security's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the agency responsible for safeguarding U.S. elections.

In the role, she will serve as the federal government's top liaison to the states.

"This is one of those unique opportunities that doesn't come often in your career, where your experience and your knowledge are exactly what is needed at a certain point in time," Wyman, 59, told The Associated Press during a recent interview in her office.

Wyman's new job builds off of the outspoken role she took in the 2020 election cycle. She was a constant presence on national networks in the weeks leading up to the polls, extolling the safety and security of the vote-by-mail system in Washington state, a process in place for years, and disputing former President Donald Trump's claims that mail-in voting was fraudulent.

"There wasn't fraud in this election," she said. "As a Republican, and having people

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within my own party accusing me of all sorts of things, what I know to be true is the great job that people did in the election sphere."

Matt Masterson, who held Wyman's new position from 2018 until December 2020, has known her for years and said she "is the absolutely perfect person to come into this role."

"Elections security is not a partisan issue and Kim gets that and understands what needs to be done to support state and local officials so that they can run a secure process," said Masterson, who is now a non-resident fellow at Stanford, doing research and work on election security and misinformation surrounding elections.

Last October, Wyman published the book "Elections 2020: Controlling Chaos: How Foreign Interference, a Global Pandemic, and Political Polarization Threaten U.S. Democracy."

She said that many of the threats that existed back in 2016 and into 2020 have not gone away.

"Obviously foreign threat actors are still going to try to undermine our elections and try to infiltrate them," she said. "The misinformation and disinformation campaigns continue to this day and we need to have ways to combat that."

Wyman, is the fifth consecutive Republican secretary of state in Washington dating back to 1965, and was reelected to a third term in November. Last week, Gov. Jay Inslee appointed Democratic Sen. Steve Hobbs to replace her.

Hobbs will be sworn in Monday and serve until the general election in November 2022, which will determine who will serve the remainder of Wyman's four-year term.

Wyman said she knows she is letting some people down by leaving before the conclusion of her term and breaking the chain of GOP secretaries of state in order to take the position within the Biden administration, but said "this is a call of duty to serve my country and that takes precedence."

Rep. J.T. Wilcox, the state House minority leader, said that while he's disappointed to see her go, Wyman "has been very steadfast in never allowing herself to be the least bit partisan."

He noted that she faced two tough reelection bids and prevailed over her Democratic opponents in years where political divisiveness was high.

"It's always a gift in politics when the best route to winning is just being yourself," he said.

In a statement issued last month when news of Wyman's appointment was announced, Inslee praised her work in the state, writing that he had "no doubt that her expertise, energy and focus will lead to more secure elections and help restore faith in the democratic process."

When asked if she still considers herself a Republican, Wyman answered that she still believes "in the Republican principles that Ronald Reagan espoused 40 years ago that made me a Republican in the first place," citing smaller government, a strong military and lower taxes.

"I think our party has gotten off track from principles, and now it's a lot of tests of

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whether you are a real Republican or not and that's for each of us to decide," she said.

Wyman starts her cross-country trek to Virginia on Tuesday. When she arrives, she said she plans to register as an independent, citing both the desire to ensure neutrality in her new job and the fact that she's "kind of ready to step away from politics in every way right now."

"I may return to politics down the road, but right now I'm just going to be an independent American for a while," she said.

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Tough border policies appear to boost poll results for Gov. Abbott
Dianne Solis
Dallas Morning News
November 22, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/11/22/tough-border-policies-appear-to-boost-poll-results-for-gov-abbott/

Support is deepening for Gov. Greg Abbott's handling of immigration at the border, compared with that of President Joe Biden's performance, according to a new Texas poll.

Why does it matter? The Republican governor's get-tough border policies may give him an edge in his bid for re-election in 2022, and prove a testing ground for a politico who's also eyeing a White House run.

A new poll by The Dallas Morning News and the University of Texas at Tyler shows that 49% of polled registered voters approve of Abbott's border policies — up from 47% in September. The poll surveyed 1,106 registered voters on a range of issues from Nov. 9-16. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points.

Many of the findings on immigration and the border showed an increasingly conservative stance when compared with the last poll in early September. In mid-September, national attention became focused on the chaotic arrival of asylum-seekers in Del Rio.

There, more than 15,000 Haitians swam across the Rio Grande, where they were placed in an outdoor camp under the international bridge. Abbott sent state troopers and members of the Texas National Guard to park their vehicles along the riverbanks in an effort to discourage the mass crossings while federal authorities struggled to cope with the arriving migrants.

Adding to the tension were policies recently implemented by Abbott that allowed for the arrest of migrants on state charges of property trespassing.

The poll found:

- 50% of voters agree or strongly agree that a wall along the Texas-Mexico border is "necessary for a safe border. That's 2% higher than early September polling.
- 48% of voters support granting permanent legal status to immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children. In September, 51% supported granting permanent legal status. Democrats supported such a measure by 71%, and Republicans by 40%.

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When asked “what party do you trust to address the needs of the Texas-Mexico border,” there was polarization by race and ethnicity:

- Overall, 54% said they trusted Republicans, compared to 43% who trusted Democrats.
- But 58% of those who identified as Independents said they trusted the Republicans.
- Latinos were more likely to trust Democrats at 57% and Blacks gave Democrats an even higher percentage at 80%. Only 28% of whites trusted Democrats more than Republicans when it comes to addressing the needs at the border.

Biden’s strongest approval ratings at the border came from Black and Latino voters, illustrating again the sharp divisions depending on ethnicity and race.

- Black voters gave Biden a 53% approve or strongly approve rating.
- Latino voters gave Biden a 44% approve or strongly approve rating.
- Non-Latino whites gave Biden only a 24% rating of approval or strongly approve.

Methodology

The Dallas Morning News/UT-Tyler Poll is a statewide random sample of 1,106 registered voters conducted between Nov. 9-16. The mixed-mode sample includes 244 registered voters surveyed over the phone by the University of Texas at Tyler with support from ReconMR and 866 registered voters randomly selected from Dynata’s panel of online respondents. The margin of error for a sample of 1,106 registered voters in Texas is +/- 2.9 percentage points, and the more conservative margin of sampling error that includes design effects from this poll is +/- 3.2 percentage points for a 95% confidence interval. The online and phone surveys were conducted in English and Spanish. Using information from the 2020 Current Population Survey and Office of the Texas Secretary of State. The sample’s gender, age, race/ethnicity, education, metropolitan density and vote choice were matched to the population of registered voters in Texas.

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Texas governor hopeful Beto O'Rourke criticizes Biden on immigration
Kanishka Singh
Reuters
November 21, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/world/us/texas-governor-hopeful-beto-orourke-criticizes-biden-immigration-2021-11-21/

Nov 21 (Reuters) - Beto O'Rourke, the Democratic former U.S. congressman who is running for governor of Texas, on Sunday criticized President Joe Biden for a lack of urgency on pursuing a revamp of immigration laws, indicating he will distance himself from the White House in his underdog campaign.

O'Rourke announced last Monday he will seek to unseat Republican Governor Greg Abbott in next year's election, aiming to become the first Democrat to win a statewide race in Texas, the second most populous U.S. state, in three decades.

"I do not think we have seen enough urgency when it comes to rewriting our immigration laws to match the needs and the reality that we see, especially in our

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border communities," O'Rourke told CNN's "State of the Union" program on Sunday. "So, yes, we expect more of our president and those who represent us in Congress."

The Democratic president has made other issues such as infrastructure, social spending and COVID-19 relief higher legislative priorities than immigration reform. Democrats narrowly control Congress.

O'Rourke also took aim at Abbott, saying the governor is "using the border right now as a photo opportunity, scapegoating and vilifying immigrants, asking Texans to, quote, 'defend themselves' and take matters into their own hands from this 'invasion,' as he describes it."

Biden has faced criticism from Democrats and Republicans over immigration and border issues. Arrests at the U.S.-Mexico border have reached record levels in recent months.

Asked whether he would welcome Biden to Texas to help him campaign, O'Rourke suggested he would not, saying: "This campaign in Texas is not going to be about Joe Biden. It's not going to be about Donald Trump. It's not going to be about anyone from outside of our state."

Trump, known for a hardline approach on immigration, last year defeated Biden in Texas while losing the presidential election nationally.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Biden have pledged to create a working group on arms trafficking and related transborder crime and border security, the White House said on Friday.

Biden has kept in place a controversial order, first implemented by his Republican predecessor Trump last year, that allows migrants to be immediately expelled without an opportunity to seek asylum in light of the pandemic.

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Fact check: Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick claims up to 3 million migrants entered U.S. illegally in 2021
Nusaiba Mizan
Politifact Texas/Houston Chronicle
November 22, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/home/article/Fact-check-Lt-Gov-Dan-Patrick-says-up-to-3-16639101.php

The claim: On unauthorized crossings at the southern border, “we are looking at over a million people apprehended this year, meaning probably another 2 or 3 million have come in illegally.” — Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

In an Oct. 18 interview on Fox News, Patrick described the number of migrants crossing the border as “out of control” and blamed President Joe Biden.

PolitiFact rating: Half true. The first part of Patrick’s claim is accurate when you look at figures released by the Border Patrol. But because the Border Patrol has been apprehending a higher share of people over time, the number of people who were not apprehended in fiscal 2021 was likely far fewer than his estimate.

The statement is partially accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

When contacted by PolitiFact, Patrick's spokesperson wrote in an email, "we are clearly on pace for well over 2 million encounters" and that the number of people who crossed the border between ports of entry but were not apprehended are from ratio estimates by "various law enforcements." His office did not answer follow-up questions on which law enforcement entities made those estimates.

The number of people who entered the U.S. illegally but were not apprehended is not available from Customs and Border Protection, but the Homeland Security Department does calculate border security metrics.

The methodology behind the Border Patrol's migrant apprehension rate is presented in annual reports. The latest available report is the 2020 report with fiscal 2018 data. Some of these metrics rely on estimates of the number of people who crossed the border undetected.

The apprehension rate was 70 percent in 2018. Ruth Wasem, who teaches policy courses on immigration at the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs, noted this rate suggests the number of people who were not apprehended this year would be lower than Patrick's estimate.

Patrick's estimate of 2 million or 3 million people would mean two-thirds or more of migrants weren't apprehended.

That might have been the case in the early 2000s when the apprehension rate ranged from 33 percent to 43 percent, but not now, Wasem said. The apprehension rate generally has increased over time.

In an October Fox News interview, the former head of the Border Patrol, Rodney Scott, said there were more than 400,000 "got aways" over the past year.

The left-leaning Migration Policy Institute estimates 500,000 to 600,000 people entered the country without authorization and were not apprehended last year.

"There's also been statements from CBP officials throughout the year that they're seeing about 1,000 got-aways per day. If you multiply that by 365 days to account for 365 days in a year, it comes out to about 365,000," said Jessica Bolter, an analyst for the Migration Policy Institute.

So, it could be estimated there were 365,000 to 600,000 people entering the country without authorization in fiscal 2021.

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Exclusive: Gov. Greg Abbott talks El Paso, job growth "Texas will remain the economic engine of the U.S."
Christina Aguayo
KTSM-TV
November 21, 2021
https://www.myhighplains.com/news/texas/exclusive-gov-greg-abbott-talks-el-paso-job-growth-texans-want-freedom/

EL PASO, Texas (KTSM) – Governor Greg Abbott announced Friday that the there has been job growth in Texas for 17 of the last 18 months, and according to the Texas workforce commission, more than 56,000 jobs were added in the month of October alone.

In an exclusive interview Governor Greg Abbott said that one of the things he will continue to do for the Lone Star State, is making sure Texas remains the economic engine of the United States.

Abbott also said he will continue to bring in more businesses and create more jobs adding that over the last two months, Texas has added more than 150,000 jobs.

The Governor touched on everything from border security to public safety and even had a message for the people of El Paso.

"As you know my wife is the first Hispanic first lady in the history of Texas. I've connected with the Hispanic community across the entire state of Texas including in El Paso and in border towns all across Texas. And let me tell you what I found, the values of the Hispanic community are the exact same values of the people across the state of Texas. They want good paying jobs, they want a high quality education, they want to have safety in their communities. But I will tell you this; The thing that I've learned from Texans in every region of the state, the thing they want the most is freedom. They want to have the freedom to chart their own future without government dictating every aspect of their lives. " -GOVERNOR GREG ABBOTT

Governor Abbott also touched on what his plans are to 'keep Texas thriving,'

"The first thing that I will continue to do is to keep Texas the economic engine of the United States by continuing to bring in more businesses and create more jobs. In just the past two months for example, Texas has added more than 150,000 new jobs. But also I will focus on public safety and that means funding our police rather than defunding our police, and then in addition to what I'm doing on securing the southern border, listen we focusing on something that I hear about as I criss-cross the entire state of Texas and that it when it comes to educating our children, parents matter. And parents need to have a greater say that needs to be respected by our schools about what our children are being taught." -GOVERNOR GREG ABBOTT

We will have more from our exclusive interview with governor Greg Abbott on Saturday and Sunday.

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Podcast: O'Rourke: The border is greatest opportunity Texas has ever known
Mario Munoz
Rio Grande Guardian
November 21, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/orourke-the-border-is-the-greatest-opportunity-that-texas-has-ever-known/

BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS – Beto O'Rourke says that if elected governor of Texas he will invest heavily in infrastructure for border communities.

In an exclusive interview with the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service about economic development, O'Rourke pointed out that the ports of entry through which US-Mexico trade passes support more than 600,000 jobs across the state of Texas.

"Very often Governor Abbott, Lieutenant Governor Patrick, will talk about the border simply as a threat, a place where people are coming to get us from. They use words, as you have heard, like invasion. Governor Abbott encouraged us to defend

ourselves and literally said, take matters into your own hands when it comes to immigrants at the border, which in part helped to inspire that shooter who came to El Paso two and a half years ago and killed 23 people," O'Rourke said.

"The border is actually the greatest opportunity that Texas has ever known. The goods that we produce and manufacture in this state flows through these ports of entry to markets around the globe. And the things that we manufacture together with our partners in Mexico come back through these ports with a majority of the value added content produced here in the United States and in Texas and so there are hundreds of thousands of jobs that depend on our ability to facilitate the flow of trade in Laredo and Brownsville, McAllen, El Paso and other critical land ports."

O'Rourke, a native of El Paso, said retail businesses along the border were devastated by the closure for 20 months of land ports of entry to so-called non-essential travel. This was due to the coronavirus pandemic. He said Mexican shoppers have been incredibly loyal to border cities in Texas for generations. He said his mother's family owned a furniture store for more than 50 years. The majority of that store's business came from Mexican shoppers.

"We really do rely on each other. And we need a governor who understands that and will improve that bilateral relationship by investing in the infrastructure around our ports of entry, making sure that more of these trucks can get in and get out. As I was driving into Laredo yesterday from San Antonio, there was a line of 18 wheelers that stretched probably two miles as they were heading north, trying to get into Texas. But they were bottlenecked because of a lack of infrastructure capacity," O'Rourke said.

"Let's invest in this job creating, economic driving force that is our border. We can get past the culture war stuff and the scapegoating of immigrants and back to creating jobs and ensuring that we have economic opportunity in our communities. That is the value that I see in the border and as governor I am going to make sure we make the most of it."

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Mexico Expects Arms Suit To Bring Change In Industry-Officials
Reuters
November 19, 2021
https://www.shorenewsnetwork.com/2021/11/19/mexico-expects-arms-suit/

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) – Mexico expects the lawsuit it has filed in a U.S. court against prominent arms makers for negligent business practices will force the industry to change, in spite of companies efforts' to have the case thrown out, Mexican officials said on Friday.

The Mexican government argues the companies knew their practices had encouraged illegal arms trafficking into Mexico, helping to cause thousands of gangland deaths.

The arms industry has rejected Mexico's allegations.

The firms, including Smith & Wesson, Barrett Firearms and Colt's Manufacturing Co have until Monday to respond to the lawsuit Mexico filed in a Massachusetts court in August, and Mexican officials are confident they are winning the argument.

In a briefing with reporters, officials said that once more facts about the industry became known during the process, firearms makers would have to tighten up their

practices.

“After discussions on the motion to dismiss (the lawsuit) are over … we get to the heart of it,” said one of the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity. “And in the discovery process, I can assure you the companies will self-regulate.”

The official said Mexico expected the companies to say that corruption in Mexico and other failings were to blame for illicit entry of arms into the country, and to use other arguments to deflect from their own responsibility.

Noting that holding arms makers to account had widespread support in Mexico, the official said that if firms tried to pass the matter off as being about Mexican corruption, Mexico would end up talking about corruption in U.S. law enforcement on the border and the role of the National Rifle Association in U.S. politics.

Lawyers for the arms companies did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

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Biden, Trudeau, López Obrador Pledge to Curb Oil and Gas Methane Emissions in Trilateral Summit
Andrew Baker
Natural Gas Intelligence
November 19, 2021
https://www.naturalgasintel.com/biden-trudeau-lopez-obrador-pledge-to-curb-oil-and-gas-methane-emissions-in-trilateral-summit/

President Biden, joined by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador on Thursday pledged to create a “North American strategy on methane and black carbon” during a trilateral summit this week in Washington, DC.

The strategy will aim “to reduce methane emissions from all sectors, especially oil and gas,” the White House said. “We will also focus on reducing black carbon from diesel vehicles and engines, flaring, wood-burning appliances, and shipping.”

Biden and Trudeau “reiterated their pledge to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, to enhance 2030 greenhouse gas reduction targets, and they affirmed the Global Methane Pledge,” the White House said.

More than 100 countries representing slightly under half of global anthropogenic methane emissions have signed the pledge. Signatories commit to a collective goal of reducing global methane emissions by at least 30% from 2020 levels by 2030 “and moving toward using best available inventory methodologies to quantify methane emissions, with a particular focus on high emission sources,” according to a joint statement from the participating countries.

The summit follows the announcement of a proposed Clean Air Act rule by the Environmental Protection Agency to sharply curb methane emissions from oil and gas operations.

Canada’s government in October announced a goal to cut oil and gas methane emissions by 75% versus 2012 levels by 2030.

Methane emissions and climate change in general have been less of a priority for López Obrador, who has instead sought to shore up production of oil and refined

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products by state-owned oil company Petróleos Mexicanos, aka Pemex. Mexico did, however, sign onto the Global Methane Pledge.

Accelerating Carbon Sequestration
In addition to tackling methane emissions, Biden and Trudeau "plan to expand clean electricity, grow zero-emissions vehicles and charging infrastructure, and accelerate carbon sequestration," the White House said. "They will work to reduce oil and gas sector emissions and end new direct public support for unabated fossil fuels internationally by the end of 2022."

Biden and López Obrador, meanwhile, "discussed their visions to tackle the climate crisis and the energy future of North America," the White House said. "Both noted their commitment to work closely together to accelerate North American deployment of renewable energy, including catalyzing finance and technology in service of renewable energy."

López Obrador has drawn criticism from environmentalists and the business community for energy policies aimed at strengthening Pemex and state power utility Comisión Federal de Electricidad (CFE). He is currently promoting a constitutional reform that would give priority to CFE plants in electricity dispatch and end power purchase agreements between non-state actors.

Clean energy groups have denounced the proposal as an attack on private sector wind, solar and natural gas generation.

Pemex also has drawn criticism for being a laggard on natural gas flaring, methane emissions, and environmental, social and governance issues in general.

The trilateral summit coincided with passage of the House reconciliation bill on Friday, the $2 trillion flagship proposal of Biden's Build Back Better agenda. The bill, which will now head to the Senate, includes a proposed tax on methane leaks from oil and gas operations and infrastructure that is opposed by the industry.

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Competitive elections should drive higher turnout in 2022
Bob Rivard
San Antonio Report
November 21, 2021
https://sanantonioreport.org/competitive-elections-should-drive-higher-turnout-in-2022/

Democrats, Republicans, and independents in Bexar County have growing reason to be sure they register to vote in advance of the 2022 primary elections in March and the general election in November.

Texas is still weeks away from knowing the complete field of candidates running in local and state primary races. Yet already a growing number of races promise to be competitive. Two, in particular, dominate the conversation.

A new Bexar County judge

Bexar County voters will select a new county judge for the first time in more than two decades with Nelson Wolff stepping down after five terms and more than 20 years in the office. This will bring to a close the career of one of the state's longest-serving public servants. As my colleague Rick Casey wrote last week, Wolff leaves an

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indelible mark on the city and county.

The assumption is that a Republican cannot win the office, which I would say is a reasonable assumption only in the conventional wisdom department. The right Republican candidate with enough charisma and vision for the job might be able to upend a Democrat. So far, that candidate has not emerged. A Dec. 13 candidate filing deadline will soon end the conjecture.

Republicans have prevailed in other traditionally Democratic strongholds, such as state Rep. John Lujan's recent victory over Democrat Frank Ramirez in a special election runoff for Texas House District 118 on Nov. 2. Lujan reclaimed the seat he held in 2016. Once upon a time, that district was a solid Democratic stronghold. Not today.

The Democrats do have demographics on their side, and a Wolff endorsement would add a lot of momentum. Right now the advantage in the Democratic primary has to be given to state Rep. Ina Minjarez (D-San Antonio). Her departure from the Texas Legislature likely will draw multiple Democratic candidates running for the vacant House seat.

An earlier announcement by Peter Sakai, who served four terms as judge of a children's court, surprised. Sakai was highly regarded for his service and leadership in reforming the county's inadequate practices for addressing child abuse, but launching a high-profile political campaign for the county judge office takes Sakai into new territory.

Former Mayor Ed Garza has told reporters that he, too, is considering entry into the Democratic race after serving since 2009 as a trustee on the San Antonio Independent School District board.

In an interview with Jackie Wang, the San Antonio Report's local government reporter, Mayor Ron Nirenberg's chief of staff, Ivalis Meza Gonzalez, said she also is mulling a run for Bexar County judge.

Anybody else?

The challenge to Gov. Greg Abbott
Voters also face the prospect of a lively race for governor throughout the coming year.

Last week's announcement by former Democratic El Paso Congressman Beto O'Rourke that he will challenge Gov. Greg Abbott gives his party its most credible candidate for statewide office in memory. Early polling suggests O'Rourke faces an uphill battle, not for the first time. Actor Mathew McConaughey, like a cat with a mouse, has toyed with his own entry in the race, but his fans likely will be disappointed.

O'Rourke is certain to increase Democratic turnout in Bexar County and across the state's other metro areas, just as he did in his 2018 race against Sen. Ted Cruz, the best statewide performance of a Democrat in 40 years.

Bexar County Republicans likely will continue their strong support for Abbott as he fends off three poorly funded longshot challengers, former state Sen. Don Huffines of Dallas, former Texas GOP Chair Allen West, and conservative commentator Chad Prather.

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With an estimated $60 million in his campaign chest and 83% approval from likely primary voters, according to an October Quinnipiac University poll, Abbott seems more focused on O'Rourke and the November general election. His embrace of far-right wedge issues throughout the four legislative sessions this year was interpreted by many as a defense against any primary challengers.

One wild card hand not yet played or folded in the statewide races is held by former House Speaker Joe Straus. Many of his supporters, including state Rep. Lyle Larson (R-San Antonio) in a commentary published here, have urged the moderate San Antonio Republican to run for governor or lieutenant governor as an independent.

With the filing deadline looming, a decision by Straus will be public knowledge soon enough.

It all adds up to a year when every eligible citizen should register to vote, and for those who intend to vote absentee or need a mail-in ballot, to understand how to request a ballot. This year the Texas Legislature passed a law that restricts local election officials from employing innovative ways for more people to vote by mail, to vote after hours, or at drive-thru poll sites.

If you want to exercise your right to vote, be prepared.

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Biden's DOJ Makes a Faulty Case against the Texas Election-Integrity Law
Bryan Hughes
National Review
November 22, 2021
https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/11/bidens-doj-makes-a-faulty-case-against-the-texas-election-integrity-law/

President Biden has failed to usurp state oversight of elections in Congress, and now his DOJ has resorted to suing in order to block Texas's commonsense election-reform law. Among other things, the legislation requires voter identification for voting by mail, creates uniform voting-hour guidelines throughout the state, and imposes civil and criminal penalties for vote harvesting.

The DOJ's lawsuit is long on form and short on substance. Before it was passed, the Texas elections bill was often attacked as virulently racist, as "Jim Crow 2.0." It was the subject of unfounded allegations of voter suppression, parroted by the media with little scrutiny. Yet when real evidence was demanded in a court of law, the Biden administration dropped those scurrilous arguments.

Instead, the administration based its case on narrow, technical provisions of the law related to voter assisters and ID numbers on mail-in ballots. These are not unimportant issues, but that the DOJ chose to hang its case on them reveals just how little substance there was underneath the hyperbolic attacks on the bill.

Returning to the Justice Department's arguments, there are varying circumstances in which a voter will need assistance. Both federal and Texas law provide guidelines for such instances. Section 208 of the federal Voting Rights Act says that a voter who needs help owing to "blindness, disability, or inability to read or write may be given assistance by a person of the voter's choice."

States can place reasonable limits on how this assistance may be given, and the Texas elections law does just that: It permits assisters only to help a disabled voter

read and mark the ballot. This approach puts voters who need help and voters who don't on level ground. Non-disabled voters must cast their ballot in the polling booth with no influence from poll workers, and disabled voters should be subject to the same requirement. The Texas elections bill allows disabled voters to mitigate their disability while protecting their prerogative to make their own decisions.

The administration also argues that requiring an ID number on a mail-ballot application should not be necessary to determine if the applicant is eligible to vote. When debating the elections bill, Texas senators heard testimony in committee that the potential for voter fraud is greatest with mail-in ballots, because the voter's identity is not confirmed by a poll worker at the time of voting. The ballot could be prepared and submitted by someone other than the registered voter. For example, Zul Mirza Mohamed, a past mayoral candidate in Carrollton, Texas, was recently indicted on 84 counts of mail-ballot fraud.

Formerly, Texas law required just the name and address of the registered voter on an early-voting-ballot application. Under the new elections law, the voter now must include an ID number, a reform that will make mail-ballot fraud much harder to pull off.

In Texas, voter-ID requirements have been hit with accusations of voter suppression before. A 2011 state law requiring voter identification for in-person voting received much the same treatment as the current election-reform law. Were voters suppressed after the 2011 bill was enacted? Quite the opposite. Voter registration increased by almost 30 percent in the decade following the bill's enactment, from 13.27 million in November 2010 to 16.99 million in November 2021. By comparison, the state's population increased by 16 percent between 2010 and 2020, from 25.21 million to 29.45 million.

President Biden has criticized Texas's election-reform efforts as an "un-American" attack on the right to vote. His support for the more extreme versions of the For the People Act belies that criticism, however. This legislation would remove important election safeguards and diminish the value of the right he claims to want to protect. It represents the standard Democratic policy response to election issues: the centralizing of federal power and the compromising of election integrity.

In Texas, we are taking a different course. We believe that election integrity and voter access go hand in hand, and that the right to vote is important enough to be worth protecting. The Biden administration, sadly, doesn't seem to agree.

BRYAN HUGHES, a Republican, represents District 1 in the Texas state senate.

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Analysis: A swelling Texas treasury gives 2022 hopefuls room for big ideas
Ross Ramsey
Texas Tribune
November 22, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/22/texas-election-budget-surplus/

According to the state comptroller, Texas is heading into an election year with projections that more than $24 billion will be left over at the end of the current budget, in spite of a pandemic that began with fears that the economy might be hit as hard as public health.

That projected pile of cash gives the political class the power to grant wishes — or to

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propose granting wishes — for budget-busting goodies their voters want, like lower property taxes, and higher spending on public education, health care, highways and law enforcement.

A couple of weeks ago, Comptroller Glenn Hegar said the state will bring in almost $23 billion more in general revenue during the current two-year budget period than he originally estimated.

He's expecting the state to end the current budget period, which runs through August 2023, with almost $12 billion in the bank, and with an additional $12.6 billion in the state's Economic Stabilization Fund, more commonly known as the Rainy Day Fund.

In spring 2020, Hegar was telling state lawmakers and budget writers to hit the brakes on spending, and to expect an economic downturn as the coronavirus took hold. The improvement in the official outlook has been steady and dramatic since then. In each of the last seven months, the state's sales tax receipts topped $3 billion; it had only reached that monthly total three times in state history.

"Texas personal income, buoyed by support from federal pandemic relief spending, increased by an estimated 6.5% in fiscal 2021 following 5.4% growth in 2020," according to the comptroller's latest projection of state revenue. Gross state product increased 7.9% in 2021, and is expected to grow 8.3% next year, the report said.

The traditional caveat on comptroller forecasts was in the fine print: Hegar said COVID-19, supply-chain problems, inflationary pressures and labor shortages could slow or derail the economic train.

That might as well have gone unsaid: This is the beginning of an election cycle. Candidates are filing to run for office. By this time next year, the primary and general elections will be behind us, and the newly elected and reelected lawmakers will be preparing to come to Austin to pass new laws and write a new budget.

Given the amount of money Hegar predicts will be on hand, those incoming officeholders will be entertaining every politician's fantasy: There's money in the state treasury, and we can make big proposals without laying out new taxes or budget cuts to cover the costs.

They don't need to wait for the 2023 session to begin. Challengers and incumbents are already starting to talk to voters. Some people are concerned about inflation and other economic troubles. For instance, Hegar and others have said we are in a "K-shaped recovery," where economic conditions are improving rapidly for some parts of the economy while they're getting worse for others.

The state appears to be one of the beneficiaries, a boon to anyone who wants money for one of the big-ticket items in the state budget — or on campaign wishlists.

That's not the only money piling up. Federal revenue to the state's Coronavirus Relief Fund totaled $44.1 billion in the last budget, and another $36.9 billion is expected during the current two-year budget period, according to the comptroller. Texas expects to get $35.4 billion from the federal infrastructure bill over the next five years, most of it for transportation spending.

It sets the table for anyone who's been stymied by a tight state budget. It's easy for budget writers to say no in lean times. When there's money in the bank, they don't have the excuse of "sorry, no money."

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Discipline is scarcer during the political election season than during the governing season that follows. Until the general elections next November, politicians can paint the prettiest pictures they want, proposing new programs, services, tax breaks and whatever else they and their consultants dream up. When voters ask how they'll pay for it, they'll point at those rosy projections of bulging state treasury vaults.

They won't have to do the math until after the elections.

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 11/23/21
Date:	Tuesday, November 23, 2021 7:47:57 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
November 23, 2021

Texas counties to face vote audit potential, *KTEN-TV*, November 22, 2021

Early voting begins for runoff elections in Buda, Kyle, *Community Impact,* November 22, 2021

'Undermining of democracy': UN expert cites Texas voting law as failure to protect minority rights, *KXAN-TV*, November 22, 2021

Candidates scramble during redistricting uncertainty, *Longview News-Journal*, November 23, 2021

New maps draw ire from both sides as county commissions deal with fallout from new maps, *KPRC-TV*, November 22, 2021

Commissioners confirm interim elections appointment, *Temple Daily Telegram*, November 22, 2021

U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert joins Texas Republicans running against Attorney General Ken Paxton, *Texas Tribune*, November 22, 2021

Luis Roberto Vera Jr., Latino civil rights leader and attorney, dies at 65, *NBC News,* November 22, 2021

El Paso-Juárez cross-border traffic creeps higher despite initially light crowds, *El Paso Times*, November 22, 2021

Mexican president decrees automatic approval for projects, *Associated Press*, November 22, 2021

Hard questions at Deer Park go unanswered, *Houston Chronicle*, November 22, 2021

The Mexican government is suing U.S. gun manufacturers for contributing to violence, *Dallas Morning News*, November 23, 2021

Opinion: Election 'irregularities' an issue that concerns more than just Republicans, *The Hill*, November 22, 2021

Letter to the Editor: Secretary of State Scott's election audit in one word:

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Kubuki, *Houston Chronicle*, November 23, 2021

Texas counties to face vote audit potential
Molly O'Brien
KTEN-TV
November 22, 2021
https://www.kten.com/story/45261207/texas-counties-will-soon-be-potentially-audited

FANNIN COUNTY, Texas (KTEN) — A new Texas law will soon require the secretary of state to select four counties at random every two years to be audited after elections.

"Ensuring the integrity of our elections is critical to our democracy," Republican Gov. Greg Abbott said in a written statement.

The state will earmark funds from another department to establish a new office to conduct the audits.

"We can move $4 million ... set aside for the Department of Criminal Justice into the secretary of state's office into the election division to form this election audit division," said state Rep. David Spiller (R-District 68).

For each biennial audit, two counties will be selected with a population over 300,000; the two others will be smaller than that.

Fannin County Clerk Tammy Biggar believes the new law encourages counties to be transparent.

"We have a full audit trail of everything that we've done, so its not a problem for us," she said. "We invite it; we welcome it."

Fannin County Judge Randy Moore extended a similar invitation to any potential auditors.

"Anybody can look at it; that information is open to everybody," he said.

The audit law takes effect on December 2.

Recently-appointed Secretary of State John Scott, who helped Donald Trump challenge the 2020 election results in Pennsylvania, told the Texas Tribune that he has "no timeline" for the audit results, but is keen to get the ball rolling.

"I want to get the audit over," Scott told the Tribune. "I think the counties have enough other things fixin' to come up, and I think this state needs some resolution on this. I think the country needs some resolution on this."

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Early voting begins for runoff elections in Buda, Kyle
Zara Flores
Community Impact
November 22, 2021
https://communityimpact.com/austin/san-marcos-buda-

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kyle/government/2021/11/22/early-voting-begins-for-runoff-elections-in-buda-kyle/

Early voting begins Nov. 22 for the Buda City Council and Kyle City Council runoff elections. Election day is Dec. 7. None of the candidates in either election garnered 51% of the votes needed to win the seat in the Nov. 2 election, resulting in the runoff.

The runoff for the Buda At-Large Position 3 seat will be between LaVonia Horne-Williams and Emily Jones. Horne-Williams came close to winning the seat in the Nov. 2 election with 48.92% of the vote while Jones received 33.82%.

The Kyle City Council runoff election is for the District 5 seat between incumbent Rick Koch, who received 35.25% of the vote in the Nov. 2 election, and challenger Daniela Parsley, who received 28.07%.

Early voting for the runoff election will be held Nov. 22-24 from 8 a.m.-5 p.m., Nov. 27-28 from noon-4 p.m., Nov. 29-Dec. 1 from 8 a.m.-5 p.m. and Dec. 2-3 from 7 a.m.-7 p.m.

Polls will be closed Nov. 25-26 for Thanksgiving.

Election day voting will be from 7 a.m.-7 p.m. Dec. 7.

Registered voters can cast their vote at Buda City Hall, Kyle City Hall and Hays County Precinct 2.

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‘Undermining of democracy’: UN expert cites Texas voting law as failure to protect minority rights
Will DuPree
KXAN-TV
November 22, 2021
https://www.kxan.com/news/texas-politics/undermining-of-democracy-un-expert-cites-texas-voting-law-as-failure-to-protect-minority-rights/

UNITED NATIONS (KXAN) — A human rights expert working for the United Nations cited the new voting law and political maps approved in Texas as examples of the country’s broader failures to protect the rights of minorities.

Fernand de Varennes, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on minority issues, said he visited Texas as one of the stops during his 15-day trip to several states and American territories that concluded Monday. He said he did so to highlight “progress, opportunities and challenges encountered by minorities,” which preliminarily found that two of the biggest threats to their human rights include voting and equal political participation.

During a news conference Monday, he specifically called out the provisions of Senate Bill 1, the new voting changes approved by Texas Republicans this year, because he claims they will hamper the right to vote for the state’s growing communities of color.

“I conclude that there is in fact what could be described as an undermining of democracy, with a phenomenal number of legislative measures in different parts of the country, which have the effect — whether it’s intentional or not — but it certainly has the effect of making the exercise of the right to vote more difficult for certain minorities,” de Varennes said.

He called out measures in the law like banning 24-hour voting, restricting drive-through voting and limiting voting by mail. He also questioned whether the legislation would prevent poll workers from assisting voters who are not fluent in English — arguments that many of the law's opponents have articulated.

"The less opportunities, the less measures to facilitate as much as possible voting, those that are most likely disproportionately to have their right to vote reduced or make more difficult are demonstrably minorities," de Varennes said.

Texas Republican lawmakers who supported the bill, including Gov. Greg Abbott, long contended that SB 1 would make the election process much more secure in the state. However, Democrats and voting rights activists argued the changes would make it harder for people to cast a ballot. Democratic lawmakers even fled the state and went to Washington, D.C. for several weeks to prevent the state legislature from having enough people present to conduct business. The legislation ultimately passed when some of them returned to the state.

The Department of Justice announced it's suing Texas over SB 1, claiming it violates a number of federal civil and voting rights laws.

"The challenged provisions will disenfranchise eligible Texas citizens who seek to exercise their right to vote, including voters with limited English proficiency, voters with disabilities, elderly voters, members of the military deployed away from home, and American citizens residing outside of the country," the DOJ's complaint reads.

'Tyranny of the majority'

Additionally, de Varennes said how Texas redrew its political boundaries will harm minorities by diluting their political power. He pointed out the state gained two Congressional seats because of its explosive growth during the last decade, with minorities driving 95% of it. However, he said "gerrymandering" kept white voters in the majority of the new political maps.

"It is becoming unfortunately apparent that it is almost a tyranny of the majority, where minorities' right to vote are being denied in many areas, many parts of the country and that this cannot be a positive development," de Varennes said. "This cannot be consistent with the fundamental values of democracy and certainly does not seem to be consistent with the United States' human rights obligations."

Gov. Abbott signed the state's new political maps into law in October. However, they're now facing a number of legal challenges.

De Varennes said he will now work on a longer, more in-depth report to present to the country's leaders in the hopes of identifying ways to improve human rights for Americans.

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Candidates scramble during redistricting uncertainty
Darryl Kinsey Jr.
Longview News-Journal
November 23, 2021
https://www.news-journal.com/candidates-scramble-during-redistricting-uncertainty/article_51d0d09b-c5b6-520b-beb8-16568b2c46fe.html

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About 100 guests piled into the Green Turtle in La Plata on Nov. 17 for a meet-and-greet event ahead of next year's midterm elections.

The event, held by Del. Matt Morgan (R- St. Mary's), was unique as Morgan was campaigning to court residents for a district that doesn't yet exist.

"It has changed up the campaign because we would be really focusing in on our district and you don't know where that district is," Morgan said before Wednesday's event.

Morgan's current district, 29A, could be changed completely due to the upcoming special session of the Maryland General Assembly, which will decide how voting districts for state and federal legislation will look over the next decade following the 2020 census.

When the Maryland General Assembly meets for the session starting Dec. 6, legislatures will vote on multiple alternative voting district maps.

This year is unique, as dueling map proposals from the legislature and Gov. Larry Hogan's (R) Citizens Redistricting Commission have created strong feelings and a diverse group of options.

The commission, made up of three Democrats, three Republicans and three independents, released its proposed election maps for state and federal voting districts on Nov. 5.

The state level maps, if approved, would further split Charles County into three districts in the state Senate, and five in the House of Delegates.

One of those proposed districts, 41A, would join southern Charles County with northern St. Mary's County.

The fusion of a traditionally more conservative portion of Charles with northern St. Mary's, which also leans Republican, could create an opportunity for a Republican to win in Charles, which according to Morgan hasn't happened in 20 years.

Morgan believes the district could create a "winnable" race for Republicans that could create "diversity of thought" in the region.

However, the governor's maps are only one option in the redistricting puzzle.

The legislature's Redistricting Advisory Commission, a seven-member commission comprised of four Democrats, two Republicans, and an independent chairman, is creating its own maps.

The commission released four conceptual maps for federal voting districts on Nov. 9, four days after the Maryland Citizens Redistricting Commission released theirs. However, state level voting district maps have not yet been released.

According to Del. Edith Patterson (D-Charles), state level maps are expected to be released once the entire assembly convenes during December's special session.

Patterson also stated that one of her priorities was ensuring Charles voters have appropriate representation in the state legislature.

"Having individuals from St. Mary's County rule on Charles County affairs would not

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be fair," Patterson said.

Redistricting maps are coming together in a compressed timeline due to ramifications from delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Delays in the 2020 census resulted in a later than usual collection process, and Maryland population data wasn't received until August this year.

The delays in receiving data and amended maps means the districts' delegates and senators have filed for could drastically change depending on which maps get approved.

Potential changes are critical, as candidates are required to file for next June's primary by Feb. 22, 2022.

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New maps draw ire from both sides as county commissions deal with fallout from new maps
Syan Rhodes
KPRC-TV
November 22, 2021
https://www.click2houston.com/news/local/2021/11/23/new-maps-draw-ire-from-both-sides-as-county-commissions-deal-with-fallout-from-new-maps/

Inside a packed room earlier this month, Galveston County residents gathered to speak in opposition to proposed new precinct maps.

"I'm neither Democrat nor Republican," said Hannah Melcer. "What I do know, as a woman born in the south and raised in the south, is that this map, both of them, are racist, and you know it."

Galveston County Precinct 3 commissioner Stephen Holmes, who has held the position since 1999, says the map approved by the Republican majority commission is discriminatory.

Holmes said the redrawn lines dismantle his largely Black and Latino precinct.

"The map seriously reduces the impact and the power that Black and Hispanic [people] have in voting here in Galveston County," he told KPRC 2.

In Fort Bend County, another Precinct 3 commissioner says he's in danger of losing his position after the Democratic majority approved a map that shifts his Katy-based precinct to Sugar Land and Missouri City.

"I'm a seven-term incumbent that they have redistricted out of office. I'm not going to win a 56 -57% Democrat precinct as a Republican," Meyers told KPRC 2. "I don't like the fact that, you know, I'm basically will be out of office. But, elections have consequences and the Democrats won."

Fort Bend County Judge KP George says the changes were necessary and based on census data.

"It is a true reflection of our county's population, I honestly believe this is a very fairly drawn map," George said.

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Political analysts believe any legal challenges will depend on the courts' ability to define and separate purely partisan maps from those that disenfranchise voters based on race.

"If there's an egregious case of racial gerrymandering, then I think that violates the principle the fundamental principle of redistricting and certainly they will have standing to sue in court,"said Dr. Michael Adams, political science professor at Texas Southern University.

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Commissioners confirm interim elections appointment
Shane Monaco
Temple Daily Telegram
November 22, 2021
https://www.tdtnews.com/news/business/article_ffee5fca-4bda-11ec-9fc9-c761a1ff0272.html

BELTON — Bell County commissioners on Monday confirmed the appointment of Tax Assessor-Collector Shay Luedeke as interim elections administrator.

Luedeke was appointed to the position on Friday by the Bell County Elections Commission. While the commission makes the appointment, the Commissioners Court's approval is needed to accept the appointment.

Of the five members that serve on the Elections Commission, Luedeke, a Holland Republican, was the only member able to replace the previous elections administrator Matthew Dutton.

Luedeke, 46, serves on the Elections Commission with Bell County Judge David Blackburn, County Clerk Shelley Coston, Republican Party chair Nancy Boston and Democratic Party chair Chris Rosenberg. Coston and Blackburn are up for reelection in 2022, with the party chairs not able to serve as the election administrator.

Dutton, the previous interim elections administrator, stepped down from his position after only serving for six months to take a position in another county.

Luedeke, who was reelected to his position last year, said his goal is to make sure that elections run smoothly in 2022. With that goal, Luedeke met with the department's staff last week to learn the day-to-day operations of the department.

"I just want to help out," he said.

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U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert joins Texas Republicans running against Attorney General Ken Paxton
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 22, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/18/louie-gohmert-texas-attorney-general-ken-paxton/

U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert, R-Tyler, announced Monday he is running for attorney general, challenging fellow Republican Ken Paxton, in the already crowded primary.

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"Texas I am officially running to be your next Attorney General and will enforce the rule of law," Gohmert tweeted after announcing his campaign on Newsmax.

Gohmert announced earlier this month that he would join the GOP lineup against Paxton if he could raise $1 million in 10 days. The 10th day was Friday. Gohmert said in an announcement video that he has “reached our initial goal of raising $1 million in order to start a run for” attorney general, though he did not confirm whether he was able to collect it in 10 days.

Gohmert is at least the fourth primary opponent that Paxton has drawn. The others include Land Commissioner George P. Bush, former Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman and state Rep. Matt Krause of Fort Worth. At least three Democrats are also running for the job.

The race has attracted intense interest due to Paxton's legal problems, which include a 2015 securities fraud indictment that remains pending. Paxton has also come under FBI investigation over claims that he abused his office to help a wealthy donor. He has denied wrongdoing in both cases. Gohmert has latched on to those legal issues, warning they could cause Paxton to lose the general election.

Gohmert was originally scheduled to announce his decision Friday on Mark Davis' radio show in Dallas, but he never called in and the show went off air without hearing from him.

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Luis Roberto Vera Jr., Latino civil rights leader and attorney, dies at 65
Kynala Phillips
NBC News
November 22, 2021
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/latino/luis-roberto-vera-jr-latino-civil-rights-leader-attorney-dies-65-rcna6339

Civil rights leader and attorney Luis Roberto Vera Jr. died Sunday after a long illness.

He was 65.

The League of United Latin American Citizens, the nation’s oldest Hispanic civil rights organization, which was founded in 1929, announced his death. Vera was its national general counsel and worked with it for three decades.

Vera died in San Antonio, the city of his birth, surrounded by his family, according to LULAC.

"Ironically, Luis lives on through the recent lawsuits he helped file in federal court that will forever carry the imprint of his love for justice and the voice that shall never be silenced," LULAC National CEO Sindy Benavides said in a statement.

Vera's landmark cases included a 2019 lawsuit to stop the Texas secretary of state from requiring nearly 100,000 voters to prove their citizenship or risk being removed from the voter rolls, a tactic that disproportionately impacts the Latino community.

Another major case was a 2017 attempt to uphold the "sanctuary" status of border town El Cenizo and halt a measure that allowed law enforcement to question and detain undocumented residents.

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That same year, Vera was awarded Mexico's Ohtli Award, one of the highest federal recognitions that is given to those whose work empowers and supports Mexicans and Latinos.

"He was a fierce fighter for what is right and persisted even when the odds were against LULAC, as has been the case often given today's volatile politics," Elsie Valdes-Ramos, LULAC national board member and vice president for women, said in a statement.

"I knew we had in Luis, a tireless defender and a man who any enticement could never sway, nor was he seeking fame for himself," she said.

“Latinos in Texas and indeed, our entire nation and Puerto Rico, have lost a selfless and brilliant legal fighter, cut from the same civil rights cloth as Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta,” Rodolfo Rosales Jr., LULAC’s Texas state director, said in a statement.

Despite his illness, Vera was actively working as the organization’s counsel until very recently, according to the LULAC statement.

“He was fearless and argued with the fire and brimstone passion of a legal preacher,” Rosales said.

Vera earned both an undergraduate and a graduate degree from St. Mary’s University and earned his law degree from Western New England University School of Law, according to San Antonio Report.

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El Paso-Juárez cross-border traffic creeps higher despite initially light crowds
Lauren Villagran
El Paso Times
November 22, 2021
https://news.yahoo.com/el-paso-ju-rez-cross-182503203.html

Everyone thought that when the U.S. border reopened to tourists, people in Juárez were going to line up at ports of entry like it was Black Friday already.

But fewer than a dozen Mexican nationals with border crossing cards showed up before the 10 p.m. reopening Nov. 7 at the Downtown bridge. The next day, vehicle and pedestrian lines at El Paso-area international bridges were shorter and faster than usual.

Border crossers from both sides marveled at all the empty pavement.

Cross-border traffic has been creeping up from that weak start, keeping hopes alive for a stronger holiday shopping season at El Paso stores. But there are obstacles, economists say, that are holding Mexican shoppers back from rushing north of the border.

A weak Mexican peso is making dollar-based goods more expensive. Middle class household income declined in Juárez during the pandemic, meaning family budgets are tighter than usual. And price inflation has hit hard on both sides of the border.

The pool of people in Juárez able to cross the border under current rules has also shrunk.

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Tens of thousands of people watched their border crossing card visas expire during the pandemic and either didn't renew the cards or were unable to because the U.S. Consulate in Juárez had reduced services. Mexican public school teachers were also left out: They were among the first to get vaccinated in Juárez, but the Mexican government gave them doses of Cansino, a vaccine not on the U.S. list of accepted brands.

In the days since the U.S. lifted restrictions on non-essential travel for fully vaccinated foreign nationals, U.S. Customs and Border Protection has seen a steady increase in traffic at the El Paso area crossings, according to Ray Provencio, CBP acting El Paso Ports Director.

Passenger vehicle traffic ticked up 10% in the week after restrictions were lifted compared to the prior week, while pedestrian traffic rose about 25%, he said.

The volume of Mexican customers "is edging up slowly," said Tom Fullerton, a professor of economics and finance at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Besides the economic obstacles, Fullerton said, the border was closed to Mexican tourists long enough that people developed different shopping habits. He estimates that El Paso lost as much as $300 million in sales, as northern Mexican shoppers bought locally and online from retailers including Amazon, Alibaba and Mercado Libre.

"For 19 months, many of these customers figured out ways to obtain goods without coming to El Paso and they simply have other habits ingrained," he said. "They are slowly reincorporating trips to El Paso among their routines."

Weak peso nips spending power

The peso hit 25 to the U.S. dollar in late March 2020, plummeting as the global pandemic shut down economic activity and curbed expectations for demand for crude oil production, a cornerstone of the Mexican economy.

In recent months, the peso has been floating closer to 20 to the U.S. dollar. That's still historically weak for the currency. As recently as 2016, 15 pesos would buy $1.

On the morning after the U.S. ports of entry reopened to Mexican tourists, a Juárez police officer monitored traffic at a street corner near the Paso del Norte international bridge and mused about how the expected line of border crossers hadn't materialized. He pointed to one answer across the street: A currency exchange house selling the dollar at 20 pesos and change.

"The dollar is so expensive," he said, adding that most workers hadn't received their holiday bonus yet known as the aguinaldo.

Goods are more expensive, too.

In Texas, a key measure of core inflation in the price index for personal consumption expenditures hit 5.1% in September, the fastest one-month rate since August 1990, according to the latest figures from the Dallas Federal Reserve.

Fullerton noted that household income in Juárez has also declined, even as goods have gotten more expensive. The take-home earnings of business services professionals like bookkeepers, attorneys and other office workers "have all taken

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pretty big hits."

"A lot of the middle class doesn’t have the same amount of disposable income available that allowed them to visit El Paso as frequently as before the pandemic," he said.

From a few weeks' wait to '679 days'
Mexican nationals in Juárez cross the border with a visa known as a "border crossing card," a type of B1/B2 tourist visa that typically last 10 years and are available to qualifying Mexicans who live in the border region.

The coveted cards look like a driver's license but carry biometric information and allow holders to crisscross the border and travel up to 25 miles into Texas and 55 miles into New Mexico.

The U.S. Consulate in Juárez in fiscal 2011 issued about 125,000 combination B1/B2 visas and border crossing cards. With a 10-year expiration date, that's roughly how many would have expired in fiscal 2021, but the U.S. Consulate issued fewer than 22,000 in the 12 months through September — suggesting that tens of thousands of people who would normally be able to cross now cannot.

State Department statistics don't differentiate between renewals and new applications. But the sharp decline in cards issued could be attributed, in part, to people waiting for the border to reopen before re-applying and to the consulate operating with minimal staffing and hours during the pandemic.

"We're looking at appointments in March of 2023," said Fernando Aguirre, who manages a Grupo Francie location in Ciudad Juárez, a third-party business that helps residents apply for tourist visas with the U.S. Consulate. "People, obviously, want to start renewing their visas. And even though the wait is until 2023, they are saying, 'Let's get started.'"

For a process that used to take a few weeks, the U.S. Consulate in Juárez now lists a wait time of 679 days for a visitor visa.

'Hoping for another opportunity'
Left out of the border reopening because their vaccine wasn't on the list of accepted shots, public school teachers in Juárez were among thousands of people who showed up for a dose of AstraZeneca last week.

Nallely Saucedo, a 27-year-old elementary school P.E. teacher, spent six hours in a vaccination line that wrapped around the Indios baseball stadium multiple times. With vaccine access extremely limited in Juárez, tensions were high, she said.

"I was there on the first day, fighting with all the people," she said. "Nine other teachers from my school were in line, too. We're just hoping for another opportunity."

The U.S. rules require foreign travelers be fully vaccinated and show proof. Saucedo and other teachers who got the first AstraZeneca shot will have to wait for the Mexican government to announce another clinic. She expects it could be months.

"The truth is, I am very upset," she said. "The government didn't think about the impact (the Cansino vaccine) would have on us teachers at the border."

Feelings of discontent

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Other juárenses may have given up on El Paso, for now.

The U.S. kept its land border closed to Mexican visa holders without restricting air travel — disproportionately impacting border communities. The ports stayed closed months after economies on both sides had fully reopened.

"A lot of times workers and households, if they are treated badly, they harbor resentment for an extended period of time," Fullerton said. "It wouldn't surprise me if people felt like they were being treated like they were criminals and weren't allowed to visit the United States" and are skipping out on trips to El Paso.

A meme circulated on Facebook in the days after the border reopened, when cross-border traffic was unusually light.

It juxtaposed a photo of an empty Bridge of the Americas tagged with the phrase in Spanish "You can cross already" beside a painting of a figure, possibly Antonio López de Santa Anna, with his arms crossed, a contemptuous look and the phrase, "No, ya no."

Not anymore.

"Eventually that type of resentment should ebb away for most people," Fullerton said.

Wait times fall, 'avanza bien'

What's probably not hurting traffic is bridge wait times.

The Trump years were especially tough on frequent border crossers, as the administration pulled CBP officers from their posts facilitating legitimate trade and travel to aid Border Patrol with unauthorized crossings. With staffing thin at the bridges, wait times surged in 2019 to an average of nearly two hours.

Wait times spiked again mid-pandemic, when CBP elected to crack down on U.S. citizens who were considered "essential" under the border restrictions but who may have been crossing for a variety of reasons not involving work, school or medical emergencies. Family visits, so important to Borderland residents, weren't considered essential under the rules.

Since the border reopened, CBP has kept staffing high through peak hours and reports suggest that wait times have been generally stable for passenger vehicles and pedestrians, running between 30 minutes and an hour.

There have been isolated reports of three-hour plus wait times in recent weeks.

"I'm very attuned to wait times and the impacts to our regional and national economy and even global economy," Provencio, the acting ports director, said. "There are public studies that talk about the impacts if there are wait times out there. During the time we are in right now, with the economy where it's at, I think CBP has a significant role to play to help bounce back our economy."

CBP continues to advise the public that wait times could increase heading into the holidays, as traffic flows rise and the agency manages its other core responsibilities, including intercepting illegal narcotics.

More than 260,000 people belong to a Facebook group that serves as a platform to crowd-source the El Paso-Juárez bridge wait times. Although members posted

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photos of occasionally long vehicle and pedestrian lines, many came with positive feedback.

"The universe conspires in your favor when you are happy and you don't complain in the line," said one user last week with a laugh-crying emoji and a time stamp of 11:57 a.m., just five cars out from the crossing.

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Mexican president decrees automatic approval for projects
Associated Press
November 22, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Mexican-president-decrees-automatic-approval-for-16643217.php

MEXICO CITY (AP) — The administration of Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador issued a broad decree Monday requiring all federal agencies to give automatic approval for any public works project the government deems to be "in the national interest" or to “involve national security.”

The decree published Monday sidesteps all environmental, accountability and feasibility review processes, and gives regulatory agencies five days to grant a year-long ‘temporary’ approval for anything the government wants to build.

The agencies would then have a year to grant definitive approval, by which time the projects would presumably already have broken ground.

López Obrador has been known for building huge projects. For example, he started building a 950-mile (1,500- kilometer) “Maya Train” line that will run in a rough loop around the Yucatan peninsula.

Though the area has abundant Indigenous communities, jungles, wildlife and archaeological sites, the project was rushed through with little in the way of consultations, feasibility studies or environmental impact statements.

But Monday's decree by the Interior Department would simply do away with such requirements.

“This is serious. This is severe. This needs to be resisted,” security analyst Alejandro Hope wrote in his Twitter account.

Leonardo Núñez, a researcher at the nonprofit group Mexicans Against Corruption, called the decree “extremely dangerous."

The decree states that “the projects and works carried out by the Mexican government associated with infrastructure in the areas of communications, telecommunications, customs, borders, water works, the environment, tourism, health, railways and everything having to do with energy, ports, airports ... are declared to be in the public interest and a concern of national security.”

López Obrador is big proponent of fossil fuels, and has ordered the construction of one large oil refinery and the upgrading of others.

But the Maya train is perhaps his most ambitious effort. It is intended to connect Caribbean beach resorts to the peninsula’s interior, with largely Indigenous populations and ruin sites, in a bid to stimulate economic development around its 15

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stations. The government says it will cost as much as $6.8 billion, but others say it will be much more.

Critics say López Obrador rammed through the project without adequate study of its effects on the environment, underground sinkhole caves known as cenotes, and ruin sites.

Some stretches of the route already have tracks, and the institute said some artefacts had already been disturbed by railway construction decades ago. But other stretches are to push through sensitive jungle terrain, though they will parallel existing roads or transmission lines. Even where an old railway line exists, the project would imply updating tracks and building new stations.

Some Mayan communities have filed court challenges against the project, arguing it will cause environmental damage. They also say they were not adequately consulted about it or they will not share in its benefits.

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Hard questions at Deer Park go unanswered
George Baker
Houston Chronicle
November 22, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/energy/article/Hard-Questions-at-Deer-Park-Go-Unanswered-16639914.php

DEER PARK -- Guy Hackwell, the manager of the Shell-operated refinery here, has worked for Royal Dutch Shell for 30 years. His employment at Shell may come to end in fewer than two weeks.

"As of December 1st, I will no longer be a Shell employee," he recently told residents and officials of this city of 35,000 southeast of Houston. "I will be a Pemex employee."

Shell expects regulatory approval by November 29 from the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States.

Hackwell, an Australian with 30 years with the oil major Royal Dutch Shell, provides a good example of sudden change coming to the Deer Park when Shell completes the sale of its half-interest in the refinery to its partner, Petróleos Mexicanos, or Pemex, and ends more than 27 years as the operator. Hackwell, who was named general manager in February, has become the public-relations front man for both the seller and prospective buyer. The message: The refinery will operate as it always has under the new owner.

In three recent public meetings (one online), Hackwell said the handover of operations from Shell to Pemex has already begun. He assured residents that the jobs of Shell's 900 refinery workers are safe and the emergency response team would be transferred to Pemex along with the refinery. "There will be job gains, as new positions will be created to meet the needs of two companies," he added.

But Hackwell left unanswered many critical questions, skirting them when pressed by residents, reporters, and me:

How realistic is it to imagine that all of the refinery's output could be sent to Mexico, as Mexico's president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, says he wants?

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What evidence is there that Pemex is qualified to operate the refinery? Pemex was merely an observer of refinery operations in Deer Park. In Mexico, Pemex's refineries operate on average at less than half their capacity.

The refinery has reported losses of $360 million this year. What is the outlook for profitability?

Would the U.S. company set up by Pemex be able to cover the costs of a major safety or environmental incident?

Of the new jobs, how many and of what kind?

When the time comes for the decommissioning of the refinery and environmental remediation, who will be financially responsible for a possible billion-dollar expense?

Such questions were also raised in Mexico following the out-of-the-blue announcement by AMLO in late May. And it's disheartening that elected politicians, business leaders and community activists are not demanding answers to these and other hard questions before this deal gets approval from the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States and goes through. Consider:

Pemex has $110 billion in debt. No financial advisor would recommend spending $1 billion to buy a money-losing business abroad that has uncalculated liabilities related to decommissioning and environmental remediation, and for the management of which Pemex has made no preparation in its business plans.

AMLO has a record of hands-on involvement in executive appointments and procurement. Marcos Herrería, the number 2 executive in Pemex, is an in-law of the president. It would be naïve to suppose that AMLO would not appoint his people to jobs in Deer Park and replace local contractors with his favorites.

Having Pemex as the full owner of the refinery would increase Mexico's energy security, AMLO asserts. Specialists tell me that refineries serve markets with the best margins--not countries, and Deer Park as a refinery dedicated to Mexico makes no economic sense.

Deafening silence
I asked the Greater Houston Partnership if it would make a public comment about the proposed Pemex deal in Deer Park, or, if not, would it commission a white paper by me that would identify public-interest issues. Ditto the Baker Institute at Rice University and the Law Center at the University of Houston. No dice.

In Deer Park, Mayor Jerry Mouton, Jr. assured me that "Shell has been a great industry partner," implying, I suppose, that any party to whom Shell would sell its interest would behave in the same community-minded fashion. Dr. Brian Babin, the Republican congressman from Deer Park, on June 22, wrote to members of Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, objecting to the sale to Pemex, citing safety concerns, but since then, he has kept silent.

The sale and transfer of control of the refinery seems to be sailing through with little scrutiny. You have to wonder why and with what consequences.

George Baker is writes about Mexico energy topics. He is the founding publisher of Mexico Energy Intelligence, an industry newsletter. @Energia_com.

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The Mexican government is suing U.S. gun manufacturers for contributing to violence
Mauricio Ibarra Ponce de Leon
Dallas Morning News
November 23, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/11/23/the-mexican-government-is-suing-us-gun-manufacturers-for-contributing-to-violence/

The trafficking of weapons from the U.S. to Mexico has been a long-standing issue in the relationship between the governments of the two countries. Trafficking weapons is a criminal activity that affects millions of people on both sides of the border.

In this regard, many initiatives have been discussed and many actions taken both in Mexico and the U.S. to curb this transnational crime, without concrete results. That is why the government of President Andres Manuel López Obrador is taking strategic and significant legal action against the root causes of weapons trafficking to Mexico.

After a comprehensive legal analysis that took two years, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Mexico concluded that the same lax rules that allow individuals in the U.S. to acquire deadly weapons and use them in tragic incidents, such as the fatal shooting that took place in El Paso in 2019, also allow transnational criminal organizations on both sides of the border to purchase guns, rifles and assault weapons from supermarkets, gun shows and even the internet.

In this context, on Aug. 4, the Mexican government filed a civil lawsuit against 11 manufacturers and distributors of firearms in federal court in Massachusetts, including Barrett, Beretta, Colt, Glock and Smith & Wesson, among others. The suit targets their negligent and illicit business practices, such as multiple sales to a single buyer, the absence of background checks of the buyer or the origin of the weapon, among others. These practices result in the annual traffic to Mexico of half a million weapons that give transnational criminal organizations extreme firepower.

The defendants are scheduled to respond to the lawsuit this week, followed by the government of Mexico's counterarguments before Jan. 31.

The lawsuit also affirms that arms trafficking from the U.S. to Mexico generates both human and financial costs, and the government of Mexico has been affected both directly and indirectly. In 2019, more than 3.9 million crimes in Mexico were committed with American-origin weapons, which translated into the deaths of civilians and law enforcement (14,000 in 2019) and damage to infrastructure and equipment. This violence touched thousands of families and damaged the social fabric of the nation. The shootings harm public health and life expectancy and cause severe losses in trade and tourism, representing 6.8% of GDP.

The Mexican government considers that while the defendant companies are aware that their products are illegally trafficked and used in illicit activities on Mexican soil, they prioritize economic profit over security. Moreover, these companies increasingly promote lethal weapons without security or traceability devices.

A clear example is the customization of gun models that attract criminal groups, such as the special edition of a Colt .38 Super with an Emiliano Zapata engraving, used by a "sicario" in the 2017 murder of journalist Miroslava Breach in the capital of the state of Chihuahua, Mexico.

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It is important to underscore that the Mexican government has always been respectful of U.S. internal affairs, including its gun legislation. Therefore, the lawsuit does not seek to challenge the constitutional freedoms of U.S. citizens to purchase and possess weapons for self-defense, nor to dispute responsible arms sales within U.S. territory. However, the government of Mexico has always objected, adamantly, the negligent commercial practices that result in a variety of high-power weapons easily trafficked to Mexican national territory.

Also, this civil lawsuit is in no way directed against the U.S. government, as U.S. leaders recognize shared responsibility for the problem and have implemented policies with stricter controls to strengthen the responsible sale of weapons.

Therefore, even though the government of Mexico seeks financial compensation to be determined in the trial, its main objective is for the companies to adopt self-regulatory measures and monitoring systems for the distribution of weapons. Furthermore, the companies should campaign to prevent and combat illicit arms trafficking to reduce violence and the destructive power of criminal organizations operating on both sides of the border.

Mauricio Ibarra Ponce de León is consul general of Mexico in El Paso. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

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Election 'irregularities' an issue that concerns more than just Republicans
Keith Naughton
The Hill
November 22, 2021
https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/582597-election-irregularities-an-issue-that-concerns-more-than-just-republicans

Election Day was Nov. 2, but if you lived in Bucks County, Pa., and you thought you would know the winners by the end of the week, you were in for a disappointment. One week after the fact, the county was still trying to figure out which ballots to count and who won. Not surprisingly, some people sending mail-in ballots were unable to follow simple instructions. Also not surprisingly, the election board was still debating what to count — even in the case of unsigned ballots, which are clearly illegal under Pennsylvania law (eventually, these ballots were rejected).

But Bucks County is not the only place where delays and debates occur. Election workers not following instructions, machines jamming, false registrations and voting in the wrong precinct are just some of the various mistakes that occur regularly. Individually, each problem is minor and not likely to result in a change, but the collective weight of mistakes and regularity of occurrence are grating, to say the least.

Worse, tracking who is and who is not eligible to vote is far from assured. When a person dies, their county election department is one of the places that is supposed to get a copy of the death certificate — at which point they are removed from the rolls. How efficiently do you think that's working? Not very well in Michigan, where up to 25,000 deceased people are still on the voter rolls.

The same problem exists for changes of address, where your "new" county election department is tasked to inform the county of your previous residence that you have moved, which takes your name off the rolls. That process is not going too well either, with over 7 million voters registered in more than one jurisdiction — and virtually unchanged since 2014, so the problem is not getting better.

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None of this proves fraud or vindicates Donald Trump's allegations of a stolen election.

If anything, the fact that Trump and his legal team could not find a single vote to overturn in the midst of all these voting roll problems makes his crew so incompetent they don't even qualify to serve as "Keystone Kops."

But it does show that the opportunity exists — and where there is both opportunity and motive, somebody, somewhere will take advantage.

The problem is not in high-profile, well-funded races, where a combination of media and partisan scrutiny pairs with the resources for poll watchers and lawyers. No, the problem is in low-profile local races where candidates don't have the resources for lawyers and investigators.

What's the motive? Not only do local governments have their own patronage, contracts, public authorities and finance, but they make land use and permitting decisions that are worth millions. Consider a municipality in an "off-year" with low turnout, but dozens or even hundreds of non-existent voters on the rolls. With no media coverage, limited partisan interest and low funds, it would be quite tempting for an unscrupulous land developer to "nudge" the vote in one direction — and who would know? Or care to investigate?

We know that elections have been stolen or been subject to fraud: local elections, state elections and national elections; Robert Caro essentially proves Lyndon Johnson stole his 1948 U.S. Senate primary and may have stolen Texas for President Kennedy in 1960. But the scattering of proven stolen elections likely hides many more. After all, why register thousands of fraudulent voters, if you don't intend to use them at some point?

Election fraud has three possible outcomes: 1) You steal enough votes to win, 2) You steal votes, but not enough to win, and 3) You steal votes, but you would have won anyway. In the latter two cases, the election fraud does not change who won. If a candidate wins in a landslide, there is little impetus to investigate. The same holds for a candidate who wins despite an attempt to steal the election. Why don't we hear much about election fraud? Simply because examples #2 and #3 are not investigated. Should criminals be let off the hook just because they are bad at their chosen profession?

Voter fraud and election security is proving to be a potent issue beyond just Republican voters. Lost in all the handwringing over Trump's sore-loser whining and the media hyperventilating over GOP voters' acquiescence is that independents are also listening. According to YouGov, 39 percent of independents think President Biden was not legitimately elected — even 5 percent of Democrats agree.

When it comes to being a sore loser, Trump has company among Republican and Democratic voters. Only 26 percent of voters think the correct person won each of the last two Presidential elections, according to Rassmussen, with 52 percent of Democrats not thinking Trump legitimately won in 2016 (20 percent of independents) and 66 percent of Republicans thinking likewise about Biden (25 percent Independents). YouGov puts the number of Republicans who think Trump beat Biden at 76 percent. And plenty of Republicans remember Terry McAuliffe refusing to accept the results of the 2000 presidential election.

Put together, GOP demands for better election accountability, post-election audits,

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voter ID and general transparency will prove to be powerful issues going forward. There is surprising public agreement on a series of election integrity questions.

According to Pew Research, 76 percent of voters support requiring a photo ID to vote (61 percent of Democrats, 93 percent of Republicans), 82 percent want a paper backup to electronic voting, and 78 percent support early in-person voting (63 percent of Republicans, 91 percent of Democrats).

Removing people from the voter rolls is less popular ("purging the rolls"), with just 46 percent support. But that is when the question asks about removing people who have not "recently" voted. In the past, a voter purge was for those who have not voted in 4-5 years (an automatic purge would remove dead people and duplicate voters). I think it is quite likely if the question included a 5-year time frame, it would garner significant support. Regardless, Republican support for the purge has gone up in three years from 53 percent to 68 percent, and even Democratic support has edged up from 23 percent to 27 percent.

Voting should not be a medieval gauntlet, but it should have appropriate safeguards. Deciding who should run our various governments is a critical act with far-reaching consequences. The priority should be to educate the public and ensure the integrity of the process, not to make it as easy as ordering a pizza.

Keith Naughton, Ph.D., is co-founder of Silent Majority Strategies, a public and regulatory affairs consulting firm. Naughton is a former Pennsylvania political campaign consultant. Follow him on Twitter @KNaughton711.

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Letter to the Editor: Secretary of State Scott's election audit in one word: Kubuki
Houston Chronicle
November 23, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/letters/article/Opinion-Secretary-of-State-Scott-s-election-16642854.php

Election audit

Regarding "Opinion: Full forensic audit will restore faith in Texas elections," (Nov. 21): Secretary of State John Scott's op-ed regarding the Texas 2020 election audit can be easily summed up in a word: Kabuki. Millions of dollars are going to be spent to try to find fraudulent voting from sources unfriendly to former President Trump. Scott would have served the public better had he explained how to file a protest for a particular vote. The last major election where 'every vote counts' was an issue was the 2000 presidential election, when President Bush was declared the winner of the electoral votes from Florida after much dispute. In most elections, the results are basically preordained due to gerrymandering, so election fraud is really a bogeyman hiding in the conspiracy theory of the losers.

James A. Babb, Friendswood

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 11/24/21
Date:	Wednesday, November 24, 2021 8:14:38 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
November 24, 2021

Advocates, legal experts decry Gov. Greg Abbott diverting $4M in state prisons funding for election audits, *Houston Chronicle*, November 23, 2021

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Beto O'Rourke targets South Texas in bid to win back Democratic voters he'll need to beat Gov. Greg Abbott in 2022, *Texas Tribune*, November 24, 2021

Trump's False Claims of Voter Fraud Test Republican Candidates, *Wall Street Journal*, November 23, 2021

A Congressional Subpoena Is The Latest In A Long Line Of Legal Entanglements For The Oath Keepers And Proud Boys, *BuzzFeed News*, November 23, 2021

Questions remain about Pennsylvania GOP's election 'investigation,' *Associated Press*, November 23, 2021

New York Moves to Allow 800,000 Noncitizens to Vote in Local Elections, *New York Times*, November 23, 2021

'Is that it?' Democrats warn Biden spending bill isn't enough to satisfy party

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base, *McClatchy DC*, November 24, 2021

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to serve tamales to law enforcement, troops sent to border, *Border Report*, November 23, 2021

Mexico breaks up second migrant march, *Associated Press*, November 23, 2021

In surprise move, Mexican president pulls pick to head central bank, *Reuters*, November 23, 2021

2,500 now living at migrant encampment in dangerous border city of Reynosa, Mexico, *Border Report*, November 23, 2021

The majority of Central Americans who want to migrate internationally are driven by economic factors, report says, *CNBC*, November 23, 2021

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Samsung announces new advanced semiconductor site in Taylor, Texas, *TechCrunch*, November 23, 2021

Mendez: State of Texas needs to invest more in space race, 2.0, *Rio Grande Guardian*, November 23, 2021

Oil and gas should be the tie that binds Mexico, U.S. and Canada, *Dallas Morning News*, November 24, 2021

Opinion: If Biden fails to secure voting rights, it will be his most lasting legacy, *Washington Post*, November 23, 2021

Advocates, legal experts decry Gov. Greg Abbott diverting $4M in state prisons funding for election audits
Ariana Garcia
Houston Chronicle
November 23, 2021
https://www.chron.com/politics/article/Texas-election-audit-Greg-Abbott-Trump-16645026.php

Gov. Greg Abbott on Friday signed off on the transfer of $4 million from the state prison system to the secretary of state's office to fund county election audits to "ensure election integrity," a move that some criminal justice advocates have since denounced. The new Election Audit Division will study the results of the November 2020 election in four Texas counties.

"Ensuring the integrity of our elections is critical to our democracy, and the Texas Secretary of State's office deserves the resources and support needed to thoroughly complete this ongoing task," Abbott said in a Friday news release. "The people of Texas must have trust and confidence in the election process, as well as the outcomes of our elections, which is why the state of Texas will transfer funding needed so that the Texas Secretary of State can create a division dedicated entirely to this important issue."

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In a letter sent to Abbott, GOP legislative leaders Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick and Texas Speaker of the House Dade Phelan, proposed the transfer from the state prison system, saying the secretary of state's office wasn't given enough money in the current two-year-budget cycle "to ensure election integrity," and therefore, "this insufficiency of funds creates an emergency." State law allows a Legislative Budget Board to shift money already appropriated if they find there's an emergency.

Michele Deitch, a law professor from the University of Texas at Austin who specializes in analyzing prison and jail conditions, said in an email that while it's unclear what parts of the prison agency's budget will be directly affected, many parts of the prison system are already underfunded. She added the Texas Department of Criminal Justice is dangerously understaffed and the provision of health care to incarcerated people as well as food budgets are always a concern.

"You can't take $4 million away from operations and services without impacting the quality of those services or the health and safety of incarcerated people and staff," Deitch wrote. "Defunding a law enforcement agency like this has the potential to put a lot of incarcerated people and staff at risk."

In October, lawmakers gave the Texas Department of Criminal Justice nearly $360 million in federal funds for employee pay and benefits, to use instead of state discretionary money, according to Robert T. Garrett of the Dallas Morning News. Robert Hurst, a spokesperson for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice said the $4 million is "likely to be returned before it's needed through supplement appropriations," but did not confirm how or when.

A similar transfer of $250 million from the state prison system was used to start Abbott's border barrier, according to the Dallas Morning News. However, lawmakers restored the money this fall so prisons didn't sustain cuts.

Krishnaveni Gundu, co-founder and executive director of criminal justice reform organization Texas Jail Project, said in an emailed statement that understaffing and a lack of resources are already endangering the lives of incarcerated individuals, especially those who are ill or disabled. "We have been hearing lately from pretrial detainees of Operation Lonestar and they are all complaining about lack of food (they get fed at 3 a.m. and 4 p.m.) and lack of access to phone calls (only one free phone call per day unlike individuals incarcerated in county jails) and of course inadequate representation," Gundu wrote.

Alycia Castillo, director of policy and advocacy at Texas Center for Justice and Equity, in an email said the move by Abbott was unsurprising, adding the state always fails to acknowledge the humanity of incarcerated people.

"People in our state's prisons endure torturous and inhumane conditions that we bring up every legislative session, only to be told that we can't afford to address them," Castillo wrote, "so it is an insult and an outrage when the Governor cuts from that very same 'too small' budget to fund a strictly politically-motivated audit, without a plan to safely decarcerate TDCJ and county jails because it may cost more lives"

Castillo said the announcement only makes it more urgent to significantly stop the flow of people into the prison system, starting with the elderly, parole-eligible and medically vulnerable.

"There are about 118,000 people trapped in those prisons and 10s of thousands in county jails," Castillo wrote. "With more reductions to the budget, it is absolutely essential to relieve the overcrowding in Texas' prison system. Budget cuts to the

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prison system should coincide with people's safe release, otherwise, more people will die."

The governor's office did not respond to a request for comment as of the time of this writing.

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Bastrop County seeks to join state's Countywide Polling Place Program to give voters more options
Colleen DeGuzman
Austin American-Statesman
November 23, 2021
https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2021/11/23/bastrop-county-seeks-allow-voters-cast-ballots-any-county-polls/8725764002/

Bastrop County voters might be able to cast their ballots at any polling location in the county in the upcoming election.

The county recently sent an application to be part of the state's Countywide Polling Place Program, which would allow residents to vote in any one of the county's proposed 17 polling locations for the upcoming primary election and still receive a ballot for the precinct in which they live.

Kristin Miles, the county's elections administrator, explained to county commissioners during a meeting Monday how being part of the polling program would expand voters' voting site options.

A requirement to join the state's program is to use direct recording electronic voting systems, which the county purchased in October. Those machines are slated to be delivered next week, Miles said.

Additionally, counties under the program have to use a computerized voter registration system. Bastrop County has tracked ballots online since 2008.

Miles said computerized tracking is important because it strengthens communication between polls and prevents residents from voting twice.

The elections department is proposing five changes to the county's current polling locations:

- Smithville City Hall to the Smithville Recreation Center, 106 Royton St., Smithville.
- Cedar Creek United Methodist Church to Cedar Creek Tax Office Annex, 5785 FM 535, Cedar Creek.
- Elgin Public Library-Civic Center to the Elgin Recreation Center, 316 N. Texas 95, Elgin.
- Bastrop County Precinct 1 Road Barn to Bastrop Fire Department Station No. 4, 1432 N. Texas 95, Bastrop.
- First Baptist Church to Ascension Catholic Church, 804 Pine St., Bastrop.

The department is also proposing to eliminate five polling locations:

- Lake Thunderbird Community Center, 104 Thunderbird Drive, Smithville.
- Bastrop County ESD No. 1 Station 5, 1525 FM 812, Cedar Creek.
- Lost Pines Cowboy Church, 334 Roemer Road, Elgin.

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- Heart of the Pines VFD, 109 Green Acres Loop, Bastrop.
- Bastrop Fire Department Station 2 (Tahitian), 120 Corporate Drive, Bastrop.

With the changes, the number of polling locations in the county would go down from 22 to 17.

The recommendations were made by the county's Election Department in collaboration with the appointed Vote Center Advisory Committee — a group consisting of precinct officials and organizations representing minority voters and voters with disabilities.

"These changes were to accommodate a potential influx of voters if we were to move countywide (polling)" Miles said.

The application to be part of the state's polling program was sent to the Secretary of State on Monday, and Miles said it could take up to a month to get a decision on whether the county's application will be approved or rejected.

"The reason that we chose to apply is voter convenience," Miles told the Bastrop Advertiser. "... This would eliminate the need for voters to have to vote in one specific location, thus making it easier for the voter to cast their ballot."

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Runoff Elections in Troubled Houston School District Set to Begin
Holly Hansen
The Texan
November 23, 2021
https://thetexan.news/runoff-elections-in-troubled-houston-school-district-set-to-begin/

Runoff elections for four seats on the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board are slated to begin next week while the beleaguered district remains under the threat of a state takeover.
Following years of chronically underperforming schools and an investigation into multiple ethics violations by the board of trustees, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) moved to take over HISD in 2019.

The district obtained a court-ordered injunction to block the takeover last year and the matter remains pending before the Supreme Court of Texas. A new state law that took effect on September 1 may bolster the TEA's position and eventually allow the state agency to replace the HISD elected board of trustees with an appointed board of managers, but for now, the district may proceed with elections.

Allegations of HISD board misconduct, inability to significantly improve student performance, and a projected 2022 budget deficit of $105 million drew extensive interest from the community, and multiple candidates filed to challenge incumbent trustees in the general election.

Trustee Myrna Guidry, appointed to the board in 2020, was the only incumbent to win her race outright on election day, successfully fending off two challengers to garner more than 60 percent of the vote.

Incumbents for single-member geographic districts 1, 5, 6, and 7 are Elizabeth Santos, Sue Deigaard, Holly Flynn Vilaseca, and Anne Sung. The 2019 TEA investigation specifically accused Santos, Vilaseca, and Sung of violating Texas open meetings laws by conducting a "walking quorum" while considering a new

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superintendent.

The TEA investigator's report also indicated that incumbents Santos, Vilaseca, and Sung had engaged in trustee overreach that included "monitoring, directing, influencing or interfering with administrative actions in the areas of operations (including campaign events), contracting, grievances and personnel."

Santos, a former teacher who has served on the board since 2016, will face Janette Garza Lindner, a consultant who has served on the Latinos for Education board and an advisory board for school choice. Both candidates have expressed opposition to the state takeover, but Santos has been endorsed by Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo along with other prominent local Democrats.

Lindner has endorsements from Houstonians for Great Public Schools, the Houston Chronicle Editorial Board, and homebuilder David Weekley.

The two have recently sparred over campaign donations, with Lindner noting that more than 70 percent of Santos' campaign funds come from Washington, D.C.-based Patriot Majority PAC.

Patriot Majority, a left-leaning political action group largely funded by the American Federation of Teachers union, has also contributed to the campaigns of Vilaseca and Sung.

In the District 5 runoff, incumbent Deigaard faces challenger Caroline Walter. An activist for public education issues, Deigaard won election to the HISD board in 2017 and has endorsements from Congresswoman Lizzie Fletcher (D-TX-07), state Rep. Ann Johnson (D-Houston), and Houston City Councilmember Abbie Kamin.

Walter, an HISD parent involved in multiple area charities, captured 36 percent of the vote to Deigaard's 49 percent in the general election and has been endorsed by the Conservative Coalition of Harris County, the Harris County Republican Party (HCRP), and business political networking organization BIZPAC.

For District 6, incumbent and former teacher Vilaseca will head to the runoff against challenger Kendall Baker, a well-known local pastor who vocally opposed Houston's controversial transgender rights ordinance known as HERO.

Baker also previously ran for mayor of Houston in 2019 and is part of the Houston Area Pastor Council. A former manager for Houston's 311 Help and Information Center, Baker faced accusations of sexual harassment that ended his employment with the city in 2013.

Vilaseca touts a lengthy list of endorsing entities including the Texas Gulf Coast AFL-CIO and Houston Federation of Teachers unions, as well as the Houston GLBT Caucus, Fletcher, Hidalgo, and other elected Democrats.

Baker received endorsements from the county's Republican party, Houston Business Connections Newspaper, and several local Republican officials and groups.

Also garnering right-leaning endorsements, Bridget Wade took more than 40 percent of the vote to incumbent Sung's 37 percent in the four-way race for District VII. President of a local school Parent Teacher Organization who serves on multiple other boards, Wade has called for school district emphasis on reading and math skills.

A former HISD teacher who graduated from Harvard, Sung won election to the board

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in 2016 and says she has worked for reforms in the district that have led to improvements in college and career readiness. Her lengthy endorsement list includes local unions and Democratic groups and elected officials.

Like many other public school districts around the state, HISD has adopted a focus on "equity." Last year the district partnered with Rice University's Houston Education Research Consortium to study educational equity, and an HISD mission statement webpage reads, "we believe equity is a/the lens through which all policy decisions are made."

Goals outlined by the current board include increasing the percentage of third grade students reading at grade level to 50 percent and performing math at grade level to 54 percent by 2024.

Early voting for the HISD runoff elections begins on Monday, November 29 and continues through December 7. Election Day is December 11.

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Clear Creek ISD trustees remain divided over election logistics
Colleen Ferguson
Community Impact
November 22, 2021
https://communityimpact.com/houston/bay-area/education/2021/11/22/clear-creek-isd-trustees-remain-divided-over-election-logistics/

While Clear Creek ISD trustees approved a $250,000 expenditure for new voting equipment during the Nov. 15 regular meeting, district leaders and stakeholders are divided over how best to conduct district elections.

The next election will be held in May, when Scott Bowen and Laura DuPont's seats on the board expire. CCISD's May 2020 elections were postponed until November due to COVID-19; in November, Harris and Galveston counties ran the election for the first time in decades, CCISD leaders said.

CCISD will see a savings of about $65,000 in the general fund by running its own election in May, said Paul McLarty, deputy superintendent of business and support services, Nov. 15. The total cost of a county-run election would exceed $125,000, whereas the district can run the election for about $60,000, he said.

"We're going to save money by doing it internally," McLarty said, adding all votes cast in a district election have been true and correctly counted. "We've never had any problems with our elections. ... All the numbers have been verified, so we've held clean elections."

The motion to approve the spending on new voting machines passed with trustees Bowen, Michelle Davis and Jeff Larson opposing. Trustees and community members expressed concerns throughout the meeting over the accessibility of district-run elections compared to county-run elections.

Voter turnout in November was higher than usual, indicating the district might see more engagement if its elections coincided with other municipal races, Bowen said.

"Being on a common election with other local elections is good governance," he said. "An election is not just something we do. We want it to be something that our community can participate in."

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There are different restrictions around ISD elections, McLarty said, and the board would not be able to formally amend election dates or frequencies on its own without legislative changes.

During the meeting's public comment section, Bettina Ellison and Katie French both spoke in opposition of the district purchasing the new voting machines. Using county-provided staff and supplies for elections would reduce the load on CCISD employees, Ellison said.

She and French said local citizens have concerns around election integrity, which would be assuaged if elections were county-run. French also asked the board to consider burden on voters when it comes to having elections run by different entities, since this means people have to visit multiple locations to cast all votes.

Davis, who has electioneering experience, echoed French's sentiment.

"People are not likely to go to two voting places," she said. "I know this because I've done electioneering, and I've told them where to go to vote for CCISD elections, and nine out of 10 of the people said, 'Nah, I'm not going over there.'"

Hart InterCivic, the company providing the voting machines, gave CCISD around a $60,000 discount on the new equipment purchased, per board meeting documents. This discount was good through the Nov. 15 meeting, after which time it was not guaranteed, McLarty said.

The company, like many others, is facing supply chain issues, which is why district leaders saw it necessary to place the order well ahead of the May elections, he added. The new machines will be of the same type used by both Harris and Galveston counties in their elections.

The new voting machines were purchased to comply with state legislative requirements: Senate Bill 598, passed during the 87th regular session, requires a verifiable paper trail of all votes. The systems used now by almost all Texas entities do not have a verifiable paper trail and, as such, will be phased out by Sept. 1, 2026, per board meeting documents.

While this leaves CCISD with ample time to update its machines, McLarty said equipment failures this May could take entire polling places out of service. Hart InterCivic no longer makes the eSlate voting equipment that CCISD currently owns, so they cannot guarantee the ability to repair machines or availability of replacement parts for those machines, he said.

Two early voting eSlates malfunctioned during the May 2021 election, and one malfunction was on election day, which resulted in no backup eSlates for that day, he said. The district would risk equipment failures happening again, which could take entire polling places out of service, if machines were not updated for the election this May, McLarty said.

The eSlate equipment was purchased in late 2013, per board documents; prior to this time, the district leased equipment from Harris County. Bowen and Davis expressed concerns that the new machines, much like those purchased eight years ago, could become outdated and expensive to update down the line. However, McLarty said the district no longer has any option to lease Harris County equipment.

Board President Jay Cunningham said CCISD staff run a smooth, efficient election,

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especially compared to those that are county-run. During discussions over the voting machine expenditures, he indicated trustees should make consistent decisions when it comes to spending money.

“I think we have to decide, if we’re fiscally conservative, are we only fiscally conservative when it suits our needs, or are we fiscally conservative all the time,” Cunningham said.

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Can Audits Help To Combat Voter Fraud?
High Plains Observer – Perryton
November 23, 2021
https://highplainsobserverperryton.com/can-audits-help-to-combat-voter-fraud-p31059-267.htm

Texas Governor Greg Abbott announced last week that he had approved funding to launch an election audit division within the Texas Secretary of State’s office.

Can these audits be effective in fighting voter fraud? Dr. Shiva Ayyadurai is a systems scientist with multiple degrees from MIT and recently told KXDJ’s Chris Samples, “Look, I’ve solved problems all my life. The real solution is that number one, these election officials must give us what is called their “standardized operating procedures.” You do this in every other field. Number two, we need to do signature verification in an objective manner.”

Click here to listen to more.

Dr. Ayyadurai holds four degrees from MIT, is a world-renowned systems scientist, inventor and entrepreneur. He is a Fulbright Scholar, Lemelson-MIT Awards Finalist, India’s First Outstanding Scientist and Technologist of Indian Origin, Westinghouse Science Talent Honors Award recipient, and a nominee for the U.S. National Medal of Technology and Innovation.

If you would like to read more from him on the problems he sees with our election system, click here.

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Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott officially files for reelection
Paul LeBlanc
CNN
November 23, 2021
https://www.cnn.com/2021/11/23/politics/greg-abbott-texas-governor-files-reelection/index.html

Washington (CNN)Republican Gov. Greg Abbott on Tuesday filed to run for reelection in Texas, officially entering what is shaping up to be one of the most high-profile contests in 2022.

Abbott launched his campaign with a focus on border security and police support, saying in a video posted to his Twitter account: "I want you to know I'm running for reelection to protect and secure our border. I'm running for reelection to support our police officers in the great state of Texas. And I'm running to make sure Texas remains a job creation machine."

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The Texas gubernatorial race began to draw national attention in earnest earlier this month when Beto O'Rourke, the former Texas congressman who ran unsuccessfully for the US Senate in 2018 and the Democratic presidential nomination in 2020, launched his campaign, which many Democrats in the state had identified as the party's only chance of denying Abbott a third term.

In the two-minute video announcing his campaign, O'Rourke used the February failure of the Texas power grid during a severe winter storm to criticize Abbott's leadership, saying those without power and water were "abandoned by those that were elected to serve and look out for them."

Democrats in Texas have said they see Abbott as politically wounded from the episode along with a string of other controversies stemming from his efforts to restrict abortion and ban government vaccine mandates. A September poll from Quinnipiac University found that 51% of registered voters in the state said Abbott did not deserve reelection.

Still, turning Texas blue in a statewide race remains a tall task for Democrats, especially with President Joe Biden's lower approval ratings energizing Republicans, who hope to run against his presidency to make electoral gains in Washington and statehouses across the country.

Abbott has already used O'Rourke's comments from the presidential race on issues like gun control, the Green New Deal, health care reform, immigration and the Black Lives Matter movement -- generally out of context -- in an ad series he has posted on YouTube called "Wrong Way O'Rourke."

One wild card in the race could be actor Matthew McConaughey, who has signaled interest in launching his own campaign. "I'm measuring it," he said of running for office on a podcast in September. "Look, it's going to be in some capacity. ... I just -- I'm more of a folksy and philosopher poet statesman than I am a, per se, definitive politician."

He continued, "So I go, well, that's a reason not to, but then I go, no, that's exactly why you should, because politics needs redefinition, but I'm measuring, you know, what is my category? What's my embassy?"

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Matthew McConaughey says he'll make a decision on Texas governor run 'shortly'
Mede Nix
Dallas Morning News
November 23, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/11/23/matthew-mcconaughey-says-hell-make-a-decision-on-texas-governor-run-shortly/

Actor Matthew McConaughey promised a decision on whether he'll run for Texas governor "shortly" in an interview with Hollywood Reporter published Tuesday.

The actor, who's been talking about making a run for the office for months, talked about his decision-making process in a wide-ranging interview with the show business publication. The deadline to file for the Republican or Democratic primary — or to declare as an independent candidate — is Dec. 13.

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“I’m a storyteller. I’m a CEO. But being CEO of a state?” he said. “Am I best equipped for the people in the state, and for my family and myself? There’s great sacrifice that comes with a decision. That’s what I’ve been doing, and there’s no tease to it. There’s me doing my diligence, and I will let you know shortly.”

McConaughey said he wasn’t being coy about the race.

“It’s a new embassy of leadership that I have really been doing my diligence to study, to look into, to question what it is, what would it be for me,” he said. “Not the question of, ‘Hey, do you think I could win?’ No. Let’s talk about what Texas politics is. Talk about a policy statement.”

The interview with the Hollywood Reporter came days after Democrat Beto O’Rourke entered the race for governor. Republican Gov. Greg Abbott officially filed for a third term on Tuesday. Abbott will face several primary challengers.

McConaughey, also a best-selling author, was asked his reaction about O’Rourke entering the race.

“I missed the news. I figured he would,” he said.

A Dallas Morning News/University of Texas-Tyler poll released Sunday showed that in a three-way race with Abbott, O’Rourke and McConaughey, Abbott had 37% of registered voters polled with McConaughey at 27% and O’Rourke at 26%.

Those polled said they’d support McConaughey over Abbott, 43% to 35%, with 22% wanting someone else to run.

But by nearly 2-to-1, all voters would be more likely to support McConaughey than O’Rourke. Pluralities of Democrats and independents want the Oscar-winning movie star and products endorser to run.

Still, McConaughey doesn’t have a clear path if he were to decide to run. By 65%-11%, Democratic voters believe O’Rourke is the best opportunity for Democrats to break a statewide losing streak dating to 1998.

The poll, conducted Nov. 9-16, surveyed 1,106 adults who are registered voters and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.2 percentage points.

McConaughey hasn’t said whether he would run as a Republican or Democrat. He could run as an independent, but would face some hurdles to qualify for the ballot.

An independent candidate would have to file intent to run by Dec. 13, and then collect signatures of 1% of the number of voters who voted in the 2018 gubernatorial election — a minimum of 83,435 signatures. The signatures must also be from voters who did not vote in the 2022 March primary or May primary runoff elections. The deadline for turning in those signatures to the Texas secretary of state is June 23, 2022.

“It’s a bunch,” said former state Rep. Glen Maxey, an Austin Democrat knowledgeable about third-party and independent candidates’ ballot access. Historically, the Legislature has made it hard for independent candidates, he noted. Only a wealthy candidate or one with a big campaign account can hire the signature gatherers needed to get the required number of signatures.

The last significant Texas independent gubernatorial candidates were in 2006, when singer/humorist Kinky Friedman and former Texas Comptroller Carole Keeton

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Strayhorn, lost to Rick Perry in 2006. Chris Bell was the Democratic candidate. Perry had 39% of the vote, Bell 30%, Strayhorn 18% and Friedman 13%.

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Beto O'Rourke targets South Texas in bid to win back Democratic voters he'll need to beat Gov. Greg Abbott in 2022
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 24, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/24/beto-orourke-2022-south-texas/

MCALLEN — In the first days of his campaign for governor, Beto O'Rourke made a beeline to this southernmost corner of the state, saying it was no mistake he was choosing to start his run in a part of Texas where Democrats have their work cut out for them after the 2020 election.

His supporters know it, too.

"We are being attacked at all ends," Amanda Elise Salas said as she introduced him here Wednesday night. "This is a Democratic area, and there is no way we are gonna let Republicans come in here and take over."

"They're knocking at our door," Mario Saenz, a Democratic precinct chair from Brownsville, said afterward. "We cannot let them in."

A lot of Democratic hopes are riding on O'Rourke this election cycle, but few may be more consequential to the party's future in Texas than his ability to stave off a strong GOP offensive in South Texas. Emboldened by President Joe Biden's underwhelming performance throughout the predominantly Hispanic region last year, Republicans have been pushing hard to make new inroads there, and O'Rourke faces an incumbent in Gov. Greg Abbott who been working for years to win Hispanic voters.

But it is not just about halting the GOP's post-2020 march in South Texas. O'Rourke, who is facing an uphill battle in the governor's race, has ground to make up after his own less-than-stellar performance with voters there in 2018 when he ran for U.S. Senate — and turning out more Latino voters has long been key to Democratic hopes statewide.

O'Rourke has been candid about the problem. Days after the 2020 election, which cemented Republican dominance across Texas, he told supporters that the fact that the border region "has been ignored for years by the national party, and even many statewide Democratic candidates, hurt us badly." Last week, he began his campaign for governor with a swing through the region, calling the early itinerary "very intentional" and vowing to return frequently.

"If the great sin committed by Republicans historically has been to disenfranchise voters, including those in the Rio Grande Valley, then that committed by Democrats has been to take those same voters for granted in the past," O'Rourke told reporters in San Antonio, before heading south to Laredo and the Valley.

O'Rourke got a wake-up call in South Texas during the 2018 Democratic primary for U.S. Senate, losing many counties in the region to a little-known and little-funded opponent, Sema Hernandez. While it was not the first time a candidate with a Hispanic surname beat expectations in a statewide Democratic primary, O'Rourke acknowledged afterward that he needed to do more outreach.

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Months later, in the general election, O'Rourke failed to make significant gains in South Texas compared to his party's 2016 presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton, which would have been key to defeating U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. In the largest South Texas county outside San Antonio — Hidalgo — O'Rourke barely improved on Clinton's vote share there, getting 68.8% after she got 68.5%.

Then came 2020, when Biden carried South Texas — and the Rio Grande Valley in particular — by a much narrower margin than Clinton did. He outright lost Zapata County, a longtime Democratic stronghold just north of the Valley.

Republicans charged into this election cycle determined to make further gains, and they have already had success. They flipped a state House seat on the South Side of San Antonio earlier this month, and on the same day that O'Rourke announced his campaign for governor, state Rep. Ryan Guillen, who has represented Rio Grande City as a Democrat since 2003, announced he was joining the GOP.

Abbott's top political adviser, Dave Carney, said the governor's campaign has "a lot of plans" for South Texas this election cycle and that Abbott is "gonna be there a lot." Carney said he was not worried about new Latino voters turning out next year.

"I want every Hispanic voter to turn out," Carney said. "That helps us."

Democrats say O'Rourke needs to keep his word and return often to South Texas, giving it the kind of attention that the Biden campaign did not last year. And while border communities are about "so much more than immigration" — as O'Rourke said at multiple stops last week — he will have to grapple with how to talk about an issue that is No. 1 for Abbott and a political liability for Democrats in Texas right now.

Republicans scoff at the idea that O'Rourke can rescue his party in South Texas. Monica De La Cruz, a GOP candidate to flip a congressional seat anchored in the Valley, said O'Rourke is "not the answer," and his positions on law enforcement, gun rights and border security are out of step with South Texas voters.

"I don't think it changes the landscape," De La Cruz said. "I think that South Texans have conservative values of faith, family and freedom, and I don't think Beto O'Rourke changes that at all."

The border

Taking on South Texas means O'Rourke will not be able to avoid tough questions about border security and immigration — issues with which Democrats have struggled in the past year to find a unified position under Biden.

Texas Republicans are largely narrowing in on border security as a winning issue for the party. And Abbott has taken sweeping — and at times unprecedented — action to fortify the border since Biden took office, charging migrants as criminal trespassers in state court and announcing the construction of a state-funded border wall.

While there is not necessarily broad support for everything Abbott has done on the border, Texas voters agree they do not like Biden's approach. The latest University of Texas/Texas Tribune survey found that only 22% of voters approved of how Biden has handled immigration and border security, compared with 63% who disapprove.

In one of his first interviews as a gubernatorial candidate, O'Rourke criticized Biden's handling of the border, saying it is clear Biden "could be doing a better job at the

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border" and that it is "not enough of a priority for his administration." In that interview and other comments to reporters last week, O'Rourke called for "predictability," "order" and "rule of law" on the border. He also spoke frankly about the need for asylum-seekers to come to the country through ports of entry, not in between them, present their asylum claim and, if it is denied, face deportation.

It is the kind of rhetoric that would have been surprising to hear in O'Rourke's past campaigns. While it may appeal to voters looking for a harder line on the border, it could turn off Democrats hoping for a bold contrast with the GOP.

"He's taking up these right-wing talking points instead of pushing for a more humane approach to immigration, which is what he was doing back in 2017," said Denisce Palacios, a Democratic organizer from the Valley who volunteered for O'Rourke's 2018 campaign. "It looks like he's kind of moved more to the center in terms of messaging. That's kind of frustrating."

At the same time, O'Rourke said Biden needs to end Title 42, a policy that allows the administration to quickly turn away undocumented immigrants at the border, citing a public health crisis — the coronavirus pandemic. O'Rourke said that is fueling disorder at the border because those who are rejected are simply returning again and again.

It remains to be seen how much O'Rourke actively campaigns on border issues.

His announcement video did not mention the border. He prioritized other issues in interviews around the announcement. And he did not mention the border during his first public campaign event Tuesday morning in San Antonio. But hours later in Laredo, he was back in familiar form, extolling immigrants' value to the country and praising Laredoans for having "stood up" to city leaders to stop a border wall, a major rallying cry in his 2018 campaign.

Chants of "No more wall!" almost instantly broke out. Minutes earlier, the chair of the Webb County Democratic Party, Sylvia Bruni, had said while introducing O'Rourke that she was "so, so thrilled, I want to cry."

Dani Marrero Hi, a spokesperson for LUPE Votes, said now is not the time for O'Rourke to downplay immigration as an issue in South Texas. She pointed out that Abbott "talks about immigration all the time," and while she strongly disagrees with his policies and rhetoric, he is at least talking about it.

"When there's a space and Democrats don't talk about it with an alternative vision, it leaves room for Abbott and Trump … to come in and write the whole narrative about what the border is," she said.

Showing up

Beyond any issue, though, South Texas Democrats say O'Rourke needs to show up, especially after a presidential election that left them wanting. Biden never visited Texas, let alone anywhere in South Texas, during the general election, and his running mate, Kamala Harris, visited McAllen only in the final days of the race.

To that end, South Texas Democrats are not particularly concerned about O'Rourke, who is known for his relentless campaigning. He toured all 254 counties during his 2018 race, which included a bus tour specifically focused on the border.

"We're the poorest region of Texas, maybe one of the poorest regions in the nation,

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and you know, it was a huge letdown that Kamala and Biden didn't make a prolonged appearance here in the Valley, but Beto, you know, he's been recurringly focusing his presence here, especially in his past campaigns," said Sebastian Bonilla, a 25-year-old from the Valley who came to see O'Rourke speak in McAllen.

Abbott has put an emphasis on South Texas since his first gubernatorial campaign in 2014, and he has been increasingly traveling there in recent months, both in his official capacity and for political appearances. Carney said it will become "crystal clear" after the holidays that Abbott will be traveling to South Texas frequently.

Carney said Abbott's campaign has "already modeled a million Democrat voters who do not support Beto, the vast majority south of San Antonio." The voters say they support a Democrat in a generic gubernatorial ballot — an unnamed Democrat versus an unnamed Republican — but when asked about O'Rourke versus Abbott, they are undecided or pick Abbott.

"That's just such a hole to come out of," Carney said.

Bruni said she is optimistic that O'Rourke will not meet the same fate as Biden in South Texas because he will spend meaningful time there and Democrats will campaign in person, unlike in 2020, when they largely went virtual due to the coronavirus pandemic.

She said that allowed Republicans to campaign in person unchecked — and they "scared the Dickens" out of voters in places like Zapata County with claims that Biden would eliminate their oil-and-gas jobs and take away their guns.

"The only way we can resolve that [next year] … is by being out there and telling the right story," Bruni said. "That's the only way. We did not do that in 2020."

To the extent that anxieties about oil-and-gas jobs and gun rights fueled GOP gains in South Texas last year, O'Rourke entered the gubernatorial race prepared. He has been talking about a Texas AFL-CIO plan to generate 1 million energy jobs that would supplement — not replace, he emphasizes — existing jobs in the oil-and-gas industry. And while he has not backed away from his 2020 campaign pledge to "take" people's assault weapons, he has sought to reframe it in the context of Texas having a "long, proud tradition of responsible gun ownership."

O'Rourke touched on several other issues during his inaugural trip to the Valley as a gubernatorial candidate. He discussed COVID-19 with school board members in McAllen and with Hidalgo County Health Authority Ivan Melendez in Mission. The two spoke at length about how the region has been uniquely vulnerable to the pandemic, with its poverty and uninsured population, and they exchanged ideas on how to convince vaccine skeptics to get immunized.

Speaking with reporters after his McAllen rally, O'Rourke ticked through the unique issues that had come up in his conversations with South Texas leaders recently. O'Rourke said he spoke with Brownsville Mayor Trey Mendez about expanding broadband internet, he spoke with Jim Hogg County Judge Juan Carlos Guerra about improving water quality and he talked with Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez about combating food insecurity, especially among children.

After the McAllen event, Ivan Duran Puente, a 22-year-old graduate school student at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, said he was taking the GOP threat in South Texas seriously but was hopeful Democrats have increased their numbers since 2018. At the same time, he acknowledged Republicans have a "major voice

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here, especially with our older conservative demographic."

"I don't want to give it power, but it's always something you have to be cautious about," he said. "We just need to put more faith in the campaign of Beto than give power to the voice of conservatives because that's how they are gonna win at the end of the day."

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Trump's False Claims of Voter Fraud Test Republican Candidates
Michael C. Bender, Alexa Corse and Joshua Jamerson
Wall Street Journal
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https://www.wsj.com/articles/trumps-voter-fraud-claims-test-republican-candidates-election-youngkin-campaign-11637679164

WASHINGTON—Former President Donald Trump's yearlong campaign falsely claiming he won the 2020 election and demanding redress is turning voter fraud into a litmus test for Republicans seeking office as the party seeks to reclaim the House and Senate in 2022.

Mr. Trump has told advisers the issue will help the party win control of Congress next year and win back the White House in 2024. He has privately floated the possibility of an early presidential campaign announcement to underscore the message to conservative voters.

Many Republican candidates have fallen in line. Some have refused to concede defeats from 2020—and, like Mr. Trump, used fraud claims to raise money. Others seeking office have tailored their campaign messages to echo Mr. Trump's claim that he won to avoid facing a backlash from his supporters.

Still other Republicans, including Glenn Youngkin, who won the Virginia governor's race earlier this month, have aimed to navigate the issue by sidestepping many of Mr. Trump's election-fraud claims without disavowing the man himself. Meanwhile, several of the former president's most persistent Republican critics, such as six-term Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, have said they aren't running for re-election.

On the local level, some election chiefs have been harassed and subject to intimidation for refusing to say the vote counting isn't secure. A wave of election officials and longtime professional staff have left their jobs under pressure.

The message appears to be contributing to eroding confidence in the nation's election systems—similar to the long-running decline of faith in civic institutions such as the government, the criminal justice system and the media. In October, a Grinnell College poll found that 58% of Americans were very or somewhat confident that the 2022 vote will be counted fairly. Confidence among Republicans was at just 38%, down from 85% in March 2020.

In the wake of last year's election, Mr. Trump's campaign and his allies lost dozens of lawsuits around the country that challenged the 2020 results. The Justice Department said there were no signs of widespread fraud. A bipartisan consortium of local, state and federal election officials declared the 2020 race the most secure U.S. election in history.

But Mr. Trump never conceded, and a year later continues to press his case. Last month he sent a letter to The Wall Street Journal editorial board making multiple false claims about the results in Pennsylvania. In a recent interview, he raised doubts

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about the coming elections. “A lot of people are worried that if we don’t take care of that issue, you’re going to have a problem in ’22 and ’24,” Mr. Trump said. “They don’t want the same thing to happen where the election is rigged. I’m very concerned that the elections are going to be rigged.”

Following his example, some other Republican candidates haven’t conceded their 2020 losses.

In Pennsylvania, Republican Sean Parnell hasn’t conceded in a western Pennsylvania House race he lost last year by 2.3 percentage points—a narrow defeat but more than four times the margin required to trigger an automatic recount in the state. Mr. Trump cited unfounded claims about irregularities in Mr. Parnell’s race when he endorsed the candidate, an author and former Army Ranger, in a crowded primary for the state’s Republican Senate nomination next year. Mr. Parnell quit the race Monday.

In Washington state, Republican Loren Culp refused to concede after failing to unseat Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, in 2020. Mr. Culp is one of several primary challengers for Rep. Dan Newhouse who, like Mr. Kinzinger, is one of 10 Republicans who voted to impeach Mr. Trump on charges that his election-fraud claims incited the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol.

Mr. Trump’s campaign and support across the party has further inflamed state and local battles over voting rights and regulations. Republicans have sponsored more than 100 new state laws this year making changes to elections and election procedures, saying wider embrace of tactics such as mail-in voting and expanded hours—in some cases introduced during the pandemic—call for new rules to prevent fraud or abuse. Mr. Trump has often praised the new proposals.

Democrats have called the wave of measures a restrictive assault on voting rights and a threat to democracy that are driven by Mr. Trump’s fraudulent claims. The Democratic National Committee has said it would invest in voter turnout efforts to counter the new restrictions and the Justice Department has sued Georgia and Texas over their new, Republican-backed voting laws. Democrats in Congress have proposed federal standards for voting access with legislation that has been blocked by Senate Republicans.

The battles over election security reflect sharpening political divisions. In five of the last six presidential elections over the last 20 years, the popular vote margin has been less than 5 percentage points—as many times as in the previous 100 years. In three of those five elections, moreover, the results have been publicly questioned.

In 2000, Democratic nominee Al Gore conceded the race to Republican George W. Bush after a bitter battle and a Supreme Court ruling. He said he disagreed with the ruling to end the decisive recount in Florida, but would abide by the verdict.

Some of Mr. Gore’s allies—including Terry McAuliffe, the Democrat who lost to Mr. Youngkin in Virginia this month—have said the recount in Florida that year was rigged.

After Mr. Trump won in 2016, Democrat Hillary Clinton conceded—then later raised doubts about the legitimacy of the results based on Russian interference. Some House Democrats challenged Mr. Trump’s victory in the joint session of Congress to ratify the election—but the effort failed when no senator joined them. At least one member from each chamber is required to bring a challenge to a vote.

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After the closely fought 2018 gubernatorial race in Georgia, Democrat Stacey Abrams didn't concede to Republican Brian Kemp, accusing him of trying to suppress minority voters in his role as Secretary of State, which he denied. A voting group founded by Ms. Abrams challenged the state's election rules in court, and she has declined to call Mr. Kemp the legitimate governor. Many Democrats have voiced support for her stance; last month, Mr. McAuliffe reiterated that he believes Ms. Abrams should have won the Georgia governor's race in 2018 but lost because of voter suppression.

This past year, Mr. Trump has supercharged the trend. In private conversations, he has said Mr. Gore was wrong to concede the race in 2000, people familiar with the remarks said. He has also told allies that his polling shows voter fraud motivates his base and argued that an announcement sometime next year that he would run for president would boost Republican turnout for the midterms, people familiar with the conversations said.

Fellow Republicans have dissuaded him from that strategy for now, the people said. But the disagreement was over whether Mr. Trump's presence in the midterms would be a better motivator for Democratic voters than Republicans—not over the use of voter fraud as an issue, they said.

In Washington, some top Republicans privately say they don't believe voter fraud tilted the 2020 election away from Mr. Trump—but rarely acknowledge Mr. Biden's victory in public. Still, there is broad consensus that the former president has tapped into voter frustration by using election security issues to motivate their votes.

Three out of four Republicans said Mr. Trump was right to question whether the election was rigged because there were "real cases of fraud that changed the results," in an NPR/PBS NewsHour/Marist poll conducted last month.

Many of the former president's supporters interviewed in Virginia recently said raising questions about the electoral process doesn't undermine democracy and instead could help bolster it.

"I have to believe that all the elections in the country are fair, but there is always room for improvement," said Jeff Johnson, 56 years old, from Stafford, Va. The retired police officer heard Mr. Youngkin speak there at an early-voting site for the recent election. He said he supports strict photo ID laws to vote and said the U.S. shouldn't try to support fair elections in other countries without making sure they are trusted at home.

"Since I was a kid, there was cheating in elections," said Republican voter Tim Bussing, a retired defense contractor from Fredericksburg, Va. "It was never to this scale."

Republican candidates seeking Mr. Trump's endorsement have aggressively pushed the former president's claims. Eric Greitens has taken his Missouri Senate campaign to Arizona to tout allegations of wrongdoing in a state where the former president has repeatedly blamed his loss on election fraud.

Josh Mandel has sought to strengthen his candidacy in a crowded Ohio Republican Senate primary by saying Mr. Trump won more votes than Mr. Biden.

In August, Alabama Senate candidate Mo Brooks was booed at a Trump rally in his home state when he cautioned the massive crowd against remaining despondent over election fraud accusations. "Put that behind you," the congressman said.

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Later that night, Mr. Brooks said on social media that he remained convinced that Mr. Trump had won the 2020 contest.

In Virginia's race for governor, the most hotly contested campaign of 2021, Mr. Youngkin successfully executed a more nuanced approach. The former private-equity executive said Mr. Biden legitimately won the White House, but that the presidential election showed voting security needed improvement. Earlier this month, he defeated Mr. McAuliffe, halting recent Democratic gains in the state.

In the closing days of his campaign, Mr. Youngkin focused on local issues, emphasizing public education. Even so, some Republican voters said in interviews they were motivated by Mr. Trump's claims of fraud or anecdotal reports of irregularities published in conservative media.

At a campaign event last month, 57-year-old pizza shop manager Diana Qura shouted back to Mr. Youngkin in a Manassas parking lot when he urged supporters to bring friends with them to the polls.

"But legal!" said Ms. Qura, who said she emigrated from Jordan in the 1980s. "Legal votes!"

Republican strategists who have explored these issues in focus groups have found that voters' complaints about fraud are often rooted in frustration with emergency changes made to election procedures approved during the pandemic and lockdowns instead of certainty about rampant criminal wrongdoing.

One target of their ire has been longtime election officials—even in states that Mr. Trump won—who have insisted that the election wasn't stolen.

In Arizona, half of the staff in the secretary of state's elections division have left their jobs since the election, with most taking jobs in other fields, said a spokeswoman for Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs.

Ms. Hobbs, a Democrat, said that armed protesters gathered outside her home after the 2020 race and threatened her and her family and that she has at times had to have police protection. "I fear that many more will reach a breaking point and decide that this line of public service is no longer worth it," she told a Senate committee in written testimony last month.

In Texas, Hood County Elections Administrator Michele Carew resigned in October after local Republicans publicly accused her of not following election procedures. Mr. Trump won the county by 64 percentage points, roughly the same as his 66-point margin in 2016. Ms. Carew, who had worked in elections for 14 years, said she did nothing wrong.

"After basically a year of it, I just didn't want to do it any more," she said.

In Pennsylvania, approximately 30 senior election officials have departed since last year. Some were planned, but others stemmed from frustration with a lack of resources, state officials said. Philadelphia Commissioner Al Schmidt, who serves as vice chairman of the city's election board, said that he and his family received threats after Mr. Trump criticized him on Twitter over Pennsylvania's election results, which went to Mr. Biden.

"What was once a fairly obscure administrative job is now one where lunatics are threatening to murder your children," Mr. Schmidt, a Republican, told senators in

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written testimony at the October hearing.

Meanwhile, Mr. Trump and his supporters are working to install allies in state offices that oversee elections and would be in charge of certifying the state's presidential results in 2024.

The former president has backed secretary of state candidates in Arizona, Georgia and Michigan—all states that flipped to Democrats in 2020 and where he personally lobbied officials to overturn results or block certification of his defeat.

In Georgia, Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger is facing primary challengers in his bid for re-election. Mr. Raffensperger was a target of Mr. Trump's anger after his narrow 2020 loss in the state. Mr. Trump alleged Georgia had produced fraudulent results and tried to pressure Mr. Raffensperger to overturn Mr. Biden's victory there. Georgia law-enforcement officers investigated claims of fraud and didn't find any problems that could have put in doubt the presidential election result.

"You're seeing this issue on both sides of the aisle, and people need to understand that what it destroys is voter confidence in the process," Mr. Raffensperger said in an interview.

Mr. Trump has endorsed Jody Hice, a U.S. congressman from the state who has opened a primary challenge against Mr. Raffensperger. Mr. Hice, who led the objection in the House to Electoral College results from Georgia, said in a statement that he would investigate allegations of fraud if elected. "The election should not have been certified without an unbiased investigation and President Trump's case regarding the election should have been heard in court," Mr. Hice said in the statement.

In Michigan, Mr. Trump has endorsed Kristina Karamo, a Republican candidate for secretary of state. Ms. Karamo previously supported a lawsuit that sought to block Mr. Biden's victory from being certified.

Ms. Karamo said in an interview that she would act in a nonpartisan manner if elected as secretary of state. She said she couldn't answer whether Mr. Biden fairly won last year's election because she still had concerns about how the election was run.

In Nevada, the state Republican party censured Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske—the only Republican in statewide office—for failure to investigate fraud and "dismissive public statements regarding election integrity concerns."

Ms. Cegavske said her job was to "carry out the duties of my office as enacted by the Nevada Legislature, not carry water for the state GOP or put my thumb on the scale of democracy."

Republican Jim Marchant, a former state lawmaker, is running to replace Ms. Cegavske, who is term-limited from running again. Mr. Marchant lost a congressional race last year and unsuccessfully sued to challenge the outcome.

Mr. Marchant said he didn't know whether Mr. Biden won the election. "I would not have certified it," he said in an interview. "And I would have searched for alternatives to make sure that everybody that voted had their vote counted, and properly and fair and transparent."

Attempts to prove otherwise have mostly backfired. In Texas, Republican Lt. Gov.

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Dan Patrick offered up $1 million in bounties for information that led to voter fraud convictions anywhere in the country. After a year, Mr. Patrick has paid one tipster: a progressive Pennsylvania poll worker who helped uncover illegal voting by a registered Republican.

In Nevada, Republican officials last year pointed to a ballot cast by Rosemarie Hartle —who had died in 2017—as evidence of fraud after the 2020 election. A state investigation concluded in October that her husband, Donald "Kirk" Hartle, cast both his ballot and that of his deceased wife.

Mr. Hartle is a registered Republican, public records show. He's also an executive at Ahern Rentals, Inc., whose owners were fined for Covid violations after hosting an indoor Trump rally at another business in September 2020.

Last week, Mr. Hartle pleaded guilty to voting more than once in the same election. He will pay a $2,000 fine.

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A Congressional Subpoena Is The Latest In A Long Line Of Legal Entanglements For The Oath Keepers And Proud Boys
Zoe Tillman
BuzzFeed News
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https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/zoetillman/proud-boys-oath-keepers-insurrection-j6-investigation

WASHINGTON — The special House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the US Capitol announced Tuesday that it was issuing subpoenas to the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys, adding to the already very long list of investigations, lawsuits, and charges that members of both far-right groups are facing in connection with the Capitol riot.

The subpoenas open up a new front in the ongoing efforts to shed light not only on the role that these organizations and their members played in the insurrection, but also more broadly on their scope and function in recent years and the extent of any ties to elected officials and the rest of the conservative political universe.

Chair Bennie Thompson said in a statement that the committee believed the Oath Keepers, an extremist group that's focused on recruiting members from the military and law enforcement; the Proud Boys, which has described its members as "western chauvinists"; and a third group that was subpoenaed, the 1st Amendment Praetorian, which reportedly has ties to QAnon and that the committee noted provided security at pro-Trump rallies leading up to Jan. 6, "have relevant information about how violence erupted at the Capitol and the preparation leading up to this violent attack."

The Oath Keepers and Proud Boys organizations, their leaders, and others with some connection to these groups are already enmeshed in multiple legal fights, some of which could complicate the committee's efforts to immediately get the information and documents that members want.

The committee subpoenaed the Proud Boys organization as well as the group's leader, Henry "Enrique" Tarrio, but Tarrio is in jail at the moment. He's serving a five-month sentence after pleading guilty this summer to burning a Black Lives Matter banner that was taken from a historic Black church in December and for bringing two high-capacity ammunition magazines to the city. Earlier this month, Tarrio lost an

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effort to serve the remainder of his sentence in home confinement, citing the "allegedly inhumane" conditions at the DC jail facility; he's appealing that loss. His lawyer in the criminal case and a different attorney who entered an appearance this month in a civil case Tarrio is facing related to Jan. 6 filed by police officers did not immediately return a request for comment.

The subpoena to Proud Boys International LLC was directed to Jason Lee Van Dyke, a former Proud Boys leader who served for a time as the group's attorney. Van Dyke was named in a civil suit brought by the DC church whose banner Tarrio pleaded guilty to burning, and has represented in court that he hasn't been associated with the Proud Boys since 2018; he blamed Tarrio for failing to "take any action with respect to the legal apparatus" of the organization. The committee wrote that it had subpoenaed Van Dyke since he was listed as the last director before the Proud Boys' corporate entity dissolved in February; he was directed to turn over any relevant records in his possession.

Van Dyke wrote in an email to BuzzFeed News that the only documents he had that he believed he was "legally permitted" to give to the committee were a final copy of the Proud Boys' bylaws and incorporation records filed with the Texas secretary of state. He wrote that he either didn't have other records the committee wanted or that he was barred from turning over certain materials shielded by attorney-client privilege and other ethical obligations that he still owed the group as its former attorney.

"It is my position that the House of Representatives lacks the authority to compel me to breach these privilege[s] or to violate the rules of professional conduct. I will not violate said rules in response to their subpoena," Van Dyke wrote.

The committee subpoenaed Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes III individually along with the organization that he founded in 2009. Rhodes hasn't been charged in connection with Jan. 6. He told the New York Times that he'd sat for an interview with the FBI in the spring. In the indictments returned against members of the Oath Keepers charged with conspiracy and illegally going to the Capitol, prosecutors have described some of Rhodes' communications before Jan. 6 — including an article posted on the Oath Keepers' website on Jan. 4 stating it was "CRITICAL that all patriots who can be in DC get to DC to stand tall in support of President Trump's fight" — as well as that day with defendants, referring to him as "Person One." The Los Angeles Times reported that his estranged wife, Tasha Adams, had spoken with the Jan. 6 committee's investigators last month.

Kellye SoRelle, the general counsel for the Oath Keepers, wrote in a text that there wasn't an official "full statement" from the group yet in response to the subpoena announcement, but "from me, I look forward to the truth being finally told about the what occurred on the 6th."

The Proud Boys, Tarrio, the Oath Keepers, and Rhodes are all named as defendants along with former president Donald Trump and other high-profile Trump allies in civil lawsuits filed by Democrats in Congress and police officers who responded to the riot on Jan. 6. The Oath Keepers initially hired attorney Kerry Morgan to fight the suit filed by Democrats, but earlier this month Morgan received the judge's permission to leave the case after filing notice that the group hadn't been responding to his communications and hadn't paid its legal bills. No one from the Oath Keepers responded to Morgan in court.

Dozens of people affiliated with both organizations are facing criminal charges for their alleged participation in the assault on the Capitol. Some of these defendants are

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pressing challenges to the validity of charges that prosecutors have brought against them, including that they obstructed an “official proceeding” — Congress’s certification of the election results. Judges have ordered Proud Boys leaders Ethan Nordean and Joseph Biggs and some, but not all, of the 16 people currently facing charges in the Oath Keepers conspiracy case to remain in jail while their cases are pending, citing the seriousness of the allegations against them and agreeing with prosecutors that they continue to pose a danger to the community.

Five people with ties to the Oath Keepers have pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with law enforcement; four of those defendants were specifically linked to the alleged conspiracy. In several of those cases, defendants admitted coordinating with other members to stash guns at a hotel in Virginia so that they could be readily accessible to bring into Washington on Jan. 6.

The committee has spoken with or asked for testimony from several defendants charged in connection with the riots, according to media reports and accounts from defense attorneys in court, but it wasn’t clear if any of the four rioters who pleaded guilty in the Oath Keepers conspiracy had appeared; their lawyers either declined to discuss it or did not immediately return requests for comment. A committee spokesperson declined to comment.

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Questions remain about GOP's election 'investigation’
Marc Levy
Associated Press
November 23, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/article/Questions-remain-about-GOP-s-election-16647144.php

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Many questions remain unanswered Tuesday as to what Republicans in Pennsylvania's Senate can accomplish from what they call a “forensic investigation" into last year's presidential election now that they have hired a contractor that has not pointed to any experience in elections.

Senate Republicans last week hired the Iowa-based Envoy Sage onto a $270,000 contract to help carry out the undertaking, fueled by pressure from former President Donald Trump and his allies in a search for fraud across battleground states to back up their baseless allegations that the election was stolen.

In a brief conference call with reporters Tuesday, Steve Lahr, Envoy Sage's president, said the company could hire people or subcontractors with expertise, if necessary.

Pressed for details about his aims, Lahr said only that his team will examine last year's presidential election and last May's primary election, analyze submissions to the Senate GOP's online appeal for evidence of “election improprieties” and review “previous election audit-related materials.”

Ultimately, the firm aims to “provide recommendations based on analysis of facts for future elections and voting integrity legislation,” Lahr said.

Lahr described his experience as having conducted investigations and audits, developed “crucial information and intelligence” from “extensive, complicated and sensitive investigation research and multi-discipline analysis," both in the military and as a Defense Department contractor.

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Asked for details, he said that most of it is confidential and classified at the highest levels of the federal government and the Department of Defense, and that he cannot discuss those contracts.

Lahr's previous firm, Silverback 7, had an extensive list of federal contracts.

Republican-controlled committees in both the House and Senate already held hearings on last year's election throughout last spring and produced reports, as well as legislation that Democrats opposed. One bill was vetoed by Gov. Tom Wolf.

Gregory Miller, chief operating officer of the California-based OSET Institute, which is devoted to research on election infrastructure and administration, said there is no established election “investigation” concept for what Republicans are carrying out in states like Pennsylvania and Arizona.

But, Miller said, there are election administrators who have expertise in running elections, information technology firms that can analyze the security of computers and networks and the voting-system manufacturers that have a deep understanding of their hardware and components.

Mark Lindeman, a political scientist who has written on and consulted on post-election audits, said many people have experience in working closely with various kinds of election records and equipment, such as paper ballots, vote totals and registration and voting records.

“Experience matters because novices can misinterpret the routine quirks of elections as anomalies or evidence of fraud,” said Lindeman, who works for Verified Voting, which advocates for election integrity and the responsible use of election technology.

For instance, Lindeman said, Republicans' widely discredited election “audit” carried out in Arizona's Maricopa County was riddled with unfounded allegations based on basic misunderstandings.

“Inexperienced, partisan consultants tend to leap to invidious conclusions,” Lindeman said. “They shouldn’t lead serious investigations.”

Lahr said he sees himself bipartisan and fair, and has no pre-conceived notions about the task before him.

However, the man who hired Lahr’s firm, Sen. Cris Dush, R-Jefferson, signed a letter last year urging Congress to object to Pennsylvania’s electoral votes being cast for Democrat Joe Biden, despite a certified victory of more than 80,000 votes.

In a Facebook post last Jan. 1, Dush proclaimed that “there was no election. There was a scam."

Even if Republican senators avoid repeating Trump’s baseless election claims about fraud, they have perpetuated the idea that Democrats cheated by distorting Pennsylvania's election laws and the actions of courts and election officials leading up to last year’s election.

Critics inside the Senate Republican caucus have suggested that people who want the “forensic investigation” are only interested in seeing Trump reinstated.

Election administrators say an audit is duplicative, given the required audits already

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carried out by counties and the state.

Meanwhile, Trump's false claims of a stolen election have been debunked by the courts, his own Justice Department and numerous recounts, and no prosecutor, judge or election official in Pennsylvania has raised a concern about widespread fraud.

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New York Moves to Allow 800,000 Noncitizens to Vote in Local Elections
Jeffery C. Mays and Annie Correal
New York Times
November 23, 2021
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/23/nyregion/noncitizen-voting-rights-nyc.html

For decades, lawmakers and immigrant advocates in New York City have pushed for legislation that would allow legal residents who are not citizens to vote in municipal elections, a right they had in school board elections until the boards were abolished in the early 2000s.

Now city lawmakers are moving to make noncitizen voting a reality — over the objections of Mayor Bill de Blasio.

The City Council is planning to approve a bill that would allow more than 800,000 noncitizen New Yorkers to register as members of political parties and vote in municipal elections, provided they are green card holders or have the right to work in the United States.

The measure is expected to be approved on Dec. 9 by a veto-proof margin. It would allow noncitizens to vote in local elections, and would not apply to federal or state contests. But the measure raises longstanding questions about who should be allowed to participate in the country's democratic process.

Supporters maintain that immigrants who reside in the city legally, pay taxes, send their children to public schools and rely on city services should have some say in who becomes mayor or represents them on the City Council.

Opponents say the bill would weaken the voting rights of citizens and discourage immigrants from trying to become citizens.

Mr. de Blasio, speaking at a news conference on Tuesday, said he would not veto the legislation. But he expressed concern that the bill would undermine the "value of citizenship" if it dissuaded residents from seeking it. Mr. de Blasio, a Democrat, also said he believes only the State Legislature can grant noncitizens the right to vote — a view many experts dispute.

A leading opponent, Joseph Borelli, a Republican councilman who represents Staten Island, went further, saying the bill would "weaken" citizens' votes.

"Someone who has lived here for 30 days will have a say in how we raise our taxes, our debt and long-term pension liabilities," he said. "These are things people who are temporary residents should not have a say in."

The push to allow noncitizens to vote in New York City comes as an increasingly polarized country is dealing with a swath of new laws to restrict voting, as well as the economic problems caused by declining immigration.

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Voters in Alabama, Colorado and Florida passed ballot measures last year stipulating that only U.S. citizens could vote, joining Arizona and North Dakota in specifying that noncitizens could not vote in state and local elections.

On the other side of the issue, several towns in Maryland and Vermont already grant noncitizens some municipal voting rights, and noncitizens can vote in school board elections in San Francisco. Other municipalities in California, Maine, Illinois and Massachusetts are weighing similar legislation.

“In the so-called blue states, we are moving toward expansion and that includes expansion of noncitizen voting,” said Joshua A. Douglas, a professor at the University of Kentucky J. David Rosenberg College of Law who studies voting rights and election law. “In the so-called red places, you are moving toward more constrictions on the right to vote, which includes noncitizens. The whole world of voting rights has become one that is more polarized, even more than normal.”

At a rally outside City Hall on Tuesday, supporters of the bill hugged, choked back tears and chanted, “Yes, we can,” in Spanish as they shared stories of legal residents who felt left out of having a say over the city services their tax dollars helped finance.

“It’s important for the Democratic Party to look at New York City and see that when voting rights are being attacked, we are expanding voter participation,” said Ydanis Rodriguez, a councilman who is the bill’s prime sponsor and represents Washington Heights in Upper Manhattan. Mr. Rodriguez is a former green card holder from the Dominican Republic who became a citizen in 2000.

Historians said that debates over the right of noncitizens to vote are as old as the country, and that into the 20th century, many states allowed the practice.

Alexander Keyssar, a professor of history and social policy at Harvard and the author of “The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States,” said that at the outset of the country’s history there was no link between citizenship and voting rights — voting rights were decided by states or municipalities, and citizenship was a federal government responsibility. The connection developed only gradually from the early 19th century onward, becoming “very tight” by the 1960s.

Dr. Keyssar said that the “basic tradition” around voting rights has been “an expectation that the right to vote will not be extended to people who will only be here a short time — but should be extended to people who plan to be here for a substantial period of time.” For that reason, he said, the move to extend voting rights to noncitizens by the City Council “does not undermine what has been the long tradition.”

Eric Foner, an emeritus professor of history at Columbia University and an expert in slavery and 19th-century America, said that historically politicians favored or opposed granting the right based on whether they thought it would benefit them in elections. Race was also a factor, as Black people were long denied the vote, along with Chinese people on the West Coast.

“A lot of this becomes connected to various prejudices and beliefs about who ought to be an American, who should have the right to vote, to be represented,” he said. “That was always being debated, and it’s still being debated now.”

The latest iteration of the New York City bill also extends the vote to people with work authorization, such as the so-called Dreamers — immigrants who were brought into the country illegally as children but have been allowed to live and work here through a

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federal program known as DACA.

Of the estimated 808,000 adult New Yorkers who are lawful permanent residents, or green card holders, or have work authorization, about 130,000 are from the Dominican Republic; another 117,500 are from China, according to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs. The bill requires that immigrants be residents of New York City for 30 days and otherwise eligible to vote under state law.

In spite of having a veto-proof majority of 34 out of 51 City Council members and the public advocate as co-sponsors, the legislation has not moved forward until now partly because of concerns about its legality.

But the Council's legal staff determined that no federal or state law bars New York City from expanding the right to vote in local elections, though it also concluded that the bill might be vulnerable to challenge.

"Any restrictions that are currently on the books really only apply to federal and state elections," said Anu Joshi, the vice president of policy at the New York Immigration Coalition, an umbrella organization that represents hundreds of community-based immigrant and refugee groups.

Professor Douglas said that nothing in the New York State Constitution expressly prevents noncitizens from voting. The state explicitly confers voting rights to citizens but does not deny those rights to noncitizens.

But Ron Hayduk, a professor of politics at San Francisco State University and the author of "Democracy for All: Restoring Immigrant Voting Rights in the U.S.," said he anticipated the new law would spark a legal battle.

"Given that there are legal challenges in other places like Vermont, and that because immigration is such a hot-button issue, I can't imagine that there wouldn't be a legal challenge" in New York, he said.

Eric Adams, the mayor-elect, has said that green card holders should have the right to participate in local elections and even urged the passage of the City Council legislation. But he has questioned whether the Council has the power to grant noncitizens the vote.

Evan Thies, a spokesman for Mr. Adams, said the new mayor will review the city law department's analysis of the bill once he takes office in January.

If the legislation passes as expected, the New York City Board of Elections would issue a separate voter registration form for green card holders and other noncitizens who have the right to work. At the polls, those voters would fill out a ballot that only has New York City offices on it. The legislation calls for training poll workers and community education campaigns to ensure every voter receives the correct ballot.

The board has faced questions about its handling of elections in the past, most recently in June when it botched the rollout of the results of New York City's first use of ranked-choice voting in a major election.

Valerie Vazquez-Diaz, a spokeswoman for the elections board, said the agency "stands ready to implement the legislation" if "it is legal."

Murad Awawdeh, executive director of the New York Immigration Coalition, said many noncitizens risked their lives during the pandemic working in groceries,

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restaurants and other vital industries and had earned the right to vote.

“This comes down to nook-and-cranny issues like trash and how the budget is spent,” he said. “These are things our community members have strong opinions about.”

Woojung Park, 22, is a DACA recipient and Hunter College student who lives in Queens and is an organizer at MinKwon Center for Community Action, a community organization in Flushing, Queens. Her parents, who brought her to the United States as an infant from South Korea, now run a nail salon in the Bronx.

The Asian American community in Flushing is facing a housing crisis, she said, with many people living in illegal or unsuitable conditions, some of them in basements that flooded after Hurricane Ida. Flushing’s residents are also contending with the lasting effects of a wave of xenophobia and hate crimes targeting Asian Americans during the pandemic.

“Being able to support Asian American candidates would definitely change the political atmosphere in Flushing,” Ms. Park said.

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‘Is that it?’ Democrats warn Biden spending bill isn’t enough to satisfy party base
Francesca Chambers and Alex Roarty
McClatchy DC
November 24, 2021
https://www.mcclatchydc.com/news/politics-government/white-house/article256063962.html

WASHINGTON President Joe Biden may be on the verge of enacting a massive social spending plan that’s widely considered to be the crown jewel of his legislative agenda.

But the bill that he has expended much of his political capital on still might not be enough to motivate his party’s base.

As Biden nears the end of months-long congressional negotiations over a nearly $2 trillion budget bill, civil rights leaders and liberal activists are warning the president that he must also act on issues they say are urgent — especially voting rights — after he and the Democratic majority in Congress finish with spending legislation.

Absent progress there, dedicated Democrats— including many Black voters and grassroots progressives — won’t back the party’s candidates with the same level of energy as they did in recent campaigns during next year’s midterm elections, they say, no matter how many new climate and economic programs the president signs into law. Those achievements are necessary, activists say, but not sufficient.

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain to Indivisible members across the country who spent five years of their life building this Democratic trifecta, with democracy on their mind, that we just didn’t get it done,” said Ezra Levin, co-founder of the progressive group Indivisible. “But then, please, knock on doors in 2022.”

The warning from Levin and other liberals strikes at a larger unknown for the White House. Will Biden’s legislative agenda — which also includes a $1.9 trillion pandemic relief measure and $1.2 trillion infrastructure investment the president signed into law

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— be enough to convince core Democratic voters to overlook stalled efforts on issues such as voting rights, police reform, gun control and immigration?

Many of the reforms advocates are pushing for in those policy areas would require at least 60 votes in an evenly divided Senate, which is unlikely, or unanimous support from the 50 senators who caucus with Democrats to end the legislative filibuster, which has been an issue of intense focus in the party but hasn't gained enough traction.

"We find ourselves in a situation where, once this bill is passed, is that it? And is that acceptable?" said Todd Schulte, president of FWD.us, an immigration advocacy group. "Is that acceptable for Congress, is that acceptable for this president, or not?"

It's an open question that has taken on new urgency as Biden's poll numbers have slipped amid haphazard congressional efforts to pass his legislative agenda and rising inflation that has sapped the public's confidence in the economy.

The drop in support for Biden has come even from Democratic voters: A Fox News poll released this month found that 82% of Democrats approve of the president's job performance, compared to 17% who do not. That is a meaningful drop in support from the sky-high approval ratings Biden received from the party faithful earlier this year.

Democracy for America CEO Yvette Simpson said some of the organization's most dedicated activists are "checked out" of politics or have turned their attention to other causes. Biden would need to show he is leading on voting rights, criminal justice reform and other racial justice issues to reengage those voters, she said.

"We just can't get the base excited because they continue to feel like promises weren't kept to them," Simpson said. "I think voting rights should have been a number one priority for him, and he should have at all costs made that the number one issue and he did not."

Simpson said it would also help if Biden pushed Democrats to pass legislation that increases the wages of low-income Americans.

"They could care less about roads and bridges. They don't care that Biden is working with Republicans," she said. "This effort for bipartisanship, I think was a win for him, but I don't know if it was a win for the part of the base that he's going to need to get the additional help in the midterms."

The White House has insisted for months that it remains focused on voting rights, even amid congressional negotiations on other aspects of the president's agenda. Biden himself has repeatedly decried a surge of Republican-backed laws across the country that restrict voting, likening them to old "Jim Crow" prohibitions in the South.

Some liberal activists were heartened last month when Biden said during a televised town hall he would consider altering the filibuster to make changes to voting rights.

House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., who has questioned whether Democrats have "the will to win" in the midterms, said his party can still pass voting reforms if the Senate embraces the proposed tweak to the filibuster rule.

"If we didn't get anything done, I would be concerned, but time has not run out," Clyburn said. "I still think we're going to do it."

Democratic National Committee Chairman Jaime Harrison said the goodwill that

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Biden built with the party's senators during the spending deal and infrastructure negotiations could help the president secure victories on voting rights and other issues.

"The hope that I have, is that with enough wins, and enough victories and enough positive feelings that you generate from those wins, that it makes it easier when the president really comes back to ask for support from the caucus," Harrison said.

Democrats would need every one of their senators to vote for a change to Senate rules or find support within the Republican Party. At least two Democratic senators, Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, have said they oppose altering the filibuster.

Liberal leaders acknowledge the political challenges a narrowly divided Senate and House present Biden.

"This 2020 win was no overwhelming majority. It's not like in the Obama years," said Marc Morial, president and CEO of the National Urban League. "That's a reality check on politics that has nothing to do with will."

But he said Democrats could pay a steep political price if they do not find a way to pass voting rights legislation.

"All of the suppression is not targeted at the Republican base, it's targeted at the Democratic base," Morial said. "So on democracy, do you stand up for your voters? Do you stand up for the people who brought you to the dance?"

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Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to serve tamales to law enforcement, troops sent to border
Steven Masso
Border Report
November 23, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/politics/texas-gov-greg-abbott-to-serve-tamales-to-law-enforcement-troops-sent-to-border/

EDINBURG, Texas (ValleyCentral) — Gov. Greg Abbott will serve meals to Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) troopers and Texas National Guard service members stationed near the border for Operation Lone Star for Thanksgiving.

Abbott will stop in both Del Rio and Edinburg on Wednesday, Nov. 24.

In Edinburg, he will be stopping at Delia's tamales prior to visiting with service members.

Abbott will be joined by DPS Executive Director Steve McCraw, Texas Millitary Department (TMD) Major General Tracy Norris, and Deputy Adjutant General for Air, Major General Thomas Suelzer for the visit.

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Mexico breaks up second migrant march
Associated Press
November 23, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/news/article/Mexico-breaks-up-second-migrant-march-16647763.php

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MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexican authorities say a group of hundreds of mainly Haitian and Central American migrants who had started walking north have agreed to be separated and taken by bus to several cities to apply for humanitarian visas.

The migrant march had set out on Nov. 18 with about 2,000 migrants from the southern city of Tapachula.

Migrants have grown tired of the long delay in granting visas in Tapachula, near the Guatemala border, where many say they can't find work.

Mexico's National Immigration Institute said the migrants had agreed to stop their march Tuesday in the southern city of Mapastepec, near Tapachula. The institute distributed video showing many of them boarding buses to other cities in central and western Mexico.

An earlier migrant march that set out in October is now in southern Veracruz state, but it has dwindled to several hundreds migrants, down from a high point of some 4,000.

Mexican authorities had said the attempts to walk through southern Mexico put the health and safety of the migrants — many accompanied by children — at risk.

The Mexican government had relied on a strategy of containing migrants in the southernmost part of the country to alleviate pressure at the U.S. border.

But those states are the poorest and there is far more opportunity to find work in Mexico's northern and western states.

Activists claim that even migrants who have received humanitarian visas that are supposed to allow them to travel in Mexico have been detained by immigration agents and sent back to Tapachula.

Migrant caravans began several years ago as a way for migrants who did not have the money to pay smugglers to take advantage of safety in numbers as they moved toward the U.S. border. However, more recently Guatemala and Mexico have become more aggressive in quickly breaking up the caravans with security forces.

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In surprise move, Mexican president pulls pick to head central bank
Reuters
November 23, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/article/marketsNews/idUSL1N2SE2PS?il=0

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - The former finance minister tapped to be the next head of Mexico's central bank said on Tuesday that President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador had changed his mind about choosing him, casting doubt over the future leadership of the Bank of Mexico.

After a senior lawmaker said Arturo Herrera's name had been withdrawn, the former minister issued a statement saying he could "confirm" that Lopez Obrador told him last week he had "decided to reconsider" his nomination to head the bank.

While still serving as finance minister, Herrera was picked in June to succeed Bank of Mexico Governor Alejandro Diaz de Leon, whose term concludes at the end of 2021.

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Neither Lopez Obrador's office nor the Finance Ministry immediately responded to requests for comment.

Ricardo Monreal, the Senate leader of Lopez Obrador's leftist National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), said the president's decision to pull the nomination was made in August, and that Herrera might still be a candidate for the bank's top job.

But after the unusual withdrawal announcement, one Mexican official said that prospect now appeared unlikely.

Neither Monreal nor Herrera explained why the former finance minister's name had been withdrawn.

Monreal said there was still time this year for the Senate to ratify whoever is proposed to take the top job.

The head of Mexico's traditionally autonomous central bank holds sway over borrowing costs in Latin America's second-biggest economy as well as managing inflation, which has been rising steadily this year beyond the bank's 3% target.

The unexpected turn of events over the central bank succession could rattle investors wary of politicization of the monetary authority, whose governor has straddled the terms of presidents from rival administrations in the past.

In July, Rogelio Ramirez de la O took over as finance minister following Herrera's nomination, in what had been seen as an orderly transition of the top economic policymakers.

Mexico's peso weakened on Tuesday to its lowest level against the dollar since March, as market bets that the U.S. Federal Reserve will hike interest rates next year continue to grow.

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2,500 now living at migrant encampment in dangerous border city of Reynosa
Sandra Sanchez
Border Report
November 23, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/2500-now-living-at-migrant-encampment-in-dangerous-border-city-of-reynosa-mexico/

McALLEN, Texas (Border Report) — A migrant encampment in the crime-ridden northern Mexican city of Reynosa has swollen to about 2,500 asylum-seekers, according to the co-director of a non-governmental organization that provides schooling for 500 children on site.

Felicia Rangel-Samponaro, who founded the Sidewalk School for Children Asylum Seekers, told Border Report on Monday that a new three-story building her NGO has rented to provide classes to students is also doubling as a resource center where blankets and tents and socks are being distributed to newly arriving migrants in Reynosa.

"It was meant to be the school, but it is turning into something else very different. It is turning into a resource center," she said via phone as she was en route to Reynosa to help migrants Monday.

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The facility is located across from the encampment, very close to the McAllen-Hidalgo-Reynosa International Bridge, and it has become a place where migrants turn to once they are sent back to Mexico by U.S. Department of Homeland personnel, she said.

“People go there to get tents, blankets. When people get expelled in the evening time people give them blankets, socks and shoes from the facility,” she said.

With the onset of winter and several cold fronts moving through the area, Rangel-Samponaro said her NGO “has had to morph into something much larger than a school.”

She said they even pay rent for many migrant families to live in apartments and to help them get off the dangerous streets of Reynosa, where daily kidnappings and murders are reported and where various drug cartels are warring openly for control.

At the encampment, multiple families are moving into tents together to get out of the rain and the cold in the fairly cramped downtown plaza near the bridge, she said.

“People are bunking with other people. People are sleeping under benches,” she said. “They have, unfortunately, made the space. That’s how we are at the number we are at today.”

Lawyers from the nonprofit Young Center For Immigrant Children’s Rights earlier this month traveled to the encampment and spoke with parents about legal options for their children. Rangel-Samponaro said many parents, out of desperation, have sent their children across the border unaccompanied.

Children who come alone are taken into the custody of the Department of Health and Human Services. And Rangel-Samponaro said often times the parents do not know where they are.

Rangel-Samponaro said three lawyers, including Young Center Executive Director Gladis Molina, on Nov. 8 toured the camp and met with families.

On Monday, the Biden administration reported there were 287 unaccompanied migrant children taken into custody by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. There were nearly 12,000 children in HHS custody.

Figures do not include Mexican national children who are sent back across the border.

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The majority of Central Americans who want to migrate internationally are driven by economic factors, report says
Annika Kim Constantino
CNBC
November 23, 2021
https://www.cnbc.com/2021/11/23/central-americans-migrating-internationally-driven-by-economic-factors-report-says.html

The majority of Central Americans who want to migrate internationally are motivated by economic factors, a new report released Tuesday found.

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About 92% of individuals surveyed from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras who expressed a desire to migrate internationally cited economic reasons such as unemployment, the lack of money for food and basic necessities, the desire to send remittances and the need for a better job, salary or working conditions, according to the report from bipartisan immigration research group Migration Policy Institute.

“Economic factors are not new to the extent that other research has documented it before, but what was different with our survey was that the numbers citing those factors are bigger than any other conducted in the past,” said Ariel Ruiz, the lead researcher of the report.

The report comes as migration from Central America has increased substantially over the past three decades, by 137% between 1990 and 2020. An estimated 16.2 million from the region resided in a country other than their country of origin in 2020, according to data from the United Nations.

It also comes as the U.S. grapples with the highest number of migrant encounters along the U.S.-Mexico border in two decades, which has jumpstarted efforts by the Biden administration to identify and address the root causes of migration. In July, for instance, Vice President Kamala Harris launched a plan to “consistently engage” with Central America to address the hardships that drive people to leave the region for the U.S.

Tuesday’s report draws from an in-person survey of nearly 5,000 migrant-sending households and an online survey of 6,000 more across El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras

Ruiz said both surveys were conducted in Spring 2021 when there was a resurgence of Covid-19 cases in Central America, which increased mobility restrictions and decreased economic conditions in the region.

For example, the report cited a United Nations World Food Programme that found the overwhelming majority of households across all three countries reported income losses or unemployment during the pandemic.

And the proportion of households employing “severe consumption-based coping strategies,” such as reducing the size or number of meals consumed by adults, almost doubled in Guatemala and surpassed half of all households in Honduras after the onset of the pandemic, according to the report.

The pandemic’s impact on the economic conditions in Central America can partially explain why so many of those who want to migrate internationally cited economic reasons, Ruiz said.

“The pandemic has triggered a spillover effect into other areas of industries and economics, making a decent livelihood in Central America so much more difficult to have,” Ruiz said.

“Clearly, there’s a lot of economic inequality now, which can explain why it is motivating so many people to want to migrate internationally,” he continued. “That’s something that occurs across Latin America, but particularly in the three countries we surveyed.”

Interrelated factors driving migration
Those that expressed the desire to migrate internationally were allowed to cite multiple motivating factors. Overall, climate and environment, violence and family

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reunification were less commonly cited than economic factors, according to the report.

Climate and environment, which includes natural hazards, was cited as a reason by 6% of survey respondents. Violence, including domestic violence and insecurity, was cited by 5% of respondents. And family reunification was cited by 6%.

About 15% of respondents cited an “other” category, which includes wanting to move for academic studies, tourism and health-related reasons such as surgeries and treatments.

Despite their lower numbers, Ruiz emphasized that such factors are interrelated to economic factors.

“There is an interplay here between other factors that contribute to these economic conditions that make people want to leave the region,” Ruiz said.

Climate change, for instance, has negative effects on the Dry Corridor in Central America, he noted. The corridor and in particular, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, is experiencing one of the “worst droughts” of the last decade, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

As a result, farmers in such countries are unable to harvest crops from much of their land, which leaves them with nothing to profit from, according to Ruiz.

Violence also plays a role in economic factors, Ruiz added.

Some Central Americans are pressured by gang members to pay certain quotas to be able to run their businesses. And others, especially women, have limited independence from violent spouses because they depend on them economically, he said.

Nuances between countries
While the overwhelming majority of survey respondents from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras cited economic factors, Ruiz emphasized that there are still nuances between the three countries.

For example, the survey found that 45% of respondents from Guatemala specifically attributed their desire to migrate internationally to the lack of money for food and other basic necessities, according to the report. A smaller 32% of respondents from El Salvador cited this same reason.

Income levels also varied between the three countries, according to the report.

The average per capita monthly expenditure for households in Guatemala was $70, while households in El Salvador was $90, the report said.

Despite lower income levels in Guatemala, about one-fifth of respondents from the country reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their household income levels, the report said. Only 11% of respondents from El Salvador and 18% of respondents from Honduras reported living comfortably with their income levels.

“It is important to highlight and elevate and these are not monolithic countries, even though they’re all sort of united by different kind of persistent economic motivations,” Ruiz said. “They’re not the same, they still have different dynamics.”

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Addressing economic factors

Several policy recommendations are included in the report to address the economic factors that motivate Central Americans to migrate internationally.

This includes expanding national social protection programs and stimulating investments to increase economic opportunities and alleviate poverty for at-risk populations El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, the report said.

“Despite small differences across each country, households reported that the lack of economic prosperity and difficulty meeting basic needs had significant and far reaching impacts on decisions to migrate,” the report said.

Ruiz said the “most important” recommendation in the short term is to offer economic support to Central Americans that have migrated to countries like the U.S.

He said the U.S. has begun to do this, noting recent increases in H-2A and H-2B visas for Central American migrants.

The H-2A visa allows U.S. employers to bring foreign nationals to the country to work in low-skill, temporary or seasonal agricultural jobs for which U.S. workers are not available. And the H-2B visa permits employers to temporarily hire foreign nationals to perform non-agricultural labor or services in the U.S..

In April, the Biden administration made 22,000 more seasonal H-2B visas for fiscal year 2021, in addition to the 66,000 that were already available, the Wall Street Journal reported.

And weeks earlier, the administration lifted a ban on H-2B visas and other work visas imposed by former President Donald Trump in June 2020 amid the economic downturn of the pandemic, according to the Journal.

“That is the right approach, more should be done to increase those work visa numbers,” Ruiz said.

“Just providing visas to Central Americans is not a solution for migration,” he continued. “We need to expand labor pathways for Central Americans in the United States.”

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Further Slippage in U.S. Foreign Trade; Mega Projects to the Rescue?
Alex Carrick
ConstructConnect Canada
November 23, 2021
https://canada.constructconnect.com/canadata/forecaster/economic/2021/11/further-slippage-in-u-s-foreign-trade-mega-projects-to-the-rescue

The U.S. foreign trade deficit deteriorated further in the latest month, sinking to -$972 billion USD in September 2021, an unwelcome record. The shortfall comes entirely in the trade of ‘goods’, -$1.178 billion. The ‘services’ balance, which includes business and tourism travel, plus between-country costs of transporting cargo, remained above water, +$206 billion USD.

Ongoing improvement in the ‘services’ surplus, though, has not been as assured as in the past. Uncharacteristically, there have been an equal number (5) of month-to-

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month declines in the ‘services’ balance so far this year as there have been advances (also 5).

It used to be the case that about half of the U.S. trade deficit originated with China. That was gradually suppressed to the point where China’s share shrank below 30% in June of this year. Since then, however, China’s proportion has edged back up again, reaching 35.6% in September.

Other nations have stepped forward to claim bigger slices. From the Euro area, Germany and Ireland held equal portions of the U.S. ‘goods’ trade deficit in September 2021, 5.5% each.

Ireland as such a big trading player is a bit of a surprise. It’s mainly due to U.S. purchases of Irish pharmaceuticals, with some ‘potent’ recreational beverages in the mix as well.

As for who’s going to lead in supplying medicines going forward, some major drug company expansions in the U.S. are expected or underway. For example, Pfizer broke ground on a modular aseptic processing facility in Portage, Michigan in October.

(In Graph 2, the shares for the individual Euro area countries add to more than the ‘total’ because there are some countries not shown (e.g., Spain and Belgium) where the exports-to-imports balance is in favor of the U.S.)

Table 1 highlights that the U.S. is running a sizable deficit in the foreign trade of motor vehicles and parts, -$149 billion year to date. Nearly half of the shortfall (46.2%) is with Mexico; and about a quarter (24.1%) of the negative gap is with Japan.

America has a small auto-sector-related trading surplus with Canada.

To avoid aggravating the imbalance with Japan, and to go hand in hand with ramped-up electric vehicle production, Toyota has announced plans to build a billion-dollar-plus battery plant at an as-yet unnamed location in the U.S.

South Korea and Germany are next in line behind Mexico and Japan for shares of the U.S. total trade deficit in motor vehicles and parts, 10.3% and 8.6% respectively.

Among States, Texas the Bandleader in Export Sales

As for which U.S. states lead the exporting parade, Texas is twirling a baton a mile in front of the band. Its dollar volume of foreign sales to date in 2021 ($269 billion) has been double what second-place California has been able to achieve ($130 billion) and four times as great as third-place New York has managed ($63 billion).

Texas and fourth-place Louisiana export a great deal of oil and gas in their various derivative forms. Prior to the pandemic, upcoming major projects lists for both states included massive additional expenditures on petrochemical plants and liquefied natural gas (LNG) facilities.

Lately, and abetted by the COP26 meeting of nations to address climate change, even more of a chill has descended on the notion of further fossil fuel investments.

Prepared to stare down disapproval, however, the Australian government has just sanctioned a giant LNG exporting proposal, with related offshore pipeline construction, tied to the Scarborough natural gas field along the country’s mid-

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western coastline.

As an interesting sidebar, Louisiana's trade story isn't all about energy. In fact, the state's major export product in 2021 has been soybeans. And the state's chief customer is China.

Alex Carrick is Chief Economist for ConstructConnect. He has delivered presentations throughout North America on the U.S., Canadian and world construction outlooks. Mr. Carrick has been with the company since 1985. Links to his numerous articles are featured on Twitter @ConstructConnx, which has 50,000 followers.

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Samsung announces new advanced semiconductor site in Taylor, Texas
Kate Park
TechCrunch
November 23, 2021
https://au.finance.yahoo.com/news/samsung-announces-advanced-semiconductor-taylor-002039244.html

Samsung Electronics announced today it has selected a site in Taylor, Texas, to build a new semiconductor wafer fabrication plant that is set to produce advanced logic devices.

The estimated $17 billion investment, which will mark the largest investment made by Samsung in the U.S., is expected to create about 2,000 new jobs directly and thousands of related jobs once the new facility is in full operation. The funding will bring Samsung's total investment in the U.S. to more than $47 billion since beginning U.S. operations in 1978.

The Taylor site, about 16 miles from Samsung's current manufacturing site in Austin, is expected to serve as a key location for Samsung's global semiconductor manufacturing capacity along, with its latest new production line in Pyeongtaek, South Korea.

The new facility will manufacture products based on advanced process technologies such as mobile, 5G, high-performance computing (HPC) and artificial intelligence (AI).

Samsung's decision comes amid a global chip shortage that has undermined industries from automobiles to electronics.

The company said it remains committed to supporting customers globally by making advanced semiconductor fabrication more accessible and meeting surging demand for semiconductor products.

Samsung will start construction on the Taylor site, which will span more than 5 million square meters, in the first quarter of 2022, aiming to have production up and running in the second half of 2024.

"As we add a new facility in Taylor, Samsung is laying the groundwork for another important chapter in our future," said Kinam Kim, vice chairman and CEO of device solution division at Samsung Electronics. "With greater manufacturing capacity, we will able to better serve the needs of our customers and contribute to the stability of the global semiconductor supply chain. We are also proud to be bringing more jobs and supporting the training and talent development for local communities, as

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Samsung celebrates 25 years of semiconductor manufacturing in the U.S."

After reviewing multiple locations within the U.S. for a potential manufacturing plant, the decision to invest in Taylor was based on multiple factors, including the local semiconductor ecosystem, infrastructure stability, local government support and community development opportunities.

Based on media reports, Samsung, which evaluated other locations such as Arizona, New York and South Korea for the new chip plant, picked Texas' Williamson County because it offered a better tax policy. In July, Samsung Electronics applied for a tax break (from the Taylor Independent School District) to build a chipmaking factory in Taylor, Texas, according to a file submitted with Texas authorities in July.

"It [Samsung] seeks a strong public partner to support the project through financial and other incentives (e.g., infrastructure and utility assistance). In connection with the project, the company is seeking rebates under Chapter 380 and 381 assistance from the Texas Enterprise Fund. In addition, the company is also pursuing incentives relating to certain infrastructure and utility improvements, rate reductions, and other non-cash benefits to support construction and operations of the proposed project," as per the document.

Samsung will also contribute financial support to create a Samsung Skills Center for the Taylor Independent School District (ISD) to help students develop future career skills and provide internships and recruiting opportunities.

"Companies like Samsung continue to invest in Texas because of our world-class business climate and exceptional workforce," said Governor Wayne Abbott. "Samsung's new semiconductor manufacturing facility in Taylor will bring countless opportunities for hardworking Central Texans and their families and will play a major role in our state's continued exceptionalism in the semiconductor industry."

"In addition to our partners in Texas, we are grateful to the Biden administration for creating an environment that supports companies like Samsung as we work to expand leading-edge semiconductor manufacturing in the U.S.," Kim said. "We also thank the administration and Congress for their bipartisan support to swiftly enact federal incentives for domestic chip production and innovation."

Samsung, one of the largest semiconductor makers in the world, said in August that it plans to invest more than $205 billion in semiconductor, bio, IT and next-generation communication networks industries over the next three years to bolster its global presence.

Samsung Group's de facto leader Jay Y. Lee, visiting North America last week, met with the U.S. government officials in Washington, D.C. to discuss the second chip plant and semiconductor supply chain. Lee also met with other tech firm leaders, including Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and execs at Moderna and Verizon Wireless, to strengthen their business ties.

Intel recently broke ground on two new chipmaking plants in Arizona. At the same time, TSMC started constructing a $12 billion chip factory in Arizona and announced its plan to build the first chip plant in Japan in October. Texas Instruments also unveiled its investment plan for four new semiconductor fabrication plants in Sherman, Texas.

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Mendez: State of Texas needs to invest more in space race, 2.0
Mario Munoz and Steve Taylor
Rio Grande Guardian
November 23, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/mendez-state-of-texas-needs-to-invest-more-in-space-race-2-0/

BROWNSVILLE, Texas – Brownsville Mayor Trey Mendez says the State of Texas needs to make a stronger commitment to the space race, 2.0.

If it does not it could get left behind by states like Florida, Colorado, and Alabama.

Mendez first made the call in an op-ed he jointly penned with Margaret Spellings, CEO and president of Texas 2036 and former Secretary of Education, retired Colonel Tim Kopra, vice president for robotics and space operations at MDA, and Maynard Holt, CEO of Tudor, Pickering, Holt & Co.

The op-ed appeared in the Houston Chronicle and the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service.

Mendez followed this up with similar comments at a news conference held in Brownsville to announce the arrival of 9Point8 Capital, a group of companies that supports the space industry with end-to-end financial products.

“It is important to position ourselves as the leader and continue to be the leader. We do have 70 years of legacy when it comes to space travel. When you think about it, we have kind of been dormant, in a way, this whole entire time. And Florida is a huge competitor, they are known as the Space Coast, they have launch sites, they have all sorts of companies out there, they have capital,” Mendez said.

“Colorado is emerging with Space Force and other things. California has always been a player. Alabama is also a huge player now, as well.”

In order for Texas to remain competitive, Mendez said, it really needs to start looking at the assets it has in the space industry and what it has to offer to companies in order to get them to locate here.

“We have to look at various things. One of them is workforce. Thanks to the college and the university and our partners and our neighbors to the south, in Matamoros, we have an advantage when it comes to workforce,” Mendez, referring to Texas Southmost College, UT-Rio Grande Valley, and the skilled workers operating in the maquiladora industry.

“We are obviously well positioned globally for launches, which is huge. If you create that atmosphere, this business-friendly environment like we are doing, we are going to be able to attract that,” Mendez said.

“But that is not enough. You also need what I spoke to earlier, which is the main component here, finance and capital. That is why I think this is a such a huge endeavor. It is so big for us here in Brownsville but it also has ramifications across the state and our competition against other states.”

Asked by the Rio Grande Guardian to elaborate on the message contained in the op-ed, Mendez said: “We want our legislators and the rest of Texas to wake up. We have Texas swagger but we also have to remember that while we are the largest state in the continental U.S., we have competition and if we do not wake up and we don’t start

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allocating resources at the state level, we are going to lose out."

Mendez said he was, thus far, pleased with the response he has received from the op-ed.

"We are really trying to forge these allegiances with Houston (home of NASA) and with McGregor (where SpaceX has a manufacturing plant) and with some other parts of the State. But, we are getting the attention we wanted from the legislature, the aerospace caucus."

Mendez said he is very close to the chair of the aerospace caucus, state Rep. Dennis Paul, and the vice chair, Doc Anderson.

"We have been having these conversations and they understand the value and they are really doing their part at the legislature to get this conversation going. Over the last couple of days I know we have gotten the attention we wanted and hopefully this creates the end goal, which is creating more resources and allocating more capital to this industry."

Asked if the state leadership needs to wake up when it comes to the Space race, 2.0, Mendez said: "They have to wake up, definitely, because if we do not get serious about this industry… we have been heavily reliant on oil and gas for the state's economy and obviously the state has done a good job attracting businesses but this is something that we already are well positioned for, that we have been leaders in, historically. But other states want a piece of this pie and we are losing out so, yes, we definitely need to wake up."

Helen Ramirez is executive director of the Greater Brownsville Incentives Corporation, Brownsville's Type A economic development group. She is also assistant city manager of Brownsville.

Ramirez also answered the Rio Grande Guardian's question.

"This is the only place you can launch in Texas. And that is very important. Recognizing that and having the rest of the state recognize that and support that is very important," Ramirez said.

Ramirez said that in Los Angeles and South Bay, a number of aerospace companies, such as Northrop Grumman and Boeing are very restrictive in what they show the general public.

"The community really didn't know what was going on behind those hangers, I think what is unique about our (SpaceX) Starbase launch site being here. And, they (SpaceX) have also located 100,000 square feet in and around our Brownsville Airport," Ramirez said.

"You can see what is happening (with SpaceX). We have thousands of kids from Brownsville go and visit and students from UTRGV go and see what is going on, there is nothing behind a closed door."

Ramirez said: "Mission Control is no longer in Houston. It is in Hawthorne, California (where SpaceX is headquartered) because of commercial space or a private company is leading the charge. So I think this is our time. We can stay asleep or we can wake up and really ride the wave."

Ramirez added that Brownsville would have a presence at SpaceCom in Florida next

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February. “We will be represented there. And we will have Brant and a lot of support from the companies that are here now and the companies that are looking to locate to Brownsville.”

The “Brant” Ramirez was talking about is J. Brant Arseneau, founder of 9Point8 Capital. Arseneau spoke at the news conference.

“We are excited to locate a key part of our operations within the City of Brownsville,” Arseneau said. “This city is quickly becoming an important location within the space industry and because we consider our relationship with our clients and investors to be paramount in helping them succeed, we need to be located near them — which includes being right here in Brownsville.”

Mayor Mendez added to his comments about the State of Texas doing more, later in the news conference. He said: “This is multifaceted. Workforce, obviously, capital, incentives (are needed). But, one thing that is lost in this is also support with infrastructure. An example of that is if you drive out to SpaceX today, SpaceX is spending almost a million dollars of their own money to rebuild Highway 4 out there because the state is moving too slow and they have not had the state support to get it done. They cannot afford to wait for the state to move. But, if the state had a little bit more strategic effort here that is probably something that would get done a lot faster. But because it hasn’t they are taking it upon themselves to do that.”

Speaking of 9Point8 Capital, Mendez said, “There is nobody that is really doing venture capital when it comes to Space. This is a huge opportunity based on the economics of the Space industry and especially New Space. What is happening and where it is going is huge. Nobody is actually really funding or doing these start ups and start up capital funding like Brant is. There are success stories already. When you see where this economy is going, we have started to, behind the scenes, also forge some partnerships with other cities in the state of Texas. And the Guardian was kind enough to publish an op-ed that I contributed to a couple of days ago talking about Space and where Texas really stands in the space race, 2.0.”

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Oil and gas should be the tie that binds Mexico, U.S. and Canada
Guillermo J. Garcia and James W. Coleman
Dallas Morning News
November 24, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2021/11/24/oil-and-gas-should-be-the-tie-that-binds-mexico-us-and-canada/

Thursday’s first meeting between President Joe Biden, Canada’s Justin Trudeau and Mexico’s Andrés Manuel López Obrador was a missed opportunity for North American energy.

The three face many shared challenges, but energy, which currently divides them, could instead be a common thread that binds them together. Silence at the highest level sends the wrong signal; it will take open commitments to resolve their energy squabbles.

Since taking office in 2018, the president of Mexico has crusaded against private participation in the energy sector. He has proposed several legislative and constitutional amendments to reinstate national monopolies for energy generation and distribution and to prioritize the use of fuel oil power plants over renewable energy.

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He has threatened to dismantle independent energy regulators if they allow foreign and private companies to openly compete with state-owned companies. Mexican military forces are even seizing U.S.-owned terminals in the name of national security. The Mexican Ministry of Energy has also halted public-private partnerships in the hydrocarbons sector that could help it face the steep decline in oil production and balance its overreliance on natural gas and refined products imports.

Mexico has abandoned the freer markets introduced by its previous president and is regressing to a centralized model more extreme than it has had since the North American Free Trade Agreement — perhaps more centralized than that adopted after the 1938 nationalization.

In the meantime, the United States and Mexico are unnecessarily opposed on global energy production. The United States, the world's biggest oil producer and now a net energy exporter, is pleading with other oil producers to increase their output. Mexico, now a net petroleum products importer, is maintaining its historical alignment with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries and resisting more oil production.

Both positions are absurd. If world energy supplies recover, it will be because the United States oil industry is able to repair production damaged by the 2020 recession. OPEC can't keep oil prices low in the long term, and a short-term boost of OPEC oil would only increase U.S. dependence on OPEC's whims. And Mexico, lacking energy, has the natural resources to be an energy superpower if it remained open to U.S. investment.

To the north, the United States continues to alienate its closest energy ally, Canada, by threatening the oil pipelines that tie the two countries together. The latest fight is over efforts in Michigan to close down Enbridge's Line 5 pipeline, which carries western Canadian oil through Michigan to eastern Canada. The pipeline is protected by a 1977 treaty between the two countries but the United States won't yet say whether it intends to honor the treaty.

The future of the so-called three amigos depends on conceiving the North American region as an interconnected energy powerhouse and resolving these unnecessary and counterproductive energy conflicts.

A lack of coordinated energy policies affects the competitiveness of North America by increasing the risks of blackouts in essential supply chains in Mexico, raising prices and leading to higher inflation in the U.S. That ultimately prevents economic development in those areas of greatest need, leading to migration pressures and poverty.

Though the three leaders squandered the chance to discuss energy issues last week, they must find a way to work out their differences in the announced next meeting in Mexico City. North American energy relations are at a crossroads. Let's not waste more time waiting for the right time to talk about the issue.

Guillermo J. Garcia Sanchez is an associate professor at Texas A&M University School of Law. James W. Coleman is a professor at SMU Dedman School of Law. Both are research fellows at the Mission Foods Texas-Mexico Center. They wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

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If Biden fails to secure voting rights, it will be his most lasting legacy

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Jennifer Rubin
Washington Post
November 23, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/11/23/if-biden-fails-secure-voting-rights-it-will-be-his-most-lasting-legacy/

When President Biden's three-legged economic agenda (his American Rescue Plan, infrastructure deal and Build Back Better package) is complete and the debt-ceiling crisis averted, the single-most important item for the administration will be voting rights reform. Try as they might to characterize voter suppression as solvable with strong turnout and vague paeans to voting rights, Biden and his team will be judged a failure by democracy defenders if they blow this opportunity to secure elections.

The White House has frustrated voting rights advocates with its lack of urgency on three major threats. First, Republicans have held fast to the "big lie" of the stolen 2020 election, thereby casting attempts to overturn the results as a dress rehearsal if things do not go their way in future elections. This specifically heightens the need to reform areas of ambiguity in the Electoral Count Act, which future John Eastmans and Mike Pences will find irresistible to exploit. Given how many Republicans are indoctrinated to election myths, as multiple polls show, we need firm guardrails to protect the sanctity of elections. Republicans' ongoing encouragement of violence as a legitimate political tool has also convinced MAGA forces that election results are neither final nor inviolate.

Second, Republican-led state legislatures have passed laws not only to suppress voting, but also to corrupt the ballot tabulation process. Whether by setting the stage to displace nonpartisan election officials with partisan legislative oversight, creating new avenues to raise spurious election fraud claims or devising "fraudits" to delegitimize results, Republicans are abiding by the adage that it does not matter who votes, only who counts the votes.

Third, the Supreme Court's systematic destruction of central pillars of the Voting Rights Act — first Section 5 and more recently Section 2 — makes the enforcement of voting rights exceedingly difficult. The Justice Department needs better tools to ensure access to the ballot and defend the rights of minority communities.

None of the needed reforms — protecting ballot access (e.g., limits on wait times, early and absentee ballots); securing election integrity (e.g., audit standards, guaranteeing state legislatures don't overturn the popular vote for president); and enforcing voting rights (e.g., reauthorization of Section 5) — will happen without filibuster reform. Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) can blather on about how the filibuster is essential to democracy (nonsensical as that may be), but 10 Republicans who will support any meaningful voting reform do not exist. Republicans have cast their lot with those who resort to voting suppression and intimidation to maintain power; they have no interest in making sure every legal voter can cast a ballot and that every legal vote is counted accurately.

The window for voting reform is narrowing as Democrats head into a midterm election year. The more likely a Republican House majority becomes (spelling an end to voting rights reform), the greater the risk of shenanigans in the 2024 presidential election and of anti-majoritarian rule for a generation or more. Now, then, is the time to impress upon Biden and Senate Democrats the need for filibuster reform to protect our democracy.

To that end, a group of 150 scholars have crafted a persuasive letter, laying out the stakes. "We urge all members of Congress to pass the bill, if necessary by

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suspending the Senate filibuster rule and using a simple majority vote," the authors write. "This is no ordinary moment in the course of our democracy. It is a moment of great peril and risk." They continue:

Though disputes over the legitimacy of America's elections have been growing for two decades, they have taken a catastrophic turn since the 2020 election. The "Big Lie" of a stolen election is now widely accepted among Republican voters, and support for it has become a litmus test for Republicans running for public office. Republicans running for public office. Republican state legislatures in Georgia, Florida, Texas, and across the country have enacted partisan laws intended to make it harder for Democrats to win elections. Most alarmingly, these laws have forged legal pathways for partisan politicians to overturn state election results if they are dissatisfied with the outcome.

The partisan politicization of what has long been trustworthy, non-partisan administration of elections represents a clear and present threat to the future of electoral democracy in the United States. The history of other crisis-ridden democracies tells us this threat cannot be wished away. It must be promptly and forthrightly confronted. Failure to pass the Freedom to Vote Act would heighten post-election disputes, weaken government legitimacy, and damage America's international reputation as a beacon of democracy in the world.

The scholars recall that critical voting rights protections — especially the 14th and 15th Amendments — were accomplished on party-line votes. Moreover, they point out, voting rights has become a party-line issue only because one party has attacked the underpinnings of democracy. The letter warns of "an extended period of minority rule, which a majority of the country would reject as undemocratic and illegitimate."

The scholars conclude poignantly:

Defenders of democracy in America still have a slim window of opportunity to act. But time is ticking away, and midnight is approaching. To lose our democracy but preserve the filibuster in its current form — in which a minority can block popular legislation without even having to hold the floor — would be a short-sighted blunder that future historians will forever puzzle over. The remarkable history of the American system of government is replete with critical, generational moments in which liberal democracy itself was under threat, and Congress asserted its central leadership role in proving that a system of free and fair elections can work.

It is far from clear that Biden will persuade his former Senate colleagues to "uphold the Senate's noblest tradition of preserving and strengthening American democracy" by finding a path around the filibuster. What is indisputable, however, is that without filibuster reform and passage of voting rights protection, severe damage to U.S. democracy will become Biden's most lasting legacy.

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 11/29/21
Date:	Monday, November 29, 2021 9:20:51 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
November 29, 2021

Matthew McConaughey says he won't run for Texas governor, *Texas Tribune*, November 28, 2021

Commissioners court to take up Britton's 'holdover' county attorney status, *Brownwood Bulletin*, November 24, 2021

Judge: District Attorney's Office may prosecute Edinburg mayor for voter fraud, *Progress Times*, November 26, 2021

Abbott makes it official, files to run for 3rd term as Texas governor, *San Antonio Express-News*, November 24, 2021

Texas' new district maps under fire as 2022 candidate deadline looms, *KAMR-TV*, November 24, 2021

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Early voting begins this week in Mesquite city council runoff, *Dallas Morning News*, November 24, 2021

Burnet County might keep additional early voting sites, *Daily Trib*, November 24, 2021

Democratic frustration growing over stagnating voting rights bills, *The Hill*, November 28, 2021

Absentee request deadline trips voters under new Georgia law, *Associated Press*, November 28, 2021

Inside the 'big wave' of misinformation targeted at Latinos, *Associated Press*, November 28, 2021

Family, police say couple orchestrated scheme to deed 8 homes from man who died to their nonprofit, *WFAA-TV*, November 23, 2021

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Texas border landowners ask for federal funding for damage incurred during migrant crisis, *KXAN-TV*, November 24, 2021

7 former McAllen Chamber chairs say organization is in 'turmoil'; ask Mayor Villalobos to intervene, *Rio Grande Guardian*, November 26, 2021

Column: Texas state senators draw for term lengths, *Huntsville Item*, November 25, 2021

Editorial: Unnecessary election audit supports baseless claims of extensive voter fraud, *Beaumont Enterprise*, November 27, 2021

Matthew McConaughey says he won't run for Texas governor
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 28, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/28/matthew-mcconaughey-texas-governor-2022/

Actor Matthew McConaughey on Sunday removed himself from consideration as a potential candidate for governor after months of toying with a campaign.

In a video posted to his Twitter account, McConaughey, who lives in Austin, said he was honored to be considered for "political leadership."

"It's a humbling and inspiring path to ponder," McConaughey said. "It is also a path that I'm choosing not to take at this moment."

McConaughey's video came just over two weeks before the candidate filing deadline for the Texas primary.

Since earlier this year, McConaughey said he was mulling a run for governor, though he did not specify whether he would run in the Democratic primary, in the Republican primary or as an independent. He has previously described himself as "aggressively centrist."

GOP Gov. Greg Abbott is seeking a third term next year. He has drawn at least three primary challengers, while Democrats got their strongest candidate yet earlier this month when Beto O'Rourke launched his campaign against Abbott.

Instead of running for office, McConaughey said he would continue to support "entrepreneurs, businesses and foundations that I believe are leaders" and "creating

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pathways for people to succeed in life.”

The prospect of a McConaughey candidacy had intrigued the Texas and national political world for months. Some polling showed he would have been a force to be reckoned with, leading Abbott in a head-to-head matchup.

But McConaughey never did much to elaborate on how he would have run, and he did not seem particularly attuned to political events in Texas. During an October podcast, he displayed a lack of familiarity with the Republicans' priority elections bill that prompted Democrats in the Texas House to flee to Washington, D.C, in protest this summer.

He more recently courted controversy for coming out against mandating COVID-19 vaccine requirements for "the younger kids." He later clarified he was specifically referring to mandates for 5- to 11-year-olds.

While some surveys suggested McConaughey could be a real contender, some in politics theorized that he was benefiting from being a political blank canvas to most Texans. That group included O'Rourke, who has crossed paths with McConaughey over the years.

"He’s a really popular figure whose political views have not in any way been fixed," O’Rourke said in September. “I don’t know, for example, who he voted for in the most consequential election since 1864 in this country. I don’t know how he feels about any of the issues that we’ve brought up. … So I think that might explain part of [the polling]."

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Commissioners court to take up Britton's 'holdover' county attorney status
Steve Nash
Brownwood Bulletin
November 24, 2021
https://www.brownwoodtx.com/story/news/2021/11/24/commissioners-court-take-up-brittons-holdover-county-attorney-status/8756177002/

Shane Britton will know a little more about his political future after Monday's meeting of the Brown County Commissioners Court, where two items are on the agenda pertaining to Britton:

* Consideration and possible approval of action to declare a special election for the county attorney position.

* Consideration and possible action to appoint someone to the county attorney position until after the March primary. Commissioners meet at 9 a.m.

Britton, 55, has been the Brown County attorney since 2001. Last week, Britton announced he is a candidate for Brown County judge in the Republican Party primary elections in March. Britton's announcement created a three-way race for Brown County judge. In addition to Britton, candidates are:

* Incumbent Paul Lilly, 52, who has been Brown County judge since 2019.

* Molly Smith, 44, who ranches and farms.

Britton's announcement of his Brown County judge candidacy triggered what's known

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as "Resign to Run" under the Texas constitution. And that means it's an automatic resignation for a county attorney and other elected officials who announce their candidacies for a different office.

But the Texas Constitution also provides that "an elected public official continues to perform the duties of office (or 'hold over') until his or her successor takes office," the Texas Association of Counties (TAC) states in a document called "Short Answers to Common Questions. The purpose of the holdover provision is to "maintain the functioning of government," TAC said.

Britton said earlier via text that his announcement "serves as automatic resignation but I remain in office until my successor takes office. Commissioners will call a special election for my job."

The way Lilly sees it, the commissioners court should appoint someone who's qualified for the job as county attorney in place of Britton. Lilly said he'll ask commissioners to appoint Terri Moore, who works in Britton's office as assistant county attorney, to the office during Monday's meeting. Lilly also said he knows of a couple of other attorneys who are willing to be appointed. He declined to name them.

Lilly said he spoke with Caroline Griggs, government relations manager in the Texas Attorney General's Office, for clarification of Britton's status under "Resign to Run."

"She said 'you always try and follow the intent of the law, and the intent of the Resign to Run was that the elected official resigns immediately, but they do hold that office over because they're elected until someone new is appointed,'" Lilly said.

Lilly told Griggs that he had heard from Precinct 1 Commissioner Gary Worley that commissioners were probably going to leave Britton in office as a holdover.

"She said 'it's legal but it's not what they intended when they passed the law,'" Lilly said.

He said Griggs referred him to Keith Ingram, director of elections in the Texas Secretary of State's office. "So I talked to Keith Ingram," Lilly said. "I told him what was brewing here and he said 'no, hold the phone. He said you can only hold a candidate over when there is no one else qualified to be appointed for the job.'"

Lilly said Ingram told him, "when our legislature created that statue, they always assumed candidates would do the honorable and right thing. In his words, they never dreamed that somebody would try and stay in office absent there not being anybody else that could do the job.

"He said they've never encountered a commissioners court that didn't accept the resignation and appoint someone new as the statute says they're supposed to do. Is it technically illegal to leave him in there? No, it's not. But it's sure, in my opinion, the unethical and dishonorable thing to do. It's very clear what the intent of the resign to run law is. It's very clear so that you can't use your current office as a springboard to get to the next.

"There's a thing called the smell test. You could do it but if it doesn't smell good, the public's going to see that. If it doesn't pass the smell test, then that means the public clearly sees that while technically it may be legal -- and I'm not implying that they're not going to follow the spirit of the law. All I'm saying is, based on a conversation with commissioner Worley, it was my impression that they have the intention to leave Mr. Britton in office."

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Lilly said Ingram toll him he's 'never encountered a commissioners court that would do something like that and he's praying that we're not the first, and I'm praying we're not the first either. If it were anybody else, we wouldn't be sitting here having this conversation, in my opinion."

Worley countered that commissioners "do not have to appoint someone immediately. It never mentions any timeline. An elected official who resigns, under the Texas constitution, remains in office as a holdover until his successor qualifies for office. The commissioners court is the only one that can make the appointment, not a county judge."

"I'm for having Shane serve until after the March primary just to keep the continuity in the office, to keep things progressing. I think Shane needs to serve as a holdover."

Worley proposed a timeline for events following Britton's announcement of his candidacy:

* Monday, Nov. 29 -- the commissioners court calls a special election for county attorney to be held at the time of the general election in November 2022.

* After Nov. 29 -- candidates for county attorney will file for a place on the March primary ballot.

* Between Nov. 29 and the March 2022 primary -- Britton will continue as holdover county attorney.

* If no one runs in the Democratic Primary -- once the primary votes are canvassed, the winner of the Publican Primary will be appointed as county attorney effective April 1, 2022.

Precinct 2 Commissioner Joel Kelton said, "As far as what to do with Shane, there are several options. You can appoint someone to fill that position. You can take no action and remains in that position and draws his salary."

Kelton said he was inclined to vote for Britton to remain as a holdover county attorney until the primary elections.

"They're already behind up there already," Kelton said of the county attorney's office. "If you pull him out, you're going to be even more shorthanded up there. My recommendation, from my understanding at the moment -- and I'm still learning about this -- is probably to let him stay in that position. It looks to me like the most commonsense thing to do is don't vacate that spot because they need that help."

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Judge: District Attorney's Office may prosecute Edinburg mayor for voter fraud
Dave Hendricks
Progress Times
November 26, 2021
https://www.progresstimes.net/2021/11/26/judge-district-attorneys-office-may-prosecute-edinburg-mayor-for-voter-fraud/

A judge on Tuesday denied Edinburg Mayor Richard Molina's request to disqualify the Hidalgo County District Attorney's Office from handling the voter fraud case

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against him.

Attorney Carlos A. Garcia of Mission, who represents Molina, argued that Hidalgo County District Attorney Ricardo Rodriguez and his family cooked up the voter fraud case against Molina when they couldn't beat him at the polls.

State District Judge Carlos Valdez of Corpus Christi didn't buy it.

"After considering the testimony of witnesses, the evidence admitted, the legal authorities submitted and the arguments of counsel, the Court is of the opinion that said motion should be denied," Valdez ruled on Tuesday morning.

Rodriguez's aunt, former Hidalgo County Justice of the Peace Mary Alice Palacios, filed a complaint against Molina in December 2017 — a month after he won the mayoral election.

The complaint alleged that voters who didn't live in Edinburg changed their addresses to cast ballots during the election.

In perhaps the most infamous example, the complaint alleged that 11 adults had registered to vote from a tiny house on the 400 block of East Fay Street.

"The work required to prepare the information thus far is not with the singular intent to change the results of the election," according to the complaint, which Mary Alice Palacios sent to the Texas Secretary of State's Office on Dec. 12, 2017, "rather, it is intended to highlight a much greater problem that will inevitably affect all future elections in Hidalgo County."

The Secretary of State's Office referred the complaint to the Texas Attorney General's Office. After an investigation, Molina was arrested in April 2019.

Molina is charged with one count of engaging in organized election fraud, a first-degree felony; and 11 counts of illegal voting, a second-degree felony.

He pleaded not guilty.

The pandemic, which prevented Hidalgo County judges from holding jury trials, left the case in limbo. More than a year went by without a hearing.

The District Attorney's Office revived the case in mid-October, when prosecutors asked the judge to set a trial date.

"Given the nature of the charges, the position of the defendant as a public servant and the length of time this case has been pending, the State also requests the court consider setting this case as soon as practicable," according to the motion filed by the District Attorney's Office, "as the State believes there is a societal interest in providing a speedy trial."

Molina found the motion suspicious.

The District Attorney's Office had filed the motion Oct. 12 — just six days before early voting started in Molina's re-election campaign. At roughly the same time, someone mailed a flier to voters that showed Molina in handcuffs and warned he could be sent to jail.

"This is a coordinated effort between the district attorney, his family and other power

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players within this county," Garcia said. "Your honor, it's no accident or mistake that you've been asked to come from Corpus — from another county — to come and sit in judgment. To call the balls and the strikes."

Garcia asked the court to disqualify the District Attorney's Office from handling the case.

First Assistant District Attorney Michael J. Garza called that argument nonsense.

"We've had the cooperation of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other state agencies," Michael J. Garza said. "And to suggest that Ricardo Rodriguez and the Palacios family controls the Attorney General, the FBI and the Texas Rangers is a ridiculous proposition."

Valdez weighed the arguments during a daylong hearing on Monday, when Molina attempted to put the Palacios family on trial.

At one point, Garcia showed the judge a chart titled "The Power of the Palacios."

It noted that former Edinburg Mayor Richard Garcia is a partner in a law firm with Rodriguez's uncle, Edinburg Municipal Judge Toribio "Terry" Palacios. It noted that Rodriguez's cousin, Ricardo "Rick" Palacios, is the former city attorney. And it noted that his aunt, Mary Alice Palacios, sought insurance contracts with the city.

Garcia questioned why the District Attorney's Office had prioritized Molina's case for trial when Hidalgo County had nearly 1,700 people in custody.

He called Hidalgo County District Clerk Laura Hinojosa, who testified that more than 9,200 cases are pending in local district courts.

With so many people in jail and so many cases pending, Garcia argued the District Attorney's Office had another motivation for requesting a trial date: politics.

Miguel Angel Garza, a politiquero aligned with Molina, testified about how the Palacios family views politics.

"If you don't support the Palacios, you're against them," Miguel Angel Garza said. "And they attack you. That's pretty much what it is."

Michael J. Garza eviscerated Miguel Angel Garza on cross examination.

In response to questions, Miguel Angel Garza admitted the FBI had questioned him about Molina.

"About your relationship and taking money for Richard Molina on pay-to-play schemes?" Michael J. Garza asked.

Miguel Angel Garza acknowledged meeting with the FBI but denied he'd cooperated with the government.

"You like to drink?" Michael J. Garza asked. "And drive while intoxicated?"

Miguel Angel Garza admitted he'd been convicted on several drunken driving charges.

"And you've done that on more than three occasions?" Michael J. Garza said. "And

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been arrested?"

Throughout his testimony, Miguel Angel Garza appeared very nervous and frequently veered off topic.

When he finished testifying, Miguel Angel Garza was in such a hurry to leave the courtroom that he tripped over a cord and nearly fell.

Garcia also quizzed Rodriguez and his aunt, Mary Alice Palacios, about the voter fraud complaint.

Rodriguez said he didn't talk with Mary Alice Palacios about the complaint before or after she filed it. Mary Alice Palacios, who testified separately, backed up his story.

"How credible is it that she never spoke to her own nephew about it? This has been the talk of the county for the last three years," Garcia said. "And yet she testified, under oath, before your honor, that she never spoke to him before, during or after. I think that credibility is questionable, judge."

Michael J. Garza, who could barely contain his contempt for the allegations, pushed back hard.

"I cited a case that talked about society's interest. And the citizens of the city of Edinburg had an interest. They have a mayor who's supposed to represent that interest but instead is more concerned with his own," Michael J. Garza said. "And that interest is to have a government that is elected free of fraud."

The facts just don't meet the standard to disqualify the District Attorney's Office, Michael J. Garza said, adding that Molina couldn't muster credible witnesses.

"Nothing in any of the testimony comes remotely close to suggesting that there's a conflict of interest," Michael J. Garza said. "And that somehow Mr. Molina's rights are infringed upon because of this imaginary statement that they want to impute some kind of a bias from some kind of made up political war on the district attorney."

Valdez sided with the District Attorney's Office. The case may head to trial in the spring.

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Abbott makes it official, files to run for 3rd term as Texas governor
Edward McKinley
San Antonio Express-News
November 24, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/politics/texas/article/Abbott-makes-it-official-files-to-run-for-3rd-16649026.php

Gov. Greg Abbott is officially running for reelection after filing paperwork Tuesday with the Texas Secretary of State's office.

Abbott's filing comes as no surprise. The 64-year-old Republican has hosted political events and been fundraising aggressively throughout much of the year, and his campaign had $55 million in its warchest at the end of June as Abbott prepared to face challengers from within his own party in the March 2022 primary election.

"I am running for re-election so that we can continue to secure the border, support our

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police, and keep Texas the best state for business," the two-term governor wrote in a Tuesday news release.

Other Republican contenders for governor include Don Huffines, a former state senator, and Allen West, an ex-Florida congressman and former chair of the Texas GOP. West and Huffines have been quick to critique Abbott as insufficiently conservative on a number of issues, often pushing the governor to the right.

Polls have shown Abbott with a significant lead over his primary challengers. If he overcomes them, he would likely face former Democratic congressman Beto O'Rourke, himself a prolific fundraiser, who began his campaign last week.

Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick also filed for reelection this week, writing: "Like Travis at the Alamo, I am drawing a line in the sand. I will not yield, I will not waiver. I am resolved to continue the fight for the safety and security of Texas."

Democratic candidates vying to run against Patrick include Mike Collier, who ran unsuccessfully for the seat in 2018, state Rep. Michelle Beckley, and Matthew Dowd, a political commentator and former Republican strategist.

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Texas' new district maps under fire as 2022 candidate deadline looms
Cat Keenan
KAMR-TV
November 24, 2021
https://www.myhighplains.com/news/your-local-election-hq/texas-new-district-maps-under-fire-as-2022-candidate-deadline-looms/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT) – While the restructuring of Texas' district maps was inevitable after the 2020 census was completed, a growing list of lawsuits against how the state government grouped together land and voters could impact the 2022 elections in ways voters may not expect. Here's a look at the current state of Texas' congressional and senate districts, and how the High Plains could be impacted in the near future.

The 2020 census and the Texas Legislature

Florida, Texas, and the Carolinas were among states that, according to 2020 census data, benefitted the most from population growth. Amarillo saw an increase in the population of about 1.6%, and Texas overall saw an increase of 16% from the 2010 census. The South, according to the data, and the West have been overtaking the Northeast and Midwest in having the majority of the country's population.

Because of results from the census, not only did Texas gain two new seats in the US House of Representatives, but population distribution throughout the state led to district lines needing to be reset to adhere to federal law.

Texas Tech University Political Science Professor Mark McKenzie explained to NPR in September that while provisions to protect voters of color from discrimination were removed in 2013, state governments are required to have equal populations in each district. Specific demographics, economic, and geographic interests across those districts don't need to coordinate.

West Texas A&M University Assistant Professor Christopher Macaulay, Ph.D., said that each Texas US Congressional District needed to have around 766,000 people –

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which led to the expansion of territory such as District 13, containing Amarillo, which was already the second-largest geographical district in the state.

In September 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott called a third special legislative session for the state legislature to focus on redistricting. Using the released data from the 2020 census, which came months later than the initial census bureau plan of delivering data by the end of March, the Texas State House and Senate went back and forth until Abbott signed the newly created maps into law on Oct. 25.

Local representatives, school size and funding, early childhood programs, where grocery stores are built, and which roads are repaired are only a few aspects of day-to-day impacts the census count and redistricting are expected to have on Texas communities.

The Texas Legislature and a list of lawsuits

Millions of Texas residents have been noted by census experts as among those most difficult to count – immigrants, poor Texans, non-English speakers being a few. However, despite that difficulty, census data showed that 95% of the population growth in Texas since 2010 was through people of color, and half of the total gains were through Hispanic people. Despite that, the new Texas House map drops the number of districts in which Hispanic people make up the majority of eligible voters from 33 to 30, and the congressional map reduced the number of districts with a Hispanic voting majority from eight to seven.

Often with this disparity cited as one of the causes, as well as the constitutionality of the entire redistricting process, the census and redistricting efforts in Texas have been dotted with lawsuits against the state legislature from communities and colleagues alike.

September saw two Texas state senators file lawsuits that contended district maps could not be legally redrawn during a special session, which ended up the process after months of census data delays.
In October, two federal lawsuits were filed against the redistricting efforts' constitutionality, and the Latino civil rights group Voto Latino alongside 13 Texas voters sued to ask a Texas US District Court to overturn the new maps.

In November, three separate lawsuits were filed by Texas lawmakers that also sought to overturn the maps, and several civil rights groups filed suit against Governor Abbott and Texas Secretary of State John Scott with the argument that the new maps were racially discriminatory.

While the exact dates in which these cases will be heard in court have remained unclear, and their verdicts not yet settled, these lawsuits carry the potential to further delay or even upend Texas' 2022 elections. After census data delays already led to the candidate filing deadline for the election to be set to Dec. 13, the primary elections were set for early May and the general election for November. However, depending on the actions of the courts, those dates could see further changes.

For a number of decades, including at recently as 2017, legislators have been sued on similar bases and higher courts have found that Texas lawmakers intentionally discriminated against Hispanic and Black voters during mapmaking.

The day-to-day thoughts from communities

It has not been only some lawmakers and civil rights organizations that have spoken

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out in objection or confusion regarding the newly drawn districts. Both rural and urban voters have either protested the maps or pleaded with lawmakers for consideration while they were being made.

Angela Arthur from Ralls, outside of Lubbock, asked lawmakers during a Texas House redistricting committee hearing to consider keeping communities with similar interests together. She worried that merging agricultural communities with more urban big-city centers would impact the quality of representation citizens like her and her neighbors would get at state and federal levels of government.

“It may seem like our county is not concerned about this issue or where or what we’ll be paired with. This is not the case,” Arthur said, “I don’t want our county needs to be overlooked and underserved because of our size and population.”

However, despite that sort of plea from rural and urban citizens alike, the new Texas maps have resulted in sometimes strangely-shaped districts that can group populations hours away from one another together while splitting up neighbors a few houses down the road.

Macaulay further noted that rural districts like 13 and 19 could see their representation even more diluted than in the past. Altogether, the watering down of voter demographics and day-to-day priorities across urban centers and the large swaths of rural communities across the state has appeared to be a concern many Texans share as common ground.

Although changes could arise before incoming election days, current candidates can be tracked here alongside other coverage from Your Local Election Headquarters.

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Galveston Republicans gut precinct represented by county’s lone Black, Democratic county commissioner
Jasper Scherer
Houston Chronicle
November 29, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Galveston-Republicans-gut-precinct-represented-by-16654380.php

During the last moments his political precinct was still intact, the lone Black member of the Galveston County Commissioners Court delivered a closing message to his all-Republican colleagues, as they prepared to approve a map that would effectively doom his re-election chances.

“We are not going to go quietly in the night,” Commissioner Stephen Holmes said, half turning to address the other members at a Nov. 12 meeting. “We are going to rage, rage, rage until justice is done.”

The new map, approved seconds later, dramatically reshapes Holmes’ Precinct 3, uprooting it from areas that he had represented since being appointed to the court in 1999. While the precinct had previously cut through the middle of Galveston County, covering an area where the majority of eligible voters were Black and Hispanic, it is now consolidated in the largely white and Republican northwest corner of the county, taking in Friendswood and League City.

Under the freshly drawn boundaries, Galveston County Republicans have laid the groundwork for winning a 5-0 majority on Commissioners Court in a county where 38

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percent of voters cast their ballots for President Joe Biden last year. Holmes, the court's only Democrat, is up for re-election in 2024.

The dismantling of Holmes' precinct mirrors the aggressive redistricting efforts seen across the country in recent months, with members of both parties using data from the 2020 Census to draw new political boundaries that expand or preserve their majorities — often at the expense of their fellow elected officials.

No longer bound by strict federal supervision, Texas and other Republican-led southern states have crafted new maps in which minority voters are drawn into predominantly white districts. They've also enacted voting restrictions that critics say are aimed at suppressing turnout of minority communities.

Holmes said he expects to be replaced by a white candidate, given that only about a quarter of the eligible voters in his new precinct are minorities.

"Even though Galveston County is 45 percent minority, every single member of the Galveston County Commissioners Court, under the new map, is going to be Anglo," Holmes said in an interview. "Minorities would not be represented by, or have the opportunity to elect, the candidate of their choice."

The map will likely give Republicans all but unchecked power to enact conservative policies on the court, which adopts the county's annual tax rate and budget, approves its spending and maintains its infrastructure, such as county buildings, roads and bridges.

County Judge Mark Henry, who was elected in 2010, has brought a conservative posture to his role, which includes presiding over the court. He refused to enforce some of Gov. Greg Abbott's COVID-19 restrictions last year and more recently issued an executive order that sent local authorities to the border, citing what he called an ongoing crisis there.

A spokesperson for Henry — who was joined by Commissioners Darrell Apffel and Joe Giusti in adopting the maps — said he was not available for comment.

Apffel said he supported the new map because it brings Galveston Island and Bolivar Peninsula into a single precinct, replacing the prior layout that split those areas among three commissioners, the Galveston County Daily News reported.

'Diluting their power'

This is not the first time that redistricting, the decennial process of redrawing political maps to ensure each commissioner precinct has roughly the same number of residents, has threatened Holmes' political career.

In 2012, the U.S. Department of Justice struck down Galveston County's maps, finding that the plan — which had been drawn up by a Republican consultant — diluted the strength of minority voters in commissioner, constable and justice-of-the-peace precincts. Federal officials also concluded that Holmes was deliberately excluded from "meaningful involvement" in the map-drawing process, which had resulted in a proposal to fold the bright red Bolivar Peninsula into his precinct.

This time, Galveston County's maps are no longer subject to Justice Department review. In 2013, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the so-called "preclearance" requirement of the Voting Rights Act that forced Texas and other states with a history of racial discrimination to obtain DOJ approval for changes to political maps and

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election laws.

“There is no longer an incentive not to be aggressive,” said Michael Li, a redistricting expert and senior counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University. “In other words, you can be aggressive in drawing maps knowing that those maps ultimately may get struck down, but that getting them struck down will take time — and in the meantime, you get to use them in one or multiple election cycles.”

Holmes did not say whether he planned to challenge the new map in court, though he has called on the Justice Department to do so, arguing that the redrawn boundaries violate Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act. The section broadly bars racially discriminatory voting practices, including those that minimize the voting strength of racial minority groups.

As GOP-led legislatures across the South enact new maps that consolidate their power, Li said it has become clear that Republicans are preparing to argue that the Voting Rights Act only protects districts where a single minority group forms a majority — unlike Holmes’ former precinct, where Black and Hispanic voters combined to form a majority. That question has never been decided by the high court.

In recent weeks, other commissioners courts in the Houston area have also reconfigured their boundaries to protect or bolster the majority party, including courts in Democrat-controlled Harris and Fort Bend counties, where longtime Republican commissioners are now in jeopardy of losing re-election.

But those new maps were not drawn up “at the expense of communities of color,” Li said, drawing a distinction with the Galveston County map.

“Here, people of color are being used sort of as the tool by which you accomplish this partisan power grab,” Li said. “You're diluting their power, and you're depriving them of a seat at the table.”

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Early voting begins this week in Mesquite city council runoff
Leah Waters
Dallas Morning News
November 24, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/2021/11/24/early-voting-begins-this-week-in-mesquite-city-council-runoff/

Mesquite voters in Districts 1 and 3 can cast ballots this week as early voting begins in a runoff for two city council seats.

Jeff Casper and David Burris are vying for the District 1 seat, and Jennifer Vidler and Elizabeth Rodriguez-Ross will face off for District 3.

Casper and Burris both won 42% of 1,156 votes; Vidler claimed 47% and Rodriguez-Ross secured 36% of 1,008 votes.

Jeff Casper, a teacher and 30-year Mesquite resident, served as District 2 council member on the city council between 2015 and 2019. Casper serves on various boards and commissions for the city of Mesquite and Mesquite ISD.

David Burris, a retired 64-year resident of Mesquite, is running in his first city election. He is a mentor for Poteet High School football players, an umpire for Mesquite

Baseball Inc. and a member of the local American Business Clubs (AMBUCS) chapter. He has also mentored youths at First United Methodist Church, Mesquite.

Elizabeth Rodriguez-Ross — a homemaker, senior hostess at E Bar Tex Mex and 35-year Mesquite resident — is running in her first city council election. She has been involved with community groups such as the Mesquite Pee Wee Football Association, Mesquite Soccer Association, NMHS Booster Club and LULAC-Mesquite.

Jennifer Vidler, a small business owner and 47-year Mesquite resident, is running in her second city council election, after losing a bid for Place 3 to Robert Miklos in 2019. She served on the Board of Adjustments and Traffic Advisory Board, and as the Planning and Zoning commissioner from 2014-19. Vidler sits on various community boards, including Old Town Mesquite/Community Heart, which focuses on the revitalization of downtown.

The runoff election day is Dec. 7.

Early voting times and location
Early voting will be at Florence Recreation Center at 2501 Whitson Way.

- Monday, Nov. 22, and Wednesday, Nov. 24, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- No voting on Nov. 25-26 because of the Thanksgiving holiday.
- Saturday, Nov. 27, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Sunday, Nov. 28, from 1 to 6 p.m.
- Monday, Nov. 29, and Wednesday, Dec. 1, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
- Thursday, Dec. 2, and Friday, Dec. 3, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

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Burnet County might keep additional early voting sites
Suzanne Freeman
Daily Trib
November 24, 2021
https://www.dailytrib.com/2021/11/24/county-might-keep-4-early-voting-sites/

Having four polling sites open for early voting in primary elections should become the new norm, Burnet County commissioners informally agreed at a regular meeting Tuesday, Nov. 23. Burnet County Elections Administrator Doug Ferguson recommended keeping polling locations in Bertram and Granite Shoals for a total of four during the two weeks of early voting for the March 1, 2022, Republican and Democratic primaries.

“Having four locations for early voting last fall was very helpful,” Ferguson said. “Especially, since traditionally in the primary, we have the same amount (of voters) in early voting as on Election Day. In fact, we’ve grown a little in early voting.”

Providing more access to early voting, which is Feb. 14-25, 2022, keeps Election Day lines from growing too long, especially in the Burnet County Courthouse South Annex in Marble Falls, he continued.

“My recommendation is to prepare for the worst and have those two additional locations open,” Ferguson said. “Let’s let that be the new standard.”

The two additional locations are in the Bertram Library, 170 S. Gabriel St., and the Granite Shoals Community Center, 1208 N. Phillips Ranch Road. The other two locations are in the Burnet County AgriLife Extension building, 607 N. Vandeveer in

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Burnet, and the South Annex, 810 Steve Hawkins Parkway in Marble Falls.

No vote was taken on the issue, but all seemed in general agreement with Ferguson's recommendation.

"That's the responsible thing to do," County Judge James Oakley said.

Polling locations will be finalized at a later Commissioners Court meeting.

Commissioners did vote to approve all contracts pertaining to the primary elections this coming March.

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Democratic frustration growing over stagnating voting rights bills
Tal Axelrod
The Hill
November 28, 2021
https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/583077-democratic-frustration-growing-over-stagnating-voting-rights-bills

Frustration among Democrats and activists is growing over stagnating legislation on Capitol Hill meant to expand voting rights, an issue the party has said is a priority but has been unable to clinch a victory on in Congress.

The dissatisfaction is mushrooming as Democrats repeatedly try and fail to muscle two bills – the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act – through a 50-50 Senate after both pieces of legislation passed through the narrowly divided House.

Republicans in Washington remain almost unanimously opposed to the voting rights expansions, leaving Democrats forced to confront their dwindling options and activists calling for bold reforms to Senate rules.

"If the Senate can pass the two bills that it has before it, we could be at a turning point heading in a new direction on this issue. Until that happens, and if that doesn't happen, then I think we have a lot to be concerned about right now," said Sean Morales-Doyle, the acting director of the voting rights and elections program at the Brennan Center. "There have been a lot of states taking action to restrict access to voting in the last year."

Democrats have insisted that voting rights is a priority, casting expanded access to the ballot box as a necessity as Republicans, led by former President Trump, decry unsubstantiated allegations of fraud in the 2020 presidential race and look to implement restrictions in key swing states that President Biden flipped last year.

Most recently, Senate Republicans on Nov. 3 blocked the chamber from debating the voting rights legislation named after the late Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), a civil rights icon.

The bill would strengthen sections of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that required Justice Department preclearance before some states could change voting laws and dropped a requirement for localities with growing minority populations to get preclearance for changes on offering food or drinks to people waiting in line to vote.

Democrats were able to win over Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), but no other

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Republicans voted to start debate, and Democrats fell short of the 60 votes needed to break a filibuster and move the bill forward, sparking another round of lamentations from lawmakers over the lack of progress on the issue.

“At virtually every turn, we have been met with resistance. What has happened to the Party of Lincoln? What has happened to that noble, noble view that voting rights is important on both sides of the aisle?” Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said the day after the vote. “The Senate is capable of far more than what we have seen from our Republican colleagues on voting rights.”

Besides the bill named after Lewis, Democrats have also been stymied in their attempts to proceed with debate on the Freedom to Vote Act. That legislation would, among other things, give all voters access to a minimum of 15 early voting days and same-day registration, make Election Day a federal holiday and expand the ability to vote by mail.

Amid the gridlock in Washington, Democrats have seen states pass laws that they liken to voter suppression.

In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott (R) signed into law legislation that prohibits round-the-clock polling stations, implements new restrictions on drive-thru voting and voting by mail, empowers partisan poll watchers who can observe an election, increases the requirements for identification voters must show when they cast a ballot and prevents elections officials from distributing vote-by-mail applications to voters who have not specifically requested them.

Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp (R) also signed a law requiring a photo ID to vote by mail, limiting the time people have to request an absentee ballot and restricting where ballot drop boxes can be located.

And Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis (R) also issued new restrictions, including curtailing voter access to absentee ballot drop boxes used by most Florida counties and mandating voters who want to cast absentee ballots to submit new requests every election cycle instead of every four years.

All told, 19 states ratified 33 laws that make it harder for Americans to vote, according to the Brennan Center.

Lawmakers say those restrictions up the ante for Democrats to pass a federal bill.

“Mostly from a national perspective, I think that's where we should have the most hope. I think to have the greatest impact is first to have a national standard when it comes to voting rights in this country. These proposals are kind of sitting on third base, if you will,” said state Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer (D-Texas), who fled to Washington earlier this year to deny the state legislature a quorum to pass Texas’s voter restrictions, a gambit that only temporarily worked.

However, activists say the stumbling blocks to passing legislation in Congress are blocking off any path to passing laws at the federal level – absent a change in the Senate’s rules.

Progressive lawmakers and outside proponents of implementing sweeping elections reforms have made the filibuster public enemy No. 1, saying the 60-vote hurdle to pass most legislation in the Senate must go or at least be altered to include a carve out for certain issues like voting rights.

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“I think that they should get rid of the filibuster,” said Nsé Ufot, the CEO of the New Georgia Project. “Stop playing, get rid of the filibuster, do whatever carve out you need to do to make you feel like you are playing well with others, but we need to stop lying and stop pretending like we are not seeing what is happening right now with American democracy.”

But changing the rules is no easy feat.

In a 50-50 Senate Democrats would need all 50 of their members to agree to a change, and Sens. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) have said they don’t support any adjustments.

Manchin, one of the most vocal opponents of altering the filibuster, has said he wants to move voting rights legislation forward in a bipartisan fashion. But activists are growing tired of that effort given the West Virginian’s inability to bring the requisite number of Republicans over to his side.

“It seems like there’s the desire to allow these attacks on our democracy to continue so that folks can continue to worship at the temple of bipartisanship,” Ufot said. “And unfortunately, I don't think that that is an aim, a goal that's worthy of our time, attention, frustration or resources in this moment. Bipartisanship should not come at the expense of being able to participate in our democracy.”

“I'm gonna let him do his thing,” she added of Manchin. “But at some point, we need to stop pretending and just acknowledge that someone farted in the room, and it stinks.”

Biden, for his part, has expressed openness to altering the filibuster, providing a jolt to progressives after saying in October he thinks “we’re going to have to move to the point where we fundamentally alter the filibuster.”

However, he has not pressured senators to get behind any specific changes, which, combined with his focus on passing sprawling infrastructure and social spending bills, have led activists to accuse Biden of not actively prioritizing voting rights in line with the way he speaks about the issue in public.

“It's definitely not a priority,” Cliff Albright, the co-founder and executive director of Black Voters Matter, told The Hill. “Anytime you say, ‘we're going to get to this after A, B and C,’ then by definition this is not a priority.”

When asked for comment on the criticism, the White House did not directly respond but pointed The Hill to comments by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre at a briefing earlier this month in which she maintained Biden “is committed to making sure that the fundamental right to vote … still exists.”

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Absentee request deadline trips voters under new Georgia law
Associated Press
November 28, 2021
http://www.elpasoinc.com/news/texas/absentee-request-deadline-trips-voters-under-new-georgia-law/article_f7e1dec2-bcf5-5a36-8de0-aac2fa35e62e.html

ATLANTA (AP) — More than half of absentee ballot applications rejected in Georgia in advance of the Nov. 2 elections were turned down because they came in after a deadline created in Georgia's new voting law.

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The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports 52% of applications were rejected because voters asked for an absentee ballot within the last 11 days before the election, too late to meet the requirements of a voting law passed in March.

The deadline was created in Senate Bill 202, which also limited absentee voting by restricting drop boxes and requiring voters to prove they had a driver's license or other state identification when applying.

The top reason Georgia election officials rejected absentee ballot applications this fall was that they were submitted too close to Election Day, missing a deadline imposed by the state's new voting law.

Republicans in the General Assembly pushed through the new law after a record 1.3 million Georgians mailed in or dropped off ballots in the 2020 presidential election.

The newspaper reports about 26% of those who made absentee ballot requests after the deadline later cast ballots in person on Election Day.

Some voting groups supported an earlier request deadline, saying it ensures voters have enough time to return their ballots by mail before Election Day. In past elections, voters could request absentee ballots until the Friday before an election, and many mail-in ballots were never returned.

"The way it was before, you almost were setting voters up to fail," said Amber McReynolds, the founding CEO for the National Vote at Home Institute, which advocates for voting access outside polling places. "That's actually a best practice to cut it off so that voters are actually receiving the ballot with enough time to get it back."

Critics of the absentee request deadline said it's too early and hinders voters from being able to cast ballots.

State Election Board member Sara Tindall Ghazal, appointed by the Democrats Party of Georgia, said the deadline should be five to seven days before Election Day.

"Far too many voters end up being disenfranchised," Ghazal said. "It leads to many voters getting their applications rejected and not able to access their ballot otherwise."

Overall, election officials rejected 4% of absentee ballot requests for municipal elections on Nov. 2, according to records analyzed by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. There were 1,362 rejected absentee ballot applications out of 35,312 submitted.

That's an increase from fewer than 1% of absentee ballot applications rejected in 2020's general election.

The second-largest cause of absentee application rejections also stemmed from Georgia's voting law. Missing or incorrect ID information accounted for 15% of denied ballot requests.

The voting law requires a driver's license number, state ID number or a photocopy of another form of ID for absentee voting. Previously, election officials verified absentee voters by a system of signature matching and registration information verification.

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Inside the 'big wave' of misinformation targeted at Latinos
Amanda Seitz and Will Weissert
Associated Press
November 28, 2021
https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/inside-big-wave-misinformation-targeted-latinos-81440503

WASHINGTON -- Before last year's presidential election, Facebook ads targeting Latino voters described Joe Biden as a communist. During his inauguration, another conspiracy theory spread online and on Spanish-language radio warning that a brooch worn by Lady Gaga signaled Biden was working with shadowy, leftist figures abroad.

And in the final stretch of Virginia's election for governor, stories written in Spanish accused Biden of ordering the arrest of a man during a school board meeting.

None of that was true. But such misinformation represents a growing threat to Democrats, who are anxious about their standing with Latino voters after surprise losses last year in places like South Florida and the Rio Grande Valley in Texas.

Heading into a midterm election in which control of Congress is at stake, lawmakers, researchers and activists are preparing for another onslaught of falsehoods targeted at Spanish-speaking voters. And they say social media platforms that often host those mistruths aren't prepared.

“For a lot of people, there’s a lot of concern that 2022 will be another big wave,” said Guy Mentel, executive director of Global Americans, a think tank that provides analysis of key issues throughout the Americas.

This month's elections may be a preview of what's to come.

After Democratic incumbent Phil Murphy won New Jersey’s close governor’s race, Spanish-language videos falsely claimed the vote was rigged, despite no evidence of widespread voter fraud — a fact the Republican candidate acknowledged, calling the results “legal and fair.”

In Virginia, where Republican Glenn Youngkin campaigned successfully on promises to defend “parental rights” in classrooms, false headlines around a controversial school board meeting emerged.

“Biden ordenó arrestar a padre de una joven violada por un trans,” read one of several misleading articles, translating to “Biden ordered the arrest of a father whose daughter was raped by a trans.”

The mistruth was spun from an altercation during a chaotic school board meeting months earlier in Loudoun County that resulted in the arrest of a father whose daughter was sexually assaulted in a bathroom by another student. The father claimed the suspect was “gender fluid,” which sparked outcry over the school’s policy allowing transgender students to use bathrooms matching their gender identity.

In reality, the White House wasn't involved with the meeting. The man was arrested by the local sheriff’s department. It’s also unclear how the suspect identifies.

Loudoun County was already the epicenter of a heated political debate over how the history of racism is taught in schools — another issue that became fodder for

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misinformation and political attacks on Spanish-language websites this summer, said Maria Teresa Kumar, president and CEO of Voto Latino, a nonprofit that mobilizes Hispanics to become politically engaged.

“It has everything to do with trust in institutions. Trust in government,” said Kumar, whose group works to combat the misinformation. “Eroding that trust will transfer not just to voting in the midterms, but just overall disengagement from your government."

Stretched truths accusing some Democrats of being socialists or communists could also dominate the online narrative, said Diego Groisman, a research analyst at New York University’s Cybersecurity for Democracy project.

During the 2020 election, Groisman flagged Facebook ads targeting Latino voters in Texas and Florida that described Biden as a “communist." The ads in Florida — where a majority of the country's Venezuelan population is concentrated — compared Biden to that country's socialist President Nicolás Maduro.

“There were clearly specific Spanish-speaking communities that were being targeted,” said Laura Edelson, the lead researcher for NYU’s program.

Evelyn Pérez-Verdía, a Florida Democratic strategist who watches Spanish misinformation patterns, says many online narratives intentionally stoke “fear in the Spanish-speaking communities."

One conspiracy theory mentioned on talk radio grew out of Lady Gaga's golden bird brooch at Biden’s inauguration. Some spreading the claim noted a similar brooch once worn by Claudia López Hernandez, the first openly gay mayor of Bogota, Colombia, signaled the new president was working with foreign leftists.

“They’re not going to stop. They’re going to double down on it,” Pérez-Verdía said of the misinformation.

Critics argue that social media companies like Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, have placed outsize attention on removing or fact-checking misinformation in English over other languages like Spanish.

Facebook’s own documents, leaked by ex-Facebook employee turned whistleblower Frances Haugen earlier this year, echo those concerns. Haugen said the company spends 87% of its misinformation budget on U.S. content — a figure that Meta spokesperson Kevin McAllister said is “out of context.”

An internal Facebook memo, written in March, revealed the company's ability to detect anti-vaccine rhetoric and misinformation was “basically non-existent” in non-English comments.

Last year, for example, Instagram and Facebook banned “#plandemic,” a hashtag associated with a video full of COVID-19 conspiracy theories. Yet users were spreading misinformation on the platforms using “#plandemia,” the Spanish version of the hashtag, until just last month.

An analysis last year by Avaaz, a left-leaning advocacy group that tracks online misinformation, also found Facebook failed to flag 70% of Spanish-language misinformation surrounding COVID-19 compared to just 29% of such information in English.

McAllister said the company removes false Spanish-language claims about voter

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fraud, COVID-19 and vaccines. Four news outlets, including The Associated Press, also fact-check Spanish-language falsehoods circulating around U.S. content on Instagram and Facebook.

Meanwhile, researchers at the nonpartisan Global Disinformation Index estimated that Google will make $12 million this year off ads on websites that peddled COVID-19 disinformation in Spanish. Google has “stopped serving ads on a majority of the pages shared in the report," company spokesperson Michael Aciman said in an email.

“Spanish-language misinformation campaigns are absolutely exploding on social media platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, etc.,” New York Democratic Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the party’s top progressive voices, tweeted after the Nov. 2 election.

That explosion is fueled in part by a U.S.-Latin America feedback loop that allows falsehoods to fester.

Misinformation that starts on U.S. websites is sometimes translated by social media pages in Latin American countries like Colombia and Venezuela. The inaccuracies are shared back through YouTube videos or messaging apps with Spanish speakers in expatriate communities like those in Miami and Houston.

Those falsehoods are more likely to reach U.S. Latinos because they tend to spend more time on sites such as YouTube, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram, according to an October Nielsen report.

“We see YouTube accounts or radio stations churning out mis- or disinformation regarding a whole range of things that they pick up from fringe U.S. outlets,” Mentel said.

Some are working to fill the void of reliable information in those communities.

The Oakland, California, news service El Timpano delivers a text message of local news in Spanish to roughly 2,000 subscribers every week. Subscribers can text back with questions that staffers work to answer, said Madeleine Blair, who launched El Timpano.

The news service has fielded more than 1,500 questions over the past year, including ones about hoax COVID-19 cures.

“We really ramped up because it was clear that the communities we were serving were most in need of basic public health information,” Blair said, “and that information wasn’t reaching them.”

Others have urged the government to take on a watchdog role. Federal Trade Commission commissioner Rebecca Kelly Slaughter, a Democrat, said the regulator may look at disparities in how Big Tech monitors English-language disinformation compared to other languages.

“The first thing I think we need to do is investigate,” Slaughter said during a November panel with lawmakers.

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Family, police say couple orchestrated scheme to deed 8 homes from man who died to their nonprofit

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Tanya Eiserer and Mark Smith
WFAA-TV
November 23, 2021
https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/local/investigates/dirty-deeds-family-couple-scheme-deed-8-homes/287-cf7ba507-0320-4557-8bf7-0890b5283e29

DALLAS — Arnold Young never married, never had children and served in the Army. He taught elementary school in Dallas.

Over the course of his 82 years, he amassed a small real estate empire: nine homes in Dallas County, part ownership in a funeral home, and land in East Texas.

“He was about family and he was just a hard-working man,” his niece, Audrey Hogg said.

So, his family was heartbroken when he fell ill of prostate cancer last fall. His decline was rapid. Surrounded by family, he passed away in February.

Young’s family thought settling his estate would be a simple matter. Young meticulously listed the relatives who would inherit his properties in a 2014 will. He designated Hogg and his sister as executors.

But within weeks of his death, family members discovered deeds, which transferred ownership of nine of Young’s houses, had been filed with the Dallas County Clerk’s office.

The houses had a value of more than a million dollars. The deeds transferring titles had allegedly been signed by Arnold Young.

One deed transferred ownership to a tenant. The other eight deeds transferred ownership to a nonprofit called Mutual Freedom, registered to a mailbox at a UPS store in Dallas.

The deeds were dated July 8, 2020 – seven months before Arnold Young’s death.

Young’s niece told WFAA that she knew immediately that the signatures on the deeds were not her uncle’s.

The notary on the deeds: Belinda Tucker.

Tucker and her husband Anthony are the founders of Mutual Freedom, the nonprofit now claiming ownership of eight of the homes. One of the properties deeded to Tucker’s nonprofit was Arnold Young’s personal residence.

“He would not have done that,” Hogg said. “In all my 52 years of living, he never said anything about the Tuckers.”

Young’s family and their attorney, Alisha Melvin, question how Belinda Tucker could notarize deeds giving control of the properties to herself.

According to the Texas Secretary State’s rules for notaries, a notary is a “third party who has no personal interest in the transaction.”

“You are not supposed to notarize anything that you have an interest in,” Melvin said.

Tucker and her husband both face one felony count for theft in connection with the

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alleged deed fraud scheme. Belinda Tucker also has been arrested on a separate charge, accusing her of fraudulently selling one of the houses to an unsuspecting buyer.

Since 2019, WFAA has detailed how easy it is to forge people's signatures on property deeds – even the signatures of dead people. Once those deeds are filed with the county clerk, scammers can take control of properties they don't own.

Belinda Tucker declined to answer WFAA's questions. However, she did provide a six-page statement denying that any deed fraud occurred. Tucker also alleged that she and her husband were victims of a conspiracy involving Young's family, the police and city officials.

"My husband and I are merely the victims of false allegations by a disgruntled family member," she wrote.

Tucker, a former Lancaster mayoral candidate, said that after she was shot by a neighbor in 2019, Young reached out to console her. She said he later asked her to notarize some documents.

"As we talked, I noticed there were several deeds that were transferred to my nonprofit organization," Tucker said. "It was hard to say no to someone who was being so generous to me."

She said he also showed her a copy of his will, which named her charity as the beneficiary of those properties.

"Still struggling with bouts of depression, I did nothing with the properties that were transferred to my organization," she said.

She also provided WFAA a handwritten note that she claimed Young sent her around that time. WFAA could not make out the signature on the note.

After learning of Young's death, Tucker filed the deeds with the Dallas County Clerk's office which transferred the title for eight of the properties to her nonprofit. She said she soon contacted tenants to schedule inspections and to determine if she could offer them a new lease under her nonprofit housing.

Young's niece said the first sign of trouble began when one of the tenants refused to pay rent on his Lancaster home. During an April 5 eviction hearing, the tenant presented a deed to a justice of the peace.

Hogg said she looked at the deed and told the judge that it was not her uncle's signature. Hogg called Melvin, who found eight other of Young's properties had been transferred to Mutual Freedom without the family's knowledge.

Hogg filed a report with the Lancaster Police Department the next day.

Around that same time, the Tuckers sent out 30-day vacate notices to the tenants living in Young's houses. Hogg provided WFAA video of Belinda Tucker placing a vacate notice on Arnold Young's personal residence.

Bennie Williams received one of the vacate notices. She and her family have lived in the house for 40 years. Williams said Young never had her sign a lease.

"He was a person that kept his word," Williams said.

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Meanwhile, Belinda Tucker was in contact with real estate investor Andrew Howard. He runs ads on a Dallas radio station, offering to buy properties from owners seeking to sell quickly.

Howard maintains an electronic record-keeping system for his real estate business. He kept records of all his contacts with Belinda Tucker. According to his notes, the first time he heard from Tucker was on April 7.

“Belinda called in from radio,” his notes say. “Says she loved the AD and it really caught her attention.”

His notes say they reached an agreement for him to buy the house Williams was living in that same day. He agreed to pay $68,000. Two days later, Howard’s notes say Belinda told him the tenants have been “unresponsive since they sent notice to vacate.”

A few weeks later, Bennie Williams received an eviction notice. Williams said she was shocked when Belinda Tucker and a locksmith showed up to change the locks a few days before the hearing.

“I spoke to Miss Tucker on the phone, and she told me she was coming in,” Williams said. “I told her you cannot go in my house, and if you go in my house, I’m going to have you arrested.”

A judge dismissed the eviction case, allowing Williams to stay in the home.

On May 19, the Tuckers filed a contest to Young’s 2014 will, contending that their nonprofit was the rightful owner of the eight houses.

That same day, according to Howard’s notes, Belinda Tucker agreed to sell the house to him for a reduced price of $63,000, once he agreed to buy the house with Williams still living there.

On May 21, Howard closed on the property. The next day, he went to see Williams.

“That didn’t go well at all,” Howard said. “She met me at the door and told me that this whole thing was a Ponzi scheme, that Belinda didn’t own the property so I couldn’t possibly own it.”

Melvin, the Young family’s attorney, had filed paperwork with the county clerk’s office to block the sale or transfer of the houses. But the title company missed it, allowing the sale to the Howards to go through.

That left Howard and his wife on the hook for a loan on a house that they lacked clear title.

“What we would like to happen is for it to not be so easy for people to steal property,” Howard told WFAA. “We want to buy it, but we want to buy it from the rightful owners.”

After Hogg filed a police report, Lancaster Detective Senad Deranjic was assigned to the case.

Deranjic says he investigated the deed transferring ownership to a tenant. The tenant initially denied knowing the Tuckers, Deranjic told WFAA.

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Deranjic said the tenant eventually admitted that Anthony Tucker had been his caretaker. The tenant told police that Anthony Tucker came up with the idea to put the house in the tenant's name and gave him the forged warranty deed.

"He said that he fired Anthony after he discovered that Anthony Tucker forged all of the deeds, and not just the deed to his house," Deranjic told WFAA.

Deranjic said he spoke to Belinda Tucker on May 25. He said she denied wanting to sell any of the homes. The detective said Belinda Tucker told him she met Young at a 2015 fundraiser. She denied knowing the tenant, the detective said. Anthony Tucker also denied knowing the tenant, according to police records. But police obtained documents showing Anthony Tucker had been the tenant's caretaker.

Deranjic told WFAA that Belinda Tucker would not provide any evidence – no phone records, no emails, nor text messages – indicating that she knew Arnold Young.

In late October, a justice of the peace ordered the $55,000 check paid to the Tuckers' nonprofit be returned to the Howards' lender.

Belinda Tucker remains adamant that she and her husband have done nothing wrong, but the legal fight between the Tuckers and Young family is far from over.

In late January 2022, Young's family and the Tuckers will face off in court over the Tucker's effort to overturn his 2014 will.

"For them to come in and just take what he built for his family, his legacy, without a thought is painful," Hogg said. "It makes you angry.

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Governor Greg Abbott: Thousands of new jobs coming to Texas, billions in investments
Christina Aguayo
KTSM-TV
November 28, 2021
https://www.krqe.com/news/national/governor-greg-abbott-thousands-of-new-jobs-coming-to-texas-billions-in-investments/

EL PASO, Texas (KTSM) – Gov. Greg Abbott announced that the world's largest commercial real estate services investment firm, CBRE Group, will bring more than 1,000 jobs to two Texas cities.

CBRE Group will invest nearly 30 million dollars in its Dallas headquarters, creating 460 new jobs. With more than a 13 million dollar capital investment going towards an operations center in Richardson, Texas, the group aims to create 550 new jobs.

"Exceptional companies like CBRE are attracted to Texas because of our dynamic workforce and unrivaled business climate. CBRE's expansion in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex will bring over one thousand high-paying jobs and greater opportunities for the hardworking people of North Texas, and I look forward to a strong relationship with the company as we work together to keep Texas the national model for economic prosperity." -GOV. GREG ABBOTT

Abbott also announced the construction of a Samsung facility, a 17 billion dollar investment, being made in Taylor, Texas.

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“Samsung had many other options for this project…this is the largest foreign investment in the state of Texas ever.”-GOV GREG ABBOTT

The Samsung facility will produce advanced microchips for mobile devices, 5G, high-performance computing (HPC), and artificial intelligence (AI).

It is predicted that the creation of the Samsung facility in Taylor will create more than 2,000 technical jobs, thousands of indirect jobs, and at least 6,500 construction jobs. Construction of the facility will start early next year and production will start in 2024.

“Companies like Samsung continue to invest in Texas because of our world-class business climate and exceptional workforce. Samsung’s new semiconductor manufacturing facility in Taylor will bring countless opportunities for hardworking Central Texans and their families and will play a major role in our state’s continued exceptionalism in the semiconductor industry. I look forward to expanding our partnership to keep the Lone Star State a leader in advanced technology and a dynamic economic powerhouse.” -GOV. GREG ABBOTT

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U.S. to require vaccines for all border crossers, starting in January
Zeke Miller
Associated Press
November 24, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/coronavirus/article/us-vaccine-requirement-texas-mexico-border-16648444.php

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will require essential, nonresident travelers crossing U.S. land borders, such as truck drivers, government and emergency response officials, to be fully vaccinated beginning on Jan. 22, the administration planned to announce.

A senior administration official said the requirement, which the White House previewed in October, brings the rules for essential travelers in line with those that took effect earlier this month for leisure travelers, when the U.S. reopened its borders to fully vaccinated individuals.

Essential travelers entering by ferry will also be required to be fully vaccinated by the same date, the official said. The official spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity to preview the announcement.

The rules pertain to non-U.S. nationals. American citizens and permanent residents may still enter the U.S. regardless of their vaccination status, but face additional testing hurdles because officials believe they more easily contract and spread COVID-19 and in order to encourage them to get a shot.

The Biden administration pushed back the requirement for essential travelers by more than two months from when it went into effect on Nov. 8 for non-essential visitors to prevent disruptions, particularly among truck drivers who are vital to North American trade. While most cross-border traffic was shut down in the earliest days of the pandemic, essential travelers have been able to transit unimpeded.

Even with the delay, though, Norita Taylor, spokeswoman for the trucking group Owner-Operator Independent Drivers Association, criticized the vaccination requirement, calling it an example of “how unnecessary government mandates can

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force experienced owner-operators and independent truckers out of business."

"These requirements are another example of how impractical regulations will send safe drivers off the road," she said.

The latest deadline is beyond the point by which the Biden administration hopes to have large businesses require their employees to be vaccinated or tested weekly under an emergency regulation issued by the Occupational Health and Safety Administration. That rule is now delayed by litigation, but the White House has encouraged businesses to implement their own mandates regardless of the federal requirement with the aim of boosting vaccination.

About 47 million adults in the U.S. remain unvaccinated, according to figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Border: New customs requirements for Mexico shipments begin Wednesday
Noi Mahoney
FreightWaves
November 28, 2021
https://www.freightwaves.com/news/new-customs-requirements-for-mexico-shipments-begin-wednesday

New customs requirements for Mexico shipments begin Wednesday

Hoping to quell a rising tide of smuggled goods and lost tax revenue, Mexico's controversial new waybill regulations — known as the Carta Porte supplement — is scheduled to go into effect Wednesday.

The regulations from the Mexican Tax Authority (SAT) aim to reduce cargo theft and the movement of contraband throughout the country. The SAT also estimates that Mexican authorities are losing as much as $7 billion a year on uncollected taxes from smuggled goods.

Trade officials in Mexico said they support the new regulations but that cross-border operators should be given more time to prepare for the changes.

"We are convinced of how important it is to fight the smuggling that affects the industry so much, and how essential it is to strengthen formal trade in our country," José Abugaber, president of the Confederation of Industrial Chambers of Mexico (CONCAMIN), said during a recent video posted on Facebook.

CONCAMIN represents more than 50 industrial chambers across different sectors and advocates for policy initiatives, while providing economic and legal advice to members.

Abugaber said the organization is concerned about the short time remaining for the start of the new regulation.

It's expected that on Wednesday, the SAT will begin trial enforcement without liability of the waybill information, and on Jan. 1, it will begin full enforcement.

"We have full confidence that the private sector can participate in an important way in the necessary and urgent training and dissemination of [Carta Porte] to a large percentage of service providers and users of all modes of transportation, including

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SMEs, which require regulatory and technological preparation," Abugaber said.

"We are concerned about the short time remaining for the mandatory start of this provision. We make a call to consider the extension of the deadline for the entry into force of this complement only for the time strictly necessary to resolve some pending technical aspects."

The SAT will require any entities sending goods through Mexico to modify their electronic invoices — known as CFDI in Spanish — with the Carta Porte supplement.

All freight of any size traveling by road, rail, air or sea through Mexico and all types of commodities will be required to have the supplement.

One of the forms that parties need to fill out for the supplement has up to about 160 questions. Providing the information will be the responsibility of the shipper, carrier and also suppliers involved in the shipment.

The SAT could fine shippers, carriers or other parties up to $4,500 for not having correct documentation.

Anaid Chacon, Nuvocargo's head of product, said the company hosted a customer event a few weeks ago during which many were asking about Carte Porte.

New York-based Nuvocargo is a digital logistics platform for cross-border trade between the U.S. and Mexico.

"I think we broke all of our records of assistance during the event because a lot of people really want to know about the subject," Chacon told FreightWaves.

The new requirements make it more important to vet potential suppliers and vendors to make sure they have the technological capability to handle the new rules, Chacon said.

"One of the things that we've seen a shift from, especially more even recently with the Carte Porte regulations changes, is that a lot of the vetting initially was very focused on price. This has now expanded also to include compliance," Chacon said.

Shippers should be thinking about their suppliers, not only as a cost center and something that they need to spend money on, but as something that can give them a strategic advantage.

"When you're thinking about the vendors or carriers to work with, it's thinking about what is their technological aptitude? What tools do they use to manage their internal teams? What kind of visibility do they have in terms of KPIs for metrics that they care about internally as a company; are they able to produce those reports?" Chacon said.

"There's a lot of changes happening very quickly, as results of regulations or as results of also things that happened with COVID, that you need to be able to respond quickly to and asking those questions [is] super valuable."

Samsung announces $17B semiconductor plant in Texas

Samsung plans to build a $17 billion semiconductor manufacturing facility in Texas to tackle a global shortage of chips, officials said.

"With greater manufacturing capacity, we will be able to better serve the needs of our

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customers and contribute to the stability of the global semiconductor supply chain," Kinam Kim, Samsung's vice chairman and CEO, said in a statement Tuesday.

The South Korea-based company's newest factory could create 2,000 high-tech jobs directly and is scheduled to open by the end of 2024.

A global semiconductor chip shortage has affected different manufacturing sectors around the world. Short supplies of semiconductors have hampered production of new vehicles and electronic devices over the past year.

"Increasing domestic production of semiconductor chips is critical for our national and economic security," said U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo in a statement.

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock secures $92.5M contract for Houston Ship Channel

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock Corp. has signed a $92.5 million dredging contract for the Houston Ship Channel Widening and Improvement, known as Project 11.

It represents the first phase of the Houston Ship Channel expansion and deepening program. Dredging is expected to begin in early 2022.

Great Lakes Dredge & Dock will dredge 11.5 miles of the channel to widen a portion of the bay from 530 feet to 700 feet, according to a release. It will pump 1.6 million cubic yards of dredged material to construct an island for a bird habitat and oyster reef.

The project will allow for larger container and petrochemical ships to navigate the Houston Ship Channel to access the Port of Houston.

Truck driver charged in record-breaking border drug seizure

A truck driver from Mexico faces federal drug charges after he was caught with record-breaking amounts of methamphetamine and fentanyl while trying to cross into the U.S., authorities said.

Carlos Martin-Quintana-Arias was arrested on Nov. 18 after 17,584 pounds of methamphetamine and 389 pounds of fentanyl were seized from a tractor-trailer he was driving at the U.S.-Mexico port of entry in Otay Mesa, California, just south of San Diego.

Authorities said the truck manifest listed automotive parts as the load being transported. Martin-Quintana-Arias was arraigned in San Diego federal court on Nov. 19 on two counts of importation of a controlled substance.

Authorities did not provide an estimated street value for the drugs seized from the truck.

Noi Mahoney is a Texas-based journalist who covers cross-border trade, logistics and supply chains for FreightWaves. He graduated from the University of Texas at Austin with a degree in English in 1999. Mahoney has more than 20 years experience as journalist, working for newspapers in Florida, Maryland and Texas. Contact nmahoney@freightwaves.com

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Human shields, drones, gunships aid Mexico's drug war

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Mark Stevenson
Associated Press
November 27, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/regions/mexico/human-shields-drones-gunships-aid-mexicos-drug-war/

AGUILILLA, Mexico (AP) — The Mexican government is rapidly running out of tools to control the expansion of the feared Jalisco cartel on the front lines of Mexico's narco war in the western state of Michoacan and the stalled ground effort is being supplemented by an increasingly sophisticated aerial conflict.

Jalisco, Mexico's most militarily powerful drug gang, has begun organizing townspeople to act as human shields against army troops, which now just try to keep rival cartels apart.

"If they try to come in here again, we'll put 2,000 people out here to stop them," said Habacuc Solorzano, a 39-year-old farmer who leads the civilian movement associated with the cartel. His statement, like most of what comes out of the Jalisco side, is not mere boasting: He already had about 500 local residents marching last week— then wading across a river — to confront an army squad blocking a dirt road leading out of Jalisco territory.

Residents of Aguililla are fed up with the army's strategy of simply separating the Jalisco and the Michoacan-based Viagras gang. The army policy effectively allows the Viagras — best known for kidnapping and extorting money — to set up roadblocks and checkpoints that have choked off all commerce with Aguililla. Limes and cattle heading out, or supplies heading in, must pay a war tax to the Viagras.

"We'd rather be killed by you than killed by those criminals!" one demonstrator shouted at soldiers during a tense, hour-long confrontation between demonstrators and a squad of a dozen troops who took cover behind a barricade of car tires. Many of the demonstrators carried rocks and powerful slingshots, but did not use them.

The residents want the army to either fight both cartels, or at least let the two gangs battle.

"Let the two cartels fight it out and kill each other," another demonstrator shouted. "Jalisco is going to beat everybody!"

That view is widespread. "What we need is for one cartel to take control, stop the fighting and impose some semblance of calm," said a local priest. "Everything indicates that group is the Jalisco cartel."

Above all, what residents want is for the Viagras' checkpoints to be cleared and the road opened again. Because they must occasionally pass through those roadblocks, none of the residents wanted to give their names for fear of reprisals.

But one explained it this way to the army squad: "The only road into Aguililla is blocked and controlled by a cartel that is only 500 yards away from you, and you (the army) are not doing anything to protect our right to travel freely," he said. "You don't know how hard it is to be paying a war tax that is being used to kill us."

That is actually a fairly accurate description of government policy: preserving the status quo, and making each cartel stay in its own territory.

But Jalisco won't accept the government as the arbiter of drug cartel territorial

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divisions; the local Jalisco cartel leader says the army is only trying to protect the weaker of the two gangs, the Viagras, for reasons of corruption.

Jalisco is everywhere in Aguililla, from pickups and homemade armored cars bearing the cartel's initials to the small trampolines the gang installed for children in every village.

Some residents say they are strongly pressured to participate in the protests, fearing their water or electricity might be cut off if they don't. Others are just tired of paying the Viagras' war taxes and being cut off from the outside world. One female protester described how her father died in early 2020 because the Viagras wouldn't allow them past to get to a hospital.

Dozens of cartel gunmen openly wear bulletproof vests emblazoned with the group's Spanish initials, "CJNG" — Jalisco New Generation Cartel — on the back, and on the front, "FEM" — "Mencho's Special Forces," a reference to the nickname of the cartel's leader, Nemesio Oseguera.

Jalisco is the one cartel in Mexico that doesn't hide what it is, and doesn't play to the politics of press relations or restraint.

"We're narcos," said the local Jalisco leader, who did not give his name. "Everybody should mind his own business." His beef with the Viagras and other local gangs he's fighting is that "they want everything for themselves."

Jalisco keeps its sizeable army of troops running with a potent mixture of money — the cartel has a lot, from trafficking fentanyl and meth into the United States — and cocaine, which it flies in from Costa Rica.

As the local boss stands at an impromptu street-side command post, a pickup full of Jalisco gunmen with AR15 assault rifles pulls up. The driver says, "The Scorpion said he needs some stuff," and the boss reaches into his own truck and hands the co-pilot a plastic bag with what appears to be a kilogram brick of cocaine, apparently for "the troops."

Jalisco understands brute force; for the moment, it doesn't bother Aguililla residents much, because it doesn't have to. But if it suspects a resident of actively working for or passing information to the Viagras, that person's life expectancy is likely to be very short.

The local boss shrugs off the government's assertions that cartels like Jalisco are having trouble finding young recruits, due to the current administration's youth employment and training programs.

"It depends on the kind of youth," he says. "Those that sleep under bridges, they come here and they think they're in Paris. There's food here."

"I make it clear to my people that they come here to fight," he adds.

Beyond food, regular pay and unlimited drugs, the Jalisco cartel also offers its young foot soldiers a kind of family structure. Everyone, even the local boss, refers to their immediate superior as "Apa," the way a child would say "Papa."

Both cartels have developed bomb-carrying drones, and the most feared warrior on these battlefields is the "dronero," or drone operator. While initially crude and dangerous to load and operate — and still worrisomely indiscriminate — drone

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warfare has improved, and it's not unusual to see metal barn or shed roofs opened like tin cans from the impact of drone explosions.

Locals also claim — though there is little evidence beyond a few craters in roads — that the cartels are starting to use land mines.

To handle the increasing firepower in the conflict, the Mexican government has resorted to playing a powerful card to outgun the Jalisco cartel: Blackhawk helicopter gunships equipped with rotating-barrel electric machine guns that can fire 6,000 rounds per minute.

It is a weapon that almost defines ''indiscriminate blanket fire" and is banned in most countries in civil conflicts. It is the kind of weapon President Andrés Manuel López Obrador says he no longer wants.

But for the moment, such massive firepower is the only thing holding Jalisco back.

"They shot up and burned two of our trucks," the local gang boss said of the gunships. "When the soldiers arrive with a helicopter, there's nothing you can do, you just get out of the way."

It's not clear that is going to be the case for long. Jalisco is known for two things: being the most heavily armed cartel in Mexico, and the only one to have ever shot down a military helicopter.

In 2015, Jalisco cartel gunmen brought down a Eurocopter transport helicopter with a rocket-propelled grenade, killing eight soldiers and a police officer. While the choppers Jalisco faces now are Blackhawks, there is little doubt the cartel can come up with something punchier.

The newspaper El Universal published transcripts of intercepted cartel communications where a leader can be heard coaching a sniper with a .50-caliber rifle to put armor-piercing rounds through the door of a helicopter. The Mexican army did not respond to request for comment on this, or other issues.

In the past, Jalisco has obtained squad machine guns, .50-caliber sniper rifles and 40mm grenades and launchers.

The government, afraid of the kind of bloodbath that started in 2018 when the Jalisco cartel moved into the neighboring state of Guanajuato, is now left with an unworkable policy of defending gang territorial divisions, and an increasingly narrow military advantage.

An unnamed army captain who tried to talk with the Aguililla protesters expressed the predicament.

"How can it be that Mexicans are killing other Mexicans?" the captain said. "This just can't be."

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Mexico lays out conditions for restart of 'Remain in Mexico' program
Monique Beals
The Hill
November 26, 2021
https://thehill.com/policy/international/583227-mexico-lays-out-conditions-for-restart-

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of-remain-in-mexico-program

The Mexican government has laid out various requests it wants met before the Trump-era "Remain in Mexico" program is reinstated after a federal judge ordered the Biden administration to restart it.

"The government of Mexico ... has raised various concerns of a humanitarian nature regarding the asylum procedure in the United States," the Mexican Foreign Ministry said in a statement Friday, per Reuters.

Biden and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador have yet to agree to restart the program, formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, which requires asylum-seekers to live in Mexico as they await determination of their applications in the U.S.

Mexico is asking that development programs for southern Mexico and Central America be accelerated in an effort to address the root causes of migration. Additionally, Mexico asked that migrants get medical attention and COVID-19 vaccines and requested "additional resources" for shelters and assistance with legal advice, the news service added.

"The Government of Mexico emphasizes that ... it requires the Government of the United States to promptly address these humanitarian measures," the Foreign Ministry also said, adding that it "awaits a formal response from the United States government," according to Reuters.

Last month, the Biden administration said it was prepared to reimplement the program in mid-November if it could get agreement from the neighboring government.

Axios reported on Wednesday that the White House plans to offer COVID-19 vaccines to asylum-seekers under the program, which sources said could restart within a week, though the administration said that would depend on Mexico.

The moves to restart the Trump-era program, which led to 70,000 asylum-seekers being sent back to Mexico, was prompted by Texas and Missouri winning legal battles that claimed the Biden administration was too quick to retract the policy.

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Texas border landowners ask for federal funding for damage incurred during migrant crisis
Maggie Glynn
Nexstar/KXAN-TV
November 24, 2021
https://www.krqe.com/news/national/texas-border-landowners-ask-for-federal-funding-for-damage-incurred-during-migrant-crisis/

DEL RIO, Texas (Nexstar) — This week, U.S. Senator John Cornyn (R-Texas) met with local leaders in Del Rio to discuss how the current crisis at Texas' southern border is affecting the community.

While local law enforcement and city officials asked for more funding, border communities have already secured $30 million from the federal government to reimburse local communities and non-governmental organizations who had spent significant resources on migrant care.

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Landowners, however, said they have been overlooked. The South Texans' Property Rights Association said landowners have experienced property damage and worker shortages due to the migrant crisis.

"We don't want to compete with law enforcement monies because of stolen vehicles and that sort of thing. So where does that come from? That leaves the landowner high and dry," Susan Kibbe, the association's executive director, told Cornyn on Monday.

"There's people that are leaving, employers are losing employees on their property. They don't want to stay anymore," Kibbe said, explaining the employees feel unsafe.

Senator Cornyn said he would take the stories he heard at the roundtable discussion to try to garner attention in D.C.

"We've been doing what we can to bring attention to the issue in a public way. We openly support the state and their efforts. And we're working with them to try to with processing centers and trying to work with all county officials to make it happen. But we need federal help, and we need a mindset change," Kibbe said.

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7 former McAllen Chamber chairs say organization is in 'turmoil'; ask Mayor Villalobos to intervene
Steve Taylor
Rio Grande Guardian
November 26, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/7-former-mcallen-chamber-chairs-say-organization-is-in-turmoil-ask-mayor-villalobos-to-intervene/

MCALLEN, Texas – Seven former chairs of McAllen Chamber of Commerce have written to McAllen Mayor Javier Villalobos to express concern over the current leadership of the chamber's board of directors.

In a joint letter, Dora Brown, Joe Brown, Bob McCreery, Karen Valdez, Charles Marina, Maurice Welton, and Larry Delgado claim the McAllen Chamber is currently in "turmoil."

Without naming her directly, the former chairs are clearly unhappy with performance of the current Board Chair Annette Franz.

"Never have we seen the actions of one Chair cause so much unrest within the Chamber, among our Chamber staff and within the Business community of McAllen," the former chairs wrote.

The former chairs say the McAllen Chamber had a great reputation under the leadership of its former president, Steve Ahlenius. He left abruptly last month.

"We wish to express our disappointment in the actions of the current board of directors and plead for your intervention in securing a change of leadership on the Board of Directors," the seven former chairs wrote, in their letter to Villalobos.

The letter ends: "Our request is that you restore order to our beloved Chamber before irreparable damage is done to it or our Great City."

Villalobos received the letter as an attachment to an email from Delgado (pictured

above), a master chef and restaurant owner in McAllen. The subject line was marked “Confidential.” The Rio Grande Guardian received the email and the letter via an open records request to the City of McAllen.

Here is what Delgado wrote:

Good evening Mayor,

The attached letter represents the sentiment of some of your past Chairman of the Board of Directors of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. While we concede that Steve Ahlenius may not be salvageable, we all agree that the Chamber of Commerce is. Thank you for your time.

Larry Delgado

Chef/Owner

Delgado Collective

Here is the letter Delgado and the six other former McAllen Chamber chairs sent Mayor Villalobos:

November 5, 2021

Dear Mayor Villalobos,

We write you in response to the turmoil currently disrupting the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. We wish to express our disappointment in the actions of the current board of directors and plead for your intervention in securing a change in leadership on the Board of Directors.

As former Chair of the board and having served many years on the Board of Directors, we are no strangers to conflict, hardship, or difference of opinion. We are, however, shocked at how quickly and utterly devastating current matters have negatively impacted the reputation and the future of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. Never have we seen the actions of one Chair cause so much unrest within the Chamber, among the Chamber staff, and within the Business community of McAllen.

Throughout the years we have held our heads high with honor and a great sense of pride for all that the McAllen Chamber of Commerce has stood for and accomplished. This Chamber has stood head and should above any in our region and perhaps the Great State of Texas and has set the standard of excellence for over 20 years culminating in National recognition for their work. The Chamber staff, under the leadership of Steve Ahlenius have worked tirelessly to fulfill the mission of the Chamber to help McAllen businesses be successful and make money, accelerate connections, create economic momentum, and enhance the image and quality of place of McAllen. Our request is that you restore order to our beloved Chamber before irreparable damage is done to it or our Great City.

Respectfully,

Dora Brown,

Chairman of the Board 2005

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Joe Brown

Chairman of the Board 2010

Bob McCreery

Chairman of the Board 2011

Karen Valdez

Chairman fo the Board 2012

Charles Marina

Chairman of the Board 2016

Maurice Welton

Chairman of the Board 2017

Larry Delgado

Chairman of the Board 2019

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Column: Texas state senators draw for term lengths
Dave McNeely
Huntsville Item
November 25, 2021
https://www.itemonline.com/opinion/texas-state-senators-draw-for-term-lengths/article_38392a5f-6980-5e12-a9c4-58f8094c1362.html

Unless you are a relatively close follower of Texas politics and government, you may not know this.

The Texas House of Representatives has 150 members, who have two-year terms. All the seats are up for election every two years. No problem.

But the 31 members of the Texas Senate serve staggered four-year terms. That means 15 seats are up for election in one even-numbered election year, and two years later, the other 16 seats are up.

But once a decade, after the decennial census, the Senate adjusts its districts, to accommodate population shifts -- and, to be blunt, to see the party in power gerrymander the districts as much as possible to help their side for elections for the next 10 years.

In the election year following the census – in this case, 2022, after the 2021 redistricting, based on the 2020 census – all 31 senate districts are up for election.

Then, to restore the senate to staggered four- year terms -- roughly half of the senators chosen every two years – all 31 senators elected in 2022 will draw lots early in the regular 140-day legislative session beginning in January of 2023 following the elections of all 31 senators – this time in 2023 – the senators will draw lots to see which 16 get four-year terms, and which 15 will get two-year terms.

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And barring successful lawsuits challenging the redistricting, the districts, with the staggered four-year terms will be in place until the 2030 census starts the shuffle once again.

This ritual to restore the staggered terms every ten years can have a major effect on the political choices of senators.

If they draw a two-year term initially, then they will come up for election in presidential election years for the rest of the decade. If they draw a four-year term, their seat will come up for election in non-presidential election years – the years that statewide officials are chosen.

For instance, if a senator wants to run for attorney general, if they initially drew a two-year term, their district would be up for election in the same election years as the attorney general's four-year term.

That means their choice would be "Up or Out." Since you can't be on the ballot for more than one office in an election (except for president or vice-president), you'd have to give up your senate seat to run for attorney general.

An example of the "Up Or Out" race for a state senator was when Democratic state Sen. Wendy Davis was catapulted into national prominence by her filibuster to block an anti-abortion bill in 2013.

She ran in 2014 for governor, rather than for re-election. But she lost the general election to Republican then-Atty. Gen. Greg Abbott. And had sacrificed her senate seat in the process.

If she had drawn a four-year initial term, she could have made a "free-ride race," where a senator could seek statewide office, and if they lost, would still be a senator for another two years.

An example is State Sen. Royce West, the long-time Dallas Democrat, who ran in 2020 for the U.S. Senate seat held by Republican U.S. Sen. John Cornyn.

West lost the Democratic primary runoff to M.J. Hegar and was out of the U.S. Senate contest. But he was still a state senator.

So, the drawing for terms in 2023 among the 31 senators elected in November of 2022 ought to be really interesting – at least to the 31 senators.

Some senators bowing out

Three of the most senior members of the Texas Senate have announced they won't run for re-election in 2022 – leaving their seats up for grabs, which is already going on.

The three are:

— Eddie Lucio, Jr., D - Brownsville 75 – third in seniority, senator since 1991, after two House terms. A surprise, because he had earlier announced he would run again.

His anti-abortion stance distanced him from other Democrats, but endeared him to Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

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His son, State Rep. Eddie Lucio III, was considered a potential successor, but announced he also will not run for re-election in 2022.

— Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, 70, senator since 1993, is the most senior Republican. Chair of the budget-writing Senate Finance Committee for the last four sessions.

— Kel Seliger, Republican, 68, former longtime Amarillo Mayor, joined the Senate in 2005.

— Dawn Buckingham, R-Lakeway, 53, senator since 2017, is leaving to run for Land Commissioner.

— Senate Dean John Whitmire, D-Houston, 72, a House member for 10 years before joining the Senate in 1983, plans to run for re-election in 2022, but after the regular legislative session ends May 29, 2023, he says he's running for mayor of Houston in November 2023.

—

Dave McNeely is a statewide political columnist. He can be reached via email at davemcneely111@gmail.com

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Unnecessary election audit supports baseless claims of extensive voter fraud
Editorial Board
Beaumont Enterprise
November 27, 2021
https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/opinions/editorials/article/OPINION-Unnecessary-election-audit-supports-16655703.php

John B. Scott, the new Texas secretary of state, believes that a "full forensic audit (of last year's elections) will restore faith in Texas voting." Someone should tell him that most Texans already have faith in Texas voting. That group should include most Texas Republicans, because their party did very well in the 2020 elections. Former president Trump carried the state easily, the GOP won all statewide races and maintained its control of the state House and Senate.

It's hard to see what they are concerned with — maybe not winning by large enough margins? — and what "problem" has to be fixed. Apparently they don't realize how disappointed Texas Democrats were with the 2020 results. Members of that party truly thought they would break through last year; if any party should be questioning the results, it would be them.

Instead, in Texas and across the nation, it is some Republicans pushing the baseless theory that last year's elections were riddled with fraud and somehow the shenanigans must finally be uncovered and exposed. That is why Scott is boasting about the ongoing "top-to-bottom examination of election records in the two largest counties with Democratic Commissioners Courts — Harris and Dallas — as well as the two largest counties with Republican Commissioners Courts — Tarrant and Collin" by his office.

Again, it's not clear what this expensive and unnecessary exercise is supposed to prove. Scott cited one poll which said that 79 percent of Americans in both parties believe there sometimes is cheating in elections. That may be true, but the word

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“sometimes” is important there. Nothing in life is absolutely perfect, and that includes elections where millions of people vote. And to the extent that some Americans believe larger fraud exists, it’s because Republican officials like Scott and Gov. Greg Abbott have been promoting this baseless theory for months. It all comes from President Trump, of course, and too many Republicans are publicly going along with his fantasy when they privately admit it’s bonkers.

Scott and Abbott should have noticed similar claims in Arizona, where not one but two official audits of the 2020 election were held, finding no fraud. State officials then contracted with a sketchy company with no relevant experience to conduct a third audit, and the results were the same. Well, except for a few more votes added for President Biden, which certainly wasn’t the goal. Oh, and no evidence of phony paper ballots imported from China with telltale bamboo fibers.

Whenever and wherever it occurs, voter fraud is serious. Any perpetrators should get serious punishment. But when large numbers of votes are cast in large counties or a huge state like Texas, some small counting mistakes are likely, if not inevitable. That’s not widescale fraud, however, which is what Scott and Abbott are talking about.

Scott hopes that this audit will that show Texans that “voting in our state is fair and secure, and that only legal votes are cast and counted.” We hope so too; in fact, there’s no reason to think otherwise.

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/1/21
Date: Wednesday, December 1, 2021 9:08:03 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 1, 2021

He's charged with assaulting police at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Now he's running for office in Texas, *Washington Post*, November 30, 2021

A growing number of Texas Republicans want a fourth special session to pass COVID-19 vaccine mandate ban, *Texas Tribune*, November 30, 2021

McConaughey said he won't run for Texas governor. What does that mean for Beto and Abbott?, *Austin American-Statesman*, November 30, 2021

Four Republicans running for Senate District 31 seat in Texas Panhandle, *The Center Square*, November 30, 2021

Politics 'Get In The Way' Of 4 HISD Board Members As They Face Runoff Challenges, *Reform Austin*, November 30, 2021

Longtime state Sen. Larry Taylor, best known for his work on education issues, says he won't run for reelection, *Texas Tribune*, November 30, 2021

How Much Are Latinos Shifting Right?, *New York Times*, November 30, 2021

GOP targets Wisconsin elections system, nonpartisan director, *Associated Press*, December 1, 2021

Texas Hispanic population has become an economic powerhouse, *Spectrum News*, November 30, 2021

Olaguibel: Construction for full cargo facilities will soon begin at Anzalduas, *Rio Grande Guardian*, November 30, 2021

U.S. security review stalls sale of Shell Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex, *Reuters*, November 30, 2021

Mexico to reverse course, give COVID-19 booster shots, *Associated Press*, November 30, 2021

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Texas Land Commissioner announces agreement authorizing construction of border wall on state-owned land, *Palestine Herald-Press*, November 30, 2021

Texas Looks to Its Future to Guide Its Past, *Bloomberg Opinion*, November 30, 2021

Editorial: Voters are sending a message with rejection of school bonds, and districts must listen, *Dallas Morning News*, December 1, 2021

Analysis: Betting a Texas election on a weather forecast, *Texas Tribune*, December 1, 2021

American elections are getting less predictable; there's a reason for that, *The Hill*, November 30, 2021

He's charged with assaulting police at the Capitol on Jan. 6. Now he's running for office in Texas
Timothy Bella
Washington Post
November 30, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/11/30/capitol-riot-mark-middleton-texas-police/

As police struggled to fight off rioters trying to breach the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, Mark Middleton said he was among "the first group to storm the Capitol." He joined the pro-Trump mob in allegedly yelling expletives and striking officers who stood between them and their goal of disrupting the validation of the 2020 presidential election results, according to the FBI.

"No more fooling around!" he said in a video posted to his Facebook page shortly after he and his wife, Jalise, were at the Capitol, prosecutors say. "Make America great again! Freedom!"

Even though the couple face multiple federal charges stemming from the deadly Jan. 6 riot, that is not stopping Middleton from running for office as a Republican in his home state of Texas.

Middleton, 52, is running for a seat in the Texas House, months after he and his wife, 51, were indicted on charges of assaulting two D.C. police officers, according to a public filing on the Texas secretary of state's website. The Texas Republican Party accepted his nomination to challenge state Rep. David Spiller, a GOP incumbent in Jacksboro, Tex., in a March 2022 primary, according to the Dallas Morning News, the first to report the story. Spiller has been in office since March, after winning a special election in February.

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The Middletons were arrested in April and charged with several counts, including assault of a law enforcement officer, obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder, obstruction of an official proceeding, disorderly conduct on Capitol grounds and unlawful entry on restricted grounds. The Middletons, from Forestburg, Tex., have both pleaded not guilty and remain free on personal recognizance bonds as they await the start of a trial.

Middleton declined to comment to The Washington Post.

“You are welcome to follow my campaign and meet with me on the trail,” he wrote in an email.

James Wesolek, a spokesman with the Texas Republican Party, confirmed Middleton’s candidacy to The Post.

“Under the Texas Election Code, the party must accept all applications that are correct in form and content,” he wrote in an email Tuesday.

Sam Taylor, a spokesman with the Texas secretary of state’s office, told The Post that state election code notes how a candidate must “have not been finally convicted of a felony from which the person has not been pardoned or otherwise released from the resulting disabilities.”

“An indictment is not the same as a final conviction,” Taylor said. “Middleton is still awaiting trial, and therefore has not been finally convicted of a felony.”

The alleged rioter’s candidacy comes at a time when at least 13 Republicans who traveled to Washington on Jan. 6 to protest the results of the 2020 election ran for office this year. None of them were charged with crimes, and they all denied being part of the mob supporting President Donald Trump that stormed the Capitol in an effort to stop the certification of President Biden’s victory. The attack resulted in five deaths and left about 140 members of law enforcement injured.

At least seven people who attended the pro-Trump rally that preceded the insurrection at the Capitol were elected to public office this month, winning in states such as Virginia, New Jersey, Massachusetts and Idaho.

At 2:09 p.m. on Jan. 6, Middleton, a volunteer firefighter and pilot who wore a red, white and blue Trump beanie, pushed against the barricade and police line with his body, according to body-cam footage obtained by the FBI.

“Get back!” one of the officers said, according to a statement of facts.

In response, Middleton is heard on video yelling an expletive at the officers as he continued to push against the barricade, prosecutors say. He struggled against the officers “for more than 30 seconds” before grabbing an officer’s left hand or wrist and pulling him forward, according to the complaint.

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At the same time, a woman identified as Jalise Middleton, also wearing a red, white and blue Trump beanie, “repeatedly grabs and strikes” the same officer with her hand, prosecutors say. When another officer attempted to defend their colleague from the assault, Mark Middleton struck that officer in the arm as well, the complaint says.

After the couple continued to grapple with the two officers, police deployed chemical spray that forced the Middletons “to retreat back from the barricade line,” investigators say.

Minutes later, the pro-Trump mob eventually breached the Capitol, breaking windows and climbing inside the building, then opening doors for others to follow.

When he was still in proximity of the Capitol, Middleton bragged in a video posted to social media about being “on the front lines” of the riot, according to the complaint.

“We helped push down the barriers,” he said in a Facebook video, prosecutors say. “Jalise and I got pepper sprayed, clubbed, and tear gassed. We had to retreat, but more patriots pushed forward, and they’re taking back our house.”

He went on to post numerous videos, photos and comments to Facebook regarding the riot and the couple’s involvement in it, records show. The Middletons said in Facebook posts that they did not enter the Capitol, even as Jalise Middleton wrote that “we made history and got everyone in,” the complaint states.

On Jan. 21, a tipster whose daughter is an acquaintance of Jalise Middleton alerted the FBI of the social media posts, which were deleted earlier in the month, according to the Justice Department. A second tipster told the FBI in February of the Middletons’ alleged involvement at the riot, helping investigators confirm that the couple had a physical altercation with police, prosecutors say. Investigators found probable cause after comparing the body-cam footage to the recovered social media posts.

The couple were arrested on April 21 and indicted on May 19 by a federal grand jury in Washington. They were arraigned and pleaded not guilty to all counts on May 27. A trial has yet to be set for them.

Mark Middleton, who lists himself as a Cub Master for the Boy Scouts of America on his LinkedIn profile, last worked in sales for Nortex Communications, an Internet services company, in April — the month he was arrested. He is currently the only primary challenger to Spiller in Texas House District 68, which stretches from the Oklahoma border to counties near Texas Hill Country because of redistricting.

On his campaign website, Middleton’s far-right platform calls for Texas to consider leaving the United States.

“To the extent the Union can be saved we should work to that end,” his campaign website says. “However, it is past time Texans start seriously exploring our exit from the Union.”

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A growing number of Texas Republicans want a fourth special session to pass COVID-19 vaccine mandate ban
Cassandra Pollock
Texas Tribune
November 30, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/30/coronavirus-texas-legislature-vaccine-mandate-ban/

A growing number of Texas Republicans are pushing for lawmakers to return to the state Capitol for a fourth overtime round of legislating to pass laws banning COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

As those calls continue to build, it remains unclear whether Gov. Greg Abbott — the only official with the power to convene special sessions — will order state lawmakers back to Austin and what issues he would include on the agenda.

Lawmakers already met for the biennial regular session that ended in May before convening for three special sessions over the summer and into this fall to tackle redistricting along with a number of GOP priorities, including a law that further tightens the state's election rules.

Abbott last week declined to say whether he intends to call another special session, but he left the door open, reminding reporters at a news conference that one "can be called anytime." On Monday, an Abbott spokesperson, contacted for comment, referred to a previous statement from the governor's office that said "there is no need for another special session at this time."

Still, at least two dozen Republican lawmakers have so far called for a fourth special session, with many focusing on efforts to ban vaccine mandates. Abbott had named it as a late priority in the third special session that ended in October, but legislation that would have banned any Texas entity from mandating the COVID-19 vaccine for employees failed to gain traction in both chambers after business groups rallied against the proposal.

Another Abbott priority — increasing the penalty for illegal voting — also did not pass in the last special session. The governor called for the stiffer penalty weeks after he signed into law a bill that reduced it. Shortly after the Legislature adjourned the third special session, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Republican leader of the state Senate, pushed for another session to focus on that as well as passing an election audit bill.

In September, President Donald Trump, who won Texas in 2020, called for a "Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election" in the state. Abbott resisted adding the item to the special session agenda and instead backed a more narrow review of the 2020 election by the secretary of state's office, which announced it was conducting a "full forensic audit" in four of the state's biggest counties. There has been no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Texas in 2020. And earlier this year, an official in the secretary of state's office called the 2020 election in Texas "smooth and secure."

Meanwhile, House Speaker Dade Phelan, the Beaumont Republican who heads the lower chamber, has not weighed in on whether he supports a fourth session, saying through a spokesperson that the decision to convene a special session is up to Abbott.

Vaccines
While Patrick's push for another special session last month focused on those elections-related issues, other Republicans in recent weeks have rallied largely around banning vaccine mandates. The lieutenant governor's office did not respond to a request for comment about whether Patrick supports adding the vaccine mandates issue to a potential

special session agenda.

In October, Abbott issued an executive order outlawing COVID-19 vaccine requirements by any entity in Texas, including private businesses and health care facilities. The governor has said his order will remain in place until lawmakers pass a bill related to the issue.

In the meantime, the state has sued the Biden administration over its coronavirus vaccine mandates for federal contractors, private businesses and health care workers.

Meanwhile, the Republican Party of Texas, which last month called for a fourth special session, is campaigning on a “Four-Day 4th,” referring to a four-day special session. The group says that short of a stretch would be all that’s needed to address vaccine mandates.

“We know legislators are tired and nobody wants an extended special session,” Texas GOP Chair Matt Rinaldi said in an interview Monday, pointing to states such as Tennessee and Florida that recently passed legislation on vaccine mandates on short timelines.

As of Tuesday, at least 25 GOP state lawmakers have publicly called for a special session related to banning vaccine mandates. While those calls began with members aligned with the further right faction of the party, other Republicans have in recent days also signaled support, including state Rep. Tom Oliverson of Cypress, who tweeted last week that “medical decisions should be made by the individual, not by their employer or the government.”

Oliverson, an anesthesiologist, said Tuesday that lawmakers during the third special session didn’t have enough time to work on the issue or “build consensus around an approach.”

“I think there’s an appetite to do something,” Oliverson said. “I don’t know exactly what that something will be. I don’t think this is a conversation you have quickly — it needs that full process of deliberation, a kind of let the cream rise to the top sort of thing.”

Another House Republican, state Rep. Briscoe Cain of Deer Park, has also called for a fourth special session over banning vaccine mandates, writing in an Oct. 26 Facebook post that he was ready to return to Austin despite spending the past 10 months in the state’s capital.

“While I am happy to be home after three special sessions in Austin,” Cain wrote, “I would happily return to Austin if called upon to protect the rights of my fellow Texans.”

Cain, a member of the hardline conservative Texas House Freedom Caucus, told The Texas Tribune on Monday that the state could benefit in its legal fight with the Biden administration if it already had a law addressing the issue.

“From a litigation standpoint,” Cain said, “I think it would help the state’s position when claiming that the federal government is interfering with an area of state rights if the state had a law on the books that the feds were interfering with.”

Rinaldi, the Texas GOP chair who’s also a former state House member, said that while legislation to ban vaccines failed during the most recent session, Republicans have since galvanized over the issue.

“When this was put on the special session call during the last special session, the issue was fairly new — people weren’t facing imminent threat of being fired at the time,” Rinaldi said. “I don’t think there’s any way of avoiding it because of the immense damage that these vaccine mandates do, both to individual lives and to our economy.”

State health officials have said that the vaccine greatly reduces the risk of COVID-19 transmission. And state data shows that unvaccinated Texans made up 85% of coronavirus cases and deaths from Jan. 15 to Oct. 1, 2021. About 54% of Texans are fully vaccinated.

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Abbott is also fielding pressure over banning vaccines mandates by at least two of his GOP primary challengers: former state Sen. Don Huffines and Allen West, a former Florida congressman and Texas GOP chair.

Weary Legislature
To be sure, most lawmakers have not publicly weighed in on whether there should be another session before the Legislature convenes for its next regular session in January 2023.

The last time a governor convened a fourth special session was in 2004, when then-Gov. Rick Perry again ordered lawmakers back after the Legislature had worked overtime from June to October that previous year following its regular session.

This year, members returned to their districts in mid-October weary from the past 10 months that featured some of the most conservative legislating in recent memory. After House Democrats aimed to block a GOP elections bill by walking out of the chamber in the final hours of the regular session that ended in May, Abbott called lawmakers back for another overtime round focused on passing that legislation along with a number of other Republican priorities.

But business stalled over the summer after Democrats again broke quorum over that elections proposal, with enough members flying to Washington, D.C., to prevent lawmakers in Austin from moving any legislation during the first special session.

That impasse lasted for weeks, though once work resumed, the GOP-dominated Legislature passed its elections legislation in a second special session before turning to the redrawing of the state's political maps during the third.

Some Democrats, such as state Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, say Republicans may try to use another special session to rally their party's base heading into primary election season.

"Texas taxpayers should not be asked to bankroll another unnecessary special session simply because Republicans want to prolong the COVID-19 pandemic," said Turner, who chairs the House Democratic Caucus, in an email through a spokesperson. "Republican legislators should explore other strategies to win their primary elections."

Another issue that has gotten attention in recent days is the renewal of Chapter 313, a decades-old law that Abbott was asked about at last week's news conference in Austin announcing that Samsung Electronics Co. will build a roughly $17 billion chipmaking plant in Williamson County.

Chapter 313, one of the state's largest corporate tax break programs, is set to expire at the end of 2022 after the Legislature did not renew it. Under the program, Samsung would save an estimated $250 million in taxes over the next 15 years.

So far, according to Dale Craymer, president of the Texas Taxpayers & Research Association, there have not been any signs to suggest there is interest among leadership at the Legislature to extend the current program in a special session.

"The politics of the issue really haven't changed since the regular session," Craymer said, adding that, "it would be challenging to take extraordinary measures to extend the program at this time."

Craymer, whose group has supported the program in the past but isn't "making a big push to get a temporary extension at this point," said that lawmakers may tackle something related to property taxes during a special session given the state's economic surplus and roughly $3 billion left in federal COVID relief money.

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“But I’d be surprised if Chapter 313 is a part of that discussion,” he said.

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McConaughey said he won't run for Texas governor. What does that mean for Beto and Abbott?
Madlin Mekelburg
Austin American-Statesman
November 30, 2021
https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/state/2021/11/30/matthew-mcconaughey-texas-tx-governor-greg-abbott-beto-orourke/8797926002/

Actor Matthew McConaughey said Sunday evening that he would not run for governor, ending months of speculation about his political aspirations and clearing the way for a more conventional race for the top job in the state.

McConaughey had teased a run since earlier this year, refraining from indicating whether he’d enter the Democratic primary or the Republican primary or run as an independent candidate. Some polls showed that he would have been a serious contender in a hypothetical matchup against Gov. Greg Abbott and Democrat Beto O’Rourke.'

His decision to stay out of the race clears the field for Abbott and O’Rourke to face off in a more traditional race next November, assuming both are successful in their primary contests.

“Both candidates, they’re breathing a sigh of relief,” said Brian Smith, political science professor at St. Edward's University. “They won’t come out and say it, but both candidates, by McConaughey not running, are very happy.”

Abbott is seeking a third term as governor and is facing at least two primary challengers: Allen West, former Texas GOP chairman, and Don Huffines, a former state senator from Dallas.

O’Rourke, a former congressman from El Paso, has emerged as the highest-profile Democrat running for the seat.

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said the fact that McConaughey was polling so well before entering the race is a reflection of the growing dissatisfaction people feel with the current state of politics. Given that Abbott and O'Rourke are the favorites to emerge from their primaries, he said both will benefit from McConaughey’s decision not to run.

“In a way, they are both better off,” Rottinghaus said. “People are frustrated with politics and politicians as usual. Both parties are going to have to grapple with that reality at some point.”

A McConaughey candidacy

In a video posted to Twitter late Sunday, McConaughey said he was honored to be considered for political leadership, a “humbling and inspiring path to ponder” but “a path that I’m choosing not to take at this moment.” Instead, he said he plans to focus on supporting entrepreneurs, businesses and foundations that he sees as leaders fighting to create “pathways for people to succeed in life.”

The prospect of McConaughey entering the gubernatorial race has been a point of fascination for political observers. His superstardom lends him international name recognition and access to serious money that could fund a competitive campaign, but his lack of experience in the political arena made him a wild card of sorts.

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With no voting record in Texas since at least 2012, McConaughey's political leanings are largely unknown. In 2020, he said he considers himself to be "in the middle" politically and believes a solution to the nation's political divide lies in being "aggressively centric."

He has avoided weighing in on many issues facing the state, but earlier this month he said he is against a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for kids "just yet" during an interview at The New York Times' DealBook summit. Later he clarified that he was speaking strictly about mandates for children between the ages of 5 and 11.

During an interview with Kara Swisher of The New York Times, McConaughey said he found elements of the state's new, restrictive abortion law to be "a little juvenile" but declined to share his perspective on abortion rights overall.

Should McConaughey have opted to enter the race, he would have been forced to take strong policy positions on any number of issues from the economy to immigration to abortion to gun regulations.

"As an undeclared candidate, he was all things to all people," Smith said. "If he was going to declare, we were going to want to know more about him and his positions — and rightfully so."

Abbott vs. O'Rourke
Early polls showed that McConaughey could have been a serious contender in hypothetical matchups against Abbott and O'Rourke.

McConaughey led Abbott in a September poll from the University of Texas at Tyler and The Dallas Morning News, in which 44% of respondents said they would vote for the actor over Abbott in a hypothetical race between the two men. Abbott polled at 35%, and 21% said they would vote for someone else.

The same poll asked respondents to choose between O'Rourke and Abbott, with 37% of respondents supporting O'Rourke, 42% supporting Abbott and 21% voting for someone else.

In the immediate future, Smith said O'Rourke might feel more relief than Abbott that McConaughey has opted not to run. If he had entered the race as a Democrat, as some had speculated, O'Rourke would have faced an expensive primary battle before facing Abbott and his $55 million campaign war chest.

His absence from the race also means Abbott won't have to spend money campaigning against a well-known candidate as likable as McConaughey. Now he can focus his energy and money against O'Rourke.

But Rottinghaus said McConaughey's decision also benefits Abbott because they probably would have been targeting the same demographics when trying to turn out voters.

In 2006, incumbent Republican Gov. Rick Perry faced a Democratic challenger and two independent candidates during the general election, including singer Kinky Friedman. Rottinghaus said support for Friedman largely came from younger white men who were not previously registered to vote — a profile Rottinghaus said Abbott hopes to cultivate.

"McConaughey isn't running, but it'd have been a lot cooler if he did," said Smith, quoting McConaughey's character in the film "Dazed and Confused."

"It would have made the race very interesting. The good thing about elections is that there's always another opportunity. For McConaughey, he would do better running in an open-seat election than against a well-known Democrat and an incumbent Republican," Smith said.

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Four Republicans running for Senate District 31 seat in Texas Panhandle
Bethany Blankley
The Center Square
November 30, 2021
https://www.thecentersquare.com/texas/four-republicans-running-for-senate-district-31-seat-in-texas-panhandle/article_e32df988-525e-11ec-912c-4bdeed0e2615.html

(The Center Square) – The field to replace Sen. Kel Seliger's Senate District 31 seat in the Texas Panhandle is growing.

The West Texas legislator announced in October that he was retiring and wasn't running for reelection.

Seliger, one of the most liberal Republicans in the Texas Legislature, repeatedly voted against property tax reform measures, banning taxpayer-funded lobbying, and legislation requiring an audit of Texas elections.

The primarily Republican SD31 includes the West Texas areas of Amarillo, Midland, and Odessa.

The first to declare their candidacies for the position were Midland oil and gas tycoon Kevin Sparks, and Coahoma ISD Trustee Stormy Bradley, both Republicans.

Sparks is considered the front-runner, having already been endorsed by former President Donald Trump and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick.

"At a time when far-left activists seek to nationalize our elections, indoctrinate our kids with so-called critical race theory, and surrender our southern border to the drug cartels, the hard-working families of Senate District 31 deserve a state senator who will proudly defend our conservative values," he said.

Sparks is president of Discovery Operating, Inc, a family owned and operated oil and gas company in Midland, which employees hundreds of workers and has for nearly 50 years.

Bradley is the owner of multiple businesses, including Bulldog Steel, a full-service steel manufacturer in Big Spring. As a Coahoma ISD board member, she's "fought to keep anti-American propaganda and critical race theory out of our schools." She also holds a leadership position with the Big Spring Chamber of Commerce Board of Trustees, and recently won a Russ McEwen Community Hero Award.

Most recently, with two weeks of the filing deadline to declare candidacy, two more candidates have thrown their hats in the ring: retired FBI agent Tim Reid and attorney Jesse Quackenbush.

"As an FBI agent, state trooper, police officer, school board member, and foster child, I believe that I am uniquely qualified to represent the citizens of this district," Reid argues. "I will actively work on the issues that we face to strengthen the future of Texas. I have served the people of this district for 28 years and call the Panhandle and all of West Texas home."

Citing education as his top priority, Reid is currently the director of Athletics and Campus Safety and a teacher at Ascension Academy, a private school in Amarillo.

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Amarillo attorney Jesse Quackenbush is running for a second time for the seat, after unsuccessfully running for the seat in 2004. Quackenbush recently told the Odessa American that he was against the recently passed Texas Heartbeat Act.

“I’m pro-life, but until Roe v. Wade is repealed, I’m against gratuitously going out there and wasting millions of dollars just to test the waters with a law that is obviously unconstitutional while senselessly adding a severe crisis for women who seek that type of healthcare,” Quackenbush said.

Attorney General Ken Paxton, and those who passed the law in the state legislature, and Gov. Greg Abbott, who signed the bill into law, disagree, arguing the bill is constitutional, and legal.

The filing deadline for all candidates seeking to run for any office in Texas in the 2022 Election is Dec. 13. The primary election is scheduled for March 1, 2022.

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Politics ‘Get In The Way’ Of 4 HISD Board Members As They Face Runoff Challenges
Reform Austin
November 30, 2021
https://www.reformaustin.org/education/politics-get-in-the-way-of-4-hisd-board-members-as-they-face-runoff-challenges/

Early voting began on Monday, where voters will decide four of five Houston ISD trustees that have been pushed into runoffs.

A month ago in re-elections, incumbents; Elizabeth Santos in District 1, Sue Deigaard in District 5, Holly Flynn Vilaseca in District 6, and Anne Sung in District 7, failed to gather at least 50 percent of the ballots cast. The only HISD race decided was for Myrna Guidry in District 9, who won with nearly 61 percent of the vote.

The outcome of the runoffs could shake things up for the board just when they were reaching a sense of stability with new Superintendent Millard House II preparing a multi-year strategic plan and the district considering its first bond referendum in nearly a decade, as reported by the Houston Chronicle.

The match consists of issues that range from local concerns to statewide issues like the potential takeover threat by the Texas Education Agency to national debates over mask mandates and critical race theory.

One of the reasons so many of the current board members are facing tough reelections is payback by voters who are looking to punish incumbents over the dysfunction of years past, referring to the so-called “walking quorum of 2018” that led HISD to the brink of a state takeover.

In 2019, state investigators determined five trustees – including Santos, Vilaseca, and Sung – met in private in an unsuccessful attempt to replace then interim superintendent Grenita Lathan with former superintendent Abe Saavedra.

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle, it appears the district is at a crossroads.

“They are at a point where they are trying to climb out of decades-long troubles,” Rottinghaus said, “and the politics of the current moment are, to some degree, getting in the way.”

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This is certainly true with incumbent Bridget Wade, who is running ahead of incumbent trustee Anne Sung heading into the runoff. She sums up her position on critical race theory, saying she believed “we’re all created equal”.

When concerning mask mandates, Wade is on the opposing side, stating that “masking should be a parental choice.”

Janette Garza Linder, who is facing Santos in the District 1 runoff, is also letting the politics get in the way. In an Interview with The Leader newspaper, she stated that if there weren’t new members on the board that she is open to a state takeover.

This raised concerns with parents, like Karina Quesada from the Heights. “”That bothers me very much because as a constituent, as a citizen, as a taxpayer, as a homeowner, I don’t want anybody, that’s OK with taking my ability to elect a representative to represent us, my children, and our teachers in this community,” Quesada said in an interview with Houston Public Media.

Jasmine Jenkins, executive director of the nonprofit Houstonians for Great Public Schools, suggests Republicans and conservatives are trying to stir up parents’ concerns by involving issues such as critical race theory and mask mandates.

“From the right, nationally, we see a bigger movement to get involved in local politics, to get involved in school boards, and so there are probably a lot of conservatives who have gotten involved in this race and who’ve decided to vote in these races who normally just sort of sit school board (elections) out,” Jenkins said, as reported by Houston Public Media.

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Longtime state Sen. Larry Taylor, best known for his work on education issues, says he won't run for reelection
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
November 30, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/30/larry-taylor-texas-senate-reelection/

State Sen. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, who helped write the law to overhaul school funding in Texas, will not seek reelection.

Taylor chairs the Senate Education Committee and has served in the Legislature since 2003, first as a member of the House. He is also chair of the Senate Republican Caucus.

His decision comes just under two weeks before the candidate filing deadline for the 2022 primary. Within minutes of Taylor announcing his retirement, state Rep. Mayes Middleton, R-Wallisville, announced he had filed for the Senate seat.

"This has been a very difficult decision, as having the privilege of representing my community in the legislature for nearly two decades has been the biggest honor of my life,” Taylor said in a statement. “Together, with my colleagues in the Legislature, we have dealt with multiple challenges and worked to secure Texas’ future as a leader for our country. I am so proud of our work and so incredibly blessed to have been a part of it.”

In the statement, Taylor also acknowledged the sacrifices that public service requires, including a “major commitment of time away from your family and friends.”

Taylor’s decision creates a vacancy in Senate District 11 in Southeast Texas. The seat favors Republicans.

After news of Taylor’s retirement broke, he told a reporter with the Galveston Daily News

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that part of his decision was due to Middleton's interest in his seat. Taylor told the reporter that he tried to dissuade Middleton, but that he is "ready to go and wanting to spend a lot of money."

Middleton, an oil-and-gas businessman, is the chairman of the conservative Freedom Caucus in the House, where he has been a member since 2019.

Taylor is perhaps best known for his work on education. He was a key player in the 2019 school finance overhaul that lawmakers counted as a top achievement that session. The $11.6 billion measure boosted per-student funding and reduced property taxes, among other things.

Taylor has also focused on coastal issues, like reforming the Texas Windstorm Insurance Association.

Taylor's decision is abrupt. His campaign had said Sunday that he would file for reelection Monday, though it did not appear to happen.

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How Much Are Latinos Shifting Right?
Jennifer Medina
New York Times
November 30, 2021
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/30/us/politics/latinos-republicans-conservative-vote-gop.html

For years, State Representative Ryan Guillen of Texas was regarded as the most conservative Democratic legislator in Austin. He was one of just a few from the party to vote in favor of carrying handguns without a permit, and the sole Democrat in the House chamber to vote for the state's new law banning most abortions. He remained popular in his Rio Grande Valley district, winning re-election last year by 17 percentage points.

Then came the news this month: He was switching parties.

"After much consideration and prayer with my family, I feel that my fiscally conservative, pro-business, and pro-life values are no longer in step with the Democratic Party of today," Mr. Guillen said.

It's an old saw in politics: I haven't changed, the party has changed. And in the past, it has been fairly applied to both Republicans and Democrats. Mr. Guillen has portrayed himself as part of a trend of Hispanic voters moving toward the Republican Party, especially in South Texas, where Donald J. Trump made major inroads during the 2020 election. But it's too soon to tell just how much of a lasting shift the movement represents.

The Republican Party has been reaching out to Latino voters for decades, particularly in Texas. Former President George W. Bush famously courted them with his "compassionate conservatism." And it was former President Ronald Reagan who told his Hispanic outreach director that he would have the easiest job in the world, because "Hispanics are already Republicans, they just don't know it yet."

Historically, roughly 30 percent of Hispanic voters have chosen to vote Republican in presidential elections, a number that increased slightly in 2020, surprising many Democrats. Republicans, unsurprisingly, celebrated the shift and have portrayed it as a seismic shift that could transform the parties.

"Republicans' enthusiasm and sense of momentum ebbs and flows, and this is a moment of high enthusiasm," said Geraldo Cadava, a professor of history at Northwestern University and the author of the book "The Hispanic Republican." "They want to capitalize

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on the momentum they feel like they have right now. They really think the energy is on their side, but they have to prove that 2020 wasn't just a blip."

So far, the data remains mixed. While there was some dampened enthusiasm among Latino voters during the recall election of Gov. Gavin Newsom of California, for example, an analysis from the Latino Policy & Politics Initiative at the University of California, Los Angeles, showed that Latino-heavy precincts overwhelmingly backed Newsom's remaining in office.

But in San Antonio this month, Democrats lost another State House seat to a Hispanic Republican, John Lujan.

Now, many Democrats are openly worried, with some calling Hispanics the new swing voter group.

"Democrats have to prove that they can stop their losses, and they have to show these voters they are hearing them and caring about them," Dr. Cadava said.

Of course, perception can drive reality: If Latinos believe that Democrats take them for granted, they are more likely to vote for Republican candidates, according to analysis from Equis Research, a Washington-based firm that focuses on Latino voters across the country.

Mr. Guillen, who did not respond to several messages from The Times, has fiercely embraced his new party, appearing with Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas during his party switch announcement and welcoming an endorsement from Mr. Trump by enthusiastically recalling how his signs "covered South Texas" during the presidential election. (Four years after Hillary Clinton won the district by 13 percentage points, Mr. Trump won by the same margin in 2020.)

"Something is happening in South Texas, and many of us are waking up to the fact that the values of those in Washington, D.C., are not our values, not the values of most Texans," Mr. Guillen told reporters during his announcement. "The ideology of defunding the police, of destroying the oil and gas industry and the chaos at our border is disastrous for those of us who live here in South Texas."

But ideology may not have been the only driver of Mr. Guillen's decision, which came after Republican-controlled redistricting turned his legislative district from a Republican-leaning district into one that would most likely be solidly red.

Mr. Guillen has brushed aside suggestions that he simply switched parties to stay in office, telling reporters that his 2020 victory as a Democrat showed his allegiance with voters in the district.

"I have found that my core beliefs align with the Republican Party," he said. "I am confident that my switch today is the right decision."

Mr. Abbott, for his part, portrayed Mr. Guillen's flip as inevitable.

"It's something that has been, candidly, the worst-kept secret in the Capitol," he said. "Ryan, we're glad you finally came out of the closet."

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GOP targets Wisconsin elections system, nonpartisan director
Scott Bauer
Associated Press
December 1, 2021
https://www.chron.com/news/article/GOP-targets-Wisconsin-elections-system-

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16663548.php

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin Republicans are working to discredit the bipartisan system they created to run elections in the state after President Joe Biden narrowly won last year's presidential race, making the political battleground the latest front in the national push by the GOP to exert more control over elections.

Wednesday will bring a flurry of election-related developments in the state, with both the Wisconsin Elections Commission and a partisan legislative panel dissecting the 2020 presidential election. At the same time, Republican lawmakers are continuing to attack the state's well-regarded election administrator in a pressure campaign to have her resign, an apparent attempt to install a GOP partisan in the position ahead of next year's midterm elections.

"This is really just the politics of fear and vengeance," said Kevin Kennedy, who was Wisconsin's top elections official for 34 years before retiring in 2016. "This is not about ideas. ... They have effigies they want to burn and that's it."

More than a year after the 2020 presidential election, former President Donald Trump and his allies continue to push his false claims that Democrats stole a second term from him. This has manifested in costly and timely partisan election reviews in a handful of states as well as new laws pushed by Republicans adding restrictions to mail voting, which was hugely popular amid the pandemic and embraced by voters of both parties.

Current and former election officials also have warned that the unrelenting attempts to discredit Biden's win have led to an erosion of public confidence in elections and threats of physical violence against election workers. They worry that longtime election officials will be driven from their jobs, creating a vacuum of experience that in some cases could be filled by partisan actors.

In Wisconsin, elections are overseen by a bipartisan elections commission comprised of an equal number of Republicans and Democrats. The commission administrator is a nonpartisan position currently held by Meagan Wolfe, a 10-year veteran of the agency and its predecessor.

Wolfe was appointed director by the commission in 2019 and confirmed unanimously by the Republican-controlled Senate for a term ending in the middle of 2023.

When efforts to overturn Trump's loss in Wisconsin failed through lawsuits and recounts, Republicans repositioned their attacks to the commission and Wolfe. At least 10 Republican lawmakers have called for the resignations of her or one or more commissioners.

If Wolfe were to resign, the Republican-controlled Senate would likely name her successor. That person plays a significant role in determining what guidance is issued to the state's more than 1,800 local election clerks who actually run elections.

Wolfe on Tuesday called the attacks against her "baseless" and said she was more determined than ever not to resign.

"I really think the calls are based on folks being upset that I'm not willing to change my behavior; I'm not willing to engage in partisan politics," she told The Associated Press. "The public recognizes politics when they see it. I think they're smart enough to understand a lot of the rhetoric around this is motivated by partisan politics."

A bipartisan group of more than 50 election experts from across the country came to Wolfe's defense, sending a letter to Republican Assembly Speaker Robin Vos calling Wolfe "one of the most highly-skilled election administrators in the country." Wolfe serves as chair of the national Electronic Registration Information Center and in February will become president of the National Association of State Election Directors.

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The attacks against Wolfe and the integrity of the 2020 election make Wisconsin “ground zero for the anti-democratic movement,” said David Becker, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation and Research.

Becker said election workers and civil servants such as Wolfe are being used as scapegoats "because leaders do not have the political courage to tell their supporters the truth of the election. And the truth is that it was objectively the most secure, transparent, verified and scrutinized election in American history by any measure.”

Republican lawmakers ratcheted up their criticism of Wolfe and the commission after a nonpartisan audit recommended dozens of changes in how elections should be run and detailed ways the elections commission didn’t follow some state laws during the pandemic in 2020. The audit did not find any widespread fraud or abuse and did not call into question Biden's victory in the state.

A Trump-supporting sheriff in Racine County recommended felony charges against five of the six commission members for their decision not to send special voting deputies into nursing homes, as required by law, during the pandemic.

Many of those facilities were not allowing any visitors, including families, at the time the commission made the decision. The commission instead called for absentee ballots to be used for residents in such facilities, a move they said was designed to protect their right to vote.

No charges have been filed in any Wisconsin county against Wolfe or any commission member.

In addition to attacking the elections commission, Republicans also are backing an investigation ordered into the 2020 election by Vos, the legislative leader. That effort is being led by a conservative former Wisconsin Supreme Court justice who told lawmakers his probe will include examining the allegations raised by the sheriff.

The elections commission was scheduled to meet Wednesday to discuss the audit. At the same time, the Assembly elections committee is to receive an update on the GOP-ordered election investigation.

Meanwhile, state Republican lawmakers are feeling pressure from U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, who in November told them the Legislature should take control over federal elections in the state. Opponents have said such a move would be barred under decisions by the U.S. and state supreme courts. The Republican leader of the state Senate also raised concerns about the legality of doing that.

Republicans can't easily alter the elections commission or change how elections are run in the state because any change in law would have to be signed by Democratic Gov. Tony Evers. He's made clear that he would block any such attempt.

“Wisconsin held a fair, accurate, and secure election under a system Republicans largely created themselves, and the results of our election have been proven over and over again," Evers said in a statement Tuesday. "It’s clear Republicans’ efforts and rhetoric are more about pre-determining our elections and maintaining political power than making our elections more secure.”

Evers is on the ballot next year, and should he lose Republicans would have a clear path to make widespread election changes before the 2024 elections.

One Republican candidate for governor, former Lt. Gov. Rebecca Kleefisch, has been critical of the elections commission and filed a lawsuit in November seeking to suspend the guidance the agency gave to local election clerks amid the coronavirus pandemic.

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Attacks against the current commission are similar to ones Republicans made against its predecessor, the Government Accountability Board, which they dissolved in 2015 under a law signed by then-Gov. Scott Walker, a Republican.

The first administrator of the current commission, Mike Haas, was driven out by Republicans because of his work on an investigation into Walker while at the previous agency. Haas stepped down after the GOP-controlled Senate refused to confirm him.

Kennedy, who retired from the state elections post amid GOP criticism, said Wolfe should not expect the pressure on her to let up.

“If she wants it to end, then she leaves,” Kennedy said.

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Texas Hispanic population has become an economic powerhouse
Eric Griffey
Spectrum News
November 30, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/dallas-fort-worth/news/2021/11/30/texas-hispanic-population-has-become-an-economic-powerhouse

FORT WORTH, Texas — New research released Tuesday by Texans for Economic Growth, a statewide 110-member business coalition, underscores the crucial role Hispanic Texans play in the state’s economy and across the major metros of Austin, Brownsville, Dallas, El Paso, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio.

Hispanic Texans in the Dallas and Fort Worth area are contributing billions in taxes and consumer spending. In 2019, Hispanic households earned $41.2 billion in income, with $6.3 billion going to federal taxes and $3.6 billion going to state and local taxes, leaving them with $31.3 billion in spending power, the study said.

These numbers are more pronounced, considering Hispanic Texans are helping drive population growth in Dallas and Fort Worth. Between 2010 and 2019, the U.S.-born Hispanic population grew by 33.4%, while the foreign-born Hispanic population grew by 13.5%. In 2010, 27.6% of the overall population in Dallas and Fort Worth were Hispanic, and that number increased to 29.3% in 2019.

Hispanic population numbers are growing across the state, though 47% of Texas Hispanics live in the state’s five biggest counties — Harris, Bexar, Dallas, Tarrant and Travis.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region best illustrates the diverging population patterns among Hispanic and white Texans. Among those five counties, Tarrant County — home to Fort Worth — continues to see the fastest growth of Hispanic residents since 2010. With a 28% growth rate, the Hispanic population in Tarrant grew from roughly 483,000 to nearly 620,000 last year.

Meanwhile, the white population in neighboring Dallas County is shrinking. Dallas' white population has fallen below 2010 levels, dropping from about 787,000 to about 746,000 in 2019.

In 2019, 70.9% of the overall Hispanic population and 72.1% of the foreign-born Hispanic population were active in the labor force, compared with 68.1% of the non-Hispanic population.

“As our business community continues to wade through labor and supply chain challenges, it is imperative that we push date-driven, policy-focused discussions regarding the economic contributions of Hispanics to the forefront,” said Anette Landeros, President and

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CEO of the Fort Worth Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. “Our DFW Metroplex is currently booming with growth and opportunity, and our Hispanic population will play an important role in ensuring that the trajectory is sustainable for years to come.”

The uninsured Texans, known as the “working poor,” include about 1.4 million hourly or low-wage workers. These people, disproportionately Hispanic (61% of the uninsured) tend to have low levels of education (48% of the uninsured don’t have a high school degree), and earn less than $35,000 a year despite typically working full-time, often in jobs such as construction or the service industry.

Hispanic Texans in Dallas & Fort Worth hold substantial voting power. In 2019, there were more than 888,000 eligible Hispanic voters, including more than 191,000 naturalized citizens. Overall, the Hispanic population made up 18.8% of the electorate, including Hispanic naturalized citizens, who on their own made up 4.1%.

“As we prepare for the post-pandemic economic recovery, it is important to know how Hispanics can and will contribute to keep the Texas economy thriving,” said J.R. Gonzales, Executive Vice Chair of the Texas Association of Mexican American Chamber of Commerce. “The new data shows Hispanics can demand a seat at the table now that we can show that what we bring to the dinner party is crucial.”

The economic benefits of "illegals" far outweigh the cost
Most statewide and national studies on the cost-benefit analysis of illegal immigrants suggest Texas is profiting from illegal immigrants.

For example, a recent Rice University study said the state of Texas made more than $420 million off immigrants living in the state illegally.

The study, which replicated an outdated state comptroller report, finds that for every $1 the Texas government spends on the estimated 1.6 million people living in the state illegally, the state brings in $1.21 in tax revenue.

The Rice study is modeled off a Texas State Comptroller report from 2006, which had similar findings: Immigrants in Texas without legal authorization generated $424.7 million more than they cost the state. The study calculated costs to the state in education and health care services, as well as incarcerations. It measures benefits through state revenues and school property taxes. Local governments, however, shouldered $929 million in uncompensated health care costs and local law enforcement costs not paid for by the state, the 2006 report found.

The Rice study — which looked at state figures, not local costs — updated it using figures from 2018, estimating that roughly 6% of the total state population that year was in the U.S. without legal authorization. With roughly 65% of those residents working in the labor force and less than 6% unemployed, the study estimated they accounted for more than 8% of the state’s workforce.

In 2018, those residents paid some $2.4 billion in state sales taxes, property taxes and consumer taxes on gasoline, vehicle inspections and more, the study estimated. It estimated they cost the state just more than $2 billion in education, health care and prison costs.

In April, Attorney General Ken Paxton said that Texans pay more than $850 million per year on illegal immigration, and the recent surge at the border could cause that amount to surpass $1 billion.

Paxton blamed President Joe Biden’s immigration policies for causing the surge of illegal immigration and escalated criminal activity at the Texas-Mexico border.

Paxton's office said "uncompensated care" for those migrants costs public hospital districts between $579 million to $717 million, and between $62 million and $90 million for their

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inclusion in the state's Emergency Medicaid program.

Housing unauthorized migrants costs $152 million a year, and between $31 million and $63 million a year is spent on education for unaccompanied minors who illegally crossed the border, according to the attorney general's office.

"Texans are hardworking and generous people, but the cost of illegal immigration is an unconscionable burden on the taxpayers of our great state," Paxton said. "If we use the minimum estimated costs for services Texas provides to unlawfully present and undocumented aliens, taxpayers are shelling out an estimated $855 million every year. Texas will always welcome those who legally immigrate, but we cannot continue forcing taxpayers to foot the bill for individuals who skirt the law and skip the line. I will continue to fight for justice, safety, and prosperity for all Texans."

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Olaguibel: Construction for full cargo facilities will soon begin at Anzalduas
Steve Taylor
Rio Grande Guardian
November 30, 2021
https://riograndeguardian.com/olaguibel-construction-for-full-cargo-facilities-will-soon-begin-at-anzalduas/

MCALLEN, Texas – Juan Olaguibel, superintendent of bridges for the City of McAllen, had an alarm set on his mobile phone for the minute he received hot news from the federal government.

That alarm has now gone off and so construction for full cargo facilities at Anzalduas International Bridge can soon begin.

Olaguibel (pictured above) spoke about the alarm he set during his monthly presentation to the McAllen Economic Development Corporation board of directors.

"With regards to the Anzalduas cargo project, I am happy to say the design is in the final stage. I have an alarm on. As soon as I get that email, this thing is supposed to go off really, really, loud. It is supposed to be really, really, soon. That is what the government says. As soon as we get it, that means that we will be signing the agreement and we will be ready for construction for our full cargo facilities at Anzalduas. I will keep you posted on that," Olaguibel told the MEDC board.

Olaguibel will be present on Wednesday, Dec. 1, when an official signing ceremony takes place at McAllen City Hall for a "Donation Acceptance Agreement" for full cargo facilities at Anzalduas International Bridge. The event is slated to take place at 11 a.m. on the 1st.

Anzalduas International Bridge is co-owned by the cities of McAllen, Mission, Hidalgo and Granjeno. The mayors of these four cities, Javier Villalobos of McAllen, Armando Ocaña of Mission, Sergio Coronado of Hidalgo, and Yvette Cabrera of Granjeno, are slated to be at the signing ceremony.

Others VIPs slated to appear at the signing ceremony, include: U.S. Sen, John Cornyn, state Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa of McAllen, state Rep. Terry Canales of Edinburg,state Rep. Sergio Muñoz of Mission, Hidalgo County Judge Richard Cortez, Hidalgo County Commissioners Eddie Cantu of Pharr and Everardo Villarreal of Mission, McAllen City Manager Roel "Roy" Rodriguez, and CBP Port Director Carlos Rodriguez.

"These facilities will allow full cargo commercial traffic to cross into the United States from Mexico, increasing trade between the two countries.The project cost is $49.9 millionand will be paid by state and local funds," a City of McAllen news advisory states.

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Olaguibel told the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service: “After this (signing ceremony) we will be able to construct.”

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U.S. security review stalls sale of Shell Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex
Erwin Seba
Reuters
November 30, 2021
https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/news/shell-deer-park-texas-refinery-174037853.html?guccounter=1

HOUSTON (Reuters) - A U.S. national security review has delayed the sale of Royal Dutch Shell's controlling interest in a Texas refinery to Mexico's national oil company, Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex), Shell said on Tuesday.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800-barrel-per-day (bpd) Deer Park, Texas, refinery outside Houston to partner Pemex for about $596 million. The closing was expected as early as Wednesday.

Approval by the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) is the last hurdle to the transfer of full control of the Texas refinery to Pemex, said people familiar with the matter.

"While we were hopeful we could conclude the sale of the Deer Park refinery earlier in the CFIUS review process, we're still targeting late 2021 as a closing date for the transfer of Shell's interest in the refinery," Shell spokesperson Curtis Smith said.

A spokesperson for CFIUS declined to comment.

One person close to Pemex said CFIUS approval could happen in mid-December.

A person who works at Deer Park said, however, there is no certain closing date. "Could be next week. Could be early next year," the person said.

U.S. Representative Brian Babin, a Republican representing southeast Texas, called on Tuesday for the U.S. government to block the sale, saying "Pemex lacks the technical expertise, safety record, and business practices needed to operate a facility of such scale in the United States."

"Allowing a foreign company run by an administration that is hostile toward American energy producers access to our critical infrastructure endangers my constituents and threatens our national security," Babin said in a statement.

Babin has openly criticized the sale since June, when he requested a review by the U.S. Treasury and Energy departments.

Under the sale agreement announced in May, Shell would retain control of the Deer Park facility's chemical plant and the company will have only one refinery in the United States, the 230,611-bpd plant in Norco, Louisiana.

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Mexico to reverse course, give COVID-19 booster shots
Associated Press
November 30, 2021

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https://www.registercitizen.com/news/article/Mexico-to-reverse-course-give-COVID-19-booster-16663293.php

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mexican officials have reversed their previous position against giving coronavirus booster shots and said Tuesday they are studying a plan to administer third doses to people over 60.

The announcement came as Mexico nears 450,000 deaths from COVID-19. The country has fully vaccinated only about 50% of its 126 million people.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said plans for the boosters are still being drawn up, but added, “It won’t be long, we have the vaccines.”

López Obrador's administration has long resisted adopting measures like mandatory face masks, mass testing and travel restrictions that have been used in many other countries.

Assistant Health Secretary Hugo López-Gatell had said as recently as August that there was no scientific evidence to justify giving booster shots, and suggested they were part of a campaign by vaccine manufacturers to increase sales.

“This proposal is being strongly pushed by the pharmaceutical companies, but it has been rejected by international organizations ... because there is no scientific evidence indicating the need for booster shots," López-Gatell said at the time.

The government also long resisted vaccinating minors, but recently relented and began administering shots to youths between 15 and 17 years of age.

Of special concern are the nation's teachers, almost all of whom got the CanSino Chinese vaccine in the spring. There have been suggestions that single-dose vaccine's protection begins to wane.

Mexico's test-confirmed coronavirus death toll stood at 293,950 on Tuesday, but because the country does so little testing, many people have died without tests. The government's own analysis of death certificates indicates the real toll is about 448,658.

Officials have been downplaying the threat posed by the Omicron variant first identified in South Africa, saying the new strain illustrates the need to get more vaccines to poorer countries.

“It's not that the new variant is terrible,” López Obrador “It's that the poor countries of the world have been abandoned."

True to form, López Obrador said there would be dance music at a massive gathering he is planning in Mexico City's vast main plaza Wednesday to celebrate his first three years in office. The president, as usual, said face masks would be optional.

“Those who want to wear face masks can do so,” López Obrador said. “We are against authoritarianism.”

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Texas Land Commissioner announces agreement authorizing construction of border wall on state-owned land
Palestine Herald-Press
November 30, 2021
https://www.palestineherald.com/news/texas-land-commissioner-announces-agreement-authorizing-construction-of-border-wall-on-state-owned-land/article_4df4ae4e-5177-11ec-973b-3f1b22644e64.html

WESLACO—On Monday, Nov. 29, Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush announced the signing of a lease agreement between the General Land Office and the Texas Department of Public Safety authorizing the construction of border wall along a GLO-owned farm tract in Starr County.

The signing of this lease agreement is the latest effort by Commissioner Bush to mitigate the immigration crisis following Governor Greg Abbott's emergency declaration to complete the Texas border wall.

"Washington continues to ignore the Biden Administration's border crisis, leaving Texans no choice but to take matters into our own hands," Bush said. "Lease revenue from this land directly benefits the most important asset in Texas—our schoolchildren. As the border crisis continues to escalate, the lives of Texans are being endangered and we are at serious risk of losing revenue generated from leased lands along the Texas-Mexico border. I thank DPS for their partnership on this critical issue, working together, we will secure our border."

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Texas Looks to Its Future to Guide Its Past
Tyler Cowen
Bloomberg Opinion
November 30, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-11-30/texas-looks-to-its-future-to-guide-its-past

Texans think very highly of Texas. This has always been the case, at least in my experience, but during a recent trip to Austin I noticed a deeper development: Texans are beginning to come to terms with their state's history — and they are less concerned about past misdeeds than about future achievements.

The relevant "monument" in Austin at the moment is Tesla's new headquarters and factory, called Giga Texas, which is still under construction. When complete, it is promised to be almost one mile long, and it is already so big it is difficult to see all at once. Meanwhile, about 90 miles southwest and almost 200 years into the past, plans are proceeding for a $400 million renovation of the Alamo site, even though the project would disrupt older burial sites, including for indigenous peoples. That too is Texas at work.

I am a fan of Texas and have long been a booster of its prospects. I also live in Virginia, and can't help but notice the difference in the treatment of the historical.

Consider the state flag, which is on display everywhere in Texas. In fact it is reputed to be the best-selling state flag, and can be found on items ranging from bikinis to boots, even though it represents a history every bit as fraught as Virginia's. Texas had slavery both before and after it joined the Union, and the flag dates from 1839. Nor did Texas treat Native Americans well, especially during its period as an independent nation.

The veneration of the Texas flag stands in stark contrast to the flag not only of Virginia but also of the Confederacy, which was once flown prominently in both states but is now socially unacceptable to display anywhere.

Context, however, is all important, so I can accept this difference in flag traditions. As Texas continues to boom, its core story is being retold. The new Texas narrators — such as the startup crowd and real-estate developers — treat the past as bygone and adopt a more forward-looking perspective. They ask which regions and political units, victimized groups included, will do the most for America.

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That may feel like dodging crucial questions about historic injustice, but consider Texas's recent record of job creation and inward migration. The Texas approach has passed a market test by attracting and keeping significant numbers of minorities. By one measure, people of color account for 95% of Texas's population growth since 2010. That too is a kind of restitution.

A visitor to Texas also can't help but ponder questions about land rights. It is now common practice for universities and companies, especially in blue states, to make "land acknowledgements," decrying the thefts of their current real estate from indigenous tribes. Yet there is rarely serious talk about giving those lands back — never mind giving indigenous peoples a share in Harvard's hedge fund income or Microsoft's dividends. This supposed acknowledgement mocks the powerlessness of those victimized groups while displaying the arrogance of power.

The Texas approach is more honest. Implicitly at least, the state recognizes that none of its land will be returned to indigenous peoples — but it offers the descendants of those groups the opportunity to shape its future and share in its prosperity, if only by working or owning property there.

If you go to BookPeople, an Austin book store emphasizing many left-wing titles (and where virtually everyone wears a mask, a rarity in the city), you will find prominently displayed T.R. Fehrenbach's monumental "Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans." The book proudly defends the broader sweep of Texas history, including the taking of Texas from Mexico and then the absorption of Texas into the United States, a sequence not without its share of chicanery.

I don't agree with every moral judgment in that book. But I am glad to see it has not been cancelled, even in the bluest part of the state. Arguably Texas pride is part of what is helping Texas build a better future. This emphasis on the future over the past is being strengthened by the arrival of so many out-of-state migrants, including well-to-do Californians from the technology sector.

None of this is to say that all historical discourses should mirror those now playing out in Texas. There is no single best answer or response to the rise of wokeism. But one thing the pandemic has made clear is that public messaging is a lot cruder and a lot simpler than one might wish.

So should we talk about "the future" or obsess over "the past"? The state of Texas is making a pretty good case for a marginal revolution — for a little less self-excoriation and a little more self-visualization.

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Voters are sending a message with rejection of school bonds, and districts must listen
Editorial Board
Dallas Morning News
December 1, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2021/12/01/voters-are-sending-a-message-with-rejection-of-school-bonds-and-districts-must-listen/

Texas voters have a long habit of rubber-stamping school bond packages. And, for the most part, that's been a good thing.

But as we recently highlighted in Allen ISD, and as reporter Corbett Smith laid out in more detail in a recent story, it isn't as easy these days for school boards to get their

whole wish list out of voters. And that's a good thing, too. Officials need to know that voters are looking at their spending carefully and are ready to send a message of financial accountability and fiscal restraint.

In the past year, multimillion dollar propositions in Dallas, Fort Worth, Allen, Azle and White Settlement have all been rejected. Smith reports that, across the state, only 47% of 110 district-led propositions passed on the November ballot.

That pushback from traditionally easygoing voters has raised questions about what political dynamics are at play locally and statewide.

We can't know why individual voters decided the way they did, but we see a pattern in the outcomes of North Texas school bond elections. Voters are rejecting projects that they see as spending on areas beyond core education, and they're often saying no for good reason.

Allen voters have twice turned down spending on athletic facilities since 2020 but approved $214 million in campus infrastructure and technology improvements. Last fall, Dallas ISD voters funded repairs and upgrades to more than 200 campuses along with technology spending but rejected three propositions focused on expensive new facilities for the fine arts and athletics. Similar scenarios played out in the Fort Worth and Azle school districts this November.

Meanwhile, White Settlement ISD voters balked at a $115 million package to expand schools, from classrooms to playgrounds to fine arts spaces, but approved a tax increase to boost counseling and teacher salaries.

In Allen ISD, a conservative political action committee takes credit for mobilizing voters, but we cannot ascribe the bond failures in other North Texas communities to the same movement.

It would also be too easy to attribute this broad voter rejection of school bonds to incendiary national politics. Rockwall ISD can offer some perspective on this. In the spring, this predominantly conservative community spurned school board candidates critical of masking mandates or guidelines in schools, and in the fall, it approved bond funds for new schools and technology.

People are keenly aware of their growing property tax bills, and the days of letting school boards borrow to the hilt might be over. We don't see voters rejecting education spending. We see them holding local governments accountable for how their money is spent.

State lawmakers gave voters a hand in 2019, when they required that districts separate out the construction of stadiums, swimming pools, theaters and other special facilities from general construction propositions. This requirement allows voters to review projects more carefully. It was the right thing to do.

Arts and athletics are important aspects of our children's education, and we don't think voters are asking that they be tossed aside. But as financial pressures grow on families, it's understandable that they want schools to focus on the meat and potatoes. It's a message that officials must heed.

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Analysis: Betting a Texas election on a weather forecast
Ross Ramsey

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Texas Tribune
December 1, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/01/texas-election-winter-storm/

In spite of the confident assurances from Texas officeholders, there's still a risk that your power will go off in the face of a big winter storm in the next few months.

Sure, this is politics. The problem, as Austin energy consultant Doug Lewin told The Texas Tribune's Mitchell Ferman, is not with technology, or even with the way electric plants are operated. It's regulatory. This is exactly the sort of problem politics and government were made for — one that can be fixed in Austin.

It's a question of who the state government is working for at any given time. Was it the electric utilities? The natural gas producers who fuel so many electric plants? Commercial and industrial electric customers willing to weather a few blackouts here and there if it means cheaper electric rates? Was it residential customers who want light and heat and water, even (or especially) when it's freezing cold?

Lobbyists are in power when the Legislature is writing laws, the governor is appointing regulators and the state agencies are writing rules. Voters are in power in election years.

Winter is coming, and so is an election year. It doesn't matter whether someone is a great fundraiser, an incumbent, a movie star or someone who flashes a skateboard in a Whataburger parking lot late at night. The job people like that are seeking starts with keeping Texans safe.

Texas failed to do that in February. The Legislature passed some bills on the subject. Some think they came up short. The governor has said that everything that could be done was done, that there's nothing to see here, that the risks are gone.

"I can guarantee the lights will stay on," he told Austin's Fox 7 News last weekend. He said he's "very confident" and said he had signed "almost a dozen laws that make the power grid more effective."

Hope he's right. So do his many supporters and donors — not to mention the Texans who suffered through the last storm.

Those laws include getting electric generating plants ready for winter. The natural gas providers who fuel many of those plants aren't required to winterize yet; the Texas Railroad Commission won't have those requirements written into the rules until after this winter. There's still a lot to do.

The risk for Abbott and the rest of the elected class is that voters, who expect and demand results to the problems with the Texas electric grid, have the right to toss anyone who doesn't deliver.

Voters have the power to be as tough as the state itself was earlier this year, when it dumped the people at the top of ERCOT and the Public Utility Commission.

The reasons are different. The elected people ran out the appointed people as a kind of political sacrifice, feeding the regulators to an angry public before those voters fixed the blame on the elected class.

So far, that's been enough. Republicans are betting the voters will stay warm this winter, and that will be that.

Meanwhile, the Democrats harping on the chances of a repeat disaster are doing so in self interest. President Joe Biden's popularity is down. National issues — immigration, the withdrawal from Afghanistan and so on — play into Republican hands. Republican lawmakers drew the election maps during this year's redistricting.

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It'll take something big to topple the Republican advantage in the state this year. Like a blackout or a bad reaction to the Texas Legislature's very conservative work this year. Without something surprising that moves voters, Texas Democrats start the election cycle at the bottom of a steep hill.

And voters might not be thinking about any of this when the general election rolls around in November. It probably won't be that cold at that time. It's a good distance from February to the election, and voters could be making their decisions on the basis of other issues.

But the electric grid remains a sore spot, even after the bills passed by the Legislature and then signed and bragged on by the governor. In a University of Texas/Texas Tribune poll in October, 60% of voters said they disapproved of lawmakers' response to February's blackouts — including 78% of self-identified Democrats, 46% of Republicans and 61% of independents.

The incumbents on the ballot are forging ahead, watching the political polls and the weather forecasts and hoping the governor's confidence is rewarded.

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American elections are getting less predictable; there's a reason for that
John Opdycke
The Hill
November 30, 2021
https://thehill.com/opinion/campaign/583435-american-elections-are-getting-less-predictable-theres-a-reason-for-that?rl=1

Much has been written about the recent elections in Virginia and New Jersey and what they mean for the Democratic and GOP brands heading into the midterms. Most share two core assumptions: The Red vs. Blue paradigm is still the most accurate way to understand political outcomes, and the increasingly unpredictable gyrations of voters are but a natural pendulum within two party political life.

Polls are routinely wrong — by wide margins. Voters seem to be acting and reacting to a new set of rules and concerns. Political analysts should be asking "What's going on? Do we need new ways and new tools to understand voters? Is something happening in America that we don't quite get?" But that's not what's happening.

Case in point is how the analyst community relates to independent voters.

The largest and fastest growing segment of the electorate is now independent voters: 40 percent to 45 percent of American voters are registered to vote or identify themselves as independents, a trend that is on the uptick in red, blue and purple states. This includes 50 percent of younger Americans. In the 30 states that register by party, "no-party-affiliation" voters are on track to be the largest or second largest group of registrants by 2030.

Most political scientists and analysts consider this trend to be unimportant, not worth studying or understanding.

Some go so far as to insist that independents are not really independents. They are “party leaners.” It is standard practice among polling firms to ask people how they identify themselves, and then to ask people who say “independent” which party they lean towards. Thus, an electorate that is 40 percent independent, 30 percent Democratic and 30 percent Republican magically becomes an electorate that is roughly 50 percent Democratic and 50 percent Republican.

Political science insists that the voters should fit the analysis, not the other way around.

It’s a clever trick. And it works in the short term. You simply reclassify independent voters as Democratic or Republican fellow-travelers and then feed their views and opinions into the existing algorithms and analytical frameworks. You generate end-product that seems to make sense: “Democrats need to distance themselves from woke extremism;” “Republicans should emphasize small business recovery and less regulation.” It works.

And yet it doesn’t.

We live in an era of insurgencies. Outsiders like Ross Perot, Barack Obama, Bernie Sanders, AOC, Andrew Yang and Donald Trump (to name a few) dominate the political landscape. They tap into ... something. A desire for disruption, a hunger for cross-ideological (even contradictory-ideological or non-ideological) forms of political expression, a craving for authenticity over platform consistency. I won’t slap on convenient labels nor attempt to link these disjointed uprisings into one cohesive narrative — but it seems obvious to me that an analytical approach that insists upon ignoring significant shifts in how the American people identify themselves is going to miss the mark when it comes to understanding this current/emerging era of insurgency and disruption.

In Virginia, independent voters, who supported Biden by 19 points over Trump in 2020, supported Republican Glenn Youngkin over Democrat Terry McAulliffe by 9 points — a 28-point swing. Many young people — the majority of them independents — stayed home. Insisting that independents are “partisans lite” covers over a very fluid and dynamic situation. What a missed opportunity to dig deeper into what’s going on.

The decision to register to vote as an independent has consequences. It makes you a second-class citizen in many states, unable to vote in primaries, serve on boards of elections, or even work the polls. You are legally barred from running for judge in Delaware if you are not a Democrat or Republican. Despite the costs, Americans are increasingly choosing this identity.

My experience, as someone who has led dozens of campaigns to give independents full voting rights in primary elections, is that voters who identify and/or register to vote as independent do so for concrete reasons, ranging from the mundane to the profound. Political analysts should be jumping over each other to dig deeper into this

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emerging phenomenon. Instead, independents are — poof — disappeared with the click of a button, magically to reappear as partisan leaners. Problem solved. Opportunity missed.

There is something going on in American politics. Understanding that it starts with listening to the American people, millions of whom are going independent would be a start. They have a lot to say. And we have much to learn.

John Opdycke is the President of Open Primaries, a national election reform organization.

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/13/21
Date: Monday, December 13, 2021 9:50:45 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 13, 2021

Texas secretary of state sends 'exhaustive' election audit ask to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin counties, *Dallas Morning News*, December 10, 2021

2nd phase of 2020 election audit in 4 Texas counties underway, *KXAN-TV*, December 10, 2021

Republicans in Texas County, in Unusual Move, Upend Primary System, *New York Times*, December 10, 2021

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Montgomery County to conduct Conroe's May election to boost polling locations, *Houston Chronicle*, December 10, 2021

Opportunity was snatched away from Dallas County Latino communities when Texas Republicans redrew congressional maps, *Texas Tribune*, December 13, 2021

Campbell draws GOP opponent in District 25, *New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung*, December 10, 2021

Conservative wins show power of politics in HISD board races, *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 2021

U.S. to Coordinate With Mexico, Regional Countries for Crackdown on People Smuggling, *Reuters*, December 11, 2021

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USMCA neighbors Canada, Mexico cry foul over Biden's electric car subsidies, *Washington Times*, December 12, 2021

Mexican peso is on a skid; Buying power decreases with value, *Brownsville Herald*, December 12, 2021

Port Houston's trade jumps 51% to nearly $17B, *FreightWaves*, December 12, 2021

Is it time to get tougher with AMLO as energy policies threaten U.S. companies?, *Houston Chronicle*, December 13, 2021

Analysis: From homegrown culture warriors to tomorrow's Texas leaders, *Texas Tribune*, December 13, 2021

Texas secretary of state sends 'exhaustive' election audit ask to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin counties
Philip Jankowski
Dallas Morning News
December 10, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/10/texas-secretary-of-state-sends-exhaustive-request-to-dallas-tarrant-counties-in-election-audit/

AUSTIN — Texas Secretary of State John Scott announced late Friday that his office has presented an "exhaustive" document request to Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris counties as part of an audit of 2020′s election.

Scott's office also announced that phase one of the audit is nearing completion, with a summary of findings expected to be made public by the end of December. The document request marks the beginning of the second phase of the audit, according to a news release from the secretary of state's office.

The request, sent to election administrators at each of the counties, asks for the counties to provide information including a full accounting of mail-in votes and provisional votes, any reported chain of custody issues as well as complaints that those offices might have received regarding the 2020 presidential election.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Scott said in the news release.

The ongoing audit comes amid unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud in 2020

pushed forward by former President Donald Trump. In September, Trump called for Texas to perform a full audit of the 2020 election results, despite winning the state by 5.5 percentage points.

The secretary of state's office announced the ongoing audit just hours after Trump made his demand. Trump later called the audit "weak" and pressured Gov. Greg Abbott to add an election audit to the special legislative session that was ongoing at the time. Abbott declined.

Following Friday's announcement, James Slattery, a senior counsel at the Texas Civil Rights Project, called the document request from the secretary of state's office a "fishing expedition."

"No other words to describe these unbelievably wide ranging document requests than 'fishing expedition,' " Slattery said on Twitter. "It'll tie these offices up in knots just as the primary season begins, diverting crucial resources from helping voters navigate all of 2021's election law changes."

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2nd phase of 2020 election audit in 4 Texas counties underway
Jaclyn Ramkissoon
KXAN-TV
December 10, 2021
https://www.kxan.com/news/texas-politics/2nd-phase-of-2020-election-audit-in-4-texas-counties-underway/

AUSTIN (KXAN) — The Texas Secretary of State's Office announced Friday it's beginning Phase 2 of its forensic audit of the 2020 general election results in four counties.

The office first announced the forensic audit for Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant Counties in September and explained the process would be carried out in two phases.

The office spent a little over two months in Phase 1 of the audit, which focused on voting machine accuracy, cybersecurity assessments and identifying and removing any ineligible voters who may have casted ballots during the election. Any potential instances of illegal voting were to be sent to the Texas Attorney General's Office to be investigated.

A summary of findings from Phase 1 of the audit will be available to the public by the end of this month, the SOS' office said.

Phase 2 of the audit began with an "exhaustive document request" from the four counties, the SOS' office said on Friday. The office claims the request "covers more election materials than any other election audit in the United States to date," and the

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audit of those four counties will cover about 35% of all votes cast in the state during the 2020 election.

The office is asking for all documents county election officials are required to maintain for 22 months after each election under federal and state law.

According to a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott addressed to the four counties' elections administrators, the counties are being asked to locate the documents in preparation for an on-site examination, tentatively scheduled for some time in January.

Also in the letter, Scott asks the elections administrators several questions about election security, including the following:

- Do you have badge-controlled access to your election office?
- Do you keep track of who enters into the office, especially sensitive areas?
- Are visitors escorted at all times?
- Do you keep track of who enters the ballot programming area?
- Are the number of people authorized to access the programming area limited?

Click here to read the full letter outlining all the documents the Texas Secretary of State's Office requested.

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Republicans in Texas County, in Unusual Move, Upend Primary System
Jennifer Medina
New York Times
December 10, 2021
https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/politics/republicans-amarillo-potter-county-primary.html

The Republican Party in the second-largest county in the Texas Panhandle is planning to conduct its own election during the state primary in March, breaking away from a nonpartisan county election board in a highly unusual move.

The G.O.P. in Potter County, which includes Amarillo, plans to use ballots that will be marked and counted by hand, rather than employ the electronic systems that the county has relied on for decades. Election experts said the changes would confuse voters and create more potential for fraud.

Under Texas law, county parties are allowed to run their own primary elections, but the vast majority have contracted with local boards of election for decades. The decision, which was reported by Votebeat, an election news website, comes as Republicans nationally have continued to push baseless claims of fraud in the 2020 election and sow doubts about the reliability of election machinery.

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Daniel L. Rogers, the chairman of the Potter County Republicans, said that he made the decision this week because “a lot of voters have concerns” with the electronic counters and “don’t feel comfortable with them.” He did not cite evidence of any problems arising under the current system, and studies have shown that hand counting leads to more inaccuracies. He argued that paper ballots would be more secure.

“The parties have become lazy and complacent, but the primaries are actually the party’s responsibility,” said Mr. Rogers, a real estate broker whose office was decorated with red Make America Great Again hats when a New York Times reporter interviewed him last year. “The counties are spending millions of dollars on electronic systems, but this way it’s a true secret ballot.”

He said that “the voters are smarter than our elected officials, than administrators — they don’t trust the voters. I do.”

Mark P. Jones, a professor of political science at Rice University in Houston, said the move “removes the Republican Party one more step away from the standard electoral procedure.”

He added: “The integrity of our electoral system depends on institutionalizing and professionalizing election boards. There will be more doubts about the overall outcome, or it will lead to more slip-ups and more potential flaws and problems than if the professionals ran it.”

Potter County has about 57,000 registered voters, and they are overwhelmingly Republican: Roughly 70 percent cast their ballots for Donald J. Trump in 2020.

Mr. Rogers, when asked if the election results nationally were valid, responded, “I don’t have any idea and that’s the problem — I don’t know if it was accurate or not.”

Under state law, the county elections board will still be responsible for absentee and early voting, which a majority of voters in Texas use to cast their ballots. But the two systems, experts said, could complicate the process and make it easier for voters to cast ballots twice.

“It opens the door wide to fraud,” Dr. Jones said. “It doesn’t close the door to fraud.”

The legal office of the Texas secretary of state, who oversees elections in the state and who was appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, raised several concerns about the move.

“Any time that a party conducts their own election rather than contracting with a county, it is more confusing to voters,” said Sam Taylor, the assistant secretary of state for communications. Still, he added that “ultimately it’s their decision to go at it alone.”

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One risk, Mr. Taylor said, is that candidates in contested races could file election challenges to prompt a court to order a new primary election. “It’s not unprecedented,” he said. “But county parties usually do not invite that opportunity upon themselves.”

“They have every legal right to do so,” he added. “We can’t really intervene.”

Melynn Huntley, the Potter County elections administrator, said that she had been taken aback by Mr. Rogers’s decision and that she was most worried about the potential to make it easier to vote twice.

“The biggest worry I have is that those two systems will not talk with each other,” Ms. Huntley said. “His desire is to eliminate fraud, but there is a vulnerability in the plan. I am concerned whether this can function with high integrity.”

Ms. Huntley, who has served as elections administrator for eight years, said that when she took on the job, she pledged not to vote in either party’s primary so that she could maintain her role as a nonpartisan overseer.

“I am truly trying to figure out how this is going to work,” she said.

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Emails: Texas' Election Audit Caught Collin and Tarrant County Officials Flat-Footed
Patrick Strickland
Dallas Observer
December 13, 2021
https://www.dallasobserver.com/news/emails-texas-election-audit-caught-collin-and-tarrant-county-officials-flatfooted-13000167

Back in September, Texas state officials announced that they had “already begun” what was dubbed a “full forensic audit” into the November 2020 presidential elections that saw Joe Biden defeat former President Donald Trump.

Now, an investigation by the watchdog American Oversight has brought back communication records and documents that show election officials in Collin and Tarrant counties were caught on their heels when the audit was announced, and that they apparently had no idea what the process meant.

In one of the emails American Oversight obtained, Collin County Election Administrator Bruce Sherbet informed employees that the audit would kick off in November.

(Does the timing feel a bit funny to you? Well: “Governor Abbott, we need a ‘Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election,’” Trump wrote in an open letter to Abbott. “Texans know

voting fraud occurred in some of their counties." A little more than eight hours later, boom: an audit is born.)

Texas Director of Elections Keith Ingram had informed Sherbet of the upcoming probe, despite having previously told the Collin County elections administrator that the vote had been both "smooth and secure."

On Sept. 24, Collin County Commissioner Darrell Hale wrote back to Sherbet and Collin County Administrator Bill Bilyeu. "What is the story?" he asked. "What's going on?"

"Just heard about it last night," Sherbet replied. "Not sure of any details."

Later, Hale confessed to an inquisitive constituent by email, "We are curious on the details ourselves."

Trump brought home 51% of the votes in Collin County, while Biden took 46%, nearly the same margin by which the former Republican president won Texas as a whole. Not only has there been no evidence of widespread voter fraud in Texas, Attorney General Ken Paxton has only closed a whopping total of 16 minor fraud cases, all of which were investigated in Harris County.

Biden narrowly bested Trump in Tarrant County, where voters hadn't gone for a Democratic presidential candidate since 1964.

After the Texas Secretary of State's Office announced the audit, Tarrant County Elections Administrator Heider Garcia urged election officials not to comment publicly until they figured out what exactly was going on and knew "what they need from us," the email communications American Oversight obtained show. Garcia urged the officials to forward any media inquiries to him.

But the lack of clarity about what such an audit actually means and what it involves hasn't stopped Texas Republicans from finding a way to spend Texans' money on the process. (By the time it would be said and done, one economic analysis firm predicts a statewide audit would cost up to some $250 million in taxpayer bucks.)

For now, the audit focuses on Dallas, Harris, Collin and Tarrant counties, and in November, Abbott and leading GOP legislators have already moved $4 million from the state prison coffers to help bankroll the probe. The funds will go toward hiring, training and sending out election auditors to — again — doublecheck the results of an election Republicans handily won.

Even Tarrant County Judge Glen Whitley, a Republican, has blasted the audit as a waste of time and resources. "The conspiracy theorists who want to come up with all these ways or reasons why this election wasn't right — they might very well find something else," he told the Texas Tribune last month. "It's time to move on."

After Trump got voted out, Attorney General Paxton caught flak for spending taxpayer money on lawsuits asking the Supreme Court to throw out results in four battleground states that picked Biden over Trump: Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin. "There is no reason not to do an audit," Paxton said earlier this year. "There is no reason not to know the truth of every election."

Last month, Abbott defended the audit while appearing on Fox News. "Why do we audit everything in this world, but people raise their hands in concern when we audit elections, which is fundamental to our democracy?" the governor said.

Meanwhile, here at the Observer, no one has thought to "raise their hands in concern" over auditing an election in a state everyone agrees Republicans won. Instead, we're sitting around scratching our heads, entirely clueless as to how Texas produced so many U.S. Capitol rioters last January.

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Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election
Judd Baker
KAMR-TV
December 13, 2021
https://www.valleycentral.com/news/potter-county-republican-party-making-move-to-hand-marked-hand-counted-ballots-in-primary-election/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT)— The Potter County Republican Party said it is changing the way it holds primary elections, making a move to hand-marked and counted ballots.

“This is the way we did it, and it worked for over 200 years,” said Republican Party Chairman, Dan Rogers.

“They vote to not go with electronic voting machines, that we go back to the way we used to do things where we vote in our precincts, and marked and counted manual poll books countywide,” said Rogers.

So how does this change the way you vote?

Potter County Elections Administrator Melynn Huntley said if you are voting in the Republican Primary during early voting, you can still go to a voting center and cast your ballot on an electronic voting machine as normal, for now. The same applies to absentee voting. Voters will still mail in their ballots and have them tabulated by Huntley’s office.

However, if you are going to vote as a Republican in the primary on Election Day, in Potter County, you will have to vote in a precinct, not a voting center, on the hand-marked paper ballots.

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“I look up your name, you sign, we look at your ID make sure it matches what’s on there, you sign, we give you a ballot, and you fill it out, and then you drop it in a box, and you leave,” said Rogers.

Rogers said he would like to see the Potter County Democratic Party adopt the same voting style.

We reached out to the Potter County Democratic Chair, Amy Taylor, for comment. Said in a statement:

“The system of voting that’s been in place for the last fifteen years in Potter County is watertight. Voter fraud under the current system is not possible. Therefore, I see no need to change to a system of all paper ballots. It’s the Republican Party’s right to run the Primary Election as they see fit, but the Potter County Democratic Party will not be following suit.” - AMY TAYLOR | POTTER COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CHAIR

“I want the Democrats’ vote counted, as well as the Republicans without any question. And I’m not saying there’s fraud. I’m not accusing anybody of doing anything wrong,” said Rogers. “You know, we have a phenomenal election administrator here that does a wonderful job. But it’s not about that. It’s about doing what’s right for the voters.”

Rogers said he has contacted other Republican County Chairs to let them know what they are doing, and what he thinks every Republican county chair should follow suit.

We asked Randall County Elections Administrator Shannon Lackey if she anticipated any changes to their primary election. She said, “I don’t anticipate any changes for Randall County. A joint primary has already been decided upon by both Party Chairs and the resolution will be adopted in Commissioner’s Court on Tuesday.”

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State of Texas: Federal lawsuit over redistricting might delay Texas primary election
Tahera Rahman
KXAN-TV
December 12, 2021
https://www.kxan.com/state-of-texas/state-of-texas-federal-lawsuit-over-redistricting-might-delay-texas-primary-election/

AUSTIN (KXAN) – The U.S. Department of Justice is suing the state of Texas, saying the state’s new redistricting maps deny and dilute votes from people of color.

The DOJ says Texas’ new maps purposely violate Section 2 of the federal Voting Rights Act based on certain voters’ race and/or minority group — also known as “vote dilution.”

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In a press conference Monday, U.S. Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta pointed to Texas' two new congressional districts specifically. The state gained two seats due to its population growth from the 2010 to 2020 U.S. Census. Texas grew by nearly 4 million residents, with an estimated 95% of that growth due to Latino and Black residents.

"…Texas has designed both of those new seats to have white voting majorities," she said. "The congressional plan also deliberately reconfigured a west Texas district to eliminate the opportunity for Latino voters to elect a representative of their choice."

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton took to Twitter to criticize the lawsuit, calling it a "preposterous attempt to sway democracy."

The Texas primary election is scheduled for March 1, but some say it could be put on hold because of the federal lawsuit.

U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, said he's fought against Texas redistricting before and supports the DOJ's challenge.

He doesn't believe any map changes would dramatically affect the newly-created district he is running for, Congressional District 37.

"This district is mainly the city of Austin, Westlake and Rollingwood," Doggett said.

He said CD 37 is the area he represented before previous redistricting-related legislative and court actions changed his boundaries.

"And now, the district I serve today stretches from north of 183 and I-35, to the very south side of San Antonio. So often, I find myself needing to be at events in both San Antonio and Austin at the same time," Doggett said of CD 35, which also now has new boundaries under Texas' new maps.

He said one change he's concerned about that might come out of the legal battle is pausing the March primary.

"I hope that doesn't happen, because it moves us off the traditional day, and it usually means fewer people participate," Doggett said.

The lawsuit asks the court to stop Texas from holding elections under these maps and to make new redistricting plans.

Richard Pineda, University of Texas at El Paso political science professor, said it's one of the few things the DOJ can try to do right now: delay the primaries or use existing district maps.

"This is one of the important questions when it comes to these kinds of lawsuits, which is the timeliness of how quickly you can get a federal judge to intervene,"

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Pineda explained.

Pineda said changing maps will be a lot trickier once the primaries start.

“The state is making these changes that’s affected the U.S. congressional districts, but this has also affected municipalities that have redrawn lines for municipal seats like county commissioner districts and also city council seats,” he said. “So it throws a huge wrench into the works to try to stop all these things or try to move against them.”

“But if there’s any entity that has the power to — the Department of Justice,” Pineda added.

Pineda said the next legal steps are to wait for additional filings and for the court to decide a venue and assign a judge to the case.

KXAN reached out to a few of the state lawmakers who supported Texas’ newly redistricted maps. They either did not respond or were not available for an interview.

In October, state Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, defended the new maps during a debate on the Senate floor.

Huffman led the redistricting process in the Senate and said she took the Voting Rights Act into consideration, which is now one of the bases of the Justice Department’s new lawsuit.

“While these maps were drafted blind to race, it is wrong to say that race was wholly ignored in my end-to-end process. I’m committed to giving due regard to all factors relevant to legal compliance, including compliance with section two of the Voting Rights Act,” she said.

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Montgomery County to conduct Conroe’s May election to boost polling locations
Catherine Dominguez
Houston Chronicle
December 10, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/neighborhood/moco/news/article/Montgomery-County-to-conduct-Conroe-s-May-16690579.php

The Conroe City Council agreed to have Montgomery County Elections conduct the city’s May 2022 elections to help save money and offer more polling locations.

The council made the decision during its Thursday meeting.

“If we decide to conduct the election ourselves, I need to go out and buy the equipment,” said City Secretary Soco Gorjon. “The equipment we have now is over 10 years old and some is not working and is not in compliance with new laws.”

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The cost for new equipment, she added, would be about $200,000. The cost to have the county handle the city election would be about $80,000 to $100,000 with 10 to 12 polling locations.

Councilwoman Marsha Porter asked if the city needed that many polling locations. In the past, the city has only offered municipal voting at city hall and at April Sound.

Gorjon said it would likely increase voter turnout and recommended the city allow the county to hold the election.

“The main reason is one big complaint our judges and I received is why is the city making the voters go to two separate elections and why isn’t the city saving money by having the county run the city election,” Gorjon said.

Councilman Curt Maddux noted Montgomery County commissioners in September approved the $8.1 million purchase of over 1,900 voting machines to replace the county’s aging voting machines. The machines will be used in the upcoming March primaries.

While the commissioners had some discussion regarding the integrity of the machines, County Judge Mark Keough’s Chief of Staff Jason Millsaps said the Verity Voting 2.5 by Hart Intercivic Inc. was approved by the Texas Secretary of the State’s Office and Texas Attorney General’s Office in January.

“They review the equipment in person and followed a checklist required to certify the equipment,” Millsaps said. “This system replaces the current electric voting system and has a paper back up element to it is not hackable and is verifiable by not only the voter but something we can look back to later to do a recount or any type audit required.”

Millsaps added the machines are not connected to the internet via a WiFi signal or ethernet cable making it impossible to tamper with.

“So less expense and more polling locations, sounds like a win-win,” said Mayor Jody Czajkoski.

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Opportunity was snatched away from Dallas County Latino communities when Texas Republicans redrew congressional maps
Alexa Ura
Texas Tribune
December 13, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/latinos-texas-redistricting-dallas/

DALLAS — When Henry R. Martinez Jr.'s cellphone rings, it usually means his

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community is in need. A surprise shipment of food must be distributed, a collapsed roof repaired, a vaccination clinic set up at the community center.

His neighbors turn to him in times of want and crisis because he knows them, respects them and will do his best to help. He wishes their government would do the same.

Martinez endeavors to fulfill the needs of the mostly Latino residents of the Ledbetter Eagle Ford community in West Dallas because the broader social and political structures don't — and haven't since his late father first took up this work decades ago.

Change seemed possible when Texas lawmakers met in Austin this year to redraw the state's political maps. The 2020 census showed that the Latino population in the Dallas-Fort Worth area had grown large enough that it seemed possible to cluster their communities, including Ledbetter Eagle Ford, together into a congressional district that would allow them to elect someone more connected to their daily lives.

Perhaps they could finally be represented by a Latino or Latina member of Congress from Dallas. Residents, legal experts and local leaders all pleaded with state lawmakers to acknowledge their constituency in the new district boundaries being drawn up.

Instead, Republicans — who entirely controlled the process — carved up predominantly Latino neighborhoods, leaving many voters of color with even less of a say in who represents them. In a bid to entrench partisan advantage in a rapidly changing state, GOP mapmakers awarded increased representation and control to white voters in rural areas, Austin and Houston.

For Martinez, it was the latest indignity for a community long denied an equal role in the democratic process.

"They're focused more on others than the Latino people, and that's unfortunate and that's sad," Martinez said. "We waited 10 years."

Rather than honoring how representation can be built, Martinez said, "they make us real small."

Generations of community

On a recent weekday, Martinez's phone buzzed late in the evening with an alert of an unexpected donation of fresh fruits and vegetables. It was too last-minute to call on other volunteers that help him run a community-based food pantry, so as a November evening chill set in, Martinez and his wife, Isabel, found themselves unloading a truckload of produce onto the uneven parking lot of a small church.

The following morning, Martinez joined three other volunteers in distributing the donations. Some were sorted into black plastic bags offering a good mix of produce,

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but most of it was loaded straight into car trunks and back seats of grateful residents as the volunteers pulled from clumsily stacked cartons of grapes, pears, berries and a selection of squash, lettuce, tomatoes and bell peppers. There hadn't been enough time to organize.

Yet the demand was so extraordinary. Even with the distribution's impromptu nature, the volunteers faced a long line of cars stretching for blocks in an area where one in four people live below the poverty line.

Ledbetter Eagle Ford sits just west of downtown Dallas, crammed between the Trinity River and Interstate 30. The busy boulevard running through its middle is lined by warehouses, industrial businesses, trucking companies and a few of what Martinez calls historical staples, including an old diner and a barber shop. Behind are rows of single-family homes, some 70 to 80 years old, tucked behind chain link or iron post fences.

It's an old neighborhood, so power lines overhang the streets. But like other historic Latino and Black enclaves in urban centers, its residents have watched warily as redevelopment swallows up areas around them. The homes for sale in Ledbetter Eagle Ford are marketed as "investor opportunities" and for their proximity to nearby trendy areas.

To Martinez, community service is an inheritance from his father. The 62-year-old is the executive director of the Ledbetter Eagle Ford Community Organization, an organization run entirely on donations.

Beyond the food pantry, the organization has helped set up a senior program for older residents at a community center, where they regularly gather to share meals, crossword puzzles and, on a recent weekday, dance moves as some shimmied and twirled over polished wood floors. Months before, the room had been lined with health care workers in masks and face shields for a COVID-19 vaccination clinic Martinez helped organize.

He also leads the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association, founded by his father to represent the area's residents, through which he helps maintain the community by helping neighbors whose homes are in need of repair, among other tasks.

Martinez himself is from and of Ledbetter Eagle Ford, born and raised in the area; his elementary school sits at the end of the road from where he was distributing the donated produce. He splits his time between his day job as a transportation specialist for a chiropractic business, his grown children and a handful of grandchildren, and his service to the community. He is so well known that some of the police officers who regularly patrol the area refer to him as the "mayor of Eagle Ford" when they run into him.

His family ties to the area date back to the early 1900s when immigrants fleeing the violence of revolution in Mexico, including his grandfather, settled in Eagle Ford, drawn in by work at a local cement company. By the late 1980s, a federal judge

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would refer to the area as the “largest Hispanic neighborhood in Dallas.” Also born and raised there, Martinez’s father served in the military before throwing himself into community work and going on to form the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association.

Under his father’s tenure, the organization's agenda ranged from overseeing a small cemetery to helping expand main thoroughfares to pushing back as development began encroaching on the area — all in service of preserving the community’s historical narrative.

Always the group found itself fighting for recognition.

One of its most significant contributions came in the late '80s when the Ledbetter Neighborhood Association joined two local Black leaders, Roy Williams and Marvin Crenshaw, to sue the city of Dallas, claiming its hybrid system for electing some city council members at large violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the votes of African Americans and Mexican Americans.

Black and Latino residents had been pushing for change for decades, looking to the courts to force Dallas to move from a system in which city council members were elected citywide to a mixed system with some elected from smaller single-member districts. But that hybrid system still drew objections as Black and Hispanic candidates struggled to be elected to any of the three at-large seats that existed at the time.

Ultimately, a federal district judge knocked down the system, finding it discriminated against Black and Hispanic voters, and ordered the city to fix it.

“The history of minority participation in the political process of Dallas is not one of choice; it is a record of what blacks and Hispanics have been permitted to do by the white majority,” U.S. District Judge Jerry Buchmeyer wrote in a March 1990 opinion.

After the first election under a newly created system of 14 single-member districts, the city council was made up of nine white members, four Black members and two Latino members. This doubled the number of Black representatives; no Latino candidates had even run in the election before.

The elder Martinez would continue his service until retiring in 2010, passing the baton — and an overstuffed Rolodex of phone numbers — to his son. The younger Martinez remembers how his father kept his community in mind until just before his death in 2019, imploring him to carry on his work.

“He said, ‘Son, I want you to keep up this community. I was born and raised here. My parents came here.’ He told me, ‘You gotta take care of and keep up this community, no matter what happens,’” Martinez said. “If there’s people that need help, help them.”

His father’s fight helped the community gain more voice in the halls of power. But in the denial of a new district anchored in the community, Martinez sees a contraction of Latinos’ political equality. It makes the progress they’ve made feel tenuous, Martinez

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said.

“We need more representation,” Martinez said. “It’s like they’re taking it and grabbing it and taking it away after we worked so hard for it.”

Opportunity lost

Martinez and other community leaders don’t complain about their current, Democratic representatives. Their frustration lies with Republicans’ rejection of a new district commensurate with their growing numbers. The work Martinez does relies on relationships he’s built locally to bring resources and attention to people for whom they aren’t always afforded.

A new district would have granted them an additional voice in the halls of power on policy changes that could improve the lives of their neighbors. That includes issues like raising the minimum wage, access to affordable health care and a safety net that includes paid sick leave.

“Whenever I think of what an additional Latino district would mean, I think about the issues that are important to our members like immigration and safe, good-paying jobs,” said Diana Ramirez, the civic engagement director for the Workers Defense Action Fund, which advocates on behalf of low-wage and immigrant workers in Dallas and other areas. “I think about the area of Pleasant Grove where I grew up and knocking on doors in that area and seeing so many pickup trucks with what look like [construction and contractor] materials.”

She imagines a political reality in which those working in construction, one of the deadliest industries, would have “direct access to a representative that could hear what their day-to-day is like.”

That opportunity existed, at least in theory, with this year's redistricting process. Federal law, in fact, provides for the creation of “opportunity districts” for traditionally marginalized voters, and Texas has a long history of depressing the political influence of Hispanic and Black voters.

Those sorts of districts are supposed to boost representation for voters of color, giving voters of a traditional minority group the ability to harness their numbers into real political power and elect their preferred candidates. Often, but not always, those candidates are of the same race or ethnicity. When lawmakers redraw political districts every 10 years to ensure they are equal in population, communities of color have a window in which to make their case.

The campaign for a district controlled by Latinos in North Texas is a manifestation of the demographic change that has transformed the region over the last few decades.

In Dallas County, the Hispanic population has grown by about 60% since 2000, crossing the 1 million mark to make up the largest portion of the county’s population. Three out of every five residents the county gained in the last decade were Hispanic. Combined with Hispanic population growth in neighboring Tarrant County, Hispanic

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residents now outnumber white residents in the two large counties. At the same time, the white population has shrunk both in its share of the overall population and in absolute numbers. The 2020 census recorded a decrease of roughly 60,000 white residents in Dallas County in the last decade.

That change, locals say, makes for a different slate of needs that demand increased representation to ensure the community's priorities are being addressed.

"We need someone who can actually represent the voice of the ethnic makeup of the community. That is what, at this point, has been challenging and has been missing," said Elba Garcia, a Dallas County commissioner who represents the western end of the county. "We have never had a Latino or Latina member of Congress. The opportunity has been denied [even though] that's what the Constitution and redistricting is all about."

There are various complex legal thresholds to clear in order to claim a Latino opportunity district, including political cohesion among Latino voters in the area and evidence that other voters, namely white voters, tend to vote in a bloc to defeat the candidates favored by Latinos.

But their numbers must first grow enough so that a geographically compact district can be drawn containing their communities — a threshold, many proponents of a new district argue, Dallas Latinos have long since crossed.

Though they've expanded their presence across the region, helping to diversify even traditionally white suburban communities, the western end of Dallas County comprises some of the neighborhoods most densely populated by Latinos. Some have pointed to Garcia's commissioner precinct as a possible starting point since it has long allowed Latinos to elect their preferred candidate at the county level. (Garcia is often mentioned as a prospective candidate for Congress if a Latino opportunity district were drawn in the area.) Advocates for a Latino-controlled district in Dallas have also looked to the southeast to communities like Pleasant Grove, where the Latino population has been expanding.

But the redistricting process is mired in partisan considerations.

Efforts to draw a new district covering those areas, which would likely elect a Democrat, were resoundingly rejected by Republicans in the Texas Legislature — at times without much substantive opposition.

In the Senate, Republicans rebuffed a Democratic proposal for such a district after the chamber's lead map-drawer said it would result in a "detailed and painstaking racial gerrymander" in North Texas. Racial gerrymanders, in which lawmakers rely too heavily on race or ethnicity to draw a district, are illegal, though race can be considered as a primary factor when drawing political districts, particularly to create or maintain opportunity districts that comply with the federal Voting Rights Act. (Senate Republican leaders claimed the state's congressional map was drawn "race blind.")

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In the House, floor debate over a potential Latino opportunity district combusted after Republicans offered an incongruous argument to shoot down an amendment by state Rep. Rafael Anchía of Dallas that would have anchored a new district in west Dallas County.

“It’s immoral to prevent the creation of a district like this. It’s also likely illegal,” Anchía told his colleagues in presenting his amendment hours into the chamber’s floor debate on a new congressional map. “You really have to try hard to deny Latinos in North Texas the ability to elect the candidate of their choice, but that's what's baked in this plan and I ask that we fix it through this amendment.”

Addressing the House, state Rep. Jacey Jetton, a Republican from the Fort Bend area, spoke in opposition to the amendment by pointing out that it would “unnecessarily” drop the Hispanic population in neighboring Congressional District 33.

That district had been created by a three-judge federal panel a decade before to protect the voting rights of people of color in the area, offering Hispanic or Black voters an equal chance to elect their preferred candidate. A decade later, Hispanics were just shy of making up the majority of eligible voters in CD-33.

Despite Jetton’s stated opposition, it was Republicans’ new congressional map that actually reduced the Hispanic population in the district from 48% to roughly 42% — a fact pointed out by state Rep. Victoria Neave of Dallas as she challenged Jetton’s claim.

“It is the underlying map that’s reducing the number of Latino voters in Congressional District 33 that you just mentioned. Did you know that?” Neave said as she pressed Jetton.

Jetton responded that he was “not advised.”

In the end, Republicans approved a map that sliced heavily Latino areas of Dallas County into at least five different districts. In all but one, Latino voters make up about a fifth or less of the electorate. In reducing the share of the Hispanic population in CD-33, Republicans placed some of those residents into Congressional District 6, a sprawling, mostly white rural district that stretches across several counties to the south and east of Dallas, covering roughly 6,000 square miles.

They used an oddly shaped tendril to connect that swath of rural counties to the areas around Irving and Arlington, stranding urban and suburban Hispanic voters who in the past were concentrated enough to influence the election of who represents them in Congress.

More broadly, the congressional map Republicans approved for elections to come will shrink the number of districts in which Hispanic and Black voters are in the majority. White voters will largely determine who fills the two new Congressional seats the state gained based on its overall growth in the last decade, almost all of which was attributable to people of color. Hispanic Texans were responsible for half of the state’s

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increase of 4 million new residents.

“I think it just goes to show you the lengths to which Republicans are willing to go to try to stick their head in the sand about the changing demographics of Texas,” said Michael Li, a senior counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice whose work focuses on redistricting and voting. “The word I keep using is ‘brazen.’ There was a really strong argument for a Latino district [in Dallas] last decade. It’s only gotten stronger because the population has grown even more.”

“Latinos will always have to fight in court”

As in the fight Martinez’s father helped waged, the fate of Dallas Latinos’ representation will be decided in a federal court — in this case, one more than 600 miles away in El Paso, where a panel of three federal judges will be considering various legal challenges to the state’s new political maps.

As they did in the last round of redistricting, and as they’ve done in legal fights dating past that, the individual voters and organizations that serve Texans of color suing the state will have to prove that state lawmakers denied them an equal opportunity to participate in the voting process. Their hope is that the courts will force a redraw of state’s political districts.

“What’s new? They’ve been doing it for the last 30 years, and sadly Latinos will always have to fight in court to get the representation they deserve,” said Garcia, the Dallas County commissioner.

Five different lawsuits have been filed against the state’s new congressional map, most arguing it is unconstitutional and violates the Voting Rights Act by diluting the electoral power of voters of color. To make their case, various of the complaints point to Republicans’ refusal to create new districts that give Latinos meaningful influence in elections. Some take specific aim at the new political boundaries in the Dallas-Fort Worth region, where they say lawmakers unlawfully manipulated the population based on race to the detriment of voters of color.

“Without such blatant cracking, map drawers could have created either an additional Latino majority district or a coalition district with Black and Latino voters in this region,” one of the lawsuits argues.

Those Texas voters and groups were recently joined in their fight by the U.S. Department of Justice, which in its lawsuit against the state scrutinized how Republicans “surgically excised” voters of color from the core of the Dallas-Fort Worth region.

The state has so far failed to convince the court to dismiss the challenges but is expected to fight arduously to keep them in place for the upcoming March primaries, arguing there isn’t enough time to redo the districts before voting is set to begin.

But with the litigation left as their only hope, it could be years before Dallas Latinos

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learn whether they were cheated out of increased representation or whether they will have to wait another 10 years to again make their case.

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Campbell draws GOP opponent in District 25
Will Wright
New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung
December 10, 2021
https://herald-zeitung.com/community_alert/article_e65cb2d4-5a1f-11ec-a5fe-9fcb7d33a1b8.html

In the past week several local candidates officially filed for the March 1, 2022 party primary elections, including a challenge to Republican Texas District 25 state Sen. Donna Campbell.

Channon Cain, a financial professional from Lakeway, says he's not a politician.

"I believe Texas remains the best place to raise a family and call home," he told the Herald-Zeitung on Friday. "District 25 is the very heart of Texas, and deserves a politically courageous state senator who can be counted on to solve hard problems instead of continuing to kick the can down the road."

Cain's opening salvo came in one of the few contested races in Comal and Guadalupe counties, where no Democrat has yet filed before Monday's 6 p.m. deadline.

Comal County has contested GOP races for Comal County Court at-Law No. 1 and for precinct 4 justice of the peace. Guadalupe County Judge Kyle Kutscher drew a challenge from Seguin's Nolan Schmidt; other contested races are for precinct 4 commissioner and precinct 1 justice of the peace.

Both parties have candidates in the District 73 Texas House race. Justin Calhoun has filed for the Democratic nomination and Barron Casteel, George Green and Carrie Isaac are vying for the Republican nod.

Comal Democratic Party Chair Marilyn Aden said the party office at 1592 West San Antonio Street will accept filings from 2-6 p.m. Monday. Sue Piner, county GOP chair, said her party headquarters at 265 Landa Street will be open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday.

Elections Administrator Cynthia Jaqua said the Comal County Elections Office at 396 North Seguin Avenue will also be open until the 6 p.m. filing deadline.

After redistricting, Senate District 25 will include all of Comal, Blanco and Kendall counties, north Bexar County, southwest Guadalupe County, and western portions of Hays and Travis counties.

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Campbell, a physician with mailing addresses in San Antonio and Austin and a home in New Braunfels, has represented District 25 since winning a two-year term in 2012. She easily won reelection to four-year terms in 2014 and 2018.

“The 87th Texas Legislature has entered into the Interim period where we are now assessing the implementation of legislation passed, as well as studying policy topics that may need to be addressed in the 88th Legislative Session,” she wrote to constituents on Nov. 29. “The Interim is also a time where you will see me out-and-about in my district attending policy luncheons, events, and meeting with all of you to discuss the issues you care about!

“It is a blessing to serve you in the Texas Senate. Together, we will continue to keep Texas strong! Why do we have to keep Texas strong? Because we don’t have another Texas to move to!”

Cain’s rhetoric mirrors Campbell’s playbook in blasting government debt and spending, but also seeks to “stop the infringement of our medical freedoms by the Biden Administration and employers, work to secure our elections at local levels, and always fight for life, our Second Amendment rights, securing our border, and supporting our veterans.”

All Comal County incumbents have filed for reelection except for Precinct 4 JP Jennifer Saunders, who announced her retirement when her term expires in 2023, and 207th District Court Judge Jack Robison. First elected in 1994, Robison has privately indicated he will not seek an eighth four-year term.

The last day to register to vote in the 2022 party primary is Monday, Jan. 31; the early voting period runs from Monday, Feb. 14 through Friday, Feb. 25. Runoff elections in both parties will be held Saturday, May 24.

For election information and updated candidate filings, visit the elections link at the Texas Secretary of State’s website, www.sos.state.tx.us.

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Conservative wins show power of politics in HISD board races
Sam Gonzalez Kelly
Houston Chronicle
December 13, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/houston/article/Conservative-wins-show-power-of-politics-in-HISD-16696925.php

Conservative candidates flipped two of the four open seats in Saturday’s runoff elections for the Houston Independent School District board — a testament, some say, to the grip that national politics have taken over local education.

Pastor Kendall Baker edged out Trustee Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca by less than 100

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votes to win the seat in District 6. In District 7, Trustee Anne Sung lost to former PTO President Bridget Wade.

It will be the first time that a conservative has had a seat on the nine-person board since the last batch of trustees was elected in 2019.

About 5,300 people, less than 7 percent of registered voters, participated in the District 6 runoff, while over 12,400 people, about 12 percent of registered voters, turned out for the District 7 election, according to Harris County election statistics.

For the incumbents, the results were an indicator of just how deeply political talking points resonated with voters. Issues that sparked nationwide debate — such as the teaching of critical race theory and mask mandates in school — found themselves front and center of what are traditionally nonpartisan races.

“Knocking on doors in District 7, it was pretty clear to me that the impression that voters have of public schools, if they don’t themselves have children in public schools, is informed by Fox News and national news coverage that has nothing to do with what our kids are being taught,” Sung said.

“The fear that kids are being taught critical race theory or taught that they are victims is completely opposite of what we’re doing in HISD schools,” Sung said.

Critical race theory — an academic framework most typically taught in colleges and universities — was banned by Gov. Greg Abbott in public schools this year. Opponents of the ban say it is not taught in Texas schools in the first place and accuse proponents of the law of trying to whitewash discussions of race and the country’s history.

Superintendent Millard House II’s mask mandate for students in public schools also drew the ire of local conservatives, mirroring similar battles that played out elsewhere across the country.

Wade says the results are proof that issues like these matter to everyday Houstonians.

“It speaks to the fact that people want to have a say in their public education as taxpayers and parents and families, people want to be active participants and be heard, and so I think it was people crying out to be heard. That was the foundation from which everything came,” Wade said.

Jasmine Jenkins, executive director of Houstonians for Greater Public Schools, a school board watchdog group, said the results were not entirely surprising, as Districts 6 and 7, which cover swaths of west Houston, tend to lean Republican.

She lamented, however, that national political talking points had made their way into local nonpartisan races.

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“School board races are nonpartisan for a reason, and here we saw particular vitriol being thrown by both parties in an attempt to grab power and saw real diversion away from actual education issues,” Jenkins said.

“I do think the Republicans, both nationally and here locally, were able to hammer home a very clear message that resonated with a lot of voters that ultimately led them to victory. Much like we see with Democrats nationally, here locally they were trying to defend their position without a clear and affirmative stance that resonated with voters,” she said.

Baker spoke out against mask mandates and critical race theory during his campaign but said Sunday that he will take time to assess the situation in Houston’s public schools before taking action.

He also attempted to put behind him sexual harassment allegations that cost him his job at the city’s 311 center in 2013. He was suspended indefinitely after an inspector general report found that he “made lewd comments and sexual advances toward subordinate female employees.”

Baker has denied the allegations and said the Texas Workforce Commission cleared him of wrongdoing. A 2014 letter from the commission found that he was fired “for a reason that was not misconduct connected to the work.”

He was also a vocal opponent of the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance in 2015 and was featured in ad campaigns saying that “we have a moral obligation to protect women from the potential danger of perverted men,” in reference to transgender people using public restrooms.

“We’re going to move forward in the best interest of all of the children, keeping all of the children safe and protected, keeping children first and parents’ voices first. Nothing will impede my ability to serve,” Baker said. “That chapter of my life is closed.”

With nine people on the school board, Baker and Wade still remain in the minority and will not be able to unilaterally affect the district’s direction. Both have said they want to put politics aside and work with the other trustees to improve educational outcomes for the students.

“We are going to see very interesting dynamics play out on the board, which could be for good or for bad,” Jenkins said, noting that school board issues rarely fall along the “typical left-right spectrum.”

“I’m optimistic enough to think that people can grow and adjust once they’re out of campaign mode and they can get work done for kids,” Jenkins said.

Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, said members will continue to ensure that schools are safe and welcoming.

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“We want to state very clearly that there is no place in HISD for discrimination of any kind. The HFT and our community simply won’t tolerate it,” she said.

The HFT is disappointed in the results of the races in Districts 6 and 7 but said it expects all elected leaders to live up to their promises of higher pay for teachers.

“Priority one for this new board must be to stabilize staffing and ensure a qualified and certified teacher is available for every student. We don’t need anyone in Austin, D.C. or some new ‘think tank’ to tell us what we must do to retain teachers. The answer is simple. Ask them. We stand ready to work with the district to achieve this very important goal,” Anderson said in a statement.

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U.S. to Coordinate With Mexico, Regional Countries for Crackdown on People Smuggling
Cassandra Garrison
Reuters
December 11, 2021
https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-12-11/u-s-to-coordinate-with-mexico-regional-countries-for-crackdown-on-people-smuggling

MEXICO CITY (Reuters) - The United States, Mexico and several regional countries will coordinate to apprehend the network of human smugglers responsible for a deadly accident that killed dozens of migrants, the U.S. embassy in Mexico said on Saturday.

The embassy announced the creation of an action group tasked with investigating, identifying and apprehending the smugglers involved in organizing a trailer, crammed with more than 160 people, which overturned on Thursday in the Mexican state of Chiapas. At least 55 migrants, most from Guatemala, were killed and dozens others were injured.

The United States, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic would support the efforts, though coordination was open to all regional countries, the embassy said.

"We have a shared commitment to apply the full weight of the law against those who are responsible, in addition to working in a coordinated manner to combat human trafficking and smuggling in all its manifestations," the embassy said in a statement.

Thousands of migrants fleeing poverty and violence in Central America have traveled through Mexico to reach the U.S. border in recent years. They often face perilous conditions, including transport in crammed trucks organized by smugglers, known as "coyotes," in dangerous conditions.

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Guatemala on Friday urged the United to invest in the country and elsewhere in Central America to boost development.

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USMCA neighbors Canada, Mexico cry foul over Biden's electric car subsidies
Haris Alic and David R. Sands
Washington Times
December 12, 2021
https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/dec/12/usmca-neighbors-canada-mexico-cry-foul-over-bidens/

America's USMCA neighbors are unhappy with President Biden's proposed electric car subsidies for unionized U.S. carmakers, putting in question a key piece of the administration's climate agenda as it nears a critical test in the Senate.

The Canadian government over the weekend joined the Mexican government in escalating the fight over a provision in Mr. Biden's roughly $1.75 trillion social spending package now on Capitol Hill that offers a lucrative tax credit for electric vehicles made by union workers in America. Officials in both capitals say they are readying retaliatory tariffs if the U.S.-only tax credits are adopted.

The North American auto production market is one of the most integrated in the world, and even with the revised U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) that went into effect in mid-2020, billions of dollars in cross-border trade in vehicles and parts remains a central feature of the market.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland sent a letter Friday to Senate leaders threatening retaliatory tariffs unless the White House strips the proposed tax credits from Mr. Biden's Build Back Better Act.

"We are deeply concerned that certain provisions of the electric vehicle tax credits as proposed in the Build Back Better Act violate the United States' obligations under the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement," Ms. Freeland wrote, referring to the trade pact.

"The proposal is equivalent to a 34% tariff on Canadian-assembled electric vehicles."

Mr. Biden's big bill, if enacted, would provide a $7,500 tax credit for consumers that purchase electric vehicles throughout 2026. Car buyers would be eligible to receive a further $4,500 credit if they purchase a vehicle manufactured at a union-run plant located in the U.S.

After Mexico, South Korea, Japan and a number of European countries complained about the proposal in a letter in October, U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai said her office backs the administration's support for the electric car industry and that she had had talks with countries unhappy with the offending provision.

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The administration “is committed to tackling the threat of climate change by supporting the transition to electric vehicle manufacturing,” USTR spokesman Adam Hodge said in a statement to the Reuters news agency on Dec. 3. “We will continue to engage a range of stakeholders, including our close trading partners, as Congress considers legislation to strengthen U.S. leadership in the sector.”
But the combined $12,500 credit poses a significant “threat to the Canadian automotive industry,” according to Ms. Freeland.

“This issue is at the top of Canada’s agenda with the United States,” she wrote. “We want to be clear that if there is no satisfactory resolution to this matter, Canada will defend its national interest … [by] applying tariffs on American exports in a manner that will impact American workers in the auto sector and several other sectors of the U.S. economy.”

Mexican officials have sounded a similar note, saying the Biden subsidy would effectively be more punitive than straight automotive tariffs President Trump threatened during the USMCA negotiations.

“President Trump at the time proposed to implement a national security measure to impose a 25% tariff on all imports to the United States,” Mexican Undersecretary for Foreign Trade Luz Maria de la Mora told The Hill newspaper earlier this month. “This proposed measure would be equivalent to a tariff that’s higher than the 25% that Trump proposed at the time and that we all thought was a crazy idea.”

In her letter, Ms. Freeland noted that Canada is the top market of U.S. “automotive exports, buying about 10%” of all American-produced vehicles annually.

Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer is pushing to hold a vote on the spending package before Christmas, though not all Senate Democrats are on board with the bill. One of the main holdouts, Sen. Joe Manchin III of West Virginia, has raised concerns specifically about the electric vehicle tax credit.

Last month in an interview with Automotive News, Mr. Manchin argued that subsidizing electric vehicles from union shops would be un-American and wrong.

“We should not use everyone’s tax dollars to pick winners and losers,” Mr. Manchin told the auto industry trade publication.

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Mexican peso is on a skid; Buying power decreases with value
Steve Clark
Brownsville Herald
December 12, 2021
https://news.yahoo.com/mexican-peso-skid-buying-power-172900719.html

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Dec. 12—Mexico's economy is shrinking and dragging down the value of the peso, which is never good news for businesses on this side of the border that rely on cross-border shoppers.

Antonio O. Garza, counsel for White & Case Mexico City, retired U.S. ambassador to Mexico and Brownsville native, said in a recent analysis of the "Three Amigos" summit between President Joe Biden, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, which Biden hosted on Nov. 18 at the White House, that Mexico's sagging economy is being caused in part by U.S. consumer price inflation and an increase in interest rates by the Bank of Mexico.

Ironically, the news comes on the heels of the recent reopening of the U.S. land ports-of-entry to "non-essential" travel from Mexico, a move cheered by the Rio Grande Valley's retail sector, largely forced to do without business from Mexican national shoppers since the U.S. Department of Homeland Security imposed restrictions in March 2020.

Garza wrote in his analysis that the impact of the challenges discussed during the summit was "reverberating throughout the region." U.S. inflation recently hit a 31-year high, as employers still face labor shortages and supply-chain issues, and the Mexican economy shrank 0.2 percent from the previous quarter, that country's first contraction since recovery from the pandemic began, he noted. Garza said the peso's value is expected to continue falling next year.

"There are a number of things at play here, all of which I think we'll feel in Brownsville and along the border," he said. "First, the weakening of the currency will have an impact on Mexican's purchasing power and, in spite of some pent-up demand in the wake of the travel restrictions, Mexico's economy is sagging and folks are feeling it. I'm guessing you'll see a slight uptick in economic activity going into the holiday season, and a fall-off shortly thereafter and lasting well into 2022."

Among the sore points going into the summit was the Biden administration's proposed consumer tax credit for electric cars produced in the United States, Garza said. Canada and Mexico are worried such a credit would encourage automakers to move their factories to the United States and allege it would violate the terms of the U.S. Mexico Canada Agreement, which took force last year, he said.

Garza said in his report on the summit that Mexico's economy minister called out the United States for allegedly pursuing protectionist polities, while the Canadian finance minister said the proposal was at risk of becoming the "dominant issue in our bilateral relationship." Much of the steel used by automakers in Mexico comes through the Port of Brownsville, and it represents a key source of income for the port.

Other companies that cater to the auto industry in Mexico are located in the Valley as well, though Garza wasn't expecting any impact from the credit — if it comes to pass — anytime soon.

"The saving grace of Mexico's economy these past couple of years have been

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manufacturing and remittances," he said. "I think that to the extent that our port activity is tied to Mexico's auto sector we won't feel an immediate hit from initiatives like the electric car credit. What steel companies are more focused on in the short term are keeping production and employment in North America and fending off the challenge of China and other countries."

Garza described the summit, which took place against a backdrop of pressing challenges such as COVID-19 and regional migration, as a further step toward Biden's goal of re-institutionalizing relations abroad and more fully integrating North American nations in order to counterbalance China's growing global influence.

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Port Houston's trade jumps 51% to nearly $17B
Noi Mahoney
FreightWaves
December 12, 2021
https://www.freightwaves.com/news/port-houstons-trade-jumps-51-to-nearly-17b
Port Houston's trade totaled $16.9 billion during October, an increase of 51% compared to the same period last year, according to a WorldCity analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data.

Port Houston's trade totaled $137 billion for the first 10 months of 2020, a 31% increase compared to the same period in 2020.

Port Chairman Ric Campo said 2021 has been an "interesting year."

"There's been lots of really good stuff going on, but also a very complicated year for our team," Campo said during the port's monthly meeting Tuesday.

Exports increased 50% year-over-year in October, while imports grew 53%.

Trade was boosted by imports of gasoline/fuels ($5.58 billion); oil ($5.25 billion); passenger vehicles ($2.05 billion); iron tubes/pipes ($1.17 billion); and furniture ($1.06 billion).

Top exports included gasoline/fuels ($2.08 billion); liquified natural gas/petroleum gases ($1.45 billion); oil ($1.34 billion); plastics ($575 million); and acyclic hydrocarbons ($318 million).

Port Houston's top international trade partners during October were China ($1.68 billion); Mexico ($1.29 billion); Brazil ($1.21 billion); South Korea ($797 million); and Japan ($797 million).

The port ranked sixth for total trade among the nation's roughly 450 airports, seaports and border crossings and is the third-ranked seaport, behind Port of Los Angeles and Port of Newark.

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“One of the things that is really cool is that the Army Corps of Engineers came out with their 2020 statistics and the Houston Ship Channel is still at No. 1 in total tonnage in the U.S.,” Campo said. “We handled more than 275 million short tons of cargo during 2020.”

Campo said looking ahead to 2022 and beyond, the port aims to expedite Project 11, a $1.1 billion widening and deepening of the Houston Ship Channel.

“Port Houston’s [Army Corp of Engineers] ranking highlights the need to continue to make improvements and expedite our Project 11 to make sure that we ensure sustainable opportunities for our community and industry for generations,” Campo said.

The port commission also recently approved its fiscal year 2022 operating and capital budget.

“We’re investing in the future with a lot of things — additional yard capacity and equipments, 12 ship-to-shore cranes, 19 rubber-tired gantry cranes, two additional container yards, two new container berths, additional wharves/turning basin facilities and redevelopment of general cargo and breakbulk docks.”

Weekly maritime imports into Port Houston (WICSTM.USHOU) totaled 29,147 shipments last week. The port’s weekly maritime shipments were up significantly year-over-year (as indicated by the blue line) compared to 2020 (red line), according to FreightWaves’ SONAR platform, which collects data on the daily number of customs filings for maritime imports.

Automotive production in Mexico drops 20% in November

Mexico’s auto production of passenger vehicles recorded its lowest monthly output since 2012 in November at 248,960 vehicles assembled, according to data from Mexico’s national statistics agency (INEGI).

The output represents a 20% decline compared to the same period in 2020, when 312,184 vehicles were produced.

Auto exports declined by 16% to 240,341 units, INEGI statistics showed.

It was the fifth month in a row that automotive output for passenger vehicles was down, fueled by an ongoing shortage of semiconductors.

AMIA chief Fausto Cuevas forecast that Mexico’s auto production would return to pre-pandemic levels by late 2023 or in 2024.

The companies with the largest monthly declines were Japanese automaker JAC (97%), Mercedes-Benz (69%) and General Motors (44%).

Mexico OKs another state to export avocados to US

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Mexico's agriculture department said it has reached an agreement with U.S. authorities on a plan to allow avocados from a second Mexican state to be exported to markets across the United States.

The state of Jalisco could begin exporting avocados as soon as early next year's harvest season, according to the Mexican Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Since 1997, the state of Michoacán has retained the sole right to export avocados to the U.S.

Mexico is the largest avocado producer in the world, with a volume that exceeded 2.3 million tons in 2020. Mexico supplies most of the avocados imported into the U.S., totaling $2.8 billion during the 2019-20 growing season.

The ports of entry in Laredo and Pharr, Texas, are two of the largest gateways for avocados from Mexico into the U.S., combining for more than $2 billion last year.

Constellation Brands to build large export brewery in Mexico

New York-based Constellation Brands Inc. recently announced it will build a $1.3 billion brewery in southeastern Mexico.

The brewery's exact site has not been officially announced, but Mexican officials have reportedly said it will be built in the state of Veracruz, along the Gulf of Mexico, according to El Economista.

The company, which distributes Corona beer and other Grupo Modelo brands across the U.S., was planning to build a factory in the Mexican city of Mexicali, along the California-Mexico border.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador halted plans for the Mexicali brewery in March 2020 after the facility ran into opposition from local residents who had concerns about its water consumption.

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Is it time to get tougher with AMLO as energy policies threaten U.S. companies?
George Baker
Houston Chronicle
December 13, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/business/energy/article/Comment-Is-it-time-to-get-tougher-with-AMLO-as-16682248.php

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, on the eve of the trilateral meeting of the heads of state of

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the United States, Mexico and Canada last month, urged President Biden to begin "aggressive engagement with Mexico."

He complained of the regulatory mistreatment of American investors in Mexico's energy sector. The situation, he said, requires "immediate attention by your administration to prevent irreparable harm to Texas businesses and workers." He cited the situation of just one Texas company, Monterra Energy, whose fuel terminals in Mexico were closed by elements of the National Guard. He called on the administration to negotiate the "immediate withdrawal" of the "militarized police force" from the facilities of Texas companies.

The governor was not alone. In a letter to Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., demanded that the Biden administration act to "reopen American energy assets that have been illegally shut by Mexican militarized police." In addition to Monterra, the senator mentioned Sempra Energy of San Diego, which operates natural gas and natural gas liquids pipelines and terminals in Mexico, and Bulkmatic, an Indiana transportation company that operates a refined products terminal in Mexico, as facing "similar operational threats."

Kennedy warned that Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known as AMLO, seems intent on shutting down foreign competition to the state-owned oil company Pemex. Meanwhile, Kennedy complained, the Biden administration isn't doing anything to stop it.

A third recent protest about Mexico's energy policies to the Biden administration came from the House of Representatives. On November 3, 40 Republican House members cosigned a letter to the secretaries of Commerce, State and Energy, as well as the U.S. Trade Representative, exhorting them to "elevate efforts to press Mexican authorities to stop discriminatory actions and provide U.S. companies . . . a level playing field."

AMLO has made no secret of his desire to kill the energy reforms of his predecessor, Enrique Pena Nieto, which ended Pemex's monopoly and invited foreign competition and investment. His efforts to undermine the reform have been described by critics as "slow rolling expropriation" and left foreign investors who entered Mexico's energy markets in good faith in the lurch, to the detriment of Mexicans.

One of the egregious instances involves Talos Energy, a Houston offshore exploration and production company. Talos is the target of a state conspiracy to deprive it of most of the commercial rights to which it is entitled by virtue of its discovery of a major oil field on the Mexican side of the Gulf of Mexico. The field, known as Zama, holds an estimated 600 million barrels of recoverable hydrocarbons.

The Mexican government is to receive nearly 80 percent the revenues from the sale of Zama production, which is targeted at 150,000 barrels per day. At $70 a barrel, the foregone state royalties in a production-sharing agreement on sales of 150,000 barrels a day exceed $4 million a day or some $1.4 billion annually. Had standard industry practices been followed, Zama would have been producing two years ago.

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The government has willfully wasted two years and nearly $3 billion, damaging the finances of not only investors but of Mexico.

Neither Abbott nor Kennedy mentioned Talos in their letters advocating “aggressive engagement” with Mexico. Neither defined what they meant by aggressive engagement, but it’s clear that the U.S. needs to react more strongly to AMLO’s expropriatory policies — which likely violate the spirit, if not the letter, of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, a free trade pact.

One suggestion: AMLO plays rough with American investors but he wants the U.S. regulator, the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States to play nice with his proposed acquisition of the controlling interest in the Deer Park refinery, now operated by Shell. Inform AMLO that the committee’s approval has been put on standby.

That small step should get the Mexican president's attention.

George Baker is the founding publisher of Mexico Energy Intelligence, a Houston-based industry newsletter. He is the platform director of Energia.com.

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Analysis: From homegrown culture warriors to tomorrow’s Texas leaders
Ross Ramsey
Texas Tribune
December 13, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/texas-republican-local-elections/

City councils and school boards in Texas are full of Republicans and Democrats, even if those people take office after nonpartisan elections in which they don’t fly those party flags.

Local offices are where the political parties find many of their future leaders and where those future leaders are having some of their gnarliest fights. School boards, in particular, have become focal points for issues that combine local and statewide interests, like book bans, critical race theory, what’s taught and what’s not, property taxes, gender identity, parental involvement, teacher autonomy, vaccinations and mask mandates.

That’s why the Republican Party of Texas is taking a “shop local” approach to candidate recruitment, trying to build farm teams of candidates who’ll turn debates the party’s way at the local level and then, perhaps, run for state and federal offices later.

The GOP announced its initiative this week, but both parties have been recruiting candidates this way for years. This is how the political ecosystem works.

Current issues work as fertilizer. Divisive topics being debated at school board and city council meetings often mirror what state legislators are talking about. They get

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the public's interest. They sharpen the rhetorical skills needed in political debate, if not in collaborative legislating.

At any given moment, the Texas Legislature has plenty of people who started off on school boards, as mayors and city council people, members of local commissions and boards. It's the training ground. And it's only natural that the political parties, always looking for new stars, are recruiting and grooming local government folk.

The GOP announcement wasn't surprising, but the timing is interesting. Texas Democrats are trying, again, to put together a win or two on the statewide ticket, hoping that their lock on most of the state's big cities and their growing strength in suburban counties will get them in position for that.

Republicans are looking at signs that Democratic strength in South Texas has begun to wane. They've been recruiting candidates — the full list will be available after the Monday evening deadline to file for the 2022 ballot — and in one case, getting incumbent Democrats in the Legislature to change parties. Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City started his current term as a Democrat and will end it as a Republican.

He's seen the numbers: Republican lawmakers, after the 2020 elections, redrew the state's political maps with those gains in mind, favoring their party where they could.

Lots of local races won't be on that ballot after Monday's deadline. For one thing, they're nonpartisan, and there are no primary races for the candidates. And the local elections are often on other dates.

Republicans in Austin have been after local governments for years, pushing aside local laws and rules on ride-sharing, short-term rentals, public health orders, mask mandates, property taxes, housing policies — a long list of issues where local and state powers overlap. Lawmakers have failed several times to outlaw lobbying by local governments and the associations they employ to tell the state lawmakers how their work will help or undermine what's happening back at home.

Those legislative eyes are still on cities and counties, particularly those in Democratic parts of the state, but they've turned their attention this year to school districts. State-level efforts — to reverse local COVID-19 responses, pull certain books from school libraries or block teachers whose lessons on history or social studies they don't like — have gone local. What were issues in Austin are echoed wherever local elected officials meet.

It's already a training ground for the next generation of state leaders. The Republicans are just formalizing it, and making an announcement that they hope will get like-minded people to run for local office and, maybe someday, for higher office.

The parties are just like sports teams in this way, building farm teams they hope will turn into dynasties.

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 12/14/21
Date:	Tuesday, December 14, 2021 8:43:43 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 14, 2021

The Texas election audit Trump encouraged, then called 'weak', enters a new stage, *Texas Standard*, December 13, 2021

An ill-advised plan for a GOP primary shows the power of election lies, *Votebeat*, December 13, 2021

'Rick Perry' is running for Texas governor against Greg Abbott but it's not the Rick Perry you know, *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 2021

Texas' 2022 races coming into focus as candidate filings close, *Texas Tribune*, December 13, 2021

Phase 2 details released for election audit that includes Collin, Dallas counties, *Rowlett Lakeshore Times*, December 13, 2021

Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election, *CW 39 Houston*, December 13, 2021

Former Dallas County DA Faith Johnson files with GOP to run for her former post, *Dallas Morning News*, December 13, 2021

Texas Republicans swarm 2022 primaries while Democrats lament lack of battleground races, *Houston Chronicle*, December 14, 2021

When the Myth of Voter Fraud Comes for You, *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2021

Democrats worry their grip on Hispanic vote is loosening, *The Hill*, December 13, 2021

Mexico May Reduce Pemex's Profit-Sharing Taxes Again, *Bloomberg*, December 13, 2021

Op-Ed: Texas Redistricting Needs to Protect Campus Communities, *Texas Signal*, December 13, 2021

Rep. Israel: What I want for Christmas, *Austin American-Statesman*, December 13, 2021

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The Texas election audit Trump encouraged, then called 'weak', enters a new stage
Jill Amend and Laura Rice
Texas Standard
December 13, 2021
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/the-texas-election-audit-trump-encouraged-then-called-weak-enters-a-new-stage/

The Texas secretary of state's office is now asking four Texas counties to provide information and documentation surrounding the 2020 Election. It's the next step in an ongoing election audit that Republicans, including former President Trump, have pushed for, arguing without evidence that there was widespread election fraud.

Though Trump won in Texas by 5.5 percentage points in the 2020 election, he asked Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to audit the results. Instead of a full audit, Abbott requested an audit of four of the state's largest counties: Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris. Trump called the move "weak," but the audit effort has continued.

Texas Secretary of State John Scott has said the first phase of the audit is nearly complete, and the request from counties is the next phase.

Dallas Morning News Austin Bureau correspondent Philip Jankowski told Texas Standard, "phase two begs the question, 'What was going on in phase one?'" He said that might be made clearer when the secretary of state's office releases findings from it. That's scheduled to happen later in December.

Learn more about the background of this audit and what happens next in the audio player above or in the transcript below.

This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity.

Texas Standard: Trump won Texas. What's this election audit all about?

Philip Jankowski: It's kind of tough to say, to be to be honest. I mean, the audit itself is because of Trump. The governor hasn't said that, but I think the timing clearly outlines Trump makes public his demand and then hours later, the secretary of state announces that it's performing this audit. So I definitely do believe that it is.

This audit comes as, should be mentioned, Abbott is facing attacks from his right flank. [The Texas gubernatorial] election is coming up next year, and he's got two opponents who are trying to position themselves further to his right. And they saw, they possibly saw, the lack of a full audit of Texas' results as somewhere that they could go after [Abbott]. Trump adds some – a whole lot – of kindling to that fire. And so he makes an open demand, and so now we have an audit.

Give us some background on new Texas Secretary of State John Scott, and why the former person in that job left the office.

The former secretary of state was never confirmed by the Texas State Legislature, which actually invoked some ire from the governor. This new secretary of state didn't have to deal with any of that. He was appointed while the Legislature was out of session, so no need for a pesky vote. His name is John Scott and he's got some involvement in some of the Trump recount stuff that went on some of those lawsuits.

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What is phase two of this audit he announced Friday?

Phase two is basically a total accounting of mail-in ballots and provisional ballots – seems to be the two largest focuses of this second phase. [Secretary of State John Scott has] asked for an "exhaustive" amount of information from these four counties. And most of it centers around mail-in ballots and provisional votes cast in the 2020 Election.

What four counties are we talking about here, and what do you make of the fact that we're talking about these four counties?

We're talking about Collin County, which is North Dallas; Dallas County; Tarrant County, where Fort Worth is; and, of course, Harris County, the largest county in the state. So we're looking at urban counties relative to the larger state and, as you know, those counties tend to vote more in favor of Democrats; denser populated counties tend to do that. And so it does seem to be some sort of, well, maybe not causation but, at the least, correlation between how those counties voted and the ones that are being examined.

How have local election officials been responding to this audit and this demand for more detailed information?

I'm unsure as of yet. As I said, this announcement was made late Friday. So, many of them might have already packed up and gone home for the weekend. And maybe this is top on their to-do list this Monday morning, but it's unclear at this point.

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An ill-advised plan for a GOP primary shows the power of election lies
Jessica Huseman
Votebeat
December 13, 2021
https://www.votebeat.org/2021/12/13/22832485/jeff-zink-election-integrity-symposium-hand-counted-ballots-potter-county

On Friday we published a scoop out of Amarillo, Texas, my ancestral homeland. The Potter County GOP chair, Dan Rogers, has decided to run his own Republican primary in March. He says he'll use manual poll books and hand-marked ballots, and that election workers will count those ballots by hand. It's a recipe for disaster, multiple election administrators and experts told me. They also told him that, but he doesn't seem to care.

Manual poll books will make it impossible for the county to prevent those who have already cast ballots in the Democratic primary (which will be run by the county in the standard way) from also casting a ballot in the Republican primary. Rogers acknowledged this, but said he "trusts" people. He also says that "logic" tells him that all of the ballots will be counted in half an hour — despite multiple studies that show it would take much, much longer. "I don't need studies, they are a waste of money," he told me.

While parties are allowed to run their primaries however they see fit, they are not allowed to violate Texas election law. And Texas's new voting bill, passed earlier this year, holds party chairs personally liable for any violations. In addition to being removed from his position, Rogers could face a $1,000 fine per individual violation. He, again, didn't seem to care.

My conversation with Rogers was confusing. He rejected studies, gave short shrift to federal civil rights law, and ignored the problems with his plan the state and the county have pointed out to him. This, he said, is what his voters want. Why do they want this? Well, they received an "election integrity symposium" from Jeff Zink, a native of nearby Borger, Texas, and a congressional candidate for Arizona's 7th District. Zink and his son were part of the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection, though he denies that they entered the building. That's news to federal prosecutors, who have charged his son, Ryan, with several crimes. "We knocked down the gates! We're storming the Capitol! You can't stop us!" he said, facing his video camera. "We're about to bum rush this shit!"

Jeff Zink is also a Cyber Ninjas truther who believes the company intentionally hid the 2020 fraud he is confident took place in Maricopa County. At the mid-October symposium, he expounded on the benefits of hand-counted ballots, and Rogers took the lessons to heart. He appears unwilling to back down from his half-baked plan and very willing to ignore facts.

The Jan. 6 insurrection continues to creep into actual policy and procedure, and this is a scary sign of things to come. While he's so far received no buy-in from other county parties, Rogers has encouraged every GOP county chair in the state to follow suit. On Dec. 3, Rogers sent out an email saying, "We would like to see other County Committees follow our lead and we will help any County Chair interested in having real secret ballot elections," he wrote.

The Texas secretary of state's office (headed by John Scott, recently appointed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott) has told Rogers it's a bad idea, and will do so again this week in a meeting on Tuesday. "This introduces a lot of potential mistakes and it also introduces opportunities for fraud," said Christina Adkins, the legal director of the secretary of state's elections division. "The candidates on this ballot really need to think about whether this is how they want their election run."

Back Then

Amarillo is the largest city in Texas to use "cumulative voting," which allows voters to cast as many votes as there are open seats in school board elections. If, for example, there are three open seats, voters can cast one ballot in each race or give all three votes to a single candidate. The city made the switch from at-large voting after being sued by civil rights groups in 1998. After the change, a Black school board member was elected for the first time, and a Latino candidate was elected for the first time since the 1970s.

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'Rick Perry' is running for Texas governor against Greg Abbott but it's not the Rick Perry you know
Robert T. Garrett
Dallas Morning News
December 13, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/13/rick-perry-is-running-for-texas-governor-against-greg-abbott-but-its-not-the-rick-perry-you-know/

AUSTIN — A "Rick Perry" from Parker County is trying to deny two-term Republican Gov. Greg Abbott the nomination of his party for a third term next year.

But the Perry who filed his papers as a gubernatorial candidate on Monday is not the former Texas governor and U.S. energy secretary.

The newly filed candidate, Rick Perry of Springtown, northwest of Fort Worth, is apparently a computer technician with the title of “senior desktop engineer” at Lockheed Martin, according to a LinkedIn profile.

Ballot-name confusion is part of Texas political lore, with Gene Kelly (not the Hollywood actor) a perennial candidate in recent decades. Earlier, candidates with Sam Houston in their monikers and some variant of former U.S. Sen. Ralph Yarborough’s surname made headway. In March 2020, political newcomer Jim Wright (not the former U.S. House speaker who represented Fort Worth in Congress for more than three decades) unseated Railroad Commissioner Ryan Sitton.

On the last day to file for the 2022 governor’s race, the Rick Perry from Springtown in Parker County briefly roiled the political community in Austin, where unfounded rumors that the former governor might come out of retirement to challenge Abbott had circulated for months. One online political news outlet, Capitol Inside, rushed out an email blast with the subject line, “State GOP: Perry Files to Run for Governor.” Five minutes later, another email followed sheepishly confessing “it’s not the former governor.”

Attempts to reach either Perry were unsuccessful Monday.

As to the Springtown-based Perry, voter registration, driver license and other public records show he is 63 and has worked as a computer technician.

In recent years, he has donated small amounts to some of the Texas GOP’s most conservative candidates — former Bedford Rep. Jonathan Stickland ($125), Garland House aspirant Jonathan Boos ($10) and onetime Railroad Commission candidate Gregory Parker ($75) — and $100 to the Parker County Conservatives’ political action committee, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission.

Although he used “Rick Perry” on LinkedIn, voter and driver records list him as “Ricky Lynn Perry.” The 71-year-old former governor, who grew up in Paint Creek in Haskell County north of Abilene, is James Richard Perry.

‘Stupid pet trick’
On Monday, Dave Carney, Abbott’s chief political strategist, fired off tweets calling Ricky Lynn Perry’s surprise candidacy a “stupid pet trick” and insinuating it’s a ploy that will backfire by one of the incumbent governor’s other Republican rivals — who include former Dallas state Sen. Don Huffines and former state GOP chairman Allen West.

“Hard to be a straw candidate by using [your] commonly referred to name now, isn’t it?” Carney said in one tweet that noted the discrepancy between Springtown Perry’s ballot name and voter registration records.

University of Houston political scientist Brandon Rottinghaus said the new development “could be problematic” for Abbott, who’s hoping to coast through the March 1 GOP primary. Abbott, who’d strongly prefer to avoid a runoff, already is running internet ads against his likely Democratic opponent next fall, former El Paso congressman Beto O’Rourke.

Any voter confusion with the former governor might require some application by Abbott of time and resources to dispel, the UH professor said.

“Rick Perry is still really well-liked in most Republican circles, if not the most far right,”

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noted Rottinghaus, who is writing a political biography of the longest-serving chief executive (14 years) in Texas history.

“It’s not likely to affect Abbott all that much, but there are still enough people out there who might feel wistful for the days of Rick Perry and Republican politics of old that this might be an issue for Abbott,” he said.

In recent months, Abbott has been endorsed by former President Donald Trump. As he eyed both the 2022 governor’s race and a possible run for the presidency in 2024, Abbott has embraced controversial elections legislation, the nation’s strictest abortion ban and positions resisting COVID-19 vaccine mandates.

Two Ricky Perrys?
Since leaving the Trump administration, Perry and his wife Anita have lived in Round Top, near Brenham.

“He is fairly happily retired,” Rottinghaus said. “He’s on a couple of [corporate] boards — so earning a pretty good living. Still keeps his hand in politically. He’s really close to Morgan Luttrell, who is running in CD 8, for the [Kevin] Brady seat,” the political scientist said, referring to a former Navy SEAL who is running for Congress in the Houston area.

Rottinghaus said when he saw press reports about the Springtown-based Perry’s candidacy, he chuckled.

“When I saw ‘Ricky Perry,’ my thought was that in his younger days, people called Richard Perry ‘Ricky,’” he said. “His mom and his wife called him Ricky. And his wife still calls him Ricky. I mean, not that it means anything, but he’s still also Ricky Perry in that way, I guess.”

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Texas’ 2022 races coming into focus as candidate filings close
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
December 13, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/13/texas-2022-elections-candidates/

Candidate filing for the 2022 primary in Texas closed Monday evening, and there were more than a few late developments in what is set to be a busy election cycle.

All the major statewide offices — including governor — are on the ballot, and every seat in the Texas Legislature is up for a vote because of redistricting. That is on top of the usual 36 congressional seats that are on the ballot every two years — plus two new U.S. House seats that Texas received because of population growth in the past decade.

The primary elections determining the two major parties’ nominees will be March 1. The general election will be Nov. 8.

At the top of the ticket, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is running for a third term, but faces challengers from within the GOP. On the Democratic side Beto O’Rourke will likely be his party’s nominee for a general election that is expected to be a marquee race. But farther down the ticket, there is a hive of activity generated by redistricting — dozens of state lawmakers are not seeking reelection to their current seats — and

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the GOP's determination to make new inroads in South Texas.

Still, statewide races continued to take shape Monday ahead of the 6 p.m. filing deadline. The Democratic primary for lieutenant governor got a third candidate as Carla Brailey, vice chair of the state party, announced her campaign. Her launch came amid a lingering discussion among Democrats about whether their statewide slate is diverse enough.

Brailey said in an interview that she was running because she "really believe[s] our democracy is at stake, and I think this is gonna be one of the most important elections we have experienced in a very long time in Texas."

"It's very important that we have leadership that just reflects Texans — all Texans — and I think I will be able to do that," said Brailey, who is Black.

She joined a primary field that includes Mike Collier, the last nominee for lieutenant governor who has been running since early this year, and state Rep. Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, who announced last month. Matthew Dowd, the cable-news commentator who once was a strategist for former President George W. Bush, had been running in the primary until last week, when he dropped out and said he wanted to make way for a more diverse field.

Brailey is not the only Democrat who has stepped forward for the statewide ticket as the filing deadline loomed. Janet Dudding, a 2020 candidate for a battleground state House seat in Brazos County, filed to run for comptroller, joining at least two other Democrats vying to take on GOP incumbent Glenn Hegar. Susan Hays, a prominent cannabis lawyer and hemp advocate, announced she was running for agriculture commissioner, giving Democrats their first candidate to challenge Republican incumbent Sid Miller.

"Farming is hard, but ethics should be easy," Hays said Thursday as she announced her campaign against the scandal-prone Miller.

In addition to the gubernatorial election, another blockbuster statewide contest is the GOP primary for attorney general, where incumbent Ken Paxton is trying to fend off three challengers: Land Commissioner George P. Bush, former state Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman and U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert of Tyler. Despite some volatility in recent weeks — state Rep. Matt Krause of Fort Worth ended his campaign and Gohmert launched his — that primary saw no 11th-hour surprises.

Congressional contests also saw 11th-hour developments Monday. Democrats lost a prominent candidate for the 15th Congressional District, which Republicans are trying to flip, as Ivan Melendez, the Hidalgo County health authority, announced he was passing on a campaign for the seat, saying he could better serve his community by continuing to fight the coronavirus pandemic.

Another South Texas seat that the GOP wants to capture — that of U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Laredo — gained at least one politically involved contender in Cassandra "Cassy" Garcia, a former staffer for U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz. Cruz endorsed Garcia within minutes of her campaign announcement.

Over in the Houston area, where one of Texas' new congressional seats is located, the longtime Republican frontrunner, Wesley Hunt, got arguably his best-known opponent yet: Mark Ramsey, a former member of the State Republican Executive Committee. The seat was drawn to favor the GOP, so Republicans have been watching how complicated of a path Hunt will have on his quest for a general-election

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win.

Until Monday, no Democrat was contesting the Houston-area seat — the 38th District — but that changed when Centrell Reed, a Houston life coach, switched to the race after filing for the 7th District. Reed's decision spares the 7th District incumbent, U.S. Rep. Lizzie Pannill Fletcher, D-Houston, a primary challenge in a district that has been made much bluer by redistricting.

In state House races, there was little late drama involving incumbents. One question mark going into Monday was whether state Rep. Claudia Ordaz Perez would follow through on her plan to run against state Rep. Art Fierro, a fellow El Paso Democrat — and she did, filing with hours to spare. Ordaz Perez had chosen to take on Fierro after redistricting forced her into the district of a fellow El Paso Latina, Democratic state Rep. Lina Ortega.

In another late development in a state House contest, state Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, drew a primary challenger: Candis Houston, president of the Aldine chapter of the American Federation of Teachers. Dutton, chair of the House Public Education Committee, was under fire from fellow Democrats earlier this year over how he handled legislation placing restrictions on transgender student athletes.

Another primary challenge emerged at the 11th hour for a state House seat in the Bryan-College Station area. John Harvey Slocum, the son of former Texas A&M University football coach R. C. Slocum, filed to run against state Rep. John Raney, R-College Station.

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Phase 2 details released for election audit that includes Collin, Dallas counties
Audrey Henvey
Rowlett Lakeshore Times
December 13, 2021
https://starlocalmedia.com/rowlettlakeshoretimes/news/phase-2-details-released-for-election-audit-that-includes-collin-dallas-counties/article_819153bc-5c51-11ec-97f9-13264b13cf2f.html

The Texas Secretary of State's office has laid out details for phase two of its "full forensic audit" of the 2020 general election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties.

On Friday, the office shared a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott addressed to elections administrators for each county.

"As indicated in our office's previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State's office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the November 2020 General Election in your respective counties," the letter stated. "The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward."

The letter asks the elections offices to begin locating requested documents in preparation for on-site examinations by the office's Forensic Audit Division, which will be coordinated in January.

The request comes after the office first announced in September that an election audit had already begun in the state's two largest Democrat and Republican counties.

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The office has since said that the audit is expected to cover about 35% of votes cast for the 2020 general election in Texas.

Scott's Friday letter came with a 10-page attachment outlining the records and procedures that the office is reviewing.

"The specific review process for each category will be based on the county's response to the initial survey questions provided," the office stated. "Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category."

The outlined materials include voting system test records, lists of election workers, video surveillance records and questions about the county's election security measures.

According to an audit outline that was shared by the office in September, phase 2 involves the office conducting a comprehensive election records examination over several months "to ensure election administration procedures were properly followed during the 2020 General Election." That includes looking at county records including logic and accuracy testing records for voting machines, early voting and election day materials and training materials.

Irregularities or deviations from election administration procedures could trigger a full manual recount of ballots in a certain area, the office stated.

"I'm very confident that Collin County will come through this audit very well," Collin County elections administrator Bruce Sherbet said in September. "We had a very smooth and good election, and I think the biggest part for me is if this audit will help voters that don't have confidence in the process have confidence or more confidence that everything was handled appropriately, then that's very important."

Official election results posted on the Texas Secretary of State's website show that three of the four counties voted for President Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the 2020 general election. Collin County was the only one of the four that overall voted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2020 general election with 51.4% of the votes cast. Dallas County overall showed favor for Biden with 65.1% of votes cast.

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Potter County Republican Party making move to hand-marked, hand-counted ballots in primary election
Judd Baker
CW 39 Houston
December 13, 2021
https://cw39.com/news/texas/potter-county-republican-party-making-move-to-hand-marked-hand-counted-ballots-in-primary-election/

AMARILLO, Texas (KAMR/KCIT)— The Potter County Republican Party said it is changing the way it holds primary elections, making a move to hand-marked and counted ballots.

"This is the way we did it, and it worked for over 200 years," said Republican Party Chairman, Dan Rogers.

"They vote to not go with electronic voting machines, that we go back to the way we used to do things where we vote in our precincts, and marked and counted manual

poll books county wide," said Rogers.

So how does this change the way you vote?

Potter County Elections Administrator Melynn Huntley said if you are voting in the Republican Primary during early voting, you can still go to a voting center and cast your ballot on an electronic voting machine as normal, for now. The same applies to absentee voting. Voters will still mail in their ballots and have them tabulated by the Huntley's office.

However, if you are going to vote as a Republican in the primary on Election Day, in Potter County, you will have to vote in a precinct, not a voting center, on the hand-marked paper ballots.

"I look up your name, you sign, we look at your ID make sure it matches what's on there, you sign, we give you a ballot, and you fill it out, and then you drop it in a box, and you leave," said Rogers.

Rogers said he would like to see the Potter County Democratic Party adopt the same voting style.

We reached out to the Potter County Democratic Chair, Amy Taylor, for comment. Said said in a statement:

"The system of voting that's been in place for the last fifteen years in Potter County is watertight. Voter fraud under the current system is not possible. Therefore, I see no need to change to a system of all paper ballots. It's the Republican Party's right to run the Primary Election as they see fit, but the Potter County Democratic Party will not be following suit." - AMY TAYLOR | POTTER COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CHAIR

"I want the Democrats vote counted, as well as the Republicans without any question. And I'm not saying there's fraud. I'm not accusing anybody of doing anything wrong," said Rogers. "You know, we have a phenomenal election administrator here that does a wonderful job. But it's not about that. It's about doing what's right for the voters."

Rogers said he has contacted other Republican County Chairs to let them know what they are doing, and what he thinks every Republican county chair should follow suit.

We asked Randall County Elections Administrator Shannon Lackey if she anticipated any changes to their primary election. She said, "I don't anticipate any changes for Randall County. A joint primary has already been decided upon by both Party Chairs and the resolution will be adopted in Commissioner's Court on Tuesday."

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Former Dallas County DA Faith Johnson files with GOP to run for her former post
Krista M. Torralva
Dallas Morning News
December 13, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/courts/2021/12/13/former-dallas-county-da-faith-johnson-files-with-gop-to-run-for-her-former-post/

Former Dallas County District Attorney Faith Johnson is vying to win back her old post, making her the third candidate from the 2018 election to compete again to be the county's top prosecutor.

Johnson, a Republican who was appointed to the job in 2016 but lost the election, threw her hat into the ring on the last day to file for the race, the local GOP said Monday.

The primary is in March, and the general election will be in November.

When reached Monday, Johnson said she would release a statement but had not as of 8:30 p.m. Dallas County District Attorney John Creuzot did not comment about Johnson's joining the race.

Last week, former state district judge Elizabeth Frizell also filed to run against Creuzot in the Democratic primary. Creuzot narrowly defeated Frizell in the 2018 primary. She did not respond to requests for comment.

Creuzot went on to face Johnson in the general election and won 60% of the vote.

Republican Party chairwoman Jennifer Stoddard-Hajdu said the party urged Johnson to run.

"She is a very big difference from John Creuzot, who has not been upholding the law," she said. "He's not prosecuting people."

The GOP has faulted Creuzot for one of his early policy changes as district attorney: no longer prosecuting theft of personal items worth less than $750 unless a theft is for financial gain. The amount of $750 is the value of stolen items that under state law is at most a Class B misdemeanor.

The change was intended to decriminalize poverty, Creuzot said, but Republican leaders and law enforcement groups quickly criticized the change.

"Crime is crime, and we believe that all crime needs to be prosecuted," Stoddard-Hajdu said. "It needs to be fair, but it all needs to be prosecuted."

She did not say whether she expected Johnson to overturn the theft policy or another of Creuzot's heavily criticized decisions: to stop taking most first-time misdemeanor marijuana cases.

He has said data shows police disproportionately arrest Black people for marijuana offenses even though national studies have shown that people of most races use marijuana at similar rates.

Johnson became district attorney when Gov. Greg Abbott appointed her in December 2016 to replace Susan Hawk, who resigned because of health issues.

Hawk was the last Republican district attorney to win an election in Dallas County. She defeated embattled Democratic former District Attorney Craig Watkins in 2014.

Under Johnson, prosecutors tried former Balch Springs Officer Roy Oliver, who is white, for killing 15-year-old Jordan Edwards, who was Black, while on duty. Jurors convicted Oliver of murder and sentenced him to 15 years in prison. Johnson was praised for her office's handling of the racially charged case.

In another case with racial overtones, Johnson's prosecutors secured a murder indictment against Amber Guyger, a white police officer who was off-duty when she shot fatally Botham Jean, a Black man, in his own apartment. Guyger had initially

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been arrested on the lesser charge of manslaughter.

Creuzot had taken over the office before Guyger's trial and agreed she should be charged with murder. His prosecutors secured a conviction, and jurors sentenced her to 10 years in prison.

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Texas Republicans swarm 2022 primaries while Democrats lament lack of battleground races
Jasper Scherer
Houston Chronicle
December 14, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-Republicans-swarm-2022-primaries-while-16699597.php

With the field now set for the March 1 primaries in Texas, much of the focus this winter will fall on the Republican side, where a raft of retirements and newly drawn districts have created an opening for first-time candidates to run for dozens of open seats, including in the Houston area.

Meanwhile, GOP incumbents who have historically received little or no primary opposition, including Gov. Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton, are in newfound territory defending their seats against fellow Republicans.

Democrats did not see the same flurry of activity in Houston or on the statewide ballot, with elected officials mostly avoiding major primary opposition. Only one Democratic elected official in Texas, state Rep. Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, is giving up her seat to run for a statewide office.

Republicans, on the other hand, have fielded candidates in each countywide judicial race in Harris County, a reversal from last year's sparse showing. And a half-dozen GOP elected officials in Texas are giving up their seats to run against statewide incumbents from their own party.

The outlook is a departure from the last two election cycles, when Democrats went after Republican districts long considered untouchable as they made aggressive plays to flip Texas blue.

But in advance of the 2022 primaries, Texas Republicans redrew many of those districts to move them well out of reach for Democrats. And the political landscape appears far tougher for the state's minority party, largely due to redistricting and President Joe Biden's dismal approval rating in Texas.

"This whole election cycle has been about Republican primaries," said state Rep. Garnet Coleman, D-Houston, who is not seeking re-election. "The whole special sessions were about Republican primaries. The rhetoric is about Republican primaries."

Harris County GOP 'pretty fired up'

In north Harris County, state Rep. Valoree Swanson, R-Spring, is set for a rematch against Tomball Republican Debbie Riddle, whom Swanson beat in 2016. At least two other GOP candidates are running in the district, which former President Donald Trump carried by 14 percentage points in 2020.

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State Rep. Lacey Hull, a freshman Republican who represents a portion of west Houston, also is slated for a rematch against 2020 primary opponent Josh Flynn, a GOP activist and former Harris County Department of Education board president.

But some of the most crowded contests are in seats where the incumbent is stepping down or running for another office. In Hull's neighboring district, five Republicans are running for the seat being vacated by state Rep. Jim Murphy, R-Houston — among them former City Council members Greg Travis and Bert Keller and Republican attorneys Mano DeAyala and Shelley Barineau.

Harris County Republican Party Chair Cindy Siegel said the national environment has given local conservatives a much-needed dose of optimism following recent cycles that saw them lose control of county government and other long-held offices.

"When I first took over last December, I think Republicans were very disheartened, and I include myself in that," Siegel said. "But I think based upon what they've seen locally, and quite frankly what they've seen from the Democrat side nationally, the Republican Party here particularly in Harris County is pretty fired up."

Even some Republican candidates who were primed for a smooth ride through the March primary received last-minute opponents. In northeast Harris County, Republican Deanna Robertson joined Humble City Councilman Charles Cunningham in the GOP primary to succeed retiring state Rep. Dan Huberty. Cunningham was endorsed by Huberty and had a clear path to the Republican nomination before that.

And in a newly drawn congressional seat in west Harris County, former Army helicopter pilot Wesley Hunt received a last-minute challenge Monday from Mark Ramsey, a former member of the State Republican Executive Committee. At least seven other Republicans are also vying for the GOP-leaning seat, though Ramsey appears to be the best-known challenger to Hunt, the 2020 nominee for a nearby congressional seat.

Democrats spared primary battles

In mid-August, three Houston Democrats returned to the Texas House for the first time in almost six weeks, allowing Republicans to advance their priority elections bill that had been stalled since early July.

The move by state Reps. Coleman, Ana Hernandez and Armando Walle sparked outrage among some Democratic activists and even a few fellow legislators, prompting calls for the lawmakers to face primary challenges. But by 6 p.m. Monday — the deadline for candidates to file for Texas' March primaries — nobody had stepped forward to challenge Hernandez, Walle or most other Democrats who helped Republicans restore a quorum this summer.

Across all of Harris County's state House districts, only a few Democratic incumbents, including state Reps. Alma Allen and Harold Dutton, received primary opponents.

"What that tells me is that our people are doing a good job," Harris County Democratic Party Chair Odus Evbagharu said. "Obviously we encourage competition. In a democracy, it needs to be competitive. But when your primary isn't as crowded, what that also says is that our electeds are doing a good job up and down the ballot."

Still, it appeared the party did not have the same enthusiasm among prospective candidates that it saw in the last two cycles.

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Until Monday, no Democrat had filed to run for Murphy's open west Houston seat, which Trump carried by less than a percentage point in 2020. Hours before the filing deadline, Mohamad Maarouf, a program director for School Empowerment Network, an education nonprofit, filed for the seat.

"The reality is, there are no battleground seats. That's the problem," Evbagharu said. "When Republicans get to carve up the state of Texas and gerrymander it by diluting the votes and taking away the voice of Texans, particularly brown and Black people, you're not going to have these seats that are competitive."

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When the Myth of Voter Fraud Comes for You
Vann R. Newkirk II
The Atlantic
December 14, 2021
https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/01/voter-fraud-myth-election-lie/620846/

When I met with Crystal Mason recently at her home in Rendon, Texas, we sat on a wide couch that served as the center of her domain, with plenty of space for children, grandchildren, nephews, and nieces. Their photographs filled the house. Mason's mother called to her from another room, needing advice; later, her eight-month-old grandson, Carter, joined us on the couch after waking up from an afternoon nap. For hours that day, Mason spoke candidly about the illegal-voting case that has consumed her life for half a decade. With us was one of her lawyers, Alison Grinter Allen.

If there is an individual in America who epitomizes one central aspect of our political moment, it might well be Crystal Mason. The story of Mason, a Black woman, illuminates the extraordinary efforts the Republican Party has made to demonstrate that fraud is being committed by minority voters on a massive scale. That false notion is now an article of faith among tens of millions of Americans. It has become an excuse to enact laws that make voting harder for everyone, but especially for voters of color, voters who are poor, voters who are old, and voters who were not born in the United States.

Mason watches the news diligently and can recount the details of prosecutions that have resulted thus far from the attack on the Capitol on January 6—an attack that was stoked by conspiracy theories about fraudulent voters. She can't help but wonder about punishments meted out for the insurrection as compared with the one she has already received for, she says, unwittingly violating a Texas voting law. "These people," Mason said of the participants in the January 6 assault, "came to do and commit dangerous crimes." When she and I spoke, only two of them had been sentenced to jail or prison, and neither for more than eight months. Mason was sentenced to five years. She is currently out on bond while she appeals her conviction.

The idea that systemic fraud has subverted the democratic process demands a search for evidence of such fraud. The point of this effort is not merely to support spurious claims that Donald Trump won the 2020 election or to stockpile spurious arguments in advance of 2024. It is to lay a foundation for the resurgence of a specific form of Jim Crow–style disenfranchisement. Jim Crow relied on outright bans at the ballot box and threats of violence to ensure white political power. But eliminating the Black vote during that era was accomplished in subtler ways as well: by undermining community cohesion, by sapping time and energy, by sheer frustration. The modern

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effort relies on similar tactics. The so-called Big Lie is built on small lies, about the actions and intentions of individuals—the kinds of lies that can destroy lives and families.

Crystal mason's role in this story began during the 2016 presidential election. She was 41 and readjusting to life at home after serving most of a five-year sentence in federal prison for tax fraud. Mason had run a tax-preparation business with her then-husband and had been charged with inflating their clients' refunds. Mason pleaded guilty and paid the penalty; after four years, a supervised-release program allowed her to return to her home. She has publicly "owned up," as she has said, to her mistakes.

Mason has three adult children, and cares for other members of the family. She had been putting her life back together, working at a Santander bank in nearby Dallas and taking classes to become an aesthetician. Around this same time, Donald Trump was making his ascent: calling Mexican immigrants "rapists," brandishing casual racism and xenophobia, and asking Black voters what the hell they had to lose by voting for him. Texas was not expected to be a swing state, but in this menacing atmosphere, Mason's mother told Crystal it was her duty to vote.

On Election Day, Mason drove to her polling place, the Tabernacle Baptist Church. She was coming from work, and almost didn't make it. "It was raining," Mason told me, remembering the night. "It was right at 7 o'clock, when it was about to be closing up. I went with my name and my ID—who I was—to where I was supposed to go." But a volunteer there, a 16-year-old neighbor of hers named Jarrod Streibich, couldn't find her name on the rolls, which happens sometimes. Streibich suggested that she use a provisional ballot. "They offered it to me," Mason recalled, "and I said, 'What's that?' And they said, 'Well, if we're at the right location, it'll count. If you're not, it won't.'" There was nothing particularly noteworthy about the interaction. Like tens of thousands of Texas voters, and millions of Americans across the country, Mason cast a provisional ballot, and went home.

Mason's provisional ballot was destined to be rejected, however. Texas law requires all terms of any felony sentence to be completed before a person once again becomes eligible to vote, and Mason had not fully completed her sentence for the tax-fraud conviction. Mason says she didn't know that ineligibility extended to the period of supervised release; she made a simple mistake. Many provisional ballots are rejected because of ineligibility, often for reasons potential voters are unaware of. Mason was sent a letter after the election stating that her provisional ballot had been disallowed.

By any reasonable measure, Mason's experience at the polls amounted to a meaningless misunderstanding that had no effect on anything. Donald Trump carried Tarrant County, which includes Rendon, and all of Texas by a healthy margin on his way to winning the White House in 2016. Republicans in Texas retained control of most of the political system in the state. Trump was inaugurated in January. Mason continued her court-mandated check-ins with her supervision officer.

Without realizing it, however, Mason had become the subject of an investigation. After the polls closed, Streibich, the neighbor who had suggested that she use a provisional ballot in the first place, told an election judge on the scene—who was also a neighbor of Mason's—something he had just remembered: that he thought Mason might still be on supervised release for a federal offense. The judge, Karl Dietrich, a local Republican Party official, informed the Tarrant County district attorney, Sharen Wilson. On February 16, 2017, Crystal Mason was arrested for illegal voting.

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Fear of voter fraud, or at least the pretense of fear, has been a centerpiece of conservative objections to the expansion of voting rights going back, in the modern era, to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Taking steps to curb alleged illegal voting tends to boost Republican electoral fortunes by disenfranchising people of color.

In 2008, the increase in Black turnout that helped put Barack Obama in office—and raised hopes among Democrats for a “demographic revolution” that would aid their cause for years to come—gave voter suppression new urgency. Then, in 2013, the Supreme Court’s decision in Shelby County v. Holder granted states more power to keep people from the polls. The decision effectively eliminated the system of preemptive federal oversight that had been in place since the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In the absence of new legislation at the national level, state laws restricting the right or ability to vote could now be blocked only if courts found them to be discriminatory after their passage. In other words, governments could be elected under legal regimes that might ultimately prove to be unconstitutional; once in office, they would be free to further restrict voting.

Meanwhile, the Court made clear in other cases that it was inclined to take states at their word if they said restrictive voting laws were simply intended to combat fraud and had no racist intent—even if the predictable consequence of those laws was to create greater burdens for voters of color. Taking states at their word provided a lot of cover. The result was a surge of democracy-limiting measures in Republican-led states: restrictive voter-ID laws, tighter guidelines for registration, and wholesale purges of voters from the electoral rolls, conducted in such a way that people of color have been disproportionately affected. According to the nonprofit Brennan Center for Justice, 33 restrictive laws were passed in 19 states in the first nine months of 2021. The laws, which will make casting a ballot more difficult in 2022, reveal how central voter suppression has become as a mobilizing issue for the GOP.

It must be underscored: There is no evidence that illegal voting of any kind occurs at a level capable of influencing elections. Nor is there evidence that the scattered violations that do take place have been increasing in frequency or severity. Common kinds of election violations include local candidates fudging signatures to get on the ballot, partisans politicking too close to polling places, and people accidentally voting at the polls after forgetting that they had already mailed in a ballot—a glitch easily corrected by administrative procedures that already exist.

Most of the new laws, however, are aimed at violations that are exceedingly rare: impersonation of one person by another, or noncitizens attempting to vote. Such violations are already illegal, yet their specter is raised to make the case for, among other measures, voter-ID laws. Voting-rights advocates and federal courts have agreed that such laws tend to target and disenfranchise people of color, older folks, and students—groups less likely to have identification documents of the kind that many of the new laws require.

In 2012, before Shelby County allowed Texas to implement a strict new voter-ID law without federal oversight, Greg Abbott, then the Texas attorney general, railed against a decision by the Department of Justice to block the law from going into effect. “I know for a fact that voter fraud is real, that it must be stopped,” he said. When he made that statement, the official rate of alleged election violations reported to his office over the previous decade—allegations, not convictions—was seven for every 1 million votes cast in the state. Data from Abbott’s own office showed that, over the same period, in all Texas elections at every level, 26 people had been convicted of some form of election violation. Only two of those cases involved someone impersonating another voter, which is what the voter-ID law was ostensibly supposed to address. Rather than attempting to prove the impossible—that illegal voting was

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truly a problem—Abbott and other GOP officials across the country chose to make public examples of the very few cases of alleged voter fraud they could find.

Abbott was elected governor in 2014. His successor as attorney general, Ken Paxton, eagerly took up the cause. One of Paxton's allies was District Attorney Sharen Wilson. In 2015, she began investigating Rosa Maria Ortega, a 35-year-old mother of four who lived in the Dallas suburbs. Ortega had been born in Mexico and came to the U.S. as a baby. She held permanent-resident status. As a noncitizen, she was not eligible to vote, but she had registered (as a Republican) and had cast ballots in several elections in Dallas County, including for Paxton as attorney general, before she moved to Tarrant County. Her new voter-registration application was rejected because she had correctly indicated her citizenship status. Ortega then sent in another application, this time identifying herself as a citizen. She had done the same thing in Dallas County, and voted without issue; she has said that when Tarrant County accepted her registration, she assumed she was allowed to vote again.

Ortega was indicted and declined a plea deal, which, her lawyers warned, would likely result in deportation. In court, the defense cited Ortega's professed misunderstanding of election law as it applied to permanent residents, and her lack of a motive for purposefully breaking the law. The prosecution presented her actions as part of a disturbing statewide pattern. As Wilson said after Ortega's indictment, "People insist this kind of thing doesn't happen, but it's happening right here at home."

Wilson's office has denied in the past that its work has been politically motivated or employed as a "scare tactic." In a statement, a spokesperson for the district attorney wrote that Wilson "didn't go out looking for the voter fraud cases against Crystal Mason and Rosa Maria Ortega." The spokesperson also noted that Ortega had been offered probation, but had turned it down. In February 2017, she was convicted of illegal voting and sentenced to eight years in prison. When the Fort Worth Star-Telegram reviewed hundreds of voting-related cases in Texas from 2005 to 2018, it found that Ortega's sentence was the longest one handed down. A prosecutor praised the jury, saying it had secured the "floodgates" that kept illegal voting under control. Ortega's case fit a familiar narrative: that immigrant voters are subverting democracy. She served nine months in prison before being paroled, then spent nearly two months in the custody of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. She is currently on parole and living in Dallas, according to Wilson's office.

One week after ortega's conviction, Crystal Mason was arrested, and found her life newly upended. Mason's family had often been in conflict with other residents in their predominantly white community—for a variety of reasons, including, Mason and her lawyers believe, outright racism. When her children were younger, she told me, a neighbor had once brandished a shotgun as her son passed by; her then-husband reported the incident, and she said that local authorities added a bus stop closer to her home so that her children could keep away from the neighbor's house. Now she faced charges brought by the local district attorney. There was no way to keep a low profile. She lost her job.

The district attorney offered a deal: 10 years' probation. But the deal required an admission of guilt, which Mason could not accept. It also would have put her back in prison: The mere fact of a conviction would mean that she had violated the terms of her supervised release. The only way for Mason to remain free was to prove her innocence. She chose a trial before a judge.

As prosecutors presented it, Mason was a felon who had ignored notifications sent by election officials to her home, warning that she was no longer a registered voter. Despite those warnings, she had nevertheless signed an affidavit when accepting her

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provisional ballot, affirming that she was indeed a registered voter. Her crime was not accidental, prosecutors argued, but a purposeful subversion of democracy.

Mason's legal team countered that the notices about illegal voting had been sent to her home while she was in prison, and therefore she had never received them. They argued, too, that, unlike people returning from state prisons on parole or probation, who typically receive official instruction about voting eligibility, as a federal inmate, she had been given no such instruction when starting her supervised release. (The person who oversaw the officer responsible for Mason's supervision confirmed this in court testimony: "That's just not something we do.") As Mason recalled when I spoke with her, the affidavit was just another thing to sign, and she hadn't really read it closely. She was focused on providing the personal information that the same sheet of paper was requesting. She said to me, "Do you have a mortgage? Have you read all your mortgage papers and all the closing [documents]?" What bothers her most is that there was no serious attempt to establish any sort of criminal motive. "They said I tried to circumvent the system," Mason said. "And for what? For a sticker?" Alison Grinter Allen, her attorney, echoed the point: "Why would you risk two to 20 years in the penitentiary in order to shout your opinion into the wind, basically?"

The arguments on Mason's behalf proved unavailing. She was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison. The prosecution had argued for "a stern prison sentence" in order to "send a message." Mason subsequently appealed to a three-judge panel, which upheld her conviction. Her case is now under review by the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals.

The ACLU of Texas has been assisting with Mason's defense, and its data suggest a racial double standard in cases like hers. A 2021 study by the group found that nearly three-quarters of prosecutions by the state's Election Integrity Unit appear to have been brought against people of color. Almost half of the total cases appear to have been brought against Black and Latina women, two of the core groups of Democratic voters in the state.

Of course, facts and circumstances differ from case to case, and rules and procedures differ from one legal setting to another. But it is worth recalling the treatment accorded to some white officials who have had encounters with election law. In 2018, Russ Casey, a Republican judge in Tarrant County, pleaded guilty to falsifying signatures in order to get his name on the ballot. Casey held a position of public trust, his actions were egregious, and he admitted that the accusations were true. In a plea deal, he received five years' probation, with no prison time. In 2016, Sharen Wilson herself was accused of an election-related violation: using the personal information of her subordinates in the D.A.'s office to invite them to a fundraiser and solicit donations from them for her reelection campaign. Her case was dismissed by the district attorney in a nearby county for "insufficient evidence of criminal intent." Wilson has acknowledged that including her employees on the invitation list for the fundraiser was a mistake.

In Mason's case, the ACLU of Texas argues that the illegal-voting charge is inappropriate on its face because Mason did not, strictly speaking, ever vote. Her provisional ballot was not counted. According to Tommy Buser-Clancy, an ACLU staff attorney, Mason's prosecution could theoretically open the door to felony charges against any potential voter whose provisional ballot is rejected: "If you start to criminalize people who make mistakes, [who think] they're eligible and then find out they're not, then that guts the provisional-balloting system—turns it into a trap." The D.A.'s office has publicly dismissed the possibility that Mason's prosecution poses any danger of precedent to people who make simple mistakes or act unknowingly; the decision by the three-judge panel in the Mason case articulated a different view. It

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declared that, under Texas law, prosecutors did not need to establish that Mason knew she was ineligible.

Because of her conviction, Mason's supervised release was revoked, and in September 2018 she was returned to prison. One of Mason's lawyers launched a crowdfunding effort to help provide for her immediate and extended family; health insurance was a particular concern. (She has been able to raise $81,000.) "It was devastating," Mason told me. "I was like, 'Are you serious? I'm a mother.' " She recalled her original experience of emerging from prison into the supervised-release program. "I was embarrassed. I was. Because when I got out of prison, I wanted my kids to know that, yeah, I hit that bump in the road. But you can get your life back on track. And that's what I did." She was working. She was going to school. And then she was back in prison. Mason was released in May 2019 and was able to return home in June.

As we spoke, the practiced cheerfulness in her voice drained away. "This isn't supposed to be happening to me. This is not right."

Only days after his inauguration in 2017, Trump declared that millions of fraudulent votes had been cast, implying that many had been cast by noncitizens or by citizens of color mobilized by Democrats to vote more than once. His evidence for widespread fraud was nonexistent, and his anecdotal accounts, and those of others, collapsed under scrutiny. Gregg Phillips, a Texas businessman and self-proclaimed voter-fraud sleuth, tweeted that he and the Tea Party–associated group True the Vote had identified 3 million noncitizen voters. The source of this information was an unnamed private database, and Trump declared that he would order a full investigation. I spoke with Phillips at the time, and in that conversation he provided no supporting evidence and backed away from any specific number of illegal voters. He told me, "The work that we're doing could create a foundation for looking at elections moving forward." I interpreted his statement to be a kind of face-saving fallback. Now I understand it to have been prophetic.

Crystal Mason's lawyers believe that Trump's claim of mass voter fraud created an environment in which actions against Mason could be especially punitive. Clark Birdsall, a lawyer for Rosa Maria Ortega, made the same argument, describing Trump's comments about millions of fraudulent voters as "the 800-pound gorilla sitting in the jury box."

Trump established a Presidential Advisory Commission on Election Integrity, an ostensibly bipartisan body designed to uncover "those laws, rules, policies, activities, strategies, and practices that undermine the American people's confidence in the integrity of voting processes used in Federal elections." It fell apart in 2018 after it tried to push states to turn over massive amounts of voter data—including Social Security numbers, party affiliations, and voting histories. Even many Republican politicians believed that the voter data might be used for nefarious purposes. Resistance to handing over the data helped kill the commission.

It had found no evidence of any widespread election violations. But in Republican-led states, investigations proliferated. Kris Kobach, then the Kansas secretary of state and a vice chair of the presidential commission, had provided a blueprint. Even before Trump's election, he had claimed that there were thousands of fraudulent or dead voters on the rolls in Kansas. He would later claim to have identified more than 100 noncitizen voters in his state. In 2015, leveraging the hysteria he had begun to create, Kobach persuaded the state legislature to give him the power to directly prosecute election-violations cases. (In every other state, only an attorney general or a local district attorney has such authority.) Yet over a period of four years, Kobach brought

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forward just 15 illegal-voting cases, most of which involved people who had accidentally voted in two places. He secured a single conviction involving a noncitizen voter.

In Texas, besides Ortega's case, there has been only one other successful prosecution by the state attorney general for voting as a noncitizen since 2005. Five people have been successfully prosecuted for impersonating other voters. Fourteen people—including Crystal Mason—have been successfully prosecuted for voting as felons with unresolved sentences. Only 11 people have been sent to prison by the state for voting violations of any kind. In 2020, Paxton's office almost doubled the working hours spent on election-violations cases and resolved only 16 of them. All stemmed from voters giving false addresses. (Paxton's office did not respond to multiple queries related to this article.)

Since 2005, nearly 90 million votes have been cast in Texas. Even if the true number of fraudulent voters is double what the state has prosecuted, the prevalence of election violations—the majority of which involve bad addresses—is about three ten-thousandths of a percent. As for voter impersonation, it is more common for a person to be struck by lightning twice than it is for voter impersonation to happen in Texas.

Those involved in investigating allegations of voter fraud argue that the detection of a small number of violations just means we aren't as good at detecting the larger number that must be out there somewhere—thus the need for new laws. But laws that make the process of registering and casting a ballot even more convoluted also increase the likelihood that people will make mistakes—the kinds of mistakes that can land them in jail.

It's a vicious cycle—which is exactly the point. First gin up fear about fraud, then use that fear to aggressively prosecute voting infractions, then use those prosecutions to create stricter laws, then use the stricter laws to induce more examples of fraud, then use those examples to gin up even more fear. The potential impact on turnout is bad enough. But the cumulative effect of restrictive laws corrodes the democratic process itself. In Texas, the narrative fueled in part by Mason's conviction has given Republicans the momentum to pass laws that restrict voting by mail, permit forms of interference by partisan poll watchers at election sites, and create new classes of felonies for engaging in common forms of voter assistance, such as explaining written instructions to people who don't speak English. (This last measure is currently facing a lawsuit brought by the Department of Justice.)

Crystal Mason is not the same person she was in 2017, when she was indicted. At the time, she was fearful; her impulse was to lie low. She eventually came to realize that her unwanted notoriety could be leveraged, not only for her own cause but for the cause of voting rights nationwide. When I spoke with her at her home, she had just gotten back from a voting-rights rally in Washington, D.C. She wore a shirt that read crystal mason: the fight against voter suppression.

If she serves her five-year sentence, her infant grandson, who was sitting on her lap, will be reading and at school by the time she gets out. She is thinking about how to prepare family members for what may lie ahead. Her adult children have been deputized to run the house in her absence.

Demagogues and insurrections are not the only—or even the primary—threats to our democracy. The slow, relentless erosion of individual civic agency is at least as dangerous, and perhaps more so. Most of the people accused of "voter fraud" have made mistakes with no provable malicious intent as they navigate voting systems that grow ever more byzantine and frustrating. Their lives may be derailed by reputational

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damage, by time and money spent in court, by prohibitive fines, and by jail or prison. The people who bear this burden may be the cornerstones of their social worlds. Their fates stand as warnings to others in already fragile communities. In a country where the influence of Black and Latino voters is purposefully diluted by gerrymandering, and where poorer, overworked folks must contend with long lines and short hours at sparse polling locations, the fear of being caught up in a punitive administrative labyrinth adds another variable to the calculus of deciding whether to vote at all.

That is why there is something in this moment reminiscent of the insidious bureaucratic character of Jim Crow. As all-encompassing as we know it to have been, Jim Crow was not imposed by a single stroke. It was built community by community, year by year, ruined life by ruined life, law by law, and lie by lie.

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Democrats worry their grip on Hispanic vote is loosening
Rafael Bernal and Alex Gangitano
The Hill
December 13, 2021
https://thehill.com/latino/585381-democrats-worry-their-grip-on-hispanic-vote-is-loosening

Democrats are worried they could be losing their electoral grip on Hispanics, the country's second-largest voter bloc by ethnicity.

A Wall Street Journal poll released last week showed Hispanic voters evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, and while that poll's data faced substantive questions over its tiny sample size, its results sounded alarm bells among Democrats nonetheless.

"I think that both parties should always have a sense of urgency in communicating with Hispanics, Latinos," said Ivan Zapien, a Democratic lobbyist and former executive director at the Hispanic Leadership Council of the Democratic National Committee (DNC).

"Do I think that Democrats' heads should be on fire over this issue? Yeah, I do. I think that their head should be on fire over this issue every day regardless of what polls say," he added.

The poll is just the latest data point that shows a growing sympathy among Hispanics toward Republican messaging. Democrats lost the states of Florida and Texas in the 2020 presidential race, and they were disappointed with some of their results from Hispanic voters.

President Biden still won 63 percent of the Latino vote in the 2020 race, nearly 30 percentage points more than former President Trump.

But the Journal's poll offered troublesome signs, finding that just 44 percent of Hispanics would vote for Biden if the 2024 presidential election were held today and 43 percent would vote for Trump.

In recent presidential elections, Democratic candidates have done about as well as Biden in 2020, but former President George W. Bush did fairly well with Hispanic voters as recently as 2004.

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According to the Pew Hispanic Center, 40 percent of the Hispanic vote went to Bush that year, compared to 58 percent for Democratic nominee John Kerry.

The various figures suggest Democrats should not take a large edge with Hispanic voters for granted, and Zapien said that whichever party can communicate best with Hispanic voters while “figuring out what’s on their mind” is likely to increase their share of the Hispanic vote going forward.

Democrats say they have a lead on cultural competency in communicating with most Hispanic communities in the country — Cubans, Venezuelans and Colombians in South Florida may be the exception — but they face challenges due to the size of their coalition.

“The Republican Party has a way easier job than we do. They just need to strip 5 percent to 7 percent of our national vote and they win,” said Rep. Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-Ariz.), chairman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus's campaign arm, Bold PAC.

He said the GOP needs to spend in the range of $10 million to $30 million on a combination of voter suppression efforts and campaign messaging to hit that goal.

“We have to continue to invest and make sure that we're still hitting in the 65 to 70 percent range in order to keep our national coalition together, which is very expensive, especially as we have a growing population,” added Gallego.

Republicans are latching on to the polling numbers and indications from 2020 that Hispanics — particularly voters in Texas and Florida — are increasingly responsive to a conservative economic message.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas) called last week’s Journal polling troubling for Democrats.

“Hispanic voters are splitting their support more evenly between the two parties, a new WSJ poll finds. That’s an ominous sign for Democrats,” he said on Wednesday.

The White House is working to sell Hispanic voters on their Build Back Better social spending agenda, blasting out quotes last month from Tucson, Ariz., Mayor Regina Romero, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and Colorado state Senate President Leroy Garcia, among others. They also highlighted statements from UnidosUS, the Hispanic Federation and Voto Latino.

In addition, they're selling Hispanic voters on the two major bills already signed by Biden: the American Rescue Plan, signed into law in the spring, that provided stimulus checks and other forms of coronavirus relief, and the recently approved infrastructure measure.

“Unemployment is down, the lowest it's been in 50 years. We've created nearly 6 million jobs. Our economy is recovering faster than any other advanced economy in the world,” said Mayra Macías, chief strategy officer of Building Back Together, a political nonprofit dedicated to selling Biden's message.

“While we've made progress. We realize that people are still not fully feeling the positive impacts in their day to day lives, but this is, if anything, more of an impetus to get Build Back Better across the finish line, because this legislation will lower the cost of health care, prescription drugs, housing, child care and more,” she added.

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The White House made another effort to gain popularity among Latinos for Hispanic Heritage Month in September with a virtual discussion to highlight the benefits of the Build Back Better agenda for the community.
The roundtable featured Latinos in the administration, including Small Business Administration chief Isabel Guzman, Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra, Education Secretary Miguel Cardona and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas.

Lucas Acosta, coalitions director and senior spokesman at the DNC, argued that Biden has been delivering for Latino families since the start of his administration, naming the expanded child tax credit and helping Latino-owned small businesses as examples.

“In the coming year, Democrats will continue to make the case to Latinos that while President Biden has focused on improving their lives, Republicans have consistently tried to stand in the way,” he said.

Aside from extending social programs popular among many Latino communities, the bill currently includes immigration language that is generally popular among Hispanics.

Democrats like Gallego say the immigration provisions could be a boon if they make it into law — potentially granting immigration relief to up to 6.5 million people — but that they are not a necessary magic bullet to get Latinos to the polls.

“I don’t think that there’s a magic wand or a particular issue that is going to assure you some sort of long-term fidelity by ‘the Hispanic vote.’ Or even segments of the Hispanic vote,” Zapien said. “The party that spends the most time, energy and resources communicating with them, where they are, is going to have the momentum.”

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Mexico May Reduce Pemex’s Profit-Sharing Taxes Again
Amy Stillman and Maya Averbuch
Bloomberg
December 13, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-13/mexico-may-reduce-pemex-s-profit-sharing-taxes-again-amlo-says?sref=ytoldrow

Mexico could slash Petroleos Mexicanos’s taxes further as the world’s most indebted oil company scrambles to reverse long-term oil production declines.

“With Pemex, for example, we are constantly or periodically lowering taxes so they have more funds,” said President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador during his daily press conference on Monday. “And we can lower them more.”

In September, the government cut Pemex’s profit-sharing duty to 40% for 2022 from 54% in 2021. Last week, Pemex announced that it will receive a $3.5 billion capital injection from the government as part of a transaction to pay down obligations and also embark on a series of bond buybacks and new issuance to reduce the cost of servicing its borrowings.

The beleaguered state oil company has $113 billion in debt, the most of any major oil producer, and has seen output decline for over a decade. Pemex replaced its chief financial officer this month amid concerns he wasn’t able to win investors’ confidence.

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It could also end up spending nearly twice as much as originally projected to take over Royal Dutch Shell Plc's Deer Park refinery in Texas.

Since coming into power in late 2018, Lopez Obrador has made it his mission to roll back the energy reforms of his predecessor and reinstate Pemex's near monopoly in the oil sector. AMLO's energy policies have been criticized by investors for allocating more resources to the company's unprofitable refining business and reducing crude exports in order to send oil to its refineries instead. International credit ratings companies such as Fitch Ratings and Moody's Corp. have downgraded Pemex's bonds to junk in recent years, in part because they say it has no clear strategy to reverse production declines.

"We're no longer following neoliberal policies, which treated Pemex as if it were any other company," said Lopez Obrador on Monday. "Now Pemex is a protected company, supported and backed by the government."

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Op-Ed: Texas Redistricting Needs to Protect Campus Communities
Jocelyn Carrera and CJ Cetina
Texas Signal
December 13, 2021
https://texassignal.com/op-ed-texas-redistricting-needs-to-protect-campus-communities/

Following the 2020 U.S. Census, the state of Texas reapportioned its districts based on population changes in a process called redistricting. This process should be guided by public input so that policymakers can make informed decisions about what our districts should look like. However, that has not been the case in our state. Texas has decades of partisan and racial gerrymandering embedded in its legislative districts. As a result, many communities continue to be split apart, leaving them unheard and underrepresented in our government. Of note, colleges and universities across the state and country consistently endure the consequences of redistricting processes that largely ignore their interests.

Between a lack of notice for public hearings, the need to travel hours to Austin for hearings that lack remote testimony options, and the need to potentially wait hours to testify in the end, our redistricting process does not encourage public participation. In fact, it actively discourages it.

As redistricting fellows with Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project, we are a voice for Texas college students in our state's redistricting process. The focus of our advocacy efforts has been to keep college and university communities together as communities of interest. While campus communities are incredibly diverse, we have common interests and concerns that deserve proper representation by elected officials.

Jocelyn attends the University of Texas at El Paso which, thankfully, is kept together in its Congressional and State Legislative districts. However, CJ and his community are not as lucky: Texas State University and the San Marcos area are split, or "cracked," into multiple Congressional and State Senate districts. As a result, the voting power of students in the San Marcos community is diluted, impacting their ability to elect officials who will understand and advocate for their needs. Students are split into different districts depending on which dorm they live in, meaning different representatives and, when it comes to voting in elections, different ballots and polling places. This is unnecessarily confusing and complex for students who want to

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participate in their democracy.

Over the past couple of months, we drew and submitted nearly 100 maps of Texas college and university communities, illustrating where students live on and off-campus. These maps are an important way for us to inform map-drawers about what our campus communities look like and how they should be kept together. We also waited hours (CJ waited over 5 hours and Jocelyn waited over 8 hours) to testify at public hearings held by the Texas House of Representatives' redistricting committee. At these hearings, we shared our concerns about campus communities being split apart and the need to bring and keep them together. Although we were privileged to be able to wait for hours to testify, we noticed many Texans who gave up after a while because waiting an entire day to testify is impractical. Many of these prospective testifiers traveled hours to Austin, only to have to give up on making their voices heard in the end.

Governor Greg Abbott recently signed into law our Congressional and State Legislative districts for the next decade, which continue to split Texas campus communities apart. However, the fight for fair districts in Texas is not over —– these maps are already in the courts with litigation well underway. Texans, including college students, need to continue advocating for our communities. We need to take advantage of every opportunity to share with the courts that our communities, the state of Texas, and our democracy are at their strongest when fair districts are drawn, communities are kept together, and every Texan is properly represented and heard by our lawmakers. And we need to continue advocating for a redistricting process that embraces public participation and ends partisan and racial gerrymandering.

Jocelyn Carrera is a senior at the University of Texas at El Paso, and CJ Cetina is a senior at Texas State University. They are also redistricting fellows with Fair Elections Center's Campus Vote Project

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What I want for Christmas
Rep. Celia Israel
Austin American-Statesman
December 13, 2021
https://www.statesman.com/story/news/2021/12/13/rep-israel-what-want-christmas/6494802001/

It's been a year like no other. And I pray we never experience this kind of year again.

Let me begin by saying each of us have gone through unique challenges over the past 12 months. The stresses of a pandemic have elevated the regular stresses of life in ways we don't always appreciate. I hope you've found and are continuing to find ways to take care of yourself. Here's some of my observations on the year as a member of the Texas Legislature during a time when finding common ground is elusive and being hopeful about the future is increasingly difficult.

Let's think back on how this year started. Perhaps in hindsight, the Jan. 6 insurrection could have set the tone for just how challenging this year would be. It was chaos. Seeing Americans attack the U.S. Capitol because they didn't believe the outcome of an election still gives me chills. That was followed up by a February winter storm that caused the loss of life and billions in property damage, then three special legislative sessions focused on far-right agendas rather than the mainstream middle issues we should have focused on, like the energy grid.

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The dramatic quorum break in July made national news and helped move the needle on what became the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act. I, along with most of my fellow Democratic House members, saw an opportunity to take this fight literally to the steps of Congress to push for federal legislation protecting the right to vote. I felt so strongly about the quorum break and voting rights that I postponed my wedding on the House floor to join my colleagues and keep up the fight. We gave up time with family, our businesses, and some pretty darn good Tex-Mex to take the fight to Congress.

Because much of my legislative energy has been spent on elections reform as well as helping to encourage others to vote, I've been so disturbed by recent stories of local Texas officials being bullied because they are not buying into the "big lie" of a stolen election. In Hood County, the long-serving elections administrator was forced to resign because she wouldn't feed into the false stories about stolen elections.

The Texas Legislature should be focused on how to help us vote more efficiently and more securely. I have always had hope of passing online voter registration to help our counties save money and ensure the accuracy of our voting rolls. As time passed, what was a common sense reform enacted by over 40 states became a politically-charged change that began to have little chance of passing. This is just one of the policies now wrapped in the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

It's a very involved piece of elections legislation. If passed, it would prevent elected officials from the revolving door practice of leaving public office then going into a paid lobbying position. It would allow for uniform early voting practices. There is also a requirement that states would enact same-day voter registration. This is really important to a state like Texas where people are moving frequently and unsure about where and when to vote.

For example, if your registration has expired and you didn't know it but showed up to vote, wouldn't it just make sense to have the election officials look you up and renew you on the spot? We have the technology to do so. When we go vote, elections officials look us up and validate our eligibility. Why not just hit the "renew" button right then and there rather than send a voter home because their registration expired when they are eligible to vote?

If you believe, as I do, that we need to stand up for voting freedoms and stand against corruption, please make your voice heard with your congressional representatives and let them know you want measures like the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act to move forward.

So this Christmas, after this most extraordinary year, I want my country to begin healing and getting back to basics in ensuring a healthy democracy for us all. The basis of our democracy is worthy of urgent action in Congress. Unfortunately the words "urgent" and "congressional action" rarely work well together.

So we are at the end of 2021 and on the verge of another big election year. Let's all find time to take a breath. I urge you to be mindful of what we have all been through, take care of yourself and those around you, and let us give grace to ourselves for the resiliency we've each endured through these truly historic times. I wish you all a peaceful and happy holiday season and I look forward to what 2022 has to bring.

Rep. Celia Israel represents House District 50, which includes Pflugerville. Follow her on Twitter @celiaisrael, or like her on Facebook at fb.com/CeliaIsraelTX.

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/16/21
Date: Thursday, December 16, 2021 9:04:52 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 16, 2021

Potter County Republican Party wants to run its GOP primary, *Texas Standard*, December 15, 2021

Texas GOP Denies Appeal to Remove a 'Rick Perry' from GOP Governors Primary Ballot, *The Texan*, December 15, 2021

Not enough voter fraud cases in disputed states to change 2020 election, AP analysis finds, *Associated Press*, December 14, 2021

Texas attorney general cannot unilaterally prosecute election cases, state's highest criminal court rules, *Texas Tribune*, December 15, 2021

Former HPD captain indicted in 2020 aggravated assault case over false voter fraud claim, *KHOU-TV*, December 14, 2021

County approves reestablished voting districts, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 15, 2021

Last minute campaign announcement creates opening for Bexar County commissioner in Pct. 3. What happens next?, *KSAT-TV*, December 15, 2021

'Prison gerrymandering:' How inmates are helping the Texas GOP maintain its power, *Dallas Morning News*, December 15, 2021

March Primary brings contested Taylor County judge race, but many candidates are unopposed, *Abilene Reporter-News*, December 15, 2021

Primaries are set for Texas gubernatorial race. See who's running, *CNHI News*, December 14, 2021

See who has filed for candidacy in Harris County ahead of the March 2022 primaries, *Community Impact*, December 15, 2021

Senate Democrats push to pass voting rights bills by Christmas, *Nexstar*, December 15, 2021

Study to look at relief route for Mines Road traffic, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 15, 2021

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North America's biggest railroad born as Kansas City sale is completed, *Mexico News Daily*, December 15, 2021

Supply-Chain Hell Ignites Economic Boom Along U.S.-Mexico Border, *Bloomberg*, December 14, 2021

Civil rights groups ask DOJ to investigate 'discriminatory' Operation Lone Star in Texas, *Border Report*, December 15, 2021

Editorial: Texas election audit undermines democracy, *Dallas Morning News*, December 16, 2021

Potter County Republican Party wants to run its GOP primary
Jill Ament
Texas Standard
December 15, 2021
https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/potter-county-republican-party-wants-to-run-its-gop-primary/

Despite Potter County going 70% for former President Donald Trump in 2020, GOP leaders there are raising unfounded claims of election irregularities and fraud. Potter County GOP chair Dan Rogers wants to reintroduce hand-marked, paper ballots for people voting in the March 2022 Republican primary, despite warnings from statewide election officials that this change could actually increase the risk of voter fraud. Rogers also wants to run his own election, rather than relying on county officials to do it.

Jessica Huseman has been reporting on this for VoteBeat.org, an online publication dedicated to reporting on elections and voting in the U.S. Listen to the interview above or read the transcript below.

This transcript has been edited lightly for clarity:

Texas Standard: First, why does the Potter County Republican Party want to conduct their own election in the 2022 Republican primary?

Jessica Huseman: The chairman of the party, Dan Rogers, has said that his voters do not trust the machines or the central count system that Potter County uses. He hasn't presented any survey data to back that up, but that is what he claims.

Does this have anything to do with President Donald Trump's false claims about the 2020 presidential election he claims was stolen from him?

Absolutely, it does. A few weeks ago, they had a presentation from Jeff Zink, who is running for Congress in Arizona and believes that the Arizona audit was, for example, manipulated and that the CyberNinjas audit there was false and hid a lot of the fraudulent numbers. And so I think that this is definitely a continuation of "the big lie."

CyberNinjas, by the way, is the name of the company that Arizona hired to do the to do the audit. So how would they be able to do this? And by bypassing county election officials, is that something they can do under the Texas Constitution?

That is something that they can do. The parties are entirely responsible for the conduct of the primaries on Election Day, but not during early voting. And so the

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county will continue to conduct early voting through the normal means. And then on Election Day, they will run their own, using paper ballots that they will hand count. And the hand counting process is really where the experts tell me things are going to go awry. It's harder than it sounds to hand count lots of ballots, especially when there are more than two dozen races on there. And so I anticipate it will take them quite a while if they if they end up doing it at all.

Well, I guess one question would be whether or not other counties might try to follow suit. Is that something people are talking about right now?

That is something that Dan Rogers really wants to happen. He sent an email out on December 3 to every party chair in the state, encouraging them to follow their lead. I have not heard of anyone doing this quite yet, nor has the Secretary of State's Office. So it seems like it's Dan Rogers out there on his own in Potter County, but who knows what will catch on in the next couple of months?

How have state election officials been responding to this? Have they made any sort of official pronouncements? Have you heard anything from your sources?

They have no power to stop Mr. Rogers from doing this, if that's what he'd like to do. The party chairs can run the primaries however they like as long as they comply with Texas' election code. The state has not been shy at telling Mr. Rogers that they think this is a terrible idea though. They think it will cause massive voter confusion and potentially lead to fraud. The checks and balances of the system that Potter County uses would all go away in this iteration of Mr. Rogers' vote counting method. I think that the state the state has told Mr. Rogers under no uncertain terms that they prefer he not do this, but they have no power to stop him.

What about local Potter County election officials? Are they anticipating separate voting sites for Republicans and Democrats, or how does this play out

That's exactly what they're anticipating. Mr. Mr. Rogers also declined to use the e-poll books that that check voters in, which allow voters to vote at any precinct in Potter County. So because he wants to use paper pull books, voters will have to turn up at an assigned precinct and can only vote there. So it really is going to be a radically different voting system than what Potter County voters are used to.

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Texas GOP Denies Appeal to Remove a 'Rick Perry' from GOP Governors Primary Ballot
Brad Johnson
The Texan
December 15, 2021
https://thetexan.news/texas-gop-denies-appeal-to-remove-a-rick-perry-from-gop-governors-primary-ballot/

Parker County resident Rick Perry — not the former governor — filed a declaration of candidacy for the GOP gubernatorial primary this week.
At first, this sparked a frenzy over whether former presidential candidate and Texas governor Rick Perry had decided he wanted his old job back. After that claim was disputed, questions were raised over this unknown Rick Perry's existence. Turns out, he is an IT engineer from Springtown who has served as a precinct chair for the Republican Party.

The validity of his gubernatorial candidacy was challenged Tuesday by attorney Eric

Opiela who delivered a letter to the Republican Party of Texas (RPT) requesting Perry's removal from the 2022 gubernatorial primary ballot on behalf of a client.

Being a primary election, its oversight is the responsibility of the party rather than the secretary of state.

RPT Chair Matt Rinaldi issued a ruling on Opiela's appeal on Wednesday and denied the request.

The issue at hand is that Perry filed for re-election to his precinct chair position on November 30. Under state code, individuals may not be on the same ballot for two different positions at once. If that happens, "each application filed subsequent to the first one filed is invalid."

On December 12, the day before he filed for governor, Perry sent a letter to Scott Utley, chairman of the Parker County GOP, to withdraw his name from the precinct chair race. That normally triggers the removal automatically, but Opiela's letter alleges the withdrawal isn't valid because it wasn't properly notarized.

"I ask that you immediately reject his application, or in the alternative declare him ineligible, take any and all necessary steps to remove Mr. Perry from the 2022 Republican Primary Ballot for Governor, and notify me when you have done so," Opiela's letter reads.

"If you fail to do so, litigation may be necessary to compel the performance of your duty under the law."

Perry's campaign treasurer is Tony McDonald, an Austin attorney and conservative activist who is on the endorsement list for Don Huffines, one of Governor Greg Abbott's primary opponents.

Reached Wednesday, McDonald pointed to a section of the state election code which both supersedes the section of code Opiela cites and lacks the "acknowledge[ment]" requirement pointed to.

There is also legal precedent on this question. In 1986, a similar situation arose and Texas' Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the section Opiela cited this week "has no application" in situations of a withdrawal from a primary ballot.

RPT's reply to Opiela's letter said, "You rely upon Section 145.001 of the Election Code, which is a general provision for withdrawal of candidates that does require a request be in writing, signed and acknowledged. This section has no application."

The letter then cited that case law precedent as support for its ruling.

Further, Rinaldi writes, "As an initial matter, it is unclear from your correspondence whether you are making this request in your personal capacity or on behalf of a client. If it is the former, I question your standing to seek a judicial remedy. If it is the latter, please identify on whose behalf this request is being made."

For a legal challenge to be heard, before its merits are considered, the plaintiff must prove legal standing, or that they were dealt harm by the issue and person at hand. At first glance, it's likely that the only individuals who might have standing against Rick Perry ineligibly appearing on the ballot are the other GOP gubernatorial candidates.

Abbott is facing the first substantial primary of his political career, headlined by

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Huffines and Allen West. While not the fruits of his labor, Perry's spot on the ballot would carry with it considerable name-ID and threaten to siphon off votes from the other candidates.

Neither Opiela nor Perry returned a request for comment after the RPT issued its ruling.

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Not enough voter fraud cases in disputed states to change 2020 election, AP analysis finds
Christina A. Cassidy
Associated Press
December 14, 2021
https://www.12newsnow.com/article/news/nation-world/alleged-voter-fraud-analysis-no-change-to-outcome/507-b8894a38-f7e3-4159-84e7-c53abd4a92c6

ATLANTA — An Associated Press review of every potential case of voter fraud in the six battleground states disputed by former President Donald Trump has found fewer than 475 — a number that would have made no difference in the 2020 presidential election.

Democrat Joe Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by a combined 311,257 votes out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president. The disputed ballots represent just 0.15% of his victory margin in those states.

The cases could not throw the outcome into question even if all the potentially fraudulent votes were for Biden, which they were not, and even if those ballots were actually counted, which in most cases they were not.

The review also showed no collusion intended to rig the voting. Virtually every case was based on an individual acting alone to cast additional ballots.

The findings build on a mountain of other evidence that the election wasn't rigged, including verification of the results by Republican governors.

The AP review, a process that took months and encompassed more than 300 local election offices, is one the most comprehensive examinations of suspected voter fraud in last year's presidential election. It relies on information collected at the local level, where officials must reconcile their ballots and account for discrepancies, and includes a handful of separate cases cited by secretaries of state and state attorneys general.

Contacted for comment, Trump repeated a litany of unfounded claims of fraud he had made previously, but offered no new evidence that specifically contradicted the AP's reporting. He said a soon-to-come report from a source he would not disclose would support his case, and insisted increased mail voting alone had opened the door to cheating that involved "hundreds of thousands of votes."

"I just don't think you should make a fool out of yourself by saying 400 votes," he said.

These are some of the culprits in the "massive election fraud" Trump falsely says deprived him of a second term:

- A Wisconsin man who mistakenly thought he could vote while on parole.

- A woman in Arizona suspected of sending in a ballot for her dead mother.
- A Pennsylvania man who went twice to the polls, voting once on his own behalf and once for his son.

The cases were isolated. There was no widespread, coordinated deceit.

The cases also underscore that suspected fraud is both generally detected and exceptionally rare.

“Voter fraud is virtually non-existent,” said George Christenson, election clerk for Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, where five people statewide have been charged with fraud out of nearly 3.3 million ballots cast for president. “I would have to venture a guess that’s about the same odds as getting hit by lightning.”

Even in the state with the highest number of potential fraud cases — Arizona, with 198 — they comprised less than 2% of the margin by which Biden won.

Trump has continued to insist that the election was fraudulent by citing a wide range of complaints, many of them involving the expansion of mail voting because of the pandemic. As the Republican weighs another run for president in 2024, he has waded into some GOP primary contests, bestowing endorsements on those who mimic his “Stop the steal” rhetoric and seeking to exact revenge on some who have opposed his efforts to overturn the results.

Trump’s false claims of a stolen election fueled the deadly Jan. 6 attempted insurrection at the Capitol, have led to death threats against election officials and have become deeply ingrained within the GOP, with two-thirds of Republicans believing Biden’s election is illegitimate. Republican lawmakers in several states have used the false claims as justification to conduct costly and time-consuming partisan election reviews, done at Trump’s urging, and add new restrictions for voting.

The number of cases identified so far by local elections officials and forwarded to prosecutors, local law enforcement or secretaries of state for further review undercuts Trump’s claim. Election officials also say that in most cases, the additional ballots were never counted because workers did their jobs and pulled them for inspection before they were added to the tally.

“There is a very specific reason why we don’t see many instances of fraud, and that is because the system is designed to catch it, to flag it and then hold those people accountable,” said Amber McReynolds, a former director of elections in Denver and the founding CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, which promotes mail voting.

The AP’s review of cases in the six battleground states found no evidence to support Trump’s various claims, which have included unsupported allegations that more votes were tallied than there are registered voters and that thousands of mail-in ballots were cast by people who are not on voter rolls. Dozens of state and federal courts have rejected the claims.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates said the AP's reporting offered further proof that the election was fairly conducted and decided, contrary to Trump's claims.

“Each time this dangerous but weak and fear-ridden conspiracy theory has been put forward, it has only cemented the truth more by being completely debunked — including at the hands of elections authorities from both parties across the nation, nonpartisan experts, and over 80 federal judges,” he said.

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Experts say to pull off stealing a presidential election would require large numbers of people willing to risk prosecution, prison time and fines working in concert with election officials from both parties who are willing to look the other way. And everyone somehow would keep quiet about the whole affair.

“It would be the most extensive conspiracy in the history of planet Earth,” said David Becker, a senior trial attorney in the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush who now directs the nonprofit Center for Election Innovation & Research.

Separate from the fraud allegations are claims by Trump and his allies that voting systems or ballot tallies were somehow manipulated to steal the election. Judges across the country, of both parties, dismissed those claims. That includes a federal judge in Michigan who ordered sanctions against attorneys allied with Trump for intending to create “confusion, commotion and chaos” in filing a lawsuit about the vote-counting process without checking for evidence to support the claims.

Even Trump’s former attorney general, William Barr, said a month after the election that there was no indication of widespread fraud that could change the result.

For its review, AP reporters in five states contacted roughly 340 election offices for details about every instance of potential voter fraud that was identified as part of their post-election review and certification process.

After an election is over, officials research voter records, request and review additional information if needed from the state or other counties, and eventually decide whether to refer potential fraud cases for further investigation — a process that can take months.

For Wisconsin, the AP relied on a report about fraud investigations compiled by the state and filed public records requests to get the details of each case, in addition to prosecutions that were not initially reported to the state elections commission. Wisconsin is the only one of the six states with a centralized accounting of all potential voter fraud cases.

A state-by-state accounting:

Arizona
Authorities have been investigating 198 possible fraud cases out of nearly 3.4 million votes cast, representing 1.9% of Biden’s margin of victory in the state. Virtually all the cases were in Pima County, home to Tucson, and involved allegations of double voting. The county has a practice of referring every effort to cast a second ballot to prosecutors, something other offices don’t do. In the Pima cases, only one ballot for each voter was counted. So far, nine people have been charged in the state with voting fraud crimes following the 2020 election. Six of those were filed by the state attorney general’s office, which has an election integrity unit that is reviewing an undisclosed number of additional cases.

Georgia
Election officials in 124 of the state’s 159 counties reported no suspicious activity after conducting their post-election checks. Officials in 24 counties identified 64 potential voter fraud cases, representing 0.54% of Biden’s margin of victory in Georgia. Of those, 31 were determined to be the result of an administrative error or some other mistake. Eleven counties, most of them rural, either declined to say or did not respond. The state attorney general's office is reviewing about 20 cases referred so far by the state election board related to all elections in 2020, including the

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primary, but it was not known if any of those overlapped with cases already identified by local election officials.

Michigan
Officials have identified 56 potential instances of voter fraud in five counties, representing 0.04% of Biden's margin of victory in the state. Most of the cases involved two people suspected of submitting about 50 fraudulent requests for absentee ballots in Macomb, Wayne and Oakland counties. All the suspicious applications were flagged by election officials and no ballots were cast improperly.

Nevada
Local officials identified between 93 and 98 potential fraud cases out of 1.4 million ballots cast, representing less than one-third of 1% of Biden's margin of victory. More than half the total — 58 — were in Washoe County, which includes Reno, and the vast majority involved allegations of possible double voting. The statewide total does not include thousands of fraud allegations submitted to the state by local Republicans. Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske has said many of those were based "largely upon an incomplete assessment of voter registration records and lack of information concerning the processes by which these records are compiled and maintained." It's not known how many remain under investigation.

Pennsylvania
Election officials in 11 of the state's 67 counties identified 26 possible cases of voter fraud, representing 0.03% of Biden's margin of victory. The elections office in Philadelphia refused to discuss potential cases with the AP, but the prosecutor's office in Philadelphia said it has not received any fraud-related referrals.

Wisconsin
Election officials have referred 31 cases of potential fraud to prosecutors in 12 of the state's 72 counties, representing about 0.15% of Biden's margin of victory. After reviewing them, prosecutors declined to bring charges in 26 of those cases. Meagan Wolfe, administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, said the number of cases in 2020 was "fairly run of the mill."

AP's review found the potential cases of fraud ran the gamut: Some were attributed to administrative error or voter confusion while others were being examined as intentional attempts to commit fraud. In those cases, many involved people who sought to vote twice — by casting both an absentee and an in-person ballots — or those who cast a ballot for a dead relative such as the woman in Maricopa County, Arizona. Authorities there say she signed her mother's name on a ballot envelope. The woman's mother had died a month before the election.

The cases are bipartisan. Some of those charged with fraud are registered Republicans or told investigators they were supporters of Trump.

Donald Holz is among the five people in Wisconsin who face voter fraud charges. He said all he wanted to do was vote for Trump. But because he was still on parole after being convicted of felony drunken driving, the 63-year-old retiree was not eligible to do so. Wisconsin is not among the states that have loosened felon voting laws in recent years.

Holz said he had no intention to break the law and only did so after he asked poll workers if it was OK.

"The only thing that helps me out is that I know what I did and I did it with good intentions," Holz said after an initial court appearance in Fond du Lac. "The guy

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upstairs knows what I did. I didn't have any intention to commit election fraud."

In southeast Pennsylvania, 72-year-old Ralph Thurman, a registered Republican, was sentenced to three years' probation after pleading guilty to one count of repeat voting. Authorities said Thurman, after voting at his polling place, returned about an hour later wearing sunglasses and cast a ballot in his son's name.

After being recognized and confronted, Thurman fled the building, officials said. Thurman's attorney told the AP the incident was the result of miscommunication at the polling place.

Las Vegas businessman Donald "Kirk" Hartle was among those in Nevada who raised the cry against election fraud. Early on, Hartle insisted someone had unlawfully cast a ballot in the name of his dead wife, and state Republicans seized on his story to support their claims of widespread fraud in the state. It turned out that someone had cast the ballot illegally — Hartle, himself. He agreed to plead guilty to a reduced charge of voting more than once in the same election.

Hartle's attorney said the businessman, who is an executive at a company that hosted a Trump rally before the election, had accepted responsibility for his actions.

Additional fraud cases could still surface in the weeks and months ahead. One avenue for those is the Electronic Registration Information Center, a data-sharing effort among 31 states aimed at improving state voter rolls. The effort also provides states with reports after each general election with information about voters who might have cast ballots in more than one state.

In the past, those lists have generated small numbers of fraud cases. In 2018, for example, Wisconsin used the report to identify 43 additional instances of potential fraud out of 2.6 million ballots cast.

Official post-election audits and other research have shown voter fraud to be exceptionally rare. A nonpartisan audit of Wisconsin's 2020 presidential election found no evidence of widespread fraud and a Republican lawmaker concluded it showed that elections in the state were "safe and secure," while also recommending dozens of changes to how elections are run. In Michigan, Republican state senators issued a report earlier this year saying they had found "no evidence of widespread or systematic fraud" in the 2020 election.

Not only do election officials look for fraud, they have procedures to detect and prevent it.

For mail voting, which expanded greatly last year because of the pandemic, election officials log every mail ballot so voters cannot request more than one. Those ballots also are logged when they are returned, checked against registration and, in many cases, voter signatures on file to ensure the voter assigned to the ballot is the one who cast it.

If everything doesn't match, the ballot isn't counted.

"Often, we don't get to fraud," said Jennifer Morrell, a former local election official in Utah and Colorado who advises election officials on security and other issues. "Say we have evidence that something might not be correct, we ask the voter to provide additional documentation. If the person doesn't respond, the ballot isn't accepted. The fraud never happened."

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If a person who requested a mail ballot shows up at a polling place, this will become apparent when they check in. Typically, poll workers either cancel the ballot that was previously issued, ensuring it's never counted, or ask the voter to complete a provisional ballot that will only be counted if the mail ballot is not.

In Union County, Georgia, someone voted in person and then election officials found their ballot in a drop box. Since the person had already voted, the ballot in the drop box was not counted and the case was referred to the state for investigation, Deputy Registrar Diana Nichols said.

"We can tell pretty quick whenever we pull up that record -- wait a minute, this person has already voted," Nichols said. "I'm not saying it's foolproof. We are all human, and we all make mistakes. But as far as the system is set up, if you follow the rules and the guidelines set up by the state, I think it's a very good system."

The final step is the canvassing process in which election officials must reconcile all their counts, ensuring the number of ballots cast equals the number of voters who voted. Any discrepancies are researched, and election officials provide detailed explanations before the election can be certified.

Often, an administrative error can raise questions that suggest the potential for fraud.

In Forsyth County, Georgia, election officials were asked by Arizona investigators for records confirming that a voter had also cast a ballot in Georgia last November. It turns out that voter didn't cast a ballot but was listed as having done so because their registration number was mistakenly associated with another voter's record in the county's system, according to a letter sent by county election officials.

In other cases, it could be as simple as a voter signing on the wrong line next to another person's name in a paper pollbook at their polling place. Once researched, it quickly becomes clear no fraud occurred.

Republican lawmakers have argued there are security gaps in the process, using concerns of fraud to justify restrictions on voting laws. This has happened even in places where Republican lawmakers have pushed back against Trump's false claims and said the 2020 election was valid.

The review by Republican lawmakers in Michigan that found no systemic fraud cited various claims they had investigated. For example, senators were provided with a list of over 200 voters in Wayne County who were believed to be dead. Of these, the report noted, only two instances involved actual dead voters. The first was due to a clerical error in which a son had been confused with his dead father and the second involved a 92-year-old woman who had died four days before the election.

And yet, Republicans in the state are collecting signatures for a citizen initiative that would allow the GOP-controlled legislature to approve voting restrictions and bypass a veto by the Democratic governor. Republicans say mail voting needs to be more secure as more people embrace it.

"These bills will restore confidence in our elections," said GOP Rep. Ann Bollin, chairwoman of the Michigan House Elections and Ethics Committee and a former township clerk. "Voters want to know their vote will count and that they, and only they, are casting their own ballot."

Overall, 80% of counties in the six states reviewed by the AP reported no suspicious activity after completing their post-election reviews. This was true of both small and

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large counties, something experts said was to be expected given how rare voter fraud has been.

Limited instances of fraud do occur, as the AP review illustrates, but safeguards ensure they are few and that they are caught, said Ben Hovland, a Democrat appointed by Trump to serve on the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which supports the state and local officials who administer elections.

“Every credible examination has shown there was no widespread fraud” in the 2020 presidential election, Hovland said. “Time and again when we have heard these claims and heard these allegations, and when you do a real investigation, you see that it is the exception and not the rule.”

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Texas attorney general cannot unilaterally prosecute election cases, state's highest criminal court rules
Patrick Svitek
Texas Tribune
December 15, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/15/ken-paxton-election-prosecute-court/

Texas’ highest court for criminal cases on Wednesday struck down a law that allows the attorney general to unilaterally prosecute election cases.

The state’s Court of Criminal Appeals issued an 8-1 opinion saying a provision of the law violates the separation of powers clause in the Texas Constitution, representing an intrusion by the executive branch into the judicial branch. The attorney general can only get involved in a case when asked to by a district or county attorney, the court said.

Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican who has been aggressive in trying to root out voter fraud, bashed the opinion from the all-GOP court. He said in a tweet that the ruling “could be devastating for future elections in Texas.”

At stake was a part of the election code that says the attorney general, the state’s top law enforcement officer, “may prosecute a criminal offense prescribed by the election laws of this state.”

The provision was thrown into jeopardy by a long-winding case involving Jefferson County Sheriff Zena Stephens. After the county district attorney declined to prosecute Stephens over campaign-finance allegations stemming from the 2016 election, Paxton's office stepped in and obtained an indictment from a grand jury in neighboring Chambers County.

In its opinion, the Court of Criminal Appeals overturned a lower-court ruling that said the election code provision “clearly and unambiguously gives the Attorney General power to prosecute criminal laws prescribed by election laws generally whether those laws are inside or outside the Code.”

Rather, the Court of Criminal Appeals said, “the Attorney General can prosecute with the permission of the local prosecutor but cannot initiate prosecution unilaterally.”

In his tweet, Paxton said the ruling means “Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas.” That is a reference to George Soros, the Democratic megadonor who has become a force in

local prosecutor elections.

Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee cheered the ruling. Harris County, the largest in Texas, was the epicenter of election-related litigation in the lead-up to the 2020 election in Texas.

“This is a big win for local government and Texans who are tired of state officials exaggerating voter fraud claims to undermine elections,” Menefee tweeted.

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Former HPD captain indicted in 2020 aggravated assault case over false voter fraud claim
Charlie Haldeman
KHOU-TV
December 14, 2021
https://www.khou.com/article/news/local/former-hpd-captain-indicted-in-2020-aggravated-assault-case-over-false-voter-fraud-claim/285-a24374dc-ae3e-47d0-8b1b-e4b7bbe2c69e

HOUSTON — A former Houston Police Department captain accused of causing an accident and holding a man at gunpoint has been indicted by a Harris County grand jury.

Mark Anthony Aguirre is charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon, a second-degree felony.

The indictment comes a year after his arrest in connection with the alleged incident.

According to court documents, Aguirre told police shortly after the Oct. 19 incident that he was part of a group of private citizens called “Liberty Center,” who were conducting a civilian investigation into an alleged ballot scheme.

Aguirre told investigators he had been conducting surveillance on the victim for four days under a theory the victim was the mastermind of a giant fraud, and there were 750,000 fraudulent ballots in a truck he was driving.

Instead, the victim turned out to be an innocent air conditioner repairman.

According to the documents, Aguirre ran his SUV into the back of the truck to get the repairman to stop and get out. When the technician got out of the truck, Aguirre pointed a handgun at him, forced him to the ground, where Aguirre reportedly put his knee on the man’s back. The incident was captured on the body-worn camera of a police officer.

Aguirre directed police to a parking lot nearby where another suspect, who has not been identified, took the truck, investigators said. There were no ballots in the truck. It was filled with air conditioning parts and tools.

Aguirre’s claims of election fraud were found to be baseless after an investigation by Houston police and by the Harris County Precinct 1 Constable’s Office, as part of the Harris County Election Security Task Force.

If convicted, Aguirre faces up to 20 years in prison.

Aguirre had been indefinitely suspended from HPD in January 2003.

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County approves reestablished voting districts
Thomas Lott
Laredo Morning Times
December 15, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/County-approves-reestablished-voting-districts-16703941.php

The Webb County Commissioners Court voted unanimously at Monday's meeting to adopt the reestablished county election districts.

As part of the action, which was required "by Order," the county will establish, redefine and renumerate all of the election precincts to conform with the adopted redistricting changes and to comply with population requirements.

Additionally, to the extent legally permissible, it will separate unincorporated territory from incorporated territory of municipalities with a population of 10,000 or more.

There were two locations brought up during Monday's meeting that needed to be addressed and were presented by Webb County Assistant Planning Director Jorge Calderon.

"We've gone through this and worked it out with the elections department. It's in compliance with the state election regulations right now the order as it is," Calderon said. " But we wanted to bring to your attention a couple of issues.

"Section 2 and 3 of the order, basically outlining a couple of VTDs (voting tabulation districts or County Election Precincts) that are underpopulated, but based on their boundaries we can't really change them so they have to stay that way."

Additionally, there was one other issue Calderon brought to the commissioners.

"In Section 3 some VTDs or Election Precincts that are half in, half out on the City of Laredo that we also couldn't mess with based on the boundaries," he said.

"This has nothing to do with commissioners precincts, these are election boundaries within the precincts."

Webb County Judge Tano A. Tijerina made sure to clarify everything had been worked out despite these issues and Calderon confirmed it had.

Another commissioner made sure to confirm there was no way to fix the underpopulation problem of the two districts.

"So only 258 and 457 shall remain as is even though they have less than 100 voters?" he asked.

"Because of the underpopulation yes," Calderon replied. "As is. There's other election precincts that we did not change but these two have to stay even though they're underpopulated."

"But they couldn't be absorbed by an adjacent precinct?" the commissioner asked.

"No, based on their boundaries we can't change those lines at this time," Calderon

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said.

“Because some other boundary interferes?” the commissioner asked.

“Yes. Some other boundary interferes,” Calderon replied.

“And this is kosher?” the commissioner asked. “We’re doing it?”

“Yes,” Calderon replied. “This will become effective Jan. 1 as adopted.”

In adopting the reestablished precincts, the County Judge is authorized to execute all required documents and directives to the County Clerk and the Elections Administrator and staff are required to publish required notices in the newspaper and the county’s official website.

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Last minute campaign announcement creates opening for Bexar County commissioner in Pct. 3. What happens next?
Fares Sabawi
KSAT-TV
December 15, 2021
https://www.ksat.com/news/local/2021/12/15/last-minute-campaign-announcement-creates-opening-for-bexar-county-commissioner-in-pct-3-what-happens-next/

SAN ANTONIO – On Monday evening, just an hour before the filing deadline expired, Bexar County Pct. 3 Commissioner Trish DeBerry made a surprise announcement that she is running for county judge.

The last minute filing will change the makeup of the Commissioners Court, as DeBerry must resign in order to embark on the political campaign according to state law. DeBerry still had roughly three years left before her term expired.

Shortly after DeBerry’s announcement, Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff said DeBerry will remain in the office in “hold over status” until he appoints an interim commissioner within 60 days.

That commissioner would only serve through November, when voters will decide on who will fill out the remainder of the term, according to the Secretary of State’s Office.

Candidates interested in succeeding DeBerry have until 6 p.m. on Dec. 20 to file for the race with their respective political party, officials confirmed on Wednesday.

Those candidates will have to win their party’s nomination during the March 1 primary to appear on the ballot during the general election in November.

Though the North Side seat has been reliably Republican in recent years, Democrat Christine Hortick ran a competitive race against DeBerry in 2020. In the end, DeBerry edged out Hortick with nearly 55% of the vote.

As of Wednesday, no candidate has yet filed for the Pct. 3 race.

DeBerry is only the second Republican to file for the county judge race. Nathan Buchanan, a small business owner, filed for the race in November. Several candidates are running for the Democratic nomination, including mayoral Chief of Staff Ivalis Meza Gonzalez, State Rep. Ina Minjarez, former mayoral candidate

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Gerard Ponce and former District Court Judge Peter Sakai.

Bexar County voters have not elected a Republican for the county judge office since 1998, when Cyndi Taylor Krier ran unopposed. Krier stepped down in 2001 to join the UT System Board of Regents. Wolff was appointed in her place, and has remained in that office ever since. Earlier this year, Wolff confirmed he will not run again after a long career of public service.

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'Prison gerrymandering:' How inmates are helping the Texas GOP maintain its power
Lauren McGaughy and Ari Sen
Dallas Morning News
December 15, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/investigations/2021/12/15/prison-gerrymandering-how-inmates-are-helping-the-texas-gop-maintain-its-power/

On paper, the Tennessee Colony area looks like a small but growing East Texas community of 16,000 residents.

But in reality, it's not much more than a country road intersection anchored by a feed store, a church and a shuttered post office. Locals say the biggest draws are Taco Tuesdays at the gas station and the monthly meeting at the Masonic lodge. Only about 2,000 people actually live in this part of rural Anderson County.

The other 13,344 are prisoners here.

Nearly a quarter of a million people were incarcerated in Texas when the Census was taken last year. When lawmakers redrew the state's voting maps this fall, these inmates were counted in the prison towns where they were locked up, rather than where they lived beforehand.

A Dallas Morning News analysis of Census and prison data found this practice, which opponents call "prison gerrymandering," inflates the political power of Republican districts while draining clout from Democratic strongholds. It also makes more conservative, rural areas of the state look larger and more diverse than they truly are.

Republicans say the maps are legal and fair. They argue there isn't a viable alternative for counting prisoners, and changing that won't shift the balance of power in Texas to Democrats.

But The News found the state's new legislative maps would look significantly different if Texas stopped this practice. Reallocating prisoners to the place where they were charged would cause nearly one in five counties — most of which went for Donald Trump last year — to lose population to more urban, liberal areas. Not counting prisoners at all would throw more than two dozen House districts out of population boundaries, making them subject to court challenge.

Experts say The News' findings raise questions about diluting the minority vote, fair representation and the principle of "one person, one vote." Incarcerated people in effect become ghost constituents, they said, unwittingly boosting the power of prison towns, and helping Republicans stay in power, while largely lacking the right to vote.

This and other concerns about the state's most recent redistricting plan have led to a half dozen lawsuits alleging the Texas GOP illegally gerrymandered districts this year

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to disenfranchise Black and Hispanic communities and retain control in the long term. Last month, a state prisoner from Grand Prairie filed a suit to force Texas to stop counting inmates in their cells.

He's asking for class action status for incarcerated people across the state.

"I'm hoping to be their voice," Damon James Wilson wrote in a letter from his prison cell in Fort Bend County. "I pray it will be the catalyst to spark a change in this manipulative process."

In the past decade, a dozen states have changed how they count incarcerated people. Texas' GOP legislative majority, however, shows no signs of changing unless one of the pending lawsuits against the state is successful.

Prisoners and redistricting
State Rep. Jasmine Crockett watches Corinth Street pass by outside the car window.

Baptist churches and tire shops line the avenue. Crockett points out duplexes built by the area's earliest Black residents. Behind her, the downtown Dallas skyline shines in the morning sun.

This east Oak Cliff zip code sends the most people to state prisons, according to information self-reported by about 100,000 inmates incarcerated by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. Though they're locked up in units from Amarillo to Edinburg, Crockett considers these men and women to be members of her district, and says they should be counted as such.

"The name of the game here in the state of Texas is we use Black and brown bodies to gain power," Crockett said. "Our constituents, sadly, we know are going to be arrested at a higher rate and incarcerated at a higher rate — and they're not being counted where they actually reside."

Every 10 years, the U.S. Census provides a snapshot of the country's population, which is used to redraw electoral maps that last for a decade, a process called redistricting.

The Census Bureau has counted incarcerated people at the lockups where they are held since the first survey in 1790. Criminal justice and anti-gerrymandering activists began criticizing the policy in the 1980s and 90s, as states built more prisons, many in rural areas, to accommodate rising inmate populations.

The Census Bureau decided to keep its policy in place for the 2020 national headcount. But states have the flexibility to allocate incarcerated people where they want during redistricting.

The 12 states that have decided to ban "prison gerrymandering" since 2010 include California, New York, Pennsylvania and Virginia. Most now count the majority of prisoners at their last known home address. Some exclude federal prisoners or those serving life sentences from their district population counts; others only reallocate incarcerated people for state legislative, not congressional, redistricting.

But the Texas Legislature, controlled by Republicans in both chambers, continues counting incarcerated people where they are held when redrawing state and congressional maps this year.

The News' data analysis shows that this practice transfers political representation

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away from Democratic strongholds to GOP counties with prisons, since most rural counties lean conservative and large cities are more liberal. The decision, if it remains unchallenged, will help the GOP remain in power even as Texas becomes more urban and more diverse.

Texas added nearly 4 million people in the last decade, Census data show, and Hispanics accounted for nearly half of this growth. The boost helped Texas pick up two additional congressional seats this year. But Democrats complain this diverse population growth was not reflected in the electoral maps the GOP majority created. The two new U.S. House seats both favor white candidates, and state Senate maps split communities of color in Tarrant County.

Including jails, federal and state prisons and detention centers, Texas incarcerated more people than any other state, last year's Census data show.

Counting these people at their place of confinement helped Republicans, The News analysis found. It's impossible to know how these incarcerated people would vote. But while many inmates in state prisons were charged in urban areas, and most are not white, the vast majority were drawn into GOP districts.

According to The News' analysis, Republicans in the state Legislature will represent two-thirds of incarcerated people under the newly redrawn maps. The number is even higher for the U.S. Congress: 76% of people incarcerated at Census time were drawn into districts represented by a Republican in Washington.

Two state lawmakers saw their district numbers inflated most by the count of incarcerated people: Rep. Kyle Kacal of College Station and Cody Harris of Palestine, both Republicans. One in 10 people in Kacal's district, where death row and the prisons department headquarters is located, is behind bars.

In Harris' district, which includes Tennessee Colony in Anderson County and all or part of three other counties in East Texas, nearly 8% are incarcerated.

How would the Texas maps change without prisoners?
The News analyzed how the state's new electoral maps would be affected if incarcerated people were counted differently. We used data on more than 140,000 inmates incarcerated in state-run jails and prisons when the Census was taken. This analysis does not include the effect of moving federal inmates or those housed in local jails or ICE detention centers.

Of the 232 counties that went for Donald Trump in the 2020 election, 46 would shrink in population if incarcerated people were counted in the county where they were charged. This is the best measure The News could use for previous residence, since state and federal prison agencies declined to release comprehensive data on inmates' previous home addresses.

The 46 counties would lose more than 104,000 people, The News' analysis shows. When added together, pro-Trump counties would lose nearly 52,000 people. Nearly all of them — 49,667 people — would be reallocated back to one of the state's five largest counties, which all went for President Joe Biden last year, with more than 11,000 going to Dallas County.

The News analysis also found counting incarcerated people at their prison address hurts GOP counties without lockups. McLennan, Smith and Montgomery Counties, all of which went for Trump in 2020, would gain more than 2,500 people each if incarcerated people were moved back to the county where they were charged.

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If prisoners were excluded from population counts altogether, The News found that 29 state House districts might need to be redrawn. This is because every Texas legislative district is meant to represent roughly the same amount of people, and there should be no more than a 10% difference in population between the smallest and largest districts.

Those that don't meet this requirement could be challenged in court; they are about equally split between Democrats and Republicans.

Two state Senate districts would come within 1% of crossing the 10% population gap rule if inmate counts were zeroed out: those represented by Sen. Charles Perry of Lubbock and Kel Seliger of Amarillo, both Republicans.

Perry declined to comment for this story. Seliger, who announced his retirement this year, said lawmakers must ensure they are following constitutional rules about equal representation and minority voting rights when drawing new maps. Other tactics within those rules that may help one party over the other, he said, are fair game.

"I'm in favor of anything that benefits Republicans," Seliger said.

Congressional districts are meant to be as equal as possible, representing just fewer than 767,000 people each in Texas. Without the incarcerated population, there would be a 2.9% population gap between the largest and smallest districts.

During redistricting this year, Crockett filed a bill to require incarcerated people to be counted in their home districts. It never got a hearing. Dallas Mayor Eric Johnson, her predecessor in the House, as well as other members of the Texas Legislative Black Caucus have also repeatedly backed this bill — without success.

"People don't stick around the area where they were incarcerated after they are released. They go back home," Johnson said. "Counting them as part of the population of any other city or county during their prison term does not make any sense — except as a way to boost the population of rural areas for political purposes at the expense of cities such as Dallas."

GOP: Prisoners a 'rounding error'
Experts acknowledge that Texas won't suddenly turn blue if "prison gerrymandering" is banned.

In a state of 29 million, incarcerated people account for less than 1% of the population. Plus, as the party in power, Republicans could simply tweak district boundary lines to make up for a few thousand prisoners here or there.

But critics note it's one of several tools the GOP uses to maintain power in a rapidly changing state. While they are a fraction of the population, there are more incarcerated people than needed for an entire House district and nearly one-third of a congressional district.

"The dynamics just described obviously favor white, rural Texas," said Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, chairman of the Texas House Democratic Caucus. "[It] real questions of fairness."

Rory Kramer, an associate professor at Villanova University who is completing a nationwide analysis of incarceration and redistricting, said The News' findings did not surprise him.

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“As your analysis demonstrates, this harms equal representation for people who live in neighborhoods with high incarceration rates,” Kramer said. “There’s no reason why living near a prison should mean some Texans have greater voices in the state legislature than other Texans.”

Mike Wessler, communications director for criminal justice advocacy group the Prison Policy Initiative, echoed Kramer’s concern: “It distorts political representation at all levels of government.”

Speaker of the Texas House Dade Phelan declined to comment for this story, citing pending lawsuits. Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Texas House Redistricting Committee Chairman Todd Hunter, all Republicans, also did not weigh in on the findings.

Jim Murphy, chairman of the House Republican Caucus, told The News that changing how prisoners are counted was not on the table this year.

“The caucus has not discussed that at all,” Murphy, R-Houston, said in October.

Because Texas is so massive, he insisted counting prisoners differently would have a minimal impact on the final maps — and definitely would not have upset the overall balance of power.

“It’s a rounding error,” Murphy said.

In some rural areas of Texas, however, prisoners are not a negligible fraction. In 24 counties, they accounted for at least one in 10 people counted in last year’s Census.

In Anderson County, they make up 23% of the population.

Plantations to prisons

Tennessee Colony was first settled as a plantation town. For decades, slaves toiled in its cotton fields. But it struggled to retain more than a few hundred people after the Civil War, as residents were drawn to Palestine, the Anderson County seat, and its new railroad.

The first state lockup arrived in the mid-1960s. Thirty years later, the county’s five prisons were the single largest employer.

Many of Texas’ other 100 state-run units were built in rural areas, where local leaders either balked less at housing inmates or actively lobbied to bring prisons to town. By contrast, just a handful were built in the state’s largest cities.

There’s little evidence on Palestine’s tidy Main Street that thousands of men are behind bars just down the road. A half dozen antique stores and even more churches dot downtown. Victorian mansions of yellow and blue, relics of the railroad’s heyday, decorate its quiet neighborhoods.

Chatting over chicken salad sandwiches at a local diner, the former mayor, Steve Presley, said rural communities have shouldered the responsibility for guarding these inmates for decades. It’s only fair, he argued, that they should be able to reap the benefits, too.

“They should be counted here,” Presley said. Big cities could claim prisoners, he

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added, but then they should have to guard them, too. “If Houston wants that fix, then build those units in Houston.”

According to state demographer Lloyd Potter, while Texas is growing, the population has steadily been shifting from rural to urban and suburban areas. Since 2010, he said 134 mostly rural counties have actually lost population.

Keeping prisons open and full helps mitigate the drain. Anderson County has lost about 500 people in the last decade, Census data show. Without prisoners, the drop would have been much more severe.

Counting inmates in their cells also has an effect on another demographic trend: racial diversity. In majority white Anderson County, more than 5,000 of the county’s 11,430 Black residents are actually behind bars, and two-thirds of its prison population was Black or Hispanic when the Census was taken.

This is also true statewide. Texas is 12.6% African American but one in three state inmates are Black, the Census and state prison data show.

Rep. Harris, of Palestine, declined to comment for this storyState Sen. Robert Nichols said he doesn’t know of a feasible alternative.

“I’m not so sure it really matters that much,” Nichols, R-Jacksonville, said.

But some county officials have pursued another way for years: Don’t count prisoners at all.

Just as state lawmakers are in charge of legislative and congressional maps, local officials draw new county districts for positions like commissioners court, justices of the peace and constables after each Census. Many smaller, conservative counties with large inmate populations have long chosen to exclude incarcerated people when redrawing local maps because prisoners would skew their demographics.

Anderson County Judge Robert Johnston said counting the local 13,344 prisoners as constituents would inflate his actual population and result in one of his four commissioners representing only a handful of people outside the prison walls.

“[Prisoners are] not out roaming the streets, spending money in my county,” he said.

County judges also said that it wouldn’t be fair to count prisoners because they can’t vote. This is mostly, but not totally, true.

State elections law allows convicted felons to vote if they are in active appeals. But they can only vote in the district where they lived prior to being incarcerated, the Department of Criminal Justice told The News. This allows Republicans who represent prison towns to maintain the benefit of counting inmates in their district without having to worry about winning their vote.

One former prisoner who was released in May from Anderson County’s Coffield Prison was surprised to learn that he will be counted as a member of the community there for the next decade, even though he has returned home to North Texas. The News is not naming him because he is on parole and fears reprisals for talking to the media.

“We can’t vote. Our voice has no say,” he said. “And then using us to fatten up the Census in those towns — That isn’t right.”

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Wilson, the Dallas area man suing to overturn the new congressional maps, believes that legislators used prisoners like him to advance their own political ambitions.

He intends to move back to Grand Prairie after he is released from this, his fourth, time behind bars and wants to be counted in Dallas County, not Potter, where he was incarcerated when the Census was taken last year.

If Wilson fails, he'll be counted in the 13th Congressional District, which is anchored in Amarillo and represented by Rep. Ronny Jackson, a Republican. If he wins, Wilson will be added to Democrat Rep. Eddie Bernice Johnson's district in Dallas.

Johnson, who has represented the district since 1993, announced her retirement this year. Last month, she endorsed a successor: Jasmine Crockett.

"I plan to pursue [prison gerrymandering], federally," Crockett vowed. "I don't believe it should be a state specific issue. It's about doing things that are fair."

Methodology

To conduct this analysis, The News began with three data files: one from the Texas Department of Criminal Justice with each incarcerated persons' name, county of charge and the facility where they were housed on March 31, 2020; another from TDCJ showing the location of each prison and a third from the Census Bureau containing the population of every county in 2020. These three files were joined together for analysis.

To conduct the reallocation analysis, The News wrote a script in the Python programming language to loop through every row of the combined data, adding one person to the county where the prisoner was charged and subtracting one person from the county where they were incarcerated, to generate final adjusted populations for every county in Texas.

The News joined a fourth data table showing county election results for 2020, obtained from the Texas Secretary of State's office, to the combined data.

The first map of prison population was generated by joining a count of all incarcerated adults in every 2020 Census Tract to a Census geospatial file of these tracts in QGIS. This was then exported as a combined shapefile and styled in Tableau.

To conduct the analysis on excluding inmates, The News reduced each district's population by its total population of incarcerated adults, as counted by the Census Bureau and then adjusted the ideal district size by the total statewide incarcerated population. The News then calculated which districts, by population size, would fall outside of the 10% maximum-minimum population threshold.

To conduct the demographic analysis, The News used the March TDCJ data and 2020 Census Bureau data for adult correctional facilities (group quarters, institutionalized population). This was compared to the 2020 Census Bureau racial demographic data for Anderson County.

The News used the March TDCJ data to determine sentencing and projected release data for Anderson County prisons in state-run facilities. Texas counties with the highest incarceration rates were determined using the 2020 Census Bureau data for adult correctional facilities.

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TDCJ provided The News with data of the number of incarcerated people who reported living in specific zip codes prior to incarceration. TDCJ warned this data was incomplete and self-reported. This data was used solely to determine, to the best of The News' ability, which zip code sent the most people to state-run jails and prisons.

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March Primary brings contested Taylor County judge race, but many candidates are unopposed
Brian Bethel
Abilene Reporter-News
December 15, 2021
https://www.reporternews.com/story/news/2021/12/15/primary-bring-contested-county-judge-race-some-unopposed-races/8908992002/

A contested race for Taylor County judge has emerged, while turnover in other areas of the county has put new names on the ballot for the March party primaries.

Filings indicate change is coming in several areas, including the position of county clerk and several justice of the peace slots.

The position of county judge, held by Downing Bolls since 2010, will see a two-man race, consisting of Taylor County Assistant District Attorney Phil Crowley and Scott Lebowitz, who formerly worked for the Taylor County Sheriff's Office.

Bolls, a former TV news anchor, first was appointed by commissioners after Judge George Newman retired, then was elected to the office.

No one filed locally as a Democrat in the primary for county offices.

At the state level, Rep. Stan Lambert drew a Democrat Linda Goolsbee as an opponent for District 7.

State Sen. Charles Perry is unopposed in District 28.

Local Democratic Party chairwoman Elizabeth Smyser and Republican Party chairman Chris Carnohan, both incumbents, did not draw opponents, according to the listings.

Candidates are listed on the Texas secretary of state's website.

County Judge race heats up

Lebowitz, in a statement about his candidacy, said he brings 32 years of experience in personnel management, budgeting and law enforcement.

He has been a resident of Taylor County for 17 years and is a 20-year retired Air Force veteran.

He served at Dyess Air Force Base from 1992-98 in the 96th Security Police Squadron until he was transferred, returning here in 2004.

He continued his career in public service by accepting a position with the sheriff's office in its adult detention facility, where he attained the rank of sergeant. He became a certified peace officer in 2010.

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In 2015, he laterally transferred within the county to the Road and Bridge Department in Precinct 2.

Lebowitz has served as a volunteer firefighter with volunteer departments in the cities of Tye and Merkel, also working for Rural Metro Ambulance in Abilene and volunteering with Merkel EMS, he said.

His experience in law enforcement and public safety will aid him in performing required judicial duties, he said, including emergency management, matters of probate and mental health commitments, juvenile cases and guardianships.

"When it comes to the budget I will ensure that our tax dollars are spent wisely," he said. "I also look forward to working with other government entities as needed to ensure the forward progression of Taylor County."

Crowley seeks office

Crowley, who announced his candidacy in September, said he brings "experience and legal knowledge" that will serve him in probate, guardianship, mental health commitment and occasional juvenile law matters heard by the county judge.

He graduated from the Abilene Independent School District and Hardin-Simmons University. He then graduated from Texas Wesleyan School of Law (now Texas A&M School of Law) and immediately returned home to practice.

If elected, his experience would help "efficiently manage the court's civil docket," he said, adding that he also brought experience as a small businessman with his own law practice.

He promised a "capability to make tough decisions daily on felony cases," and said he would set budget priorities to make sure the county's public safety needs are being met.

He said he would bring "strong conservative leadership and knowledge of Taylor County government structure" to the judge's role as the county's administrator.

He also would bring an understanding of the structure and organization of county government through his own experience as a county employee, he said.

"I want to make sure we have someone in that job who cares about government and cares about delivering good service to our constituents," Crowley said.

New blood
Several new candidates seeking office are unopposed:

► Brandi DeRemer, a former Taylor County clerk's office employee, announced her intention to seek that role after Larry Bevill, the elected clerk for 15 years, announced plans to retire.

DeRemer has worked for Taylor County since 2003, and is currently serving in Haig's office as court administrator.

► Court clerk Shawna Joiner put in a solo bid for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1, Place 2, an office presently held by Sparky Dean.

Dean said Wednesday that while he might not rule out future political endeavors, he

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and his wife have trips to take and some independent ventures to explore.

Joiner previously ran for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1, Place 1, against incumbent Mike McAuliffe in 2019.

►Unopposed is Earl Donnell of Tuscola, who put in a bid for Justice of the Peace, Precinct 3.

That position is currently held by Bob Shea Jr., who said Wednesday he did not planned to run again.

Incumbents and others

A number of incumbent county employees didn't draw opponents in their races, including County Commissioner Kyle Kendrick, County Court at Law No. 1 Judge Robert Harper, County Court at Law No. 2 Judge Harriett Haag and Treasurer Lesa Hart Crosswhite.

Incumbent Justice of the Peace Robert Jones, Precinct 2, and David Doherty, Precinct 4, also are unopposed.

Doherty, who was chief deputy for the Sheriff's Office, replaced Frank Cleveland, who retired in June.

Cleveland had served in the Precinct 4 position for almost 23 years.

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Primaries are set for Texas gubernatorial race. See who's running
Ali Linan
CNHI News
December 14, 2021
https://www.cnhinews.com/cnhi/article_6ab29b18-5c67-11ec-abad-63e751fa4bee.html

AUSTIN — Twelve candidates— seven Republicans and six Democrats — have thrown their hats in the race for Texas' highest office and will face primaries in March.

The filing period for the 2022 Texas gubernatorial race closed at 6 p.m. Monday. Now, candidates will face a primary on March 1 that will narrow the field to a single candidate for each party, unless there is a runoff where no one candidate receives more than 50% of the vote. In that case, a primary runoff election will take place on May 24. Election Day is Nov. 8.

Texas voters elect a governor every four years. The governor operates as the state's chief executive and makes policy recommendations as well as appoints the Secretary of State and other members of boards and commissions, according to the state website.

As of 9:30 a.m. Dec. 15, the following candidates have been officially accepted into the primary race, according to the Texas Secretary of State website:

Republican candidates:

- Greg Abbott—incumbent
- Paul Belew—attorney

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- Danny Harrison—small business owner
- Kandy Kaye Horn—philanthropist
- Don Huffines—real estate
- Chad Prather—television host
- Allen West—retired military

Democratic candidates:

- Inocencio Barrieniez—retired
- Michael Cooper—automotive executive
- Joy Diaz—former reporter
- R. Star Locke—veteran
- Beto O'Rourke—organizer
- Rich Wakeland—engineer/attorney

In the 2022 election, Texans will vote for all major statewide offices including lieutenant governor, attorney general, comptroller, railroad commission and state board of education.

Every state house and senate seat is also up for reelection following redistricting, as well as every U.S. House seat — a total of 38 after Texas gained two seats because of population growth.

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See who has filed for candidacy in Harris County ahead of the March 2022 primaries
Hannah Zedaker
Community Impact
December 15, 2021
https://communityimpact.com/houston/spring-klein/election/2021/12/13/see-who-has-filed-for-candidacy-in-harris-county-ahead-of-the-march-2022-primaries/

Nearly 100 candidates have filed for Harris County positions ahead of the March 2022 primaries, as of the candidate filing deadline Dec. 13, according to the Texas Secretary of State website.

The winners for each party in the March primaries will determine which candidates will be on the ballot in the November general election. Of note, 11 candidates have filed for county judge, including incumbent Lina Hidalgo; seven candidates have filed for Precinct 2 county commissioner, including incumbent Adrian Garcia; and seven candidates have filed for Precinct 4 county commissioner, including incumbent R. Jack Cagle.

Ahead of the March 2022 primaries, the first day to apply for a ballot by mail will be Jan. 1 and the last day will be Feb. 18 (received not postmarked); the last day to receive ballots by mail will be March 1. Additionally, the last day to register to vote in the March 2022 primaries will be Jan. 31. Early voting will run Feb. 14-25 and election day will be March 1.

Through Harris County's countywide polling place program, registered voters may cast their ballots at any vote center countywide during both early voting and on election day.

For more information about voting in Harris County, click here.

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*Indicates incumbent

County Judge

Hector Bolanos (R)

Martina Lemond Dixon (R)

Robert Dorris (R)

Oscar Gonzales (R)

Warren Howell (R)

Randall Kubosh (R)

Vidal Martinez (R)

Alex Mealer (R)

Ahmad R. "Rob-Beto" Hassan (D)

Lina Hidalgo* (D)

Georgia D. Provost (D)

County Civil Court at Law No. 1

James Lombardino (R)

Audrie Lawton Evans* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 2

Clyde Raymond Leuchtag (R)

Jim F. Kovach* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 3

Lashawna A. Williams* (D)

County Civic Court at Law No. 4

Brian Staley (R)

David M. Patronella (D)

M. K. Monica Singh (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 1

Alex Salgado* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 2

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Paula Goodhart (R)

Ronnisha Bowman* (D)

Jannell Robles (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 3

Leslie Johnson (R)

Staci Biggar (D)

Porscha Natasha Brown (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 4

Zachary Gibson (R)

Shannon Brichelle Baldwin* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 5

Elizabeth Buss (R)

Carlos Aguayo (D)

David Marcel Fleischer* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 6

Mark Montgomery (R)

Selina Alaniz (D)

Kelley Andrews* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 7

Mauricio Vazquez (D)

Andrew A. Wright* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 8

Mark Goldberg (R)

Erika Ramirez (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 9

Toria J. Finch* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 10

Dan Spjut (R)

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Juanita Jackson (D)

Thuy Le (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 11

Daniel Simons (R)

Sedrick T. Walker II* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 12

Genesis E. Draper* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 13

Lance Long (R)

Raul Rodriguez* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 14

Je'rell A. Rogers (D)

DAvid L. Singer* (D)

County Criminal Court at Law No. 15

Tonya Jones* (D)

Probate Court No. 1

Loyd Wright (R)

Jerry Simoneaux* (D)

Probate Court No. 2

Pamela Medina (D)

Michael Newman* (D)

Probate Court No. 3

Rory Olsen (R)

Jason Cox* (D)

Probate Court No. 4

Will Archer (R)

James Horwitz* (D)

District Clerk

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Chris Daniel (R)

Desiree Broadnax (D)

Marilyn Burgess* (D)

County Clerk

Stan Stanart (R)

Teneshia Hudspeth* (D)

County Treasurer

Eric Dick (R)

Kyle Scott (R)

Dylan Osborne* (D)

Carla L. Wyatt (D)

Harris County Department of Education, Place 1

Ben Saldana (R)

Amy Hinojosa* (D)

Harris County Department of Education, Place 2

Danielle Dick (R)

Andrea Duhon* (D)

County Commissioner Precinct 2

Daniel N. Jason (R)

John Manlove (R)

Jack Morman (R)

Jerry Mouton (R)

Richard Vega (R)

Adrian Garcia* (D)

Gary Harrison (D)

County Commissioner Precinct 4

R. Jack Cagle* (R)

Lesley Briones (D)

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Gina Calanni (D)

Bejamin "Ben" Chou (D)

Clarence Miller (D)

Jeff Stauber (D)

Ann Williams (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 1, Place 2

Steve Duble (D)

Victor Lombrana (D)

Chris Watson (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 2, Place 2

Blair McClure (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 3, Place 2

Denise Graves (R)

Lucia Bates* (D)

Herbert Alexander Sanchez (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 5, Place 2

Zee Adam Gire (R)

Eman Afshar (D)

Roderick D. Rodgers (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 6, Place 2

Luis Garza (D)

Angela D. Rodriguez* (D)

Justice of the Peace Precinct 7, Place 2

Sharon Burney* (D)

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Senate Democrats push to pass voting rights bills by Christmas
Raquel Martin
Nexstar
December 15, 2021
https://www.everythinglubbock.com/news/washington-dc/democrats-split-on-changing-senate-rules-to-pass-voting-rights-legislation/

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WASHINGTON (NEXSTAR) — Democrats are renewing their call to pass voting rights legislation before heading home for the holidays. The trouble is not every Democrat is on board.

“We must deal with this issue now,” Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., said. “The judgment of history is upon us.”

On the Senate floor Tuesday, Warnock said Democrats should change Senate rules to get the job done without Republicans.

“We’ve decided we can do it for the economy but not for the democracy,” Warnock said. “How do we in good conscious justify doing one without the other?”

With President Joe Biden’s Build Back Better Plan likely stalled until the New Year, a growing number of Democrats are backing Warnock’s call to tackle voting rights now.

“I’m completely inspired by and agree with what he said,” Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said.

“If we don’t modify the filibuster to modify voting rights then we’re going to lose Democracy,” Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., said.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said federal legislation is needed to combat a wave of new state voting rules as Michigan is “one of the states where that’s playing out in real time.”

On Wednesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., voiced his support but stopped short of endorsing the new timeline.

“There is universal consensus in our caucus that we need to pass legislation,” Schumer said.

The problem is, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., said he will only support a bipartisan effort. This renewed push comes after Senate Republicans have already struck down voting rights legislation three times this year, and Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said its for good reason.

“It’s a federal takeover bill and it’s a democrat party protection bill,” Hawley said.

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Study to look at relief route for Mines Road traffic
Thomas Lott
Laredo Morning Times
December 15, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/insider/article/Study-to-look-at-relief-route-for-Mines-16703901.php

City officials are now working with the Regional Mobility Authority on relieving congestion on FM 1472 and Mines Road.

Jed Brown, who was appointed as the presiding officer of the Webb County, City of Laredo Regional Mobility Authority by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott back in 2019, told the Metropolitan Planning Organization during a meeting last month that the RMA was ready to participate on what is known to the city as the “River Road Project.”

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Brown said the RMA Board passed a resolution one day prior to the Nov. 17 meeting to work with the MPO on the project and to perform an “alignment study” which would map out a potential avenue west of Mines Road to give passenger vehicles relief from tractor-trailer traffic.

Part of the study would be to find out exactly where the road would start and where it could possibly finish. As of right now, the potential avenue starts where River Bank Road intersects with Aquero Boulevard and ends several miles north on FM 1472.

“That’s part of the alignment study, where the logical location for that road could be,” Brown said.

“The motion that was approved by the RMA was that we would partner with the MPO on that. We did not have that project on our radar screen, but once we really looked at the project, we saw the merit.”

The RMA’s job is to assist the establishment of a comprehensive transportation system to directly benefit the traveling public of the area through the development of additional transportation alternatives within the region.

The problem

Traffic congestion on Mines Road has been a topic of discussion in Laredo for years. Even Rep. Henry Cuellar brought up the issue in September when discussing the construction on one of the bridges going to Mexico.

City Councilmember Vanessa Perez represents District VII where Mines Road sits. She believes a project like the one the RMA will be researching needs to be done for the good of the people in that area.

“With the expansion of the World Trade Bridge on all these outlets, it’s going to alleviate some of the traffic that we have now but it’s also going to cause more traffic,” she said at the Nov. 17 meeting. “There’s going to be more development, there’s going to be more trucks, and I think this project here is pretty much our only way out.”

Laredo is the largest inland port in the United States and Nuevo Laredo is the largest in Latin America. More than 47% of United States international trade and more than 36% of Mexican international trade crosses through the Laredo Port of Entry.

On Mines Road, there sits multiple facilities where trucks pick up and drop off goods which results in heavy traffic throughout the day. Muller Elementary is just off of Mines Road which presents a challenge for many parents getting to the school and making their way back home during school pickup and drop-off hours.

This situation prompted Brown to see the need for relief at this location.

“For us, largely, it’s a safety factor,” he said. “If that road is constructed and tractor-trailer traffic is not allowed on the road, but yet, you can have pedestrian vehicles, smaller vehicles, school buses and emergency services vehicles on that road only, it makes a lot of sense for parents and school buses getting children to all the schools up and down the Mines Road, never having to travel on the Mines Road probably.”

What would RMA be doing

With the RMA’s approved resolution the day before the Nov. 17 meeting, they agreed

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to work on the River Road project with the city. What that means is they would both map out potential tracks for the road as well as research the potential cost of said roads.

The RMA does not yet have a cost estimate for what a road would cost. That would come with the study.

The study — what Brown called an “alignment study,” which he said might not be exactly what it will be called — carries with it an estimated cost of $250,000, but that number cannot be exceeded. It could cost less but it will not cost more, according to the RMA.

Laredo and RMA would likely partner on this study and share the cost.

A question on studies

Congestion on Mines Road has been an issue for a while. The city, county and even RMA and TxDOT have done studies on potential solutions for the problem in the past but no changes have come about from those studies yet.

One study done on the North Laredo area was one costing $675,000, which gave TxDOT and RMA a “bird’s-eye view” of the area several years ago. This particular study would be more specific and potentially determine an exact track for the relief road to take.

However, with all of the studies that have been done in the last several years, Webb Co. Judge Tano Tijerina — who sits on the MPO — had some questions about the value of this one.

“I’m one of these guys that … when we’re paying this amount of money for studies and studies and studies and studies and nothing’s getting done, I just feel like we’re just spinning our wheels and getting nothing done,” he said. “And I’m not going against anybody here. I’m not trying to put anybody in a bad light. But if we’re spending the money, we should have some kind of results.”

Tijerina made a motion which passed unanimously asking for the MPO to collect every study done on the area by the city, county, RMA and TxDOT for the past eight years.

Brown was appointed to his position at the RMA in 2019 by Abbott. He was not part of the RMA’s study with TxDOT, so he cannot speak to the lack of action that has come out of studies on possible relief of traffic congestion in the area.

However, he said he wants this study the RMA is doing to specifically be the one to plot out the relief route residents have been wanting.

“It has to be an actionable study,” Brown said. “That’s the way I look at it. It has to be something that the work product that’s developed from it is something that … the alignment that’s ultimately selected hopefully is a result of this study.”

Funding

The RMA and the City of Laredo still have to iron out some things on the cost of the study, but city officials also wondered out loud at the meeting if there was a way to find alternative funding for the eventual road path selected by the study as opposed to paying for it with local funds.

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“I was just thinking, maybe, have a setup to where we can get maybe some fed monies and use that as a security road,” Tijerina said.

“I’m just trying to find different alternatives, different monies, trying to look at different opportunities.”

The hope would be that if this road is close enough to the border of Mexico that it could be designated as necessary for, what Mayor Pete Saenz and Tijerina referred to as, a virtual wall.

If that were to happen, Tijerina hopes maybe the city would be able to obtain some funds from the federal government to build the road. He also additionally said the latest passed infrastructure bill could help.

“I know with this infrastructure bill that has been shoved down the United States by Congress and by the Senate, that’s fine,” Tijerina said. “President (Joe) Biden wants his infrastructure bill, this is the perfect infrastructure project. That’s what I’m saying. If there’s not any money for this then what was the bill for?”

The biggest thing that seemed to be on everyone’s mind at the meeting was that there needs to be action taken to get this relief route at that location.

Several members at the meeting acknowledged their confusion that all of the studies done have yet to result in changes for the area.

“I applaud the judge for trying to figure out all of the different projects and all of the different studies that have been done, because I’ve seen six or seven studies that say the same thing — we need more roads,” Councilmember Dr. Marte Martinez said. “Well, I mean, we probably could have funded a road with as many projects as we’ve done, you know? As many studies as we’ve done. That’s the truth.”

What’s next?
Mr. Brown said he will take everything the members of the MPO said and give it to the RMA Board, and they will plan accordingly.

Saenz asked if they could make a motion for Brown to update the MPO on the project monthly, but since this wasn’t a direct item on the agenda they could not take immediate action.

However, Brown said he would come back to the MPO monthly and update the progress on the study.

The MPO meets the third Wednesday of every month and will meet again Wednesday, Dec. 15.

“I’m hearing everything everybody is saying,” Brown said. “We take this information, leave this room and start trying to process it and figure out how to implement it. We have the green light to definitely conceptually be able to move forward, to meet with staff, to meet (with) city staff, whoever we need to who’s appropriate to see what the next step is.”

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North America’s biggest railroad born as Kansas City sale is completed
Mexico News Daily

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December 15, 2021
https://mexiconewsdaily.com/news/north-americas-biggest-railroad-born-as-kansas-city-sale-is-completed/

Railway giant Canadian Pacific (CP) closed a US $31 billion deal including the assumption of $3.8 billion of debt for United States railroad Kansas City Southern (KCS) on Tuesday, a sale that was originally agreed upon in September.

The landmark deal creates Canadian Pacific Kansas City (CPKC), an approximately 32,000 kilometer railroad that connects Canada, the United States and Mexico and will generate an estimated $8.7 billion annually.

CPKC will offer a direct link between Vancouver, Montreal, New York, Texas and large parts of Mexico, currently operated under KCS' wholly-owned subsidiary Kansas City Southern de México, which carries freight from the Pacific port of Lázaro Cárdenas, Michoacán; ports in Tampico and Altamira in Tamaulipas; the port of Veracruz; and the Valley of México and the El Bajío industrial region to the U.S. via Texas.

The combination will capitalize on the North America trade agreement (USMCA), particularly in the automotive and agriculture industries, which are together worth almost $190 billion, according to the Economy Ministry.

However, the deal isn't quite finalized yet: KCS shares have been placed in a voting trust while U.S. regulators review it. The companies expect approval in the fourth quarter of 2022, and will operate independently until then.

The acquisition was given the green light by Mexican regulators in November.

Completion will bring an end to a bidding war between CP and its domestic rival Canadian National (CN), which was previously in line to take over KCS.

The president of CP, Keith Creel, said the deal would benefit North American economies: "Today is an historic day for our two iconic companies … CPKC will become the backbone connecting our customers to new markets, enhancing competition in the U.S. rail network, and driving economic growth across North America while delivering significant environmental benefits," he said.

President of KCS, Patrick Ottensmeyer, said the agreement will be beneficial for clients, shareholders and workers: "The CP-KCS combination will not only benefit customers, partners, labor and shareholders through new single line transportation services, attractive synergies and complementary routes, but will also benefit KCS and our employees by enabling us to be part of a growing corporate enterprise on the North American continent," he said.

CP began operating in 1881 and has approximately 20,100 kilometers of track in the United States and Canada.

KCS is the smallest of the major freight railroads in the U.S, with 10,800 kilometers of track in the U.S. and Mexico.

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Supply-Chain Hell Ignites Economic Boom Along U.S.-Mexico Border
Thomas Black
Bloomberg

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

December 14, 2021
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-12-14/supply-chain-hell-ignites-economic-boom-along-u-s-mexico-border?sref=ytoldrow

Wedged up against the southern edge of the Rio Grande, the sprawling desert city of Juarez has seen its share of economic booms over the years.

But perhaps none quite like the one that's taken hold today.

There are excavators and bulldozers seemingly everywhere, pushing dirt into tall piles and leaving everything -- and everyone -- covered in a coat of wind-blown dust. The space they are carving out of the desert floor will house a long list of new factories that were ordered up by anxious CEOs across the world when the pandemic roiled their global supply routes.

Ambu A/S, a Danish medical device maker, is erecting a facility on the outskirts of the city. Several miles away, Keeson Technology Corp., a Chinese furniture maker, is building a second plant here just months after opening its first. Boyd Corp., a California-based conglomerate, recently inaugurated one factory and plans to build three more. And MGA Entertainment, a California-based toymaker, began cranking out Little Tikes Cozy Coupes from its plant last month even before construction crews had cleared out debris piles or paved the parking lot.

What's the rush at MGA?

The company has 750 containers of toys stuck in supply-chain hell at ports around Los Angeles. Produced in China, those items were supposed to be on U.S. store shelves this holiday season. That won't happen, says Isaac Larian, MGA's chief executive officer. But the Juarez plant is now shipping two truckloads of toys into the U.S. each day and that number will soon grow to 10. What's more, Larian plans to break ground on a second factory in Mexico next year and will begin shifting some of MGA's Chinese production to these plants.

"We have big ambitions and big plans for Mexico," he says.

This, in the lingo of corporate executives, is near-shoring, one of the biggest economic transformations sparked by the pandemic: Shrink the length of the supply chain to keep production closer to its final destination and reduce the risk of some snag messing things up along the way. A shorter chain is a stronger chain, the thinking now goes, and there's a growing sense that this new approach will remain in vogue in C-suites long after Covid fades.

For the multinationals that do business in the red-hot U.S. economy, near-shoring often means northern Mexico, where labor costs are cheap, land is plentiful and the border is just a short ride away. El Paso, Texas, is less than 10 miles to the north of most of the new plants in Juarez.

Other border cities -- Tijuana, along the west coast, and Reynosa, Matamoros and Piedras Negras, far to the east -- are undergoing similar industrial booms, providing a much-needed lift to a Mexican economy that has been slow to recover from last year's collapse.

For more than half a century now, the factories in these cities have been a key cog in the U.S. supply chain. Known in the industry as maquiladoras, they take imported parts, assemble them into consumer and industrial products and then ship them north.

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When Nafta, the free trade deal between the U.S., Mexico and Canada, took effect in 1994, multinationals set up maquiladoras at a frenetic pace. Juarez alone is home to plants owned by General Electric, Honeywell International, Bosch, Foxconn Technology, Siemens and Electrolux, among others.

Years later, the region began to stagnate when China entered the World Trade Organization. Many companies pulled out of Mexico and set up shop in China, where labor costs were even lower. Flareups of gruesome narco violence along the border only added to the exodus.

China kept stealing U.S. market share from Mexico right up until Donald Trump took office in Washington. When he started slapping tariffs on Chinese-made products, Mexico suddenly looked pretty attractive again to executives. Then the pandemic came along and turbocharged the shift. Keeson, the furniture maker, is Exhibit A for this: It first made plans to open a factory in Juarez shortly after Trump launched his trade war against Beijing, and it sped up those plans by a full year when Covid hit.

“Manufacturing is coming back for sure,” says Jason Tolliver, a managing director who helps oversee logistics and industrial services in the Americas for real-estate firm Cushman & Wakefield PLC. The conversations he’s having with corporate leaders, he says, indicate this wave of investment along the border is just beginning. “It is structural and it’s long term.”

The boom is so intense in Juarez that industrial real estate is suddenly getting tight: 98% of existing space is already leased, and the price has jumped more than 20% over the past year to about $5.25 per square foot, according to Jesse Melendez, a director at industrial real estate company Intermex.

Intermex is rushing to cash in. It’s leasing out 5 million square feet more of factory space in the city today than it did a year ago, and it’s building four additional factory sites. They will be tightly clustered in what is now just a barren field of dirt on the city’s southwestern edge.

As excited as Melendez is about the boom, he’s already mentally preparing for the bust that often follows. “In my career, I’ve typically seen the valleys and peaks seven to 10 years apart,” he says. He figures the slowdown will begin by 2024.

As Melendez drove through the city on a recent weekday afternoon, that seemed like a distant thought. “Hiring” signs kept popping up all around him -- on the facades of factories, on buses, in shop windows.

This is what lured Efrain Gonzalez back to Juarez from his native Veracruz in the south.

People associate Mexican migrants with the U.S. labor market, but the truth is many of them, like Gonzalez, end their journeys just miles south of the border, especially when the maquiladoras are humming like they are now.

The factory jobs offer pay that, while a fraction of typical U.S. wages, is markedly higher than what the migrants can earn back home in the impoverished south of Mexico. And they don’t have to worry about getting deported.

Gonzalez, 49, earns a little over $80 a week, plus benefits like free lunch, at the Keeson plant, which produces the company’s Ergomotion adjustable beds. He said he knew he’d find work as soon as he set foot back in Juarez a few months ago. The

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sight of all the new factories going up made that clear. “There’s a lot of work here.”

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Civil rights groups ask DOJ to investigate ‘discriminatory’ Operation Lone Star in Texas
Sandra Sanchez
Border Report
December 15, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/immigration/civil-rights-groups-ask-doj-to-investigate-discriminatory-operation-lone-star-in-texas/

McALLEN, Texas (Border Report) — Ten civil rights organizations have filed a joint discrimination complaint asking the Department of Justice to investigate Operation Lone Star, a law enforcement initiative headed by Texas Gov. Greg Abbott to deter illegal immigration on the Texas/Mexico border.

The ACLU of Texas, Latino Justice, Texas Civil Rights Project and Texas Fair Defense Project are among those on Wednesday that filed a Title VI complaint with the federal government alleging that Operation Lone Star is an “unlawful, racist and xenophobic system of state immigration enforcement in Texas.”

In a letter sent Wednesday to U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland, the agencies ask that the Department of Justice launch a formal investigation into the operation and end all federal funding received by Texas agencies and counties that are engaged in what they call a “discriminatory operation.”

Operation Lone Star began in March under Abbott’s direction and utilizes the Department of Public Safety, Texas National Guard, as well as support from National Guard sent from other states to several Texas border counties.

In September, Abbott signed into law over $1.8 billion for Texas border security efforts, which includes Operation Lone Star. Abbott has held steadfast in his belief that Texas must “secure” its borders and he has repeatedly faulted the Biden administration for “failing” to better prevent migrants from entering the country illegally.

“Texas supports legal immigration but will not be an accomplice to the open border policies that cause, rather than prevent, a humanitarian crisis in our state and endanger the lives of Texans. We will surge the resources and law enforcement personnel needed to confront this crisis,” Abbott said in March when he began Operation Lone Star.

Over 100 organizations supported the discrimination complaint, according to the letter. This included: Amnesty International USA, Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Freedom Network USA, Human Rights Watch, RAICES, the Immigrant Legal Resource Center and the Haitian Bridge Alliance.

In a call with media Wednesday, several of the groups said the surge of DPS troopers and National Guardsmen inflict undue harm on migrants and unfairly affects border communities.

Their discrimination complaint alleges the operation violates the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that bars discrimination on the basis of race, color or national origin in any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

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“They’ve created a nefarious state enforcement system to punish brown and black immigrants,” said Laura Peña, legal director of the Racial and Economic Justice Program at the Texas Civil Rights Project. “There’s real human suffering … as well as consequences to the border communities that are required to enforce it.”

Claudia Muñoz, co-executive director of Grassroots Leadership, said 1,500 migrants currently are in prison on arrest charges associated with Operation Lone Star.

She said some of their clients report being magistrated by judges “in parking lots” with hundreds of other migrants.

She said that after charges were dismissed for some migrants, they had to wait days for release, and then some say they were not released but handed over to U.S. Border Patrol agents who deported them.

“It is clear to us that local officials in Texas do not care about the rules,” Muñoz said. “They target migrants and disregard federal law.”

The complaint alleges that law enforcement lure migrants to trespass on private property and “have directed individuals near the border to a particular place – giving them the impression they have permission to be on the property – only then to arrest them for trespassing.”

Kate Huddleston, a lawyer with the ACLU of Texas, said “the program deliberately targets black and brown and LatinX migrants for punishment.” And she alleged that “arrests are often lacking in probable cause.”

“They languish in that system for extremely long periods of time, weeks or months on misdemeanor charges,” Huddleston said.

Border Report reached out to Gov. Abbott’s office for a response to the allegations. This story will be updated if additional information is received.

The letter also says law enforcement have “boasted on social media” about arrests.

Law enforcement say Operation Lone Star has helped to decrease the amount of drugs and migrants trafficked through Texas.

For the past nine months the operation has steadily been increasing in manpower and funding and support from other states. There has been a blockade of the Rio Grande formed off Starr County, and shipping containers were placed off the banks of Eagle Pass, Texas, to help block those trying to enter in between legal ports of entry.

“We’re here to repel and to block any criminal activity coming into the state,” Maj. Mike Perry of the Texas Military Department said Dec. 9 during a media briefing in Weslaco.

Perry said during the first week of this month officers with Operation Lone Star caused nearly 700 migrants to turn back to Mexico.

DPS Lt. Chris Olivarez said law enforcement through Operation Lone Star have, so far, stopped from crossing the border massive loads of fentanyl drugs — enough that could have killed 200 million people, he said Dec. 9.

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Texas election audit undermines democracy
Editorial Board
Dallas Morning News
December 16, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2021/12/16/the-real-cost-of-the-texas-elections-audit/

In the days after Gov. Greg Abbott ordered a "forensic audit" of the November 2020 elections, the elections administrators of the four targeted counties were left scratching their heads. Officials in Dallas and Collin counties told us in late September that they were waiting to receive instructions from the Texas secretary of state. Tarrant and Harris counties were also in the dark.

We condemned the audit at that time, though we hoped there would be no follow-through. We thought it might be a superficial stunt to appease President Donald Trump, and nothing more.

But our news colleagues recently reported that Secretary of State John Scott sent a long list of requested documents to the four counties. And last month, the governor and GOP legislative leaders shifted $4 million from the state prison system to the office of the secretary of state to pay for the audit.

Abbott is making a mistake by pressing on with this forensic audit — whatever it is that GOP leaders mean by "forensic." The myth of widespread voter fraud is red meat for Republican primary voters but far less palatable to moderate suburban voters in a general election, a political calculus that the governor must make as he campaigns for another term and seeks to carry down-ballot Republicans with him.

Above all, this obsession with election audits is eroding democracy for all of us, no matter our political affiliation.

The Texas GOP's treatment of election integrity as a legislative emergency makes no sense on its face. Trump won Texas comfortably, and voters here kept the state a Republican stronghold. The state's director of elections described the 2020 vote as "smooth and secure."

Yet Abbott and his allies have steered us into Orwellian territory. Texans have heard repeatedly that the elections audits are an attempt to restore confidence in our state's elections systems. They are having precisely the opposite effect. Our democracy is being weakened by these baseless searches for fraud.

Targeted for suspicion are two counties that are Democratic strongholds and two counties that have grown more diverse and where Democrats are gaining ground. That's not a coincidence.

Efforts to undermine election systems continue unabated nationwide. According to one study, at least 16 states have proposed or passed laws this year that would transfer power over election administration from governors or elections officials to legislatures. We should all be alarmed about what this shift means for our future votes.

Our democracy draws its strength from a tradition of debate. We debate issues, we debate policy. We offer choices, and we accept the will of voters. That is what has made our democracy healthy for generations, regardless of whether a Republican or Democrat lived in the White House.

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This campaign to make Americans question the validity of elections is corrosive, and all of us will pay the price. How long can our leaders chip away at the foundation of our democracy before the house comes crashing down?

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/17/21
Date: Friday, December 17, 2021 9:38:13 AM
Attachments: image001.png

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 17, 2021

Dallas County audit details released, *Coppell Gazette*, December 16, 2021

Texas' renewed voter citizenship review is still flagging citizens as "possible non-U.S. citizens," *Texas Tribune*, December 17, 2021

Ballot numbering under scrutiny in Ellis County, *Waxahachie Daily Light*, December 16, 2021

Garcia: Get set for the weirdest county commissioner race we've ever seen, *San Antonio Express-News*, December 16, 2021

Texas AG Paxton's $2.2M voter fraud unit closed three cases in 2021. GOP lawmakers still boosted its budget, *Houston Chronicle*, December 17, 2021

Lawsuit alleges Harris County Democrat's map disqualifies some voters for six years, *The Center Square*, December 16, 2021

Redistricting changes raises tension in Texas before elections, *KGNS-TV*, December 16, 2021

Texas Democrats eye redistricting fights in state court as federal suits over gerrymandering mount, *Dallas Morning News*, December 16, 2021

How Out Texas Rep. Celia Israel Put Voting Rights First in 2021, *The Advocate*, December 16, 2021

Arlington approves redrawn council districts that some say dilute Black, Latino voting power, *KERA News*, December 16, 2021

Court tells Texas AG, "Nah," On Election Prosecutions, *The Root*, December 16, 2021

Controversial businessman with Dallas ties sees renewed fame as election

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'expert', *KERA News*, December 16, 2021

Nevada county where Trump won to replace voting machines, *Associated Press*, December 16, 2021

Yes, many noncitizens can now vote in New York City, but only in municipal elections, *KCEN-TV*, December 16, 2021

Biden met virtually with U.S. senators to discuss voting rights bill, *Reuters*, December 16, 2021

Voting rights advocates hold hunger strike near White House, *Washington Post*, December 17, 2021

Fox's worst week? Dominion ruling adds to drumbeat of bad news for the network, *CNN*, December 16, 2021

Opening of Texas-Mexico border boosts holiday retail in San Antonio, *Texas Public Radio*, December 16, 2021

EXCLUSIVE-Royal Dutch Shell confirms new delay in sale of Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex, *Reuters*, December 16, 2021

Texas has built 6 miles of wire border fencing along Rio Grande under Operation Lone Star, *Border Report*, December 16, 2021

Dallas County audit details released
Audrey Henvey
Coppell Gazette
December 16, 2021
https://starlocalmedia.com/coppellgazette/news/dallas-county-audit-details-released/article_37d2abc8-5e99-11ec-9aff-7b644dd8215e.html

The Texas Secretary of State's office has laid out details for phase two of its "full forensic audit" of the 2020 general election in Collin, Dallas, Harris and Tarrant counties.

On Friday, the office shared a letter from Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott addressed to elections administrators for each county.

"As indicated in our office's previous communications, the Texas Secretary of State's office is conducting the largest and most comprehensive forensic audit of the November 2020 General Election in your respective counties," the letter stated. "The purpose of this audit is to provide clarity and confidence for Texas voters that all applicable laws and procedures were followed during the 2020 Election, and to

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identify any irregularities or issues that need to be addressed going forward."

The letter asks the elections offices to begin locating requested documents in preparation for on-site examinations by the office's Forensic Audit Division, which will be coordinated in January.

The request comes after the office first announced in September that an election audit had already begun in the state's two largest Democrat and Republican counties. The office has since said that the audit is expected to cover about 35% of votes cast for the 2020 general election in Texas.

Scott's Friday letter came with a 10-page attachment outlining the records and procedures that the office is reviewing.

"The specific review process for each category will be based on the county's response to the initial survey questions provided," the office stated. "Once the scope is established on a county-by-county basis, we will provide detailed documentation regarding the specific review of each applicable category."

The outlined materials include voting system test records, lists of election workers, video surveillance records and questions about the county's election security measures.

According to an audit outline that was shared by the office in September, phase 2 involves the office conducting a comprehensive election records examination over several months "to ensure election administration procedures were properly followed during the 2020 General Election." That includes looking at county records including logic and accuracy testing records for voting machines, early voting and election day materials and training materials.

Irregularities or deviations from election administration procedures could trigger a full manual recount of ballots in a certain area, the office stated.

"I'm very confident that Collin County will come through this audit very well," Collin County elections administrator Bruce Sherbet said in September. "We had a very smooth and good election, and I think the biggest part for me is if this audit will help voters that don't have confidence in the process have confidence or more confidence that everything was handled appropriately, then that's very important."

Official election results posted on the Texas Secretary of State's website show that three of the four counties voted for President Joseph R. Biden Jr. in the 2020 general election. Collin County was the only one of the four that overall voted in favor of former President Donald J. Trump in the 2020 general election with 51.4% of the votes cast. Dallas County overall showed favor for Biden with 65.1% of votes cast.

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Texas' renewed voter citizenship review is still flagging citizens as "possible

non-U.S. citizens"
Alexa Ura
Texas Tribune
December 17, 2021
https://www.texastribune.org/2021/12/17/texas-voter-roll-review/

Texas' last attempt to scour its voting rolls for noncitizens two years ago quickly devolved into a calamity.

The state flagged nearly 100,000 voters for citizenship checks and set them up for possible criminal investigation based on flawed data that didn't account for immigrants who gained citizenship. After it became clear it was jeopardizing legitimate voter registrations, it was pulled into three federal lawsuits challenging its process. Former Secretary of State David Whitley lost his job amid the fallout. And the court battle ultimately forced the state to abandon the effort and rethink its approach to ensure naturalized citizens weren't targeted.

This fall, the state began rolling out a new, scaled-down approach. But again, the county officials responsible for carrying it out are encountering what appear to be faults in the system.

Scores of citizens are still being marked for review — and possible removal from the rolls. Registrars in some of the state's largest counties have found that a sizable number of voters labeled possible noncitizens actually filled out their voter registration cards at their naturalization ceremonies. In at least a few cases, the state flagged voters who were born in the U.S.

The secretary of state's office says it is following the settlement agreement it entered in 2019 — an arrangement that limited its screening of voters to those who registered to vote and later indicated to the Texas Department of Public Safety that they are not citizens. Flagged voters can provide documentation of their citizenship in order to keep their registrations, officials have pointed out.

But the issues tied to the new effort are significant enough that they've renewed worries among the civil rights groups that forced the state to change its practices. They are questioning Texas' compliance with the legal settlement that halted the last review. And for some attorneys, the persisting problems underscore their concerns that the state is needlessly putting the registrations of eligible voters at risk.

"We're trying to get a grasp of the scale, but obviously there's still a problem, which I think we always said would be the case," said Joaquin Gonzalez, an attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project, which was involved in the 2019 litigation. "It's definitely something we were concerned would happen if they tried to restart this process."

The review process tries to identify noncitizens using the Department of Public Safety's massive driver's license and ID database. It takes people who indicated they were not citizens when they obtained their IDs and then matches them to the voting rolls. But civil rights groups have been wary of that strategy because the database

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can contain inaccuracies and is prone to human error.

“It made sense to improve the process [in the settlement], but I think all parties were aware that there were still fundamental problems with the database and how they matched records,” Gonzalez said.

Texas’ voter citizenship review has persisted through the tenure of multiple secretaries of state and has been backed by state Republican leaders who have touted the broader review effort as a way to ensure the integrity of the voter rolls, though there is no evidence that large numbers of noncitizens are registered to vote.

The current iteration was formally initiated in early September before the appointment of the state’s new secretary of state, John Scott, who helped former President Donald Trump challenge the 2020 presidential election results in Pennsylvania.

That’s when the state sent counties 11,737 records of registered voters who were deemed “possible non-U.S. citizens.” It was a much smaller list than the one it produced in 2019, when it did not account for people who became naturalized citizens in between renewing driver’s licenses or ID cards they initially obtained as noncitizens.

But when Bexar County received its list of 641 flagged voters, county workers quickly determined that 109 of them — 17% of the total — had actually registered at naturalization ceremonies. The county is able to track the origin of those applications because of an internal labeling system it made up years ago when staff began attending the ceremonies, said Jacque Callanen, the county’s administrator.

Election officials in Travis County said they were similarly able to identify that applications for 60 voters on the county’s list of 408 flagged voters — roughly 15% of the total — had been filled out at naturalization ceremonies.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, another group that sued the state in 2019, is still assessing the extent to which the state’s new attempt to review the rolls may be defective. But those figures alone should give everyone pause, ACLU staff attorney Thomas Buser-Clancy said after The Texas Tribune provided him those tallies.

“What we do know is that every time the secretary of state tries to do something like this it fails and that these efforts, which inevitably ensnare eligible voters, should not be happening,” Buser-Clancy said.

In an advisory announcing the revised process, the secretary of state’s office told counties that they should first attempt to “investigate” a voter’s eligibility. If they are unable to verify citizenship, the county must then send out “notices of examination” that start a 30-day clock for the voter to submit proof of citizenship to retain their registration. Voters who don’t respond with proof within 30 days are removed from the rolls — though they can be reinstated if they later prove their citizenship, including at a polling place.

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Beyond the figures from Bexar and Travis counties, local election officials in other counties, including Cameron and Williamson, confirmed they've heard back from flagged voters who are naturalized citizens. After mailing 2,796 notices, officials in Harris County said 167 voters had provided them with documentation proving their citizenship. In Fort Bend, officials received proof of citizenship from at least 87 voters on their list of 515 "possible noncitizens." Last week, Texas Monthly reported on two cases of citizens in Cameron County who were flagged as possible noncitizens.

"This process, agreed upon by all parties and stakeholders, will ensure that only qualified U.S. citizens remain on the voter rolls in Texas' 254 counties," said Sam Taylor, the secretary of state's spokesperson. "We do not want any legitimate, qualified U.S. citizens to be canceled from the voter rolls, and this process protects U.S. citizens' right to remain registered and to vote."

In its advisory, the secretary of state suggested voter registrars could attempt to confirm a flagged voter's eligibility by consulting with other county governmental entities that may have verified their citizenship or by trying to identify voter registration applications that originated from naturalization ceremonies.

"To the extent that counties were able to confirm their citizenship status and they were kept on the rolls — that's exactly how the agreed-upon process is supposed to work," Taylor said of the naturalized citizens identified by officials in Bexar and Travis counties.

However, county officials have previously told the state they often have no way to independently verify someone's citizenship status to avoid sending out the 30-day notices. And most counties don't appear to track applications from naturalization ceremonies.

So far, 2,327 voter registrations have been canceled as part of the review — 88% of them because the voter did not respond to the notice within 30 days. Just 278 were canceled after voter registrars verified they were not citizens. In some cases, county officials said, this occurs because of clerical errors. Nearly 17 million Texans are registered to vote.

The rest remain pending, largely because the state is now under a federally mandated moratorium on registration cancellations within 90 days of a federal election — in this case, the upcoming March primaries. (Various counties did not send out notices until the last few weeks, meaning any cancellations for failing to respond cannot be carried out until after the primary election.)

Voters flagged through the review process "have every opportunity to confirm their U.S. citizenship status and remain on the rolls, including at the polls when they go to vote," Taylor said.

But lawyers involved in the 2019 litigation said the state cannot rely on that as a failsafe if the review process is systematically including eligible voters.

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“Whatever the flaw is, it’s systematic with respect to naturalized citizens,” said Nina Perales, the vice president of litigation for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, which also sued the state in 2019.

In the shadow of the state’s botched 2019 effort, some county elections officials told the Tribune they approached the renewed effort with hesitation. But unlike two years ago when many of them held off on acting on the state’s lists, county voter registrars are now under financial threat if they don’t cull through them.

The Texas Legislature this year empowered the secretary of state’s office to withhold funds from them if they fail to “timely perform” voter roll maintenance duties, including those related to voters flagged as possible noncitizens. Keith Ingram, the director of the office’s elections division, reminded locals of this in a Nov. 15 email in which he noted “that a number of counties” had taken no action on the registrations his office put into question.

Ingram’s email appears to have prompted several counties to send out notices of examination, while others are still seeking additional data or information that could allow them to confirm that voters are citizens without sending the notices.

Gretchen Nagy, the director of voter registration in Travis County, sees it as “due diligence” owed to the voters, recalling the phone conversations she had with anguished naturalized citizens who were caught up in the state’s 2019 review.

“It was really difficult when people on the other end were really upset and emotionally distraught, [asking] ‘Is there something wrong? Did I do something wrong?’” Nagy said. “We’re basically trying to think outside the box — any agency, any department that we can reach out to — to see if we can do a confirmation of citizenship before these individuals ever have to hear from us.”

Up the road, election officials in Williamson County last week were waiting on guidance from the state in regard to nearly a fifth of the voters on their list of 138 “possible noncitizens” who appeared to have registered through the Department of Public Safety, which only registers individuals once their citizenship has been verified.

The state erroneously included 25,000 of those types of records in its 2019 review — a mistake it began quietly walking back within days of announcing the review effort.

The secretary of state’s office confirmed its current review includes “a limited number” of those matches, though it did not respond to a request for an exact number. Taylor, the spokesperson, said the state determined that some voters who initially registered through DPS were flagged because they “marked ‘yes’ on the citizenship field but later marked ‘no’ on the same field at a subsequent visit to DPS.” Those records could also include voters who were unable to provide citizenship documents to DPS.

“As a result, these records were flagged for citizenship review,” Taylor said.

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The issues with the revised review appear to even be reaching voters who were born in the U.S.

Among them is Ivan Henson, a certified public accountant in Tarrant County, who was puzzled when he found in his mailbox a notice from the county dated Nov. 30 indicating his citizenship was in question. He was born in New Mexico.

“There is absolutely no reason I should be on this list,” Henson said.

Henson’s name appeared alongside more than 600 others on the list of possible noncitizens Tarrant County received from the state. County officials said they reviewed the list to see if they could find any clerical errors but ultimately sent out the notices following the state’s instructions.

Recalling news coverage of the state’s voter rolls debacle from two years ago, Henson made copies of his birth certificate and passport and quickly mailed them to the county, but he said he worries others who “don’t have time to mess with it” won’t be able to comply as easily.

“I am self-employed with my own copier and my own resources and my own time,” Henson said. “You know who this letter is going to disenfranchise.”

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Ballot numbering under scrutiny in Ellis County
Bill Spinks
Waxahachie Daily Light
December 16, 2021
https://www.waxahachietx.com/story/news/politics/elections/2021/12/16/ballot-numbering-under-scrutiny-ellis-county/8935432002/

Ellis County’s election system is secure, members of the Commissioners’ Court were told during Tuesday’s regular bi-weekly meeting as they peppered county elections administrator Jana Onyon with questions and heard public comments on election security across almost an hour and a half.

Onyon’s assertions, though, didn’t seem to assuage some members of the court as they seemed to lean toward reinstating sequentially numbered ballots for elections in the county.

Onyon told commissioners that ballots are numbered for security purposes so that they can be traced back to a polling location. The process dates back to legislation when hand ballots were still commonplace, but Onyon said the same process was kept even with technology advances.

A 2019 change to the balloting process allows for unused ballot stock to be reused in subsequent elections, which Onyon said resulted in significant cost savings — about $13,000 for the November 2020 election. The reason this is possible is because ballots are not numbered until the votes are cast with the electronic system Ellis County began using in May 2019. The system generates a 2-digit alpha code and a random serial number.

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Several public speakers urged a return to sequentially numbered ballots and called into question the Texas Secretary of State's advisory allowing for non-pre-numbered ballots. Most cited what they said was lack of confidence that votes were being securely counted, and said the money being saved wasn't worth the concern over security.

Onyon replied afterward that all guidance regarding the update originated from state legislation, and that all ballots that are placed in the tabulator are counted after they are filled out, regardless of numbers.

Onyon said voting equipment is routinely tested before every election. In the event that a voter is not satisfied with his or her recorded vote, that voter can request a new ballot and the old ballot is "spoiled." Onyon added that a rigorous count of all ballots — used, unused or "spoiled" — is kept at each polling site. All ballots are kept on file for 22 months following an election.

Voting devices are not connected to the internet, Onyon said. The laptop that checks in voters is the only computer that will be connected to the web, so that voters are able to be verified.

Precinct 3 Commissioner Paul Perry said he will ask County Attorney Ann Montgomery to research election statutes to find out if the allowance of random numbering has any basis in law, and bring an answer back for the Dec. 28 court meeting. Perry also said even though the Ellis County Elections Office is independent of the Commissioners' Court, the court does hold the budgetary purse strings for the office.

Precinct 1 Commissioner Randy Stinson said funding should be no object in the name of securing ballots.

"When it comes to elections, we have the money," Stinson said. "We need to put extra staff over there to implement the situation that we're trying to solve. I don't think any commissioner on this court would back off of that."

All court members were present.

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Column: Get set for the weirdest county commissioner race we've ever seen
Gilbert Garcia
San Antonio Express-News
December 16, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/gilbert_garcia/article/Garcia-Get-set-for-the-weirdest-county-16708414.php

Let's say you're a politically active person living on the North Side and you've thought about running for county commissioner.

But the precinct in which you live (Precinct 3) didn't have another election scheduled until 2024, and, besides, it had a solid incumbent, Trish DeBerry, who just took office at the beginning of this year.

Given those circumstances, you recently filed to run for another office.

This must be a strange time for you.

On Monday afternoon, moments before the filing period closed for the 2022 Texas primary elections, DeBerry stunned political observers by filing paperwork to run for county judge. In doing so, she relinquished her Precinct 3 seat.

DeBerry's move triggered an obscure provision in the Texas Election Code, which states that if a vacancy occurs after the 10th day before the filing deadline, candidates have five days from the regular filing deadline in which to apply for the primary election.

In this case, that would have meant a Saturday deadline, but the Texas Secretary of State's office rolled the deadline over to Monday.

It has created one of the weirdest dynamics we've ever seen in Bexar County politics.

"People are struggling," said Jacque Callanen, the elections administrator for Bexar County. "Lots of phone calls will be made."

Callanen said some primary candidates for other offices have contacted her to inquire about switching to the Precinct 3 contest.

"They've said, 'Hey, if I'd known that, I wouldn't have filed for this slot. Can I withdraw from this slot now and run for that one?'"

The answer, of course, is they can't.

John Austin, the chairman of the Bexar County Republican Party, said no GOP candidates had filed for the Precinct 3 seat as of Thursday morning.

"I've talked to multiple individuals that are interested," Austin said. "People are just kind of mulling it over. It's so fast and whirlwind.

"A typical executive at one of the big companies in town might be interested in that at some point. But to have only four or five days to put everything in order, it's just not enough time."

There's also the issue of filing fees. Candidates for Bexar County commissioner have the option of paying a $1,250 filing fee or submitting 500 petition signatures.

In this case, however, with only a few days in which to gather signatures, Precinct 3 hopefuls will almost certainly have to cough up the $1,250 if they hope to get their names on the March 1 primary ballot.

It's worth considering that the race for Precinct 3 commissioner (a gig which pays nearly $138,000 a year) is operating on two tracks.

There's the behind-the-scenes jockeying to secure an interim appointment from Democratic County Judge Nelson Wolff (whose voice mail, as I write this, is probably filling up with

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flattery from ambitious local Republicans). That appointment will get you the job for about a year.

Then there's the election battle, which will secure the Precinct 3 seat for the winner until the end of the 2024 election cycle. This is a solid Republican seat and most of the real action will be in the GOP primary.

Here's what we know about the Republican race:

Former Councilman (and two-time mayoral candidate) Greg Brockhouse will be running. Seven months after getting smoked by a 2-1 margin in the mayoral election by Ron Nirenberg, Brockhouse sees the Precinct 3 seat as a prime opportunity for a political comeback.

Patty Gibbons, a long-time Republican activist who finished fifth in a 10-candidate North Side field for City Council in 2017, also plans to run.

In addition, there's a slew of prominent players in the local business community who are giving this race a look.

Grant Moody, the director of policy, strategy and innovation at Valero Energy, told me that he is "prayerfully considering whether this is the right time and right opportunity for me to serve our community."

Moody majored in economics at the U.S. Naval Academy, served 10 years as a Marine F-18 pilot (including deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq) and received a gubernatorial appointment to the Texas Veterans Land Board.

Former Councilman Jeff Webster, the vice president of business development with Jacobs Engineering Group, said he is "putting it through the consideration process." A few months ago, Webster nearly entered the race for the Texas House seat being vacated by Lyle Larson, but decided he didn't want the aggravation.

Preston Woolfolk, the co-president of DOCUmation, said "he is giving it a lot of thought."

The tech executive added, "It's going to be a tight race, due to the timeline. That's a pro or a con, depending on who's looking at it. That's going to be the bigger conversation piece for everybody looking at it."

It's definitely a major conversation piece. And prospective candidates won't have much time to conduct those conversations.

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Texas AG Paxton's $2.2M voter fraud unit closed three cases in 2021. GOP lawmakers still boosted its budget
Taylor Goldenstein
Houston Chronicle
December 17, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Texas-AG-Paxton-s-2-2M-voter-

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fraud-unit-closed-16708051.php

Texas Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton has been one of former President Donald Trump's most reliable allies in spreading the myth of widespread voter fraud, particularly in the 2020 election, and frequently boasts that few states are as vigilant.

His office's election integrity unit added two lawyers to the team in the last year, bringing it up to six staffers total, and worked more than 20,000 hours between Oct. 2020 and Sept. 2021. Its budget, meanwhile, ratcheted up from $1.9 million to $2.2 million during that time.

Yet records from the office show that the unit closed just three cases this year, down from 17 last year, and opened seven new ones. That includes the newly created unit focused on the 2021 local elections, which has yet to file a single case.

"This is an exorbitant amount of money that has resulted in no benefit for the average Texan," said Austin Evers, executive director of American Oversight, a left-leaning nonprofit government watchdog that regularly files public information requests and files suits to force compliance with those requests. The organization shared some records it obtained from the Texas attorney general's office with Hearst Newspapers for this report; others were obtained independently by Hearst Newspapers.

Evers added: "Taxpayers are funding a political stunt meant to fuel the false claim of a stolen election and justify voting restrictions."

The scant caseload comes after Texas Republican lawmakers insisted a 2020 election audit was necessary and passed a sweeping elections overhaul bill loaded with voting restrictions that Democrats have warned will have a disproportionate effect on already-marginalized voters.

Paxton's office has not uncovered any evidence of voter fraud in 2020 beyond isolated incidents affecting a handful of votes in an election in which more than 11 million Texans cast ballots.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, under pressure by former president Donald Trump, initiated reviews of election processes across the state in the fall.

Paxton's office did not respond to a request for comment for this story, but in a podcast his office produced in November 2020 about voter fraud, Paxton blamed low resources for the election integrity unit's output.

"I don't think anybody knows the degree to which it happens because even our office who probably prosecutes more election fraud than anyone else in the country ... We don't have enough resources to cover all election fraud. So it's really hard to know how large an issue this is because very few states put any resources in to actually detect or prosecute voter fraud."

It's a point he's made often before, though he's never offered specifics as to what kind of staffing or funding he would find sufficient.

Richard L. Hasen, an election law professor at the University of California Irvine, said

there's a more likely explanation, noting that Paxton, who is running for re-election, has "every incentive," politically speaking, to vigorously go after voter fraud, as it's an issue that energizes his party's base.

"He's finding very little of it despite spending a lot of money and using a lot of resources looking for it," Hasen said. "The reason is not that such fraud is too hard to find. Those that commit voter fraud tend not to be brain surgeons. The reason he's not finding a lot of it is because voter fraud is rare."

Multiple academic studies and journalistic reviews have uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud, nor did a wide-ranging investigation of election fraud in 2020 conducted by the U.S. Justice Department.

After Texas' own director of elections Keith Ingram testified to lawmakers in March that the 2020 election was "smooth and secure," the Secretary of State failed to receive confirmation of her appointment by the Republican-majority state Senate and was forced to step down.

In one of the most comprehensive reviews to date, an AP analysis this month reviewed potential election fraud cases in six battleground states contested by Trump and found 475, nowhere near enough to have altered the results of his 2020 loss.

Paxton boasts of more voter fraud cases than ever
The biggest case closed this year by the Texas attorney general's office involved a Medina County resident who allegedly unlawfully assisted 10 voters with mail ballot applications during the 2020 election.

The other two were people in Lubbock and Guadalupe counties who allegedly made false statements on their voter registration applications and voted illegally in the 2018 election, and one of them also in the 2020 election.

In 2016, 2017 and 2019, Paxton's office also closed three cases.

Yet in a tweet in October, Paxton proclaimed that his office was "between pending cases & investigations — working more voter fraud cases than Texas has ever seen."

While it's true that the office has more cases pending this year over last year, 44 up from 38, that's not because of a surge in new prosecutions. It's because the vast majority of cases that were pending around this time last year are still making their way through the court system.

Among the cases pending include that of Hervis Rogers, a Black man from Houston who was charged this year with illegally voting while on parole, after he had made national headlines for waiting for six hours to vote in the 2020 primary election.

A new ruling from the state's highest criminal court Wednesday may afford legal relief to Rogers and potentially others, after it found that Paxton's office does not have the constitutional right to prosecute voter fraud without the consent of local prosecutors.

The office is also in the midst of investigating 386 allegations of fraud, according to its

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website, up by about 150 over what it reported it was looking into last year.

Paxton, members of his office and his supporters often use an unusual metric to tout the election integrity unit as a success, citing the more than 500 counts of offenses filed against defendants in pending cases, as opposed to the number of defendants, about 45.

This can prove misleading: An individual case can involve dozens of counts because the state's lawyers can file many different charges for the same action or set of actions. For example, a social worker in the Mexia State Supported Living Center was charged in October with two election fraud offenses for each of the 67 residents she registered to vote prior to the 2020 presidential election without their permission, landing her a total of 134 counts. No illegal votes were cast.

As has been the trend since the voter fraud unit began its work 15 years ago, the majority of defendants, including the three whose cases were resolved this year, have been entered into diversion programs. Those are alternatives to prosecution for low-risk, typically first-time offenders that often involve some court supervision.

Twenty-seven defendants, or 17 percent, were sentenced to deferred adjudication, which is a form of probation that gives the person a chance to avoid a criminal conviction on their record.

Under a third of defendants' cases ended in a conviction, and of those 46, a little over a dozen spent time behind bars.

The extensive use of these diversion programs makes it difficult for the public to find much information about the situations leading to the alleged crimes, which would typically be uncovered in court documents.

The Republican chairs of the committee in charge of writing the budget in the Texas House and Senate did not respond to questions about why funding increases to the election integrity unit continue to be approved despite its lack of results.

Democratic State Rep. Jessica González, vice-chair of the elections committee in the Texas House, called the spending unacceptable.

"It is clear the Election Integrity Unit receives an absurd level of funding considering their inability to find real cases of voter fraud, and this funding increase only continues to fuel their witch-hunt," González said.

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Lawsuit alleges Harris County Democrat's map disqualifies some voters for six years
Bethany Blankley
The Center Square
December 16, 2021
https://www.inforney.com/texas/lawsuit-alleges-harris-county-democrats-map-disqualifies-some-voters-for-six-years/article_3c985955-ef94-5c4a-8175-d284a759c5ae.html

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(The Center Square) – Three Harris County voters and two Republican County Commissioners have sued Democratic Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo and Harris County for a redistricting plan proposed by a Democratic commissioner, alleging it unconstitutionally disenfranchises more than one million voters in next year's county elections.

Harris County is the largest county in Texas with 4.7 million residents, according to 2020 Census data. Roughly half, or 2.48 million residents, are registered to vote, according to the Texas Secretary of State's office, with 1.63 million having voted in the 2020 General Election.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Harris County asks the court to issue a temporary restraining order and/or temporary or permanent injunction against the judge and county from implementing the redistricting plan.

The Commissioner's Court is comprised of four commissioners representing four districts, and the county judge. Two commissioners are Democrats (Precincts 1 and 2), two are Republicans (Precinct 3 and 4) and the judge is a Democrat.

The redistricting map proposed by Democratic Commissioner Rodney Ellis, known as the "Ellis Plan 3," would redraw the lines in such a way to ensure that Democrats would hold a supermajority on the court because it would likely eliminate one of the Republican districts.

Harris County Republicans argue the Democrats' goal is to eliminate a Republican from the court to ensure a Democratic supermajority. One way to do this is to take advantage of a stipulation in the Texas Constitution that states that elections for county commissioners, who serve four-year terms, must be staggered every two years.

Ellis' plan redraws the district lines so much so that it moves 1.1 million voters from even-numbered to odd-numbered voting precincts—thereby eliminating their ability to vote in at least the next election.

For example, under the state constitution's staggered election process, residents of Precincts 2 and 4 will vote in 2022; residents in Precincts 1 and 3 will vote for their commissioners in 2024. Voters in Precincts 2 and 4 would vote again in 2026, and voters in Precincts 1 and 3 in 2028.

Under Ellis' plan, his Precinct 1 would remain largely unchanged.

But Cagle's Precinct 4 would absorb the northeastern portion of the existing Precinct 2, and the northwestern portion of the existing Precinct 3.

Precinct 4 would include Katy in west Harris County, and Baytown in East Harris County, which are at least an hour apart without traffic.

Some of the Precinct 4 residents would also be moved to an odd-numbered precinct, and not be able to vote until 2024. If the district weren't redrawn, they'd be voting in 2022.

And the newly chopped up Precinct 4, historically a Republican stronghold, would be transformed enough to become a Democratic precinct. Then, the 3-2 Democrat-Republican

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court would become a 4-1 Democratic-controlled court.

“The Ellis map moves over a million Harris County voters who did not get to vote for commissioner last year to a new precinct where they won’t get to vote for commissioner next year, either,” Alan Vera, a conservative leader within the Harris County Republican Party and plaintiff in the lawsuit, said in a Houston Public Media report. “Those voters will have gone six years without the right to vote for a county commissioner, when they’re entitled to vote for commissioner every four years.”

“Democrats on Commissioners Court were so intent on padding their 3-2 majority that they callously and intentionally trampled on our clients’ sacred right – the right to elect their government officials and to participate in the electoral process,” the plaintiffs’ attorney Andy Taylor said in a statement when announcing the lawsuit.

Officials are required to set district lines every 10 years according to new census data, to ensure “one person, one vote” proportionality. County precincts are required to be drawn with no more than a 10% population deviation.

While courts have historically upheld partisan redistricting plans, Taylor argues the districts can’t be redrawn “in a manner that violates the constitutional rights of voters in those precincts.”

He and the plaintiffs’ other attorneys prepared an alternate redistricting map that they argue is constitutionally valid, and only moves a fraction of the number of voters compared to those moved by Ellis’ plan.

Judge Hidalgo maintains the plan is legal, as does Harris County Attorney Christian Menefee. He says the county “ran a transparent and thorough redistricting process” and the map the court adopted “complies with Texas law.”

Ellis has argued that Harris County was previously gerrymandered by Republicans, and that his map corrects that.

“Our plan seeks to keep communities of interest together and bring together areas that have been split apart for years," Ellis said. "For too long this county has been intentionally divided by precinct boundaries that deny people the opportunity to elect representation that accurately reflects the views of the majority of our communities. The boundaries proposed cease that continued suppression, and allows the voices and views of the people to be reflected by those who represent them."

Republicans argue the opposite.

If the court grants their request for injunction and directs the commissioners court to go back to the drawing board, and if the commissioner’s court fails to adopt an acceptable redistricting plan in time for the March primaries, the county could use the current map or the plaintiffs’ map for the 2022 election cycle.

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Redistricting changes raises tension in Texas before elections

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Christian Del Rio
KGNS-TV
December 16, 2021
https://www.kgns.tv/2021/12/16/redistricting-changes-raises-tension-texas-before-elections/

LAREDO, TX. (KGNS) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott approved the new political map for redistricting for the State of Texas.

Critics of the new maps say the changes made will benefit Republican candidates keeping them in office for the next decade.

They also believe the new maps could deny the voting rights of Latino and black voters.

The Webb County Democratic Party Chair Silvia Bruni believes it's a move by the Republican Party to hold on to whatever opportunity or advantage they might have, and they particularly targeted counties that have strong democratic demographics.

Bruni encourages everyone to register to vote before it's too late and reminds you to please go out and vote when the time comes.

The new map will be in effect for next year's primary and general elections.

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Texas Democrats eye redistricting fights in state court as federal suits over gerrymandering mount
Sami Sparber
Dallas Morning News
December 16, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/16/texas-democrats-eye-redistricting-fights-in-state-court-as-federal-suits-over-gerrymandering-mount/

AUSTIN — As federal lawsuits over new political maps pile up, some Texas Democrats are focusing on a pair of state court cases, arguing this year's GOP-led redistricting effort violated the Texas Constitution.

The Legislature's GOP mapmakers in October passed new lines that cement Republicans' grip on power for the next decade but blunt the voting strength of nonwhite voters who fueled Texas' population surge.

In two cases heard Wednesday and Thursday, a group of mostly Democratic, Hispanic lawmakers from both chambers challenged the legality of when and how Republicans drew the boundaries.

"All we're asking is for Republicans, who claim to be constitutionalists, to start acting like it, and follow the plain meaning and reading of the Constitution," said Roland Gutierrez, one of two Democratic state senators who are suing Texas.

Focusing on the timing are Gutierrez and Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, who sued to block the Legislature from redistricting in a special session this year. Also at issue are rules for

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keeping counties intact when drawing Texas House districts.

Similar to a suit they filed in federal court before redrawing began, the senators' attorneys argued the Texas Constitution requires that redistricting be done in a regular session that won't happen until 2023.

That makes the newly drawn state House and state Senate plans invalid, argued the legal team for Gutierrez and Eckhardt, of San Antonio and Austin, respectively.

The senators' lawyers pointed to a provision in the state Constitution that requires the redistricting process to start in the first regular session after the decennial Census has been published, asking the court to block the new plans from being used.

State lawyers argued the provision does not prohibit apportionment at other times, and warned that blocking the map will disrupt the 2022 election process that is already in motion.

"The Legislature … is perfectly free to redistrict whenever it wants," Will Thompson, the attorney general's deputy chief for special litigation, said at the Dec. 15 hearing in district court in Travis County.

All parties face a tight timeline for the March primaries. Overseas mail-in ballots are set to go out Jan. 15, and candidate filing ended Dec. 13.

But the court fights are not uncharted territory. The senators' attorney, Wallace B. Jefferson, pointed out that for decades, every Texas redistricting plan has been either changed or tossed out by a federal court after being found in violation of the U.S. Constitution or the federal Voting Rights Act.

Texas argues "chaos will ensue if the court were to enjoin the maps, but the sky will not fall if that's what the court decides," said Jefferson, former Texas Supreme Court Chief Justice and Republican from San Antonio.

The consolidated cases have been assigned a panel of three district court judges, with Democrat Karin Crump presiding, alongside Republicans Emily Miskel and Ken Wise.

Splitting Cameron County

The senators' legal team also argued the new state House map violated the "county line rule" of the Texas Constitution, which requires that counties with sufficient population be kept intact in drawing Texas House districts.

The second challenge, mounted by the Mexican American Legislative Caucus in the Texas House, made a similar case that the rule was broken, arguing it was designed to ensure people have local representation.

Both complaints focus on the redrawing of Cameron County in the Rio Grande Valley.

As lawmakers this fall debated the new House lines late into the night, they narrowly adopted a major change in South Texas. House District 37 was redrawn from a seat President Joe Biden won by 17 percentage points, to a seat the president won by only two

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points over former President Donald Trump in the 2020 election.

That amendment, developed by Kingsville Republican Rep. J.M. Lozano, was denounced by some Valley lawmakers. State Rep. Eddie Lucio III, D-Brownsville, called the change a “disingenuous, last-minute attempt to do a grab.”

The plaintiffs’ legal team argued the county line rule requires that two districts be wholly contained within Cameron County. Yet Lozano’s tweaks give Cameron County just one wholly contained district, with two that connect to adjoining counties.

The state’s lawyers argued the new boundaries do not dilute votes in Cameron County, and that Cameron got the number of districts it was constitutionally entitled to. The plaintiffs’ attorney rejected that interpretation of the rules.

“There is no doubt that to whatever extent Cameron County voters are a cohesive group … they get to elect the candidates of their choice,” said Thompson, one of the state’s lawyers.

District 37 Democratic candidate Ruben Cortez Jr. joined the senators’ suit, along with political organization Tejano Democrats. The new version of the district was joined with adjacent Willacy County.

“This Republican redistricting scheme is robbing the voice of Cameron County voters,” Cortez, also a member of the Texas State Board of Education, said in a news release.

The caucus’ complaint asked the court to block the Texas House map from being used in upcoming elections and allow for the creation of alternative boundaries. Both sides discussed a full trial beginning Jan. 10.

It’s unclear, if the judges rule in favor of the plaintiffs on the county line rule, whether they would delay Texas House primary elections just for South Texas, or the entire state. The plaintiffs’ legal team asked the court to delay the primary to May 24.

Thompson, the state lawyer, said he expects the 2023 Legislature to have to revisit the maps.

In a separate federal suit, MALC has argued the redrawn congressional, Texas House and State Board of Education maps are intentionally racially discriminatory and dilute Latino voting strength, in violation of the federal Voting Rights Act and U.S. Constitution.

The U.S. Department of Justice has joined the federal court fight, suing to block Texas’ gerrymandered congressional and state House maps. Several civil and voting rights groups, as well as individual voters, are among the plaintiffs in the consolidated federal redistricting cases.

Court challengers say the redrawn congressional, legislative and State Board of Education maps do not reflect the major growth of the Hispanic community, which made up nearly half of the state’s population gain since 2020. People of color accounted for 95% of the state’s population boom over the last decade, with much of the growth concentrated in cities and suburban areas, census data show.

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In the plan for state House elections, the number of majority-white seats increased from 83 to 89, among eligible voters. The number of majority-Hispanic districts grew from 33 to 30, and the number of majority-Black districts dropped from seven to six. Asian voters remain without majority control in any district.

The decennial process following a U.S. Census typically leads to lawsuits in Texas, with the courts largely siding with Republicans in recent years. Lawmakers can draw maps in a way that benefits their party's political future as long as they do not discriminate on the basis of race.

This year, Republican lawmakers have a clearer path toward using the lines they want, as Texas is no longer required to get federal approval on new political maps.

The new maps are generally expected to withstand lawsuits, but battles over aspects of the boundaries could last several years.

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How Out Texas Rep. Celia Israel Put Voting Rights First in 2021
Trudy Ring
The Advocate
December 16, 2021
https://www.advocate.com/exclusives/2021/12/16/how-out-texas-rep-celia-israel-put-voting-rights-first-2021

Celia Israel, a member of the Texas House of Representatives, stood for her principles this year even though it meant personal sacrifice. She was set to marry her partner of 26 years, Celinda Garza, on the House floor July 15, but she ended up leaving Texas for Washington, D.C., three days earlier with more than 50 other House Democrats so there would not be the number of representatives required to vote on a Republican-backed voter suppression bill. They returned eventually, though, and a later version of the bill passed. But Israel doesn't regret her action one bit.

"This summer, I was part of something larger than myself when my colleagues and I broke quorum in defense of voting rights and took the fight to Washington, D.C.," she says. "During a year in which Texas was reeling from the effects of a polar vortex that killed hundreds and a pandemic where nearly 70,000 Texans have needlessly lost their lives, I've stood firm to call out the misplaced priorities of the Texas legislature, where our democratic institutions, reproductive rights, and the LGBTQ community have been targeted."

"I fight for everyone who knows rather than using transgender children as political piñatas to placate 5 percent of the electorate, we should be working together on solutions to the gaps in our health care and infrastructure," she adds. "What is happening in our politics today is a stain on the state that I love. What motivates me are the young voters and people of color who know what's happening now in Texas and around the country is not normal and who are making their voices heard."

Israel is now being motivated to seek a different office. She announced in September that she will not seek reelection to the House, where she has represented an Austin district since 2014, and will instead consider a run for mayor of the Texas capital next year. The

current mayor, Steve Adler, cannot run again due to term limits. She has formed an exploratory committee with a diversity of members.

And Israel and Garza will have their wedding. They're planning a Texas-size ceremony and party for next spring.

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Arlington approves redrawn council districts that some say dilute Black, Latino voting power
Kailey Broussard
KERA News
December 16, 2021
https://www.keranews.org/government/2021-12-16/arlington-approves-redrawn-council-districts-that-some-say-dilute-black-latino-voting-power

Arlington's new city council districts give slightly more voting power to voters of color, but NAACP and LULAC leaders said they do not reflect its diverse communities.
Arlington city council approved redrawn voting districts this week that some civil and voting rights groups say do not reflect growth in Black, Hispanic and Latino communities.

Council members gave final approval Tuesday to a map that redraws four of the city's five single-member districts to more evenly split Arlington residents. The city-appointed redistricting task force selected the map as the best of five put forward — three from Bojorquez Law Firm, two from residents and community groups.

The approved map moves voters in the area between North Bowen Road, West Sanford Street, Oakwood Lane, and West Randol Mill Road/Westwood Drive from District 1 to District 4. District 3 residents in the boundaries of East Arkansas Lane, New York Avenue, Sherry Street, and East Mayfield Road will become part of District 5. The maps give slightly more voting power to Hispanic and Latino voters in District 1 and to Black and African-American voters in districts 3 and 5.

The 7-1 vote was the last needed to finalize the new districts ahead of municipal elections in 2022 when residents will decide four city council seats. Ruby Faye Woolridge, at-large District 6 council member, voted against the map.

Woolridge applauded the redistricting task force's efforts and formation; the group marks the first time a community board formally advised city council during the redistricting process.

"I'm very grateful for that and I look forward to the future and the progress that will continue to be made," she said.

Mayor Jim Ross was absent from the meeting.

The final vote followed months of criticism from local NAACP and LULAC chapters, whose leaders claimed the redistricting task force and council upheld districts that dilute voices in communities of color.

“Same old, same old”
Luis Castillo, president of Arlington LULAC, said the city has historically protected incumbents who, until recent years, have been mostly white. Castillo argued the same interests caused the city to gravitate from eight at-large council members to five single-member districts and three at-large members.

“It’s a continuation of the same old, same old,” he said.

Castillo’s group and Arlington NAACP submitted a map that stretched District 4, a majority-white voting district, to cover northwest Arlington, including Viridian, the city’s master-planned community composed of upscale housing developments. The leaders have opposed the task force-recommended map, and defended their submission, drawn in a manner that would give communities of color more voting power in the city’s northern, southeast and eastern regions — districts 1, 3 and 5, respectively.

Alisa Simmons, Arlington NAACP president, told council members Dec. 7 the city’s 8% population growth between 2010 and 2020 was “entirely driven by Arlington’s communities of color.” The 2020 census put Arlington’s population at 394,266, making it the 50th largest city in the United States.

“When combined, these groups can together constitute a majority of the city’s voting age population in possibly three districts,” she said.

Attorney Rezzin Pullum with Bojorquez Law Firm told council the same day the groups’ map did not fall in line with two city-instituted requirements for redistricting: that the new lines do not alter district shape as much as possible or draw sitting council members out of their districts. The NAACP and LULAC map would have cast District 1 Council Member Helen Moise into District 4, a majority-white district.

Stephanie Swanson with the League of Women Voters of Texas
said the NAACP and LULAC map did a better job of upholding section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits practices that discriminate against race, color or languages spoken by voters.

“Preserving incumbency is a very problematic redistricting criteria to adopt,” Swanson said. “There is no federal law stating that incumbents must be protected.”

Bojorquez Law Firm reviewed the concerns Swanson and the groups raised during redistricting and did not find issues that would open the city to legal action, city staff said.

Incumbents' power diminished?
Moise said the term limits for mayor and council seats that voters approved in 2018 temper concerns that incumbents can leverage redrawn lines. Moise can run for one more council term under limits that confine candidates to 12 years in office, or three two-year terms holding any council seat or serving as mayor.

In her first two races, Moise said, she ran against Black or African-American candidates, and she won support from communities of color for her work to support neighborhoods. Moise was first elected in May 2018 and re-elected in November 2020.

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“I love District 1; I’ve lived in it for 38 years,” she said. “In both of my elections, I ran a campaign that said I would serve every single person in my district, and my district listened."

Moise’s seat is one of four voters will decide in 2022, when the new districts go into effect. Raul Gonzalez, who represents southwest Arlington in District 2, announced he will run for re-election. Arlington voters will select two new at-large council members, as Victoria Farrar-Myers, District 7, is being termed out, and Woolridge announced she will run for Tarrant County commissioner’s court.

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Court tells Texas AG, "Nah," On Election Prosecutions
Keith Reed
The Root
December 16, 2021
https://www.theroot.com/court-tells-texas-ag-nah-on-election-prosecutions-1848229952

A high court in Texas smacked down the state attorney general’s argument that he can prosecute election offenses all by himself. The ruling means that Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican Trump supporter, loses a potentially powerful tool in his party’s voter suppression campaign.

The Court of Criminal Appeals, Texas’ highest authority on criminal cases, ruled on Wednesday that Paxton can’t barge in on local criminal cases involving elections, such as possible instances of voter fraud or campaign finance violations, according to the Texas Tribune. Instead Paxton has to get the OK from a local prosecutor before he sticks his nose in.

From News 4 San Antonio

In its opinion, the Court of Criminal Appeals overturned a lower-court ruling that said the election code provision “clearly and unambiguously gives the Attorney General power to prosecute criminal laws prescribed by election laws generally whether those laws are inside or outside the Code.”

Rather, the Court of Criminal Appeals said, “the Attorney General can prosecute with the permission of the local prosecutor but cannot initiate prosecution unilaterally.”

In his tweet, Paxton said the ruling means “Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas.” That is a reference to George Soros, the Democratic megadonor who has become a force in local prosecutor elections.

In short, Paxton thought he could overrule local district attorneys when he didn’t like their decisions on who to haul into court, or who not to, over elections. By an eight-to-one margin, a panel of Republican judges told him no.

It’s an important ruling because in Texas and many other states, some GOP officials have passed shady new laws designed to shrink voting rights in the wake of Donald Trump’s

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failed attempt to hold onto the presidency. Those laws were cooked up based on the Big Lie of rampant voter fraud in the 2020 election. Handing Paxton the green light on who to charge with election crimes presented the opportunity use the office to his or his party's political advantage.

Texas is already being sued over new voting restrictions its Republican governor and legislature put in place, as well as a gerrymandered voting map.

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Controversial businessman with Dallas ties sees renewed fame as election 'expert'
Bret Jaspers
KERA News
December 16, 2021
https://www.keranews.org/politics/2021-12-16/controversial-businessman-with-dallas-ties-sees-renewed-fame-as-election-expert

Longtime Dallas businessman J. Hutton Pulitzer once promoted triple-edged wiper blades and a device called the CueCat that found a spot in the Museum of Failure. More recently, he's tried to sell something else – allegations of election fraud.

The New York Times is reporting former President Trump's final chief of staff Mark Meadows submitted a PowerPoint to the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 insurrection. That PowerPoint, the Times says, "is similar to a 36-page document available online, and it appears to be based on the theories of Jovan Hutton Pulitzer, a Texas entrepreneur and self-described inventor."

Pulitzer, also known as Jovan Philyaw, attained fame – or perhaps infamy – when he convinced several companies in the late 1990s to invest in the CueCat, a much-derided computer accessory. If you haven't heard of Pulitzer, here are some important things to know:

- **CueCat.** *Time* magazine ranked it Number 5 on a list of the 50 worst inventions of all time. A 2001 article in the Wall Street Journal summed it up: "a hand-held, cat-shaped scanner that attached to a PC. Hold it up to the bar code in an ad or catalog or a can of soup, and your computer whisks you to a web page connected to the product."
-

Radio Shack reportedly invested $30 million; *The Dallas Morning News* invested even more than that. People didn't take to it, and the legacy of CueCat is that of a humorous, expensive waste.

- **Georgia's 2020 election.** In their efforts to support Trump's effort to overturn the 2020 election, conservative legislators in Georgia called Pulitzer as an expert witness. In December 2020, Pulitzer spoke before the Georgia state Senate, according to The Verge.

But the Georgia Secretary of State's office discredited his claim he had hacked into a

poll pad, noting Pulitzer provided no evidence. Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican, excoriated the state lawmakers who invited Pulitzer to speak and described him as a "failed treasure hunter."

"Fake news is hard enough to combat when mainstream media outlets push it out, but when a small cadre of Georgia legislators do it, it's a whole different story," Raffensperger said.

- **Maricopa County's election "audit."** Maricopa County is home to Phoenix and is the second-largest voting jurisdiction in the United States. The Arizona state Senate hired a firm with no prior election experience to conduct a much criticized "audit" of the county's 2020 ballots. The Arizona Mirror reported auditors used Pulitzer's technology to examine the ballots, but Pulitzer said he was unable to discuss his past experience reviewing ballots because of a nondisclosure agreement. County officials said the audit's final report included falsehoods about elections there.

Trump also called on Texas to conduct an audit of the 2020 election, and Gov. Greg Abbott complied.

Experts say claims about election fraud that are not backed up with facts and evidence undermine faith in elections and the voting process.

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Nevada county where Trump won to replace voting machines
Sam Metz
Associated Press
December 16, 2021
https://www.fox5vegas.com/election_hq/nevada-county-where-trump-won-to-replace-voting-machines/article_610271e7-4b6a-5afa-a97b-55852bffbcac.html

CARSON CITY, Nev. (AP) — Local officials in rural Nevada decided on Thursday to replace equipment manufactured by Dominion Voting Systems — a sign that unsubstantiated concerns about election machine tampering are still prevalent more than a year after the 2020 election.

In Lander County, population 5,734, commissioners approved $223,000 in spending for new ES&S voting machines and $69,000 for maintenance, installation and training. ES&S equipment is federally certified and used throughout the country, including in Carson City.

The equipment will replace Dominion's suite of voting equipment, which was the subject of conspiracy theories in the aftermath of the 2020 election, with Trump campaign attorneys suggesting without evidence that the company's equipment had ties to Venezuela, George Soros and Antifa.

Those claims have been largely debunked. News networks that promulgated them have faced defamation lawsuits. But Lander County residents continued to claim that Dominion's

equipment swayed the election results in comments to the commission over the past several months.

The commissioners decided to replace Dominion equipment after outgoing County Clerk Sadie Sullivan, who oversees local elections, told them in October that the company had been a reliable partner. They said their scrutiny of Dominion machines wasn't because they thought Lander's elections was victim to foul play, but because they weren't sure about the machines elsewhere.

Though Trump won nearly 80% of the vote in Lander County, commissioners have considered an Arizona-style voting machine audit and earlier this year floated a proposal to hand-count ballots in future elections.

Sullivan told commissioners that it would be difficult under state law and their contract with Dominion to seize the machines and said hand-counting can lead to inaccuracies and human error.

Commissioners in Elko County are also considering new voting machines. Republicans there also say they're confident in local results, but worry about election tampering in other places where Dominion equipment is used and believe replacing them may rebuild public trust.

Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske has said the results in Nevada — where President Joe Biden won by 33,596 votes — were accurate and reliable.

In Nevada, electronic voting machines are certified by the federal government and required to run on closed systems to prevent hacking and cyberattacks. Touch screen voting machines are required to print a paper audit, which is then scanned and counted by another machine.

Lander County commissioners scuttled their hand-count proposal. Officials also chose Molly Gonzalez, a county employee, to succeed Sullivan, who is among a growing list of local election officials who have announced plans to leave their posts.

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Yes, many noncitizens can now vote in New York City, but only in municipal elections
Mauricio Chamberlin and Kelly Jones
KCEN-TV
December 16, 2021
https://www.kcentv.com/article/news/verify/elections-verify/yes-many-noncitizens-can-now-vote-in-new-york-city-but-only-in-municipal-elections/536-cc003481-0648-48e0-8a7f-a2c769d4f998

On Dec. 9, the New York City council voted to allow DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits to vote in the city’s municipal elections. The bill passed 33-14 with two abstentions, according to council records.

After the bill passed, the hashtag #OurCityOurVote trended on Twitter, but not everyone was pleased with the approval. New York Senate GOP leader Rob Ortt issued a joint statement with fellow Republican Sen. Andrew Lanza, calling it a "blatant disregard for our Constitution."

After news of the change to New York City voting laws broke, VERIFY audience member Betty emailed: "Is this true? In New York City, the bill — passed 33-14 — will allow almost 900,000 immigrants to vote, including DACA recipients, green card holders, and anyone with a work permit."

THE QUESTION
Can DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits now vote in New York City?

THE SOURCES
- New York City council records
- Joint statement from New York senators Rob Ortt and Andrew Lanza
- Ralina Cardona, League of United Latin American Citizens

THE ANSWER

Yes, it is true that DACA recipients, green card holders and people with work permits can now vote in New York City municipal elections. This law does not allow these groups to vote in statewide or federal elections, and does not apply to undocumented individuals and people who don't live in New York City.

WHAT WE FOUND
According to records from the New York City council, the bill that passed on Dec. 9 "would provide a process for individuals in New York City who are lawful permanent residents or are authorized to work in the United States to vote in municipal elections." Sources estimate this applies to between 800,000 and 900,000 residents of New York City who are DACA recipients, green card holders or people with work permits.

This bill does not apply to statewide or national elections, such as the presidential election.

The joint statement released after the Dec. 9 vote from New York Republican senators Rob Ortt and Andrew Lanza said the move was a "slap in the face to every law-abiding American citizen who values the sacred right to participate in our democracy, and is the latest attempt by New York Democrats to destroy the sanctity of our elections for their own political purposes."

It also said they are confident a legal challenge to the bill will be successful.

Ralina Cardona, Northeast regional vice president for the League of United Latin American Citizens, said she would not be surprised if opponents of the bill try to take it to court, but added that right now is an exciting time in history for New York City voters.

"We know many Latinos, many immigrants are essential workers. They kept this city alive, they kept the city fed, they kept the city safe and healthy. So, for me, it is exciting, because that's what this country began on taxation without representation. And they said, 'Well, wait

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a minute, we should be able to pick and choose who will be representing us.' And they pay their Social Security taxes. They go to the supermarket, they're paying taxes on their gas, they're paying taxes on their food, they're paying taxes on everything. So once again, it is exciting," she said.

New York City isn't the first major city to allow noncitizens to vote. In 2018, San Francisco became the largest U.S. city at the time to pass a measure allowing noncitizens to vote in local elections, but it also doesn't apply to statewide or federal elections.

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Biden met virtually with U.S. senators to discuss voting rights bill
Reuters
December 16, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-met-virtually-with-us-senators-discuss-voting-rights-bill-2021-12-16/

WASHINGTON, Dec 16 (Reuters) - President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris met virtually with lawmakers in the U.S. Senate to discuss the voting rights bill on Thursday, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre told reporters.

On Wednesday, Biden said no domestic priority is "more important than voting rights," even as the Senate is scrambling to pass his signature social spending bill, raising the stakes for a last-minute push to pass voting rights bills before the U.S. Congress returns home for Christmas.

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Voting rights advocates hold hunger strike near White House
Ellie Silverman
Washington Post
December 17, 2021
https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/12/17/dc-protest-hunger-strike-voting-rights/

They tried to do this any other way.

For months, they listened to Democrats talk about passing voting rights legislation over Republican objections. They wrote emails, canvassed and called lawmakers, urging them to protect the country's democracy. They saw other liberal protesters marching in the nation's capital all summer, getting arrested to bring attention to their fight.

None of it, they said, seemed to be enough.

So last week in Phoenix, a group of 20 college students and recent graduates stopped eating.

In starving themselves, they hoped politicians at the U.S. Capitol and White House would finally act with the urgency they say this crisis of democracy demands.

“We’d rather suffer through this hunger strike than to suffer the consequences of this bill not being passed,” said Brandon Ortega, a third-year student at Arizona State University who has not eaten since the hunger strike began Dec. 6. “We’re really committed to hold out as long as we can.”

The group planned to stay outside the state Capitol in Phoenix, and focus their pressure on Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) to support passing the Freedom to Vote Act, a federal voting rights bill. But to their surprise, Sinema spoke with them on Day Four. They left that meeting thinking their message needed to be elevated.

On Day Five — Friday — they flew to Washington, where new hunger strikers who heard about their protest joined them outside the White House. The group is demanding that Democrats pass federal voting rights legislation before next year, amid concern over the 2022 midterm elections.

But by Day Nine — Tuesday — their bodies seemed to be shutting down.

Too weak to walk long distances, they used wheelchairs to get to their protest spot at Lafayette Square. One hunger striker said it felt like knives were poking at her stomach. Another said she had lost more than 10 pounds. Others had to stop fasting on the advice of a doctor who checks their vital signs twice a day.

But those who were able to continue kept showing up, encouraging each other to drink water, rest and finish college assignments.

“I think my body’s just kind of like giving up on me a little bit,” said Emma Shockley, an 18-year-old freshman at the University of Pennsylvania. “It’s kind of sad that we have to do what we’re doing, but … we’re willing to do whatever it takes.”

The students are part of un-PAC, which describes itself as a nonpartisan advocacy group launched in March that employs student organizers and whose first campaign has been to pressure legislators to pass federal democracy reform legislation.

As they struggled through Day Nine, the activists received a boost from some Texas state legislators they admire: Reps. Trey Martinez Fischer (D-San Antonio), Gina Hinojosa (D-Austin) and Jasmine Crockett (D-Dallas), who is running for Congress.

“Don’t think people are not paying attention because they are. Don’t think for a minute that you’re not making an impact because you are,” Martinez Fischer told the demonstrators.

He was among the Texas Democrats who broke quorum in May to block the passage of a restrictive voting bill. That group flew to Washington to turn up pressure on President Biden and Congress to pass federal voting rights protections to override the restrictions that Republicans in Texas and other states were trying to pass.

“When the history book is written on Freedom to Vote, and on the John Lewis Advancement Act, President Biden is signing those proposals into law, we’re all going to have a chapter in that story,” he said, “and yours is happening right now.”

Kyla Frank, 23, nodded as she listened, her hands clasped atop a pink journal detailing the

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hunger strike. As she flipped through the pages, she pointed out notes of solidarity from speakers who encouraged the group throughout the hunger strike.

Frank has participated in the hunger strike since Day One and has been drinking about 5 liters of regular water and three bottles of electrolyte-enhanced water per day. By Day Three, she felt like she was "hit by a train." She has lost 13 pounds.

She said she is motivated to stand up for voting rights after watching her mother work so hard to care for her and her siblings.

"A lot of the struggles that she faced are a direct result of corruption in our politics that prevents our government from protecting people who are most vulnerable," said Frank, a graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in the District and Virginia State University.

In the last presidential election, she voted for Biden, hoping that he would fix a system she viewed as broken.

"He promised a lot of things," Frank said. "If any of those promises are going to be seen this year, next year, we need to prioritize voting rights so people can have a pathway to getting those issues across the finish line."

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Fox's worst week? Dominion ruling adds to drumbeat of bad news for the network
Brian Stelter
CNN Business
December 16, 2021
https://kvia.com/news/2021/12/16/dominion-voting-wins-key-decision-in-lawsuit-against-fox-news-2/

On Sunday the Fox News Channel's news facade was chipped away when Chris Wallace decamped to CNN. On Monday the hypocrisy of Fox's biggest stars was highlighted by a bipartisan House committee. On Tuesday the network belatedly and weakly defended itself. And the week wasn't even half over yet.

On Wednesday Fox's social media team was forced to delete an antisemitic cartoon after advocacy groups shamed the network. And today, Thursday, Fox was set back in court in a big way. As Katelyn Polantz reports here, "a judge in Delaware has found that Fox News' coverage of election fraud after the 2020 election may have been inaccurate, and is allowing a major defamation case against the right-wing TV network to move forward."

"The ruling will now allow Dominion to attempt to unearth extensive communications within Fox News as they gather evidence for the case, and the company may be able to interview the network's top names under oath," Polantz explains.

For that reason, some media writers are speculating that the network will now try to settle, lest it be subjected to the embarrassment of the discovery process. "Fox loses the key motion; cases often settle at this point," Ben Smith tweeted, "and a settlement here would

likely be a big number. It's a very strong case."

On the other hand, Dominion wants to have its name cleared, and a confidential settlement might not seem sufficient.

"At this stage, the court must assume Dominion's claims about Fox News are true," Polantz writes. Still, the judge's 52-page opinion noted that Fox "may have slanted its coverage to push election fraud, knowing the accusations were wrong."

"Sold their souls"
"Wrong" has been a throughline in the outside coverage about Fox this week. As the network's ranks of reporters shrank and conspiratorial ranters grew, Wallace decided not to re-up his contract. Fox's court jester ridiculed him on the way out.

"There's a good chance Wallace had enough of being on the wrong end of conservative wrath," the former Fox analyst Bernard Goldberg wrote for The Hill on Thursday.

Goldberg, who was a regular on Bill O'Reilly's show back in the day, quoted an email from a "wise, conservative friend" of his. The launch of Fox was "great for journalism and great for the country," this person said, but then Fox "sold their souls to … Trump and they're too damn stupid to realize the damage they've done to the conservative cause they claim to espouse."

That damage includes the Big Lie, hyped by some of Fox's biggest stars, and now the subject of Dominion's lawsuit…

A counterpoint about Fox's loyal audience
The Dominion lawsuit is a legitimate and potentially very costly problem for Fox. But all the rest of the noise surrounding the network may be negligible. Fox viewers aren't hearing analysis of Wallace's exit or why it's such a blow to the Fox brand. They aren't hearing criticism of Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham's urgent texts to Mark Meadows on 1/6. They are hearing that Liz Cheney and her Democrat friends are illegitimate. They are hearing that "cancel culture" forces are trying to hurt Fox. Think about it, what will Fox viewers remember about mid-December 2021? That a criminal tried to burn down Fox's artificial Christmas tree. And that Fox proudly lit up a new tree the very next day.

Fox's ratings tell the story: The biggest shows on Wednesday were "Tucker Carlson Tonight," with 3.46 million viewers, and "The Five," with 3.26 million. Both shows have more than ten times as many viewers as Newsmax at the same hour. If I know anything about Fox insiders, based on my reporting work for "Hoax," they would say they are not having a bad week at all, they are having a very successful week…

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Opening of Texas-Mexico border boosts holiday retail in San Antonio
Brian Kilpatrick
Texas Public Radio
December 16, 2021
https://www.tpr.org/business/2021-12-16/opening-of-texas-mexico-border-boosts-holiday-retail-in-san-antonio

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Many San Antonians are flush with savings from spending all that time at home and/or receiving some federal COVID relief dollars. But Crawford said more than that, many are fully vaccinated and boostered and ready to get out of the house for their first real holiday shopping excursion since the pandemic began.

She said it's not just locals turning out; there are plenty of out-of-town shoppers flocking back to one of the city's best-known malls.

"The border is open from Mexico and so we are seeing those Mexican National tourists coming in and shopping," Crawford said. "And then also we are seeing the local U.S. tourists that are people getting out and doing a little a bit of traveling as well. People always like to purchase something special when their on vacation."

Crawford said this year, malls are a more appealing option for many shoppers due to a couple of problems associated with online shopping.

"Customers are able to come in and pick up their purchase and leave with it, there are absolutely no shipping delays because their able to take it with them," she said.

Crawford said the mall's merchants, more than 200 according to North Star's website, have not reported any major supply chain issues.

She said the mall's sister shopping center, The Shops at La Cantera near Loop 1604 and La Cantera Parkway on the far Northwest Side, is also reporting brisk business.

Both are managed by Brookfield Properties.

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EXCLUSIVE-Royal Dutch Shell confirms new delay in sale of Texas refinery to Mexico's Pemex
Stefanie Esenbacher and Erwin Seba
Reuters
December 16, 2021
https://www.nasdaq.com/articles/exclusive-royal-dutch-shell-confirms-new-delay-in-sale-of-texas-refinery-to-mexicos-pemex

MEXICO CITY/HOUSTON, Dec 16 (Reuters) - Royal Dutch Shell RDSa.Lon Thursday confirmed a Reuters report that the sale of its controlling interest in a Texas refinery to Mexican state oil company Petroleos Mexicanos has been delayed until next year.

A review of the deal by theCommittee on Foreign Investment in the United States, an national security group chaired by the U.S. Treasury, had been expected to wrap up this month but has been extended into next year, Shell spokesperson Curtis Smith said.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800-barrel-per-

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day (bpd) Deer Park, Texas, refinery outside Houston to partner Pemex for about $596 million. The closing was expected this month, officials have said.

"We were hopeful we could conclude the sale before the end of the month, however, it now looks like the full amount of time will be needed," Smith said. "We will continue to cooperate with CFIUS as they review the transaction."

Pemex was not immediately available to comment.

The delay signals CFIUS has moved past its initial 45-day review and into a second, investigative period. The committee is charged with reviewing sales of critical U.S. infrastructure to foreign buyers for national security implications.

The second phase does not signal a potential rejection by the security group. Questions raised during the inital review can be resolved with a letter of agreement or a mitigation agreement, according to a former CFIUS official not involved in the Pemex review.

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Texas has built 6 miles of wire border fencing along Rio Grande under Operation Lone Star
Sandra Sanchez
Border Report
December 16, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/politics/texas-has-built-6-miles-of-wire-border-fencing-along-rio-grande-under-operation-lone-star/

WESLACO, Texas (Border Report) — Since Texas Gov. Greg Abbott in June announced the state would “step up” and erect its own border barrier along the Rio Grande, only 6 miles of wire fencing so far has been completed, some of it just temporary razor fence coils laid on the ground, officials with the Texas Military Department said Thursday.

Lt. Col. Dan Garrison of the Texas Military Department, who is an engineer in charge of the fence-building that is part of Operation Lone Star, said they have secured commitments from private landholders to allow fencing to be built on a total of 62.75 miles in five counties along the Texas-Mexico border. The counties include Val Verde, Maverick, Starr, Zapata and Webb.

Currently, the Texas Military Department is building on six private properties along the border, Garrison told media during a news conference Thursday at the Texas Department of Public Safety regional office in Weslaco, Texas.

He said the barrier is being put up for the safety of migrants, as well as landowners.

“There’s a big safety aspect in building this barrier. The intent is to stop that crossing in places where people could potentially get hurt,” Garrison said.

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Civil rights groups allege Operation Lone Star violates Title VI and unfairly targets Black and brown migrants. On Wednesday, 10 organizations filed a complaint with the Department of Justice requesting an investigation and asking that federal funding associated with the operation be revoked.

Two miles of the fencing has been put up in the past two weeks in rural Starr County east of Rio Grande City.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott plans to visit the site in Rio Grande City on Saturday morning along with Texas General Land Office Commissioner George P. Bush; DPS Director Steve McCraw; Texas Military Department Adjutant Gen. Tracy Norris; and a few state lawmakers, the governor's office announced Thursday.

The Texas General Land Office gave the Department of Public Safety access to 3,100 acres of farmland to put up temporary border fencing.

But Garrison told Border Report that the wire fencing placed in Starr County is concertina wire, and the coils stand no taller than 4-feet off the ground. It is a temporary barricade that can be moved easily "in case of a caravan."

He said the razor wire deters and entangles and stops migrants from crossing the Rio Grande and into the United States.

"If there is a need to stop movement quickly, we can surge to any area and literally place (down) miles within hours," he said.

Abbott has repeatedly supported the operation and criticized the Biden administration for not doing enough to secure the border, in his opinion.

"President Biden's reckless open border policies have created a humanitarian crisis that is enriching the cartels, smugglers, and human traffickers," Abbott said in March.

Since Operation Lone Star began on March 4, there have been over 9,000 criminal arrests, and 2,347 criminal trespass arrests and over 167,000 migrant apprehensions, DPS Lt. Chris Olivarez said Thursday.

The operation has involved the placement of giant shipping containers alongside the riverbank near Eagle Pass, as well as a current boat blockade of the Rio Grande near La Joya, Texas, in Hidalgo County. Troopers work alongside National Guard troops and other agencies, and Olivarez said the border barrier is a very visual and effective way of deterring migrants from illegally crossing.

National Guard troops also have arrived in Texas from several other states to support the operation.

Currently, the Texas Military Department is negotiating to build temporary wire fencing on nearly 200 additional riverfront miles, Garrison said. Negotiations with half of those miles are with landowners in Zapata County and Webb County, which is home to Laredo.

None of those negotiations currently include land in Starr County, where Abbott plans to

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visit on Saturday.

The bulk of the fencing — 4.4 miles — has been built in Val Verde County, where a surge of 15,000 mostly Haitian migrants closed down the Del Rio international bridge in September as they crossed from Acuña, Mexico.

Garrison said construction is slow going, bogged down by areas of bedrock and extremely soft soil. They build at a rate of only a half-mile per day.

He says they are only signing agreements that they know they can complete within six months.

“So the faster we’re able to build, the more agreements we’re able to put on the books and the farther we can go,” Garrison said. “We’re trying to build as fast as we possibly can right now.”

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From: Sam Taylor
Subject: SOS Morning News Clips 12/20/21
Date: Monday, December 20, 2021 8:54:55 AM
Attachments: image001.png
Sensitivity: Personal



Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 20, 2021

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Webb County Dems hold drawing for spots on primary ballot, *Laredo Morning Times*, December 19, 2021

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Election Integrity Law at Risk After Court of Criminal Appeals Rules Only County, District Attorneys Can Prosecute Fraud, *The Texan*, December 17, 2021

Texas lawmaker calls on US Senate to stay in session through holiday to pass voting rights legislation, *WFAA-TV*, December 18, 2021

Trump road show comes to Dallas after weak ticket sales in Florida, *Spectrum News*, December 17, 2021

Republicans resist saying 3 simple words: 'Joe Biden won,' *Associated Press*, December 18, 2021

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Texas officially starts construction on border wall, Gov. Greg Abbott says, *Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 2021

Border merchants finally seeing business picking up since travel restrictions were lifted, *Border Report*, December 17, 2021

Massacre in the desert? 13 migrants feared dead in cartel feud along Texas-Mexico border, *Dallas Morning News*, December 20, 2021

'We're working very hard': US Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar visits El Paso, Juarez, addresses border visa backlog, *El Paso Times*, December 17, 2021

'The vote suppressors won 2021': Federal inaction leaves Texas advocates dismayed, *Houston Chronicle*, December 18, 2021

The time for Wolff to appoint an interim county commissioner is now, not later, *San Antonio Report*, December 19, 2021

Former U.S. Attorney General: Republican redistricting maps disenfranchise voters of color, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 17, 2021

Election audit looms as Dallas, Tarrant and Collin Counties prepare for primaries
Philip Jankowski
Dallas Morning News
December 20, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/2021/12/20/election-audit-looms-as-dallas-tarrant-and-collin-counties-prepare-for-primaries/

AUSTIN — Secretary of State John Scott wants answers soon.

On Monday, his office, which is in charge of state elections, wants to start hearing from the three North Texas counties that are part of a four-county election audit that came amid political pressure from former President Donald Trump.

But some election administrators are still trying to figure out Scott's recent "exhaustive" request for information. They're in talks with county and district attorneys and are gauging how many resources they can dedicate to the effort as March's primaries loom.

On Dec. 10, the secretary of state's office sent a lengthy request to the election administrators in Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Harris Counties — the four counties Scott is auditing as part of an investigation into 2020's presidential election.

The 12-page letter, which included more than 180 bulleted items the secretary of state is seeking, marked the first formal communications with the election offices subject to the inquiry since it was announced, according to election administrators. The request marked the beginning of "phase two" of the audit, with a report on the findings of phase one expected to be released to the public by the end of the year.

Dallas County election administrator Mike Scarpello said his office is still evaluating the request and that the Dallas County district attorney's office is reviewing the request to see what information it can turn over to state officials.

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Scarpello said the civil division of the district attorney's office is treating the secretary of state's request similarly to a request made under the Public Information Act of Texas. However, with the watchful eye of Gov. Greg Abbott behind this latest inquiry into election integrity, Scott's request is a little different than one made by your average Texan.

Scarpello said the request, which seeks information on mail-in ballots, provisional ballots, election workers and election security, "obviously carries a little more weight" than a typical information request from the public.

"We value this audit," Scarpello said. "So we're not dismissing it by any means. We're being as cooperative as we can be, we just want to make sure we — like every other request — run it through the process of reviewing it with the DA's office."

Information requests submitted under the Texas Public Information Act are what make the secretary of state's request relatively easy, according to Tarrant County election administrator Heider Garcia.

"Some of it we've already scanned and have available," Garcia said. "But again, I think the spirit between the state and us has been of cooperation and just working out a timeline that works best for everyone."

Dallas and Tarrant Counties' election administrators both said that the Dec. 10 letter was the first time since initial notification that they had been contacted by the secretary of state's office about the audit. Harris County election administrator Isabel Longoria said her office has been contacted twice about the audit. Collin County's election administrator did not return messages seeking comment about the audit.

The secretary of state's office plans to have on-site inspections of voting facilities in January. Exact dates are expected to be firmed up next week after election administrators respond to the initial inquiry, according to Scott spokesman Sam Taylor.

The office is also nearing completion of its initial findings. Taylor said the office is waiting for information from an interstate cross-check system to confirm if some flagged ballots were cast by people who voted in multiple states.

"That's the last piece of the puzzle before we're ready to publish the results," Taylor said in a text message.

The secretary of state's office announced the four-county audit in September just hours after Trump released an open letter calling for a full-scale audit of the 2020 presidential election in Texas despite winning the state by nearly 6 points. Trump later criticized the audit as "weak" and pushed for Abbott to add a comprehensive audit to the ongoing special session. Abbott did not acquiesce.

The audit is also part of a recent evolution that has seen the secretary of state's office shift from an informational resource for county election departments to something more akin to an enforcement arm of politically motivated inquiries — less of a teacher and more of a hall monitor.

The office thrust itself into politics with an abortive attempt to purge noncitizens from voting rolls in 2019 that ended after numerous naturalized citizens were found to be targeted, eventually leading to the resignation of David Whitley after he failed to be confirmed.

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That came as Trump has repeatedly pushed unfounded claims of widespread voter fraud since he was elected in 2016. In March, the head of the office's elections division, Keith Ingram, called the 2020 election "smooth and secure" — a talking point seized by Democrats hoping to stop new election laws. Their efforts to thwart new laws failed even after House Democrats broke quorum twice and fled the state.

Longoria, the Harris County election administrator, referenced Ingram's comments in a written statement to The Dallas Morning News regarding the audit.

"While the new Secretary of State is focused on revisiting an election from over a year ago, one his office deemed 'smooth and secure' and for which the results have already been accepted, my office is looking ahead," Longoria said, noting that her office is preparing for an upcoming special election in January as well as March's primaries.

And in October, Abbott appointed Scott secretary of state. His selection immediately drew attention to his brief involvement in a lawsuit unsuccessfully challenging 2020's election results in Pennsylvania.

With the controversial election law in effect since Dec. 2, the secretary of state's office has been placed in charge of implementing a host of new election law provisions, including creating guidelines and a curriculum for certified poll watchers, new mail-vote restrictions and changes to voting hours.

Legislators also approved regular audits of the returns in four counties following presidential and midterm elections. Those audits will resemble the ongoing audit, except that the law requires the state to audit two counties with populations greater than 300,000 and two counties each with fewer than 300,000 people.

It means Texas' densest 18 counties, many of which tend to be more favorable to Democrats, will be audited at a much higher rate than the 236 counties that make up their rural counterparts.

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TDCJ already struggling with recruitment see $4 million of its funding moved to election audit
Ali Linan
CNHI News
December 17, 2021
https://www.cnhinews.com/cnhi/article_4de4cb62-5f61-11ec-aba2-2f8d781ec589.html

AUSTIN — Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to reallocate $4 million in Texas Department of Criminal Justice funding to combat election fraud left a budget hole in a department already struggling to fill positions.

On Nov. 19, Abbott announced he approved a legislative budget proposal that would provide funding needed for the Texas Secretary of State's office to establish a new Election Audit Division — a division conducting comprehensive forensic audits of the state's election. This is addition to the $250 million Abbott took from the TDCJ in June to fund the border wall.

The money for the audit was taken from the General Revenue appropriated for Correctional Security Operations in fiscal year 2023 "for the purpose of ensuring election integrity," documents state.

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“Ensuring the integrity of our elections is critical to our democracy, and the Texas Secretary of State's office deserves the resources and support needed to thoroughly complete this ongoing task," Abbott said in a news release. "The people of Texas must have trust and confidence in the election process, as well as the outcomes of our elections.”

Based in Huntsville, the TDCJ manages and operates all state prisons, state jails and contracted private correctional facilities, according to its website.

As of Dec. 17, the TDCJ had 375 job openings. Of those, at least 60 were for correctional officer positions with an average pay of about $49,000 per year. In total, the TDCJ has about 29,300 employees.

“Recruiting and retaining correctional officers remains the agency’s biggest challenge and our highest priority,” said Robert Hurst, TDCJ communications officer. “Before COVID-19, staffing was frequently impacted by economic surges and competing employment opportunities. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues.”

The jobs themselves are inherently difficult and often underappreciated as reflected in their low pay, said Charley Wilkison, executive director of Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, or CLEAT. The starting salary for a TDCJ correctional officer is $36,200 per year.

CLEAT primarily works with jailers at the county level, but Wilkison said issues with staffing are seen across all state and local detention and jail systems.

Wilkison said the issues with understaffing create greater burdens on corrections officers as they are expected to watch over more inmates with fewer resources. Low staffing could also put their safety, and the safety of people incarcerated, at risk should an incident occur and help is not readily available.

“These people are the bravest, most honorable folk that you find,” Wilkison said. “[Correctional officers] take dangerous individuals who can harm the whole community and keep them off the streets and away from society.”

He added: “We don't place a value on these people, their sacrifice or honors. They are no less than any of the rest of the folks that do things to protect the community.”

Hurst said the agency is working to improve salaries and work conditions in order to increase recruiting.

This includes a recent restructuring of its correctional officer career ladder where officers can now receive pay increases earlier in their rise and more frequently as they progress, Hurst said. But to fund the changes, the agency discontinued the recruitment bonus for correctional officers, he added.

The 87th Legislature also approved a 3% pay increase for correctional officers, food service and laundry managers, and ranking correction officers at 23 maximum-security facilities. This is where the TDCJ sees the highest turnover, Hurst said.

The agency has also closed or idled six facilities within the past year in order to ease staffing burdens, Hurst said.

“We understand that there is no one solution to staffing but we will continue to find new and creative ways to fill critical positions,” he said.

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Hurst said the TDCJ is likely to recoup the redirected funding through supplemental appropriation before it is needed, but when that will happen is unclear.

THE AUDIT

On Dec. 10, the Texas Secretary of State office launched phase two of its election audit targeting Tarrant, Collin, Dallas and Harris counties in which all except Collin County voted in favor of President Joe Biden.

Republican leaders continue to insist that widespread voter fraud occurs the state even though the number of voter fraud cases is less than 0.001%, according to reports.

In the 2020 election, 11 million Texans voted. The Texas Attorney General's Office received 24 complaints where only a handful were prosecuted.

Nonetheless, Texas Secretary of State John Scott said the audit will "restore faith in Texas elections."

"For the past several election cycles, voters have faced a crisis of confidence in the very system that underpins our representative form of government," Scott said previously.

The state has already conducted partial manual recounts, election security assessments and voter eligibility verification, but Scott insisted there is a need to go further.

The office issued an exhaustive document request of publicly available election materials which it said will cover about 35% of all votes cast in the November 2020 General Election in Texas.

"Texas is leading in election integrity. As we embark on Phase 2 of our agency's Full Forensic Audit of the 2020 Election, we want to ensure every single eligible Texas voter knows that ballots in Texas are being properly processed, tabulated, and reported by county election officials in accordance with state and federal law," Scott said in a news release.

Texas is not the only state to have funded election integrity initiatives. Wisconsin taxpayers have funded $700,000 worth of initiatives and Arizona taxpayers are funding a continued investigation into the 2020 election.

Even so, Kevin Boyle ,a professor of American History at Northwestern University, said an audit — even if it proves the previously established results to be accurate and Biden is the rightful president — will not strengthen beliefs in a system GOP elected officials are determined to tear down.

Boyle said he believes unless Republican leaders stand up to what is the fundamental truth, that the election was not stolen and there is no widespread voter fraud, Texans will continue to see a push by GOP leaders for more election restrictions.

"They understand this election wasn't stolen, but they're not saying that they are not standing up to that fundamental lie. That's what needs to happen in the United States," Boyle said. "Republican leadership sees a political advantage in pushing this lie, and by doing that, they are threatening the democratic system."

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He added: “We need people and there are people in the [Republican] party … to say the nation matters more than your political advantage.”

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Texas This Week: A conversation with Texas Secretary of State John Scott
Ashley Goudeau
KVUE-TV
December 19, 2021
https://www.kvue.com/article/news/politics/texas-this-week/texas-this-week-secretary-of-state-john-scott/269-0a749cdc-32a6-4a40-9b3c-0f69d5b30149

AUSTIN, Texas — In this week's edition of Texas This Week, newly appointed Secretary of State John Scott discuss his new role as the state's chief elections officer.

Texas Secretary of State John Scott discusses his new role
The state's chief elections officer has been on the job for just about two months now. In that time, John Scott has been busy. He's charged with auditing 2020 election results for the state's four largest counties. He's visited election officers across Texas and now is preparing for the 2022 primary election. He sat down with KVUE in one of his first television interviews to discuss his new role and vision for elections in Texas.

Ashley Goudeau: I first want to talk to you about your appointment. You're obviously not new to Texas and not new to Texas government, but to get that call from Gov. Greg Abbott to say, 'I want you to be the Secretary of State,' what was your reaction?

John Scott: "Well, honored in just a simple word. I think it's a lot from a guy that, you know, Granddad was a pipe fitter and his parents, neither one of them went to college. And I mean, it brought some pride to the family. And, I think, so honor is the best word I can use to describe it."

Goudeau: This is an appointment that I think a lot of people, particularly Democrats, were a little nervous to see who would be named to this position. But you've gotten praise from from both sides of the aisle. Is that reassuring for you?

Scott: "I think it raises the expectations that I be fair and impartial. And I think when we talk about the audit, for instance, that is the thing that concerns most people most of the time and I think most of the legislators. And I think that at the end of the day, the work product has to speak for itself and it has to be fair, impartial and evidence-based. And so that's what I can assure everybody on all sides that we're going to produce."

Goudeau: There was a little bit of push-back. Obviously, people pointed to some concern about your appointment because the fact that you, for a business day, represented former President Donald Trump in one of his lawsuits challenging the election in Pennsylvania. Talk to us about that.

Scott: "It was another one of those opportunities. They had an interesting case, set of facts. Went up there and the law changed a little bit because of the Third Court of Appeals, United States Court of Appeals, on an electors clause decision. And so, a lot of the ideas that might have been relevant were no longer that, so I thought it was kind of a change of, I guess, goals and I no longer really need to be involved in the case."

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Goudeau: Did you trust the results of the 2020 election?

Scott: "I think I was like everybody else. I went and voted. I went and cast my ballot. I went in there and thought that it was going to be a fair election. And in my personal experience, I never saw anything that was anything different than any election I'd ever cast a ballot in. I think my experience up in Pennsylvania, for as brief time as it was, where the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania has 67 counties, there were seven counties that used machines to weigh mail-in ballots. And I think that's the part that gave me any concern, not that it altered the overall results of a presidential election, but it was one of those things the election should be done the same way everywhere throughout the state to ensure that it's fair. We don't want the richest enclaves in our state to have one set of rules and the rest of the state, we all have to operate under a different ones. It'd be like Westlake, in a county election, because they've got a lot of money, somehow being able to keep their voting operations 24/7. And the rest of us get, you know, six hours a day because there's not enough money to fund the other voting establishments. So I think you want to make sure that everything stays fair and impartial. And I didn't see any evidence of that in my personal experience up in Fort Worth. When I voted in Tarrant County it seemed great. But at the end of the day, that's what the audit is supposed to evaluate."

Goudeau: While we want it to be fair across the board, it should be fair across the board, we should have a base set of rules. I don't think anyone would disagree with that. Do we not see, though, that different communities in Texas have different needs? And so maybe they should be able to allow some extended voting hours or things of that nature?

Scott: "I think that's where it becomes very difficult to do oversight, and that's one of the jobs that that S.O.S. is tasked with. And if you have one set of standards, we can use Harris County because it was literally one of the, we'll use them as the canary that has identified some issues potentially that brought a lot of the legislation up, I think, which is they did 24-hour, drive-thru voting. And is that something that was available to everybody in every location around the state? No. And it gets back to a little bit about what I was talking about – the places that have enough money to do their elections one way should not have an advantage over another voter who works and lives in another community. And that's, I think, why you need one set of rules of the road for everybody to operate under."

Goudeau: Let's talk a bit about the audits. You were appointed to this position and then sort of this big project kind of fell on you. And it did, I think, have some political undertones, obviously, that we were going to do some audits of the 2020 election. I want you to first talk to us about the fairness of that election. Your predecessor said that in Texas, things ran smoothly. She did not see evidence of widespread voter fraud. Has that been your experience thus far?

Scott: "And I really don't want to speak for former Secretary Hughes, but, I have known her for a while. She's an honest person. I have no reason to doubt what she says. I don't think from our perspective, we're trying to do anything other than evaluate what went on during the election in the four largest counties, something that is about 35% of the voters or votes that were cast in that election will be under an analysis. And we're going to let that decide really what we find and really comment at that point in time. I say comment – we're going to address all of the issues that we find. And we're also going to show if there's been security that everybody should have faith in– here's the evidence of it, that it did work right or here's the evidence where it didn't work right. So we want to make sure that we get to the best practices almost on all security and bring confidence back into our elections. That's the goal."

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Goudeau: But you did say address the concerns that we find. Do you feel like you are going to find some things that are concerning?

Scott: "Well, we've got a first; so we have two phases on this process. And the first phase is looking for people that may have voted in more than one jurisdiction, Texas and another state. Another is, are the counties doing their voter roll maintenance? And so, did all the counties institute the security analysis before the election? So we're trying to make sure, and again give a snapshot of that. And I think there's going to be some findings on those or at least on one of those areas that I think was kind of surprising. Not something that, and again, people need to understand we're not trying to go back. There's no way to go back and change any election, any election results. This is really looking at, are the systems in place that are supposed to be in place, did they work right? It's no different than going to sitting down for a test when we were back in school. We got tested on their knowledge. They're going to be tested, to a certain extent, on did the system work in the way it was supposed to and if there were lapses, what were the net results of those lapses?"

Goudeau: Are you surprised at all, when we look at some of the polling, right, even though it's the same election that people are asked about, they do question the validity of the election. There are Texans who don't necessarily think that it's fair or I know I go out and talk to people when we try to encourage them to come out and vote and they say, 'Well, I don't think it matters.' How are you going to tackle that?

Scott: "I think that's one of the really great points that anyone could make, which is we don't want anyone to have the unintended consequences of dissuading someone to vote because they don't think it's going to matter or their vote's being canceled. And I think that's one of the things that I fear most about when someone says that an election was stolen or somehow fraud took place – what is the net effect on other voters out there? Will it dissuade them from even taking the time to go vote? And so that's why this audit is so important, is to reassure people that we have integrity in our elections process. It's safe. And I think that's the real end goal of this – to bring back confidence in the elections and let the politicians go battle all they want about policy. And hopefully that gets all the people to go out there and vote, and with it takes away at least a new excuse on why they don't vote."

Goudeau: But now Secretary Scott, let me ask you, some of that rhetoric, regardless of what your audit finds, some of this rhetoric is going to continue because while voting should not be political, it is going to be political. How are you going to combat that if those voices about, you know, widespread fraud or widespread issues are coming from within your own party?

Scott: "So I I think the goal is not to address every issue people have. I think there is to, there is, the goal to make sure that federal and state laws relating to elections are fair. And after that, if someone wants to find something, that's going to be a different issue for a different day and somebody besides me. But that cannot be the role of the State or the Secretary of State's Office because we are never going to sway, we're never going to convince everyone that every one of their concerns have been addressed. What we're going to be is someone who tries to make sure that all the federal and state laws in this state are followed and can assure them on that."

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‘An unusual situation’ — Secretary of State’s office nixes primary election to pick DeBerry’s successor
Gilbert Garcia
San Antonio Express-News

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December 18, 2021
https://www.expressnews.com/news/news_columnists/gilbert_garcia/article/Garcia-Secretary-of-State-s-office-nixes-16712082.php

The race to succeed Trish DeBerry apparently wasn't chaotic, confusing or messy enough.

So, on Friday, the Texas Secretary of State's office scrambled the script just a bit more.

For those of you who've been preoccupied with Christmas shopping, here's the basic chronology for this wild week in Bexar County Commissioners Court politics:

On Monday afternoon, moments before the filing deadline for the March 2022 primary, Republican County Commissioner Trish DeBerry filed to run for county judge.

DeBerry's move required her to resign her Precinct 3 seat and triggered a 2022 election to fill the post.

On Wednesday morning, Keith Ingram, the director of the Elections Division for the Texas Secretary of State's office, informed the Bexar County Elections Department that the Democratic and Republican nominees for Precinct 3 would be elected by voters in the March primary.

Ingram added that prospective candidates had until Monday afternoon to file for the primary.

Friday morning, Ingram reversed his opinion on how the Precinct 3 nominees should be chosen.

"I was wrong on the possibility of ambiguity" in the Texas Election Code, Ingram said in an email to Bexar County Elections Administrator Jacque Callanen.

"The commissioners court vacancy happened too late to be on the primary ballot. The party executive committees will have to make a nomination later this year."

This makes the race to succeed DeBerry a brand new ballgame.

With only a few days to decide on filing for an expected primary election, several potential candidates — including business executives Grant Moody, Preston Woolfolk and Jeff Webster — were unsure about running and none too thrilled about being rushed into a decision.

Under those circumstances, former Councilman and two-time mayoral candidate Greg Brockhouse already was looking like a solid favorite to take the GOP primary in the reliably Republican Precinct 3 on the North Side.

Now, the party nomination rests in the hands of a few dozen precinct chairs. Who knows how many candidates will seek the nomination? Who knows how the precinct chairs will vote?

On Friday afternoon, Brockhouse seemed to have mixed feelings about the latest determination from the Secretary of State's office.

"Hopefully, this is the final call," Brockhouse said. "I was taking a hard look at it

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myself, and I think I would have done exceptionally well in a Republican primary."

Ingram's reversal came after county and state Republican Party officials made the case that under the Election Code, the Precinct 3 vacancy had occurred too late to allow for a primary election.

Sect. 202.006 states that a party's county executive committee should select a nominee if "the vacancy occurs after the fifth day before the regular deadline" to file for the primary election.

John Austin, the chairman of the Bexar County Republican Party, sounded relieved about Ingram's decision to hand the selection process to the party precinct chairs.

Austin said a Precinct 3 primary election would have encountered legal challenges and faced the threat of having its results thrown out in court.

There is some precedent in Bexar County for having precinct chairs pick party nominees for elective office.

In 2010, Larry Click, a retired Bexar County deputy sheriff, won an uncontested Republican primary for the Precinct 4 county commissioner seat. Five months after winning the primary, Click passed away.

GOP precinct chairs selected a retired Air Force major general named Susan Pamerleau to replace Click on the ballot. Although Pamerleau came up short in that November's general election, losing to Tommy Adkisson, she parlayed her strong performance into a winning campaign for county sheriff two years later.

Last year, both major parties had to select nominees for the 144th District Court bench, after Judge Ray Olivarri's death in January 2020. Democratic precinct chairs picked Michael Mery and Republicans chose Melisa Skinner. Mery won the election.

Those precedents speak to what an unusual situation DeBerry created with her late decision to run for county judge. When local precinct chairs have been called on to appoint nominees for general-election races, it has generally been the result of vacancies created by the death of an office holder or a party nominee.

In this case, however, the vacancy was the product of DeBerry's final-day decision to seek higher office. Election officials don't have a lot of practice dealing with that kind of scenario.

"It's an unusual situation," Callanen said. "It doesn't come up that often and it probably rarely comes up when it's so close to the primary filing deadline.

"No one's ever told us that the Election Code is easy to read."

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Potter County Republican Party will hold own primary using paper, hand counted ballots
Morgan Duerden
KVII-TV
December 17, 2021
https://abc7amarillo.com/news/local/potter-county-republican-party-will-hold-own-primary-using-paper-hand-counted-ballots

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Amarillo, TX (KVII) — Voters in Potter County will see changes at the polls during the March 1st primary. The Potter County Republican Party will administer their own election using all paper, hand-marked, hand-counted ballots.

The decision was made by the party's executive committee, which state kaw says they are welcome to do.

However, there are regulations and laws that every election in Texas must follow.

This will be the first time since the early 2000s that Republican voters will be using strictly paper ballots on election day. A choice Dan Rogers the Potter County GOP Chairman said will lead to a more secure count.

"There is a lot of concerns that voters have whether or not their votes being properly counted with the electronic machines that are being used," Rogers said.

Rogers encouraged the other 253 Republican party chairs throughout Texas to join the movement.

So far though, all have passed on the idea.

Elections are stricly regulated, and the Secretary of State's Office, Rogers and Potter Country Election Administrator Melynn Huntley - who will still be running the Democratic primary - discussed those rules together on Tuesday.

"Usually in Potter County there are about 24 different precinct locations. Our understanding is that the Potter County GOP on Election Day is trying to consolidate that down to four or five precincts," Sam Taylor the Assistant Secretary of State for Communications said.

Decreasing the number of polling locations could result in longer wait times. Depending where a Republican voter lives in Potter County, like near the town of Fritch, their drive to get to the polls could be a long one.

Rogers does plan to hire at least 200 election workers to help run the polling locations and count the ballots after the polls close. This process could take 20 hours but Rogers doesn't believe there is room for human error.

"People keep telling me people can't count," Rogers said. "I trust the voters more than I trust the electronic voting systems."

"By law those paper ballots cannot leave that site," Huntley said. "The judge, the alternate judge, the workers that have been working at the site have to stay and hand count those ballots at that location that night."

The Secretary of State's Office notified Rogers that even during an-all paper election, the Americans with Disabilities Act requires a polling location to have an electronic voting system accessible.

"We will have to secure our own, but it's my understanding, from what I was told is that we only have one person in Potter County that uses that device, and it just so happens that it is my employee's daughter," Rogers said.

"You don't know who is going to vote on Election Day. I don't know how you can say one person is going to vote. Regardless, it's federal and state law," responded Taylor.

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It has been recommended to Rogers by the Secretary of State that they use E-poll books during the election.

Voters sign in on these devices, which communicate to each other, to ensure no one is voting twice or in both the Democratic and Republican primary. Rogers would like to use a paper check-in book but is open to the idea of using both.

“If you don’t follow those laws the candidate or voters or other people involved in election stake holders can actually file a lawsuit and have a court order a new election,” Taylor said.

On Election Day, remember voters in Potter County will not be able to vote at any location like years previous, as the polling locations for each precinct become established, we will let you know where you can vote.

As for early voting which begins on February 14th, the election administration office is going to facilitate the election using electronic voting and the typical voting centers for Potter County.

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Texas Primary Draws Contenders in More Partisan House Districts
Greg Giroux
Bloomberg Government
December 20, 2021
https://about.bgov.com/news/texas-primary-draws-contenders-in-more-partisan-house-districts/

The 2022 House elections in Texas will feature more competition in the March primaries than in November, after Republican redistricting crafted almost all of the 38 districts as one-party bastions.

It’s possible there will be only one highly competitive race next fall in the nation’s second most-populous state. That’s according to a Bloomberg Government analysis of the 2020 election results in the new districts, as well as the slate of candidates who met this week’s filing deadline to compete in the first-in-the-nation congressional primary.

Democrats, who fielded candidates in every Texas district in 2020, will have none running in six districts next year, according to a list compiled by the Texas Secretary of State’s office. Republican Reps. Jake Ellzey, Roger Williams, and John Carter didn’t draw Democratic opposition after being significantly strengthened by redistricting.

Democrats will also be hard-pressed to run competitive campaigns against other Republican incumbents including Michael McCaul, Beth Van Duyne, Chip Roy, and Troy Nehls, who also were bolstered by new district lines after winning by single-digit percentage-point margins in 2020.

The GOP-led redistricting shored up House Republicans after they won 23 of 36 Texas districts in the 2020 election, including 11 with less than 56% of the vote. Donald Trump would have carried 25 of the 38 reconfigured districts in 2020, all but two of them by more than 12 points. President Joe Biden would have carried 13 districts, all but one of them by at least 12 points.

“Unlike 2020 or 2018, there’s not much in the way of competitive races to run in,” said

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Mark Jones, a political scientist at Rice University in Houston. “Most of the districts have been redrawn in such a way that they are a lock for Republicans or a lock for Democrats.”

“In 2022 in Texas, I wouldn’t expect much movement. I would look to later cycles,” said Cal Jillson, a political scientist at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

The fast-growing Lone Star state added two districts in reapportionment. The U.S. Justice Department this month filed suit against the new Texas map, alleging that the changes unlawfully dilute the voting power of Latino and Black residents.

Kelly Burton, the president of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, said the map increased the number of white-majority districts after 95% of the state’s net population growth during the 2010s came from people of color.

“What you should see in the map in Texas is an increase in districts where communities of color have an ability to elect candidates of their choice and have the ability to influence the outcome of the election,” Burton said on Bloomberg Government’s “Downballot Counts” podcast.

Republican state Sen. Joan Huffman, the chair of the Texas Senate redistricting committee, said during the legislature’s consideration of the map that districts were drawn “blind to race” and complied with the Voting Rights Act.

Here’s a look at some Texas districts to watch in the March 1 primary. Runoffs, if needed, would be held on May 24. Each district number is followed parenthetically by the vote percentages that Biden and Trump would have received there in 2020.

1st District (Trump 72%-26%): Rep. Louie Gohmert (R) is running for Texas attorney general, and the GOP primary or runoff will determine Gohmert’s successor in one of the nation’s most strongly conservative districts. Republican candidates include Nathaniel Moran, the elected judge in Smith County (Tyler), the most populous jurisdiction in the district.

3rd District (Trump 56%-42%): Rep. Van Taylor‘s (R) district, anchored in fast-growing Collin County north of Dallas, became more Republican after redistricting. Taylor drew several primary opponents including Keith Self, Collin County’s former elected judge and an Army veteran, and Suzanne Harp, an investment bank executive whose son is chief of staff to Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-N.C.). Taylor was one of the 35 House Republicans who voted for a bill that would have created a bipartisan commission to investigate the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

8th District (Trump 63%-36%): The 11-candidate Republican primary is the race to watch in a district enveloping parts of Harris and Montgomery counties in metropolitan Houston. Rep. Kevin Brady, the top Republican and former chair of the Ways and Means Committee, isn’t seeking re-election. Would-be successors include Morgan Luttrell, a retired Navy SEAL backed by former Gov. Rick Perry; Christian Collins, Brady’s former campaign manager and a former aide to Sen. Ted Cruz (R), who endorsed Collins; and Jonathan Hullihan, a lawyer and Navy veteran.

15th District (Trump 51%-48%): On the Biden-Trump numbers, the reconfigured 15th is the most competitive district in Texas—an unusual claim to fame for a border district that’s 81% Hispanic and was reliably Democratic before Republican gains in 2020, when Biden carried it by 2 percentage points and Rep. Vicente Gonzalez (D) was re-elected by 3 points. Redistricting prodded Gonzalez to run for re-election in the more Democratic 34th District next door.

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Businessman Monica De La Cruz, who was Gonzalez's opponent in 2020, is among the Republicans seeking the nomination. She was one of the first candidates endorsed by House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik (N.Y.), who's working to elect more Republican women to Congress. The Democratic candidates include Ruben Ramirez, a lawyer and Army veteran, and Michelle Vallejo, a businesswoman.

23rd District (Trump 53%-46%): Redistricting bolstered first-term Rep. Tony Gonzales (R) in a district that stretches hundreds of miles from San Antonio west to El Paso. John Lira, a Marine Corps veteran, probably is the leading Democratic candidate. Democrats protested the reduction of the district's Latino population percentage to 63% from 68% in redistricting.

28th District (Biden 53%-46%): Rep. Henry Cuellar, a centrist Blue Dog Democrat and the only House Democrat opposed to abortion rights, faces progressive immigration lawyer Jessica Cisneros in a rematch of their close 2020 primary. Tannya Benavides, a former teacher, also is seeking the Democratic nomination.

Redistricting made the 28th marginally more Democratic-leaning, though Republicans could seriously compete here if they build upon their improved 2020 showing with Latino voters—and particularly if Cisneros unseats Cuellar, who has bipartisan appeal and ran well ahead of Biden's performance in the 2020 general election. Cassy Garcia, a former Cruz aide, has the senator's support in the Republican primary.

If Cisneros beats Cuellar, "then that district becomes much more vulnerable, especially if Cassy Garcia ends up being the Republican candidate," Jones said.

30th District (Biden 78%-21%): House Science, Space and Technology Committee Chair Eddie Bernice Johnson (D) is retiring after three decades from a Black-plurality district in the Dallas area, and the crowded Democratic primary is the contest to watch. State Rep. Jasmine Crockett has Johnson's endorsement.

34th District (Biden 57%-42%): Gonzalez eschewed a re-election bid in the competitive 15th District to run instead to succeed Rep. Filemon Vela (D), who's retiring from a border district that's more friendly to Democrats. Gonzalez faces several challengers in the primary. The best-funded Republican is Mayra Flores, a respiratory therapist practitioner who came to the U.S. from Mexico as a child.

35th District (Biden 72%-26%): The open-seat Democratic primary is the key race in a Hispanic-majority district that connects parts of Travis County (Austin) and Bexar County (San Antonio) via Interstate 35. The candidates include Austin councilman Greg Casar, state Rep. Eddie Rodriguez, and former San Antonio councilwoman Rebecca Viagran.

Rep. Lloyd Doggett (D) lives in the district, but he's running for re-election in the newly created 37th District, a Democratic bastion dominated by Travis County.

38th District (Trump 58%-40%): Republican mapmakers carved out a new GOP-leaning district in west-central Harris County that 10 Republicans are seeking. They include Wesley Hunt, an Army veteran who ran competitively against Rep. Lizzie Fletcher (D) in the 7th District in 2020. Redistricting shifted more Democrats into Fletcher's district to accommodate the creation of the GOP-leaning 38th.

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Webb County Dems hold drawing for spots on primary ballot
Christian Alejandro Ocampo
Laredo Morning Times
December 19, 2021
https://www.lmtonline.com/news/article/Webb-County-Dems-hold-drawing-for-spots-on-16714426.php

The Webb County Democratic Party held its drawing for a place on the 2022 Democratic Primary Ballot on Wednesday at the Laredo Firefighters Local 872 Fireman's Union Hall.

According to Sylvia Bruni, Webb County Democratic Party Chair, the drawing is part of the process set out by the Texas Secretary of State in preparation for the upcoming primary election and the printing of the ballot.

This is the second part of the usual process, and it follows the acceptance of the applications from candidates throughout all counties. According to Bruni, there are 24 Democratic candidate applications in Webb County, all of which are certified by the county party before being sent to the Secretary of State.

There are 27 Democratic counties if one counts multicounty positions such as State Sen. Judith Zaffirini, who represents Webb among other counties.

The drawing then sees local candidates gather to have their positions on the election ballots designated. This is done through a lottery system, in which the candidates for a particular position each have an assigned number picked out of the system for their place on the ballot. Simply put, if three candidates numbered Nos. 1, 2 and 3 are chosen in the lottery as 3, 1 and 2; that is how the ballot will end up looking in the upcoming election.

Currently, Bruni said the process is waiting for all counties in the state to certify their findings. Once finished, Bruni will be reporting the candidates who have opposition on the ballot to the secretary.

"It's very much part of a process that is intended to be very clear cut and very carefully managed so that there isn't any doubt that what they are doing is legal and within very strict timelines," Bruni said.

Like every year beforehand, getting the masses to vote will be a priority, and Bruni said it is important to understand who is on the ballot and for what position they are running for. As an example, in the upcoming governor race, there will be eight Democratic candidates vying for the position.

"It's going to be a pretty busy ballot when it comes down to it. Of course, the challenge is going to be to get people out there and vote. I am hoping there is enough concern and interest, and we'll get a strong showing," Bruni said. "We are going to work on getting the vote out next.

"It's not just going to be Webb County. When Webb County voters go out to vote in March, there are going to be very strong state offices up for grabs, so it's going to be an important primary."

As for research on candidates, campaigns, candidate info and their platforms, those can be found through social media and personal web pages.

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Commissioners approve contracts with Democratic, Republican parties
Brad Kellar
Greenville Herald-Banner
December 20, 2021
https://www.heraldbanner.com/news/local_news/commissioners-approve-contracts-with-democratic-republican-parties/article_fb993296-602b-11ec-99cd-5b8bafa92e86.html

The Hunt County Commissioners Court has begun the county's 2022 election cycle.

The commissioners met during Tuesday's regular session with County Civil Attorney Daniel Ray and Elections Administrator Jeannie Ash to review and approve interlocal agreements between local governments and the Hunt County Elections Office for providing next year's elections.

The commissioners also voted to approve a joint resolution authorizing the contracts between the county and the Hunt County Democratic and Republican parties for the March 1, 2022, primary elections.

Although the March 1 primaries will only have GOP contests for candidates on the Hunt County level, there will be multiple choices to be made in both the Democratic Party and Republican Party elections for the statewide and national races.

Early voting for the March 1 primaries begins on Feb. 14. In the event any primary runoff elections are needed, they would be held on May 24.

A complete list of all candidates seeking nominations in their respective parties in next year's primary elections is available online through the office of Texas Secretary of State John B. Scott at https://candidate.texas-election.com/Elections/getQualifiedCandidatesInfo.do

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Making an immediate impact: New Bell County elections administrator brings changes to department
Shane Monaco
Temple Daily Telegram
December 18, 2021
https://www.tdtnews.com/news/central_texas_news/article_e990b96e-6078-11ec-a6d6-c3ff0322c64c.html

Voters can expect to see some changes to local elections next year as the Bell County elections department looks to implement a variety of changes.

During Monday's Commissioners Court workshop, interim elections administrator Shay Luedeke briefed officials on changes he has started to make since taking over the department in November. Many of the changes have focused around modernizing and improving what the department currently does.

Luedeke, who also serves as the county's Tax Assessor-Collector, took over the interim position following the departure of Matthew Dutton, the previous elections administrator.

In improving the department, Luedeke has focused on getting the department better prepared to deal with the county's increasing population in recent years.

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“With 217,000 registered voters, we are only getting more and more people wanting to vote,” Luedeke said.

One big change for voters in the county, Luedeke said, are plans to add a seventh and possibly an eighth early voting location.

Currently the county has six early voting locations: two in Killeen, one in Temple, one in Salado, one in Belton and one in Harker Heights. The new location Luedeke hopes to open would be at the Killeen Senior Center at Lions Club Park, 1700 E. Stan Schlueter Loop in Killeen.

Luedeke said he hopes this new location will help cut down on lines across the county, but also hopes to add an additional site in Temple if he can find a space to host it.

Early voting sites in the county need to meet several requirements, including being Americans with Disabilities Act accessible, have enough space and be accessible during early voting. Early voting locations are normally open for the two weeks prior to an election, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. the first week and from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. the second week.

This time requirement has previously been one of the main blockages to the department adding more locations, with few facilities able to accommodate them while being in a good location.

Despite the need, officials admitted adding new voting centers would mean increased cost to the county for hiring the needed staff and securing the space.

Bell County Judge David Blackburn said the county will need to look at how expensive it would be to add one or multiple additional voting centers.

“I don’t disagree that we need an additional voting center, it’s pretty bad,” Blackburn said. “And I don’t disagree to targeting where the lines are the longest and where the population centers are.”

Luedeke also has started to work with the county’s technology department to modernize its election map.

The department plans on using existing mapping software used by others in the county to create a precinct map of the county. The software would allow the county to add new roads more easily than they can currently.

“We are currently using a map book from 2009 with hand-drawn precinct line,” Luedeke said. “And every time they have new roads, they hand draw the new road in this map book. So that is why we want mapping software.”

Another piece of software the county plans on using for upcoming elections is one developed during the 2020 election.

The software aims at allowing voters to see where waits at polling places are the shortest during early voting and Election Day. Adam Ward, technology services director, said the software had been finished last year but it was too close to the general election to put out something that was still in the beta testing phase.

Training for election judges, who would have to manually input wait times, was one of

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the reasons for the county not using the software.

Luedeke said he hopes to put the software into use now so the county can prepare for more intense elections.

“We are going to use it this primary, at lease put it to some practical use,” Luedeke said. “I think (the election) will be low enough volume that we can do that … and use it several times before the next general election.”

Some smaller changes being worked on by Luedeke include starting a Facebook page for the department to help with transparency and creating an official employee handbook specific to the department.

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Election Integrity Law at Risk After Court of Criminal Appeals Rules Only County, District Attorneys Can Prosecute Fraud
Hayden Sparks
The Texan
December 17, 2021
https://thetexan.news/election-integrity-law-at-risk-after-court-of-criminal-appeals-rules-only-county-district-attorneys-can-prosecute-fraud/

On Wednesday, the Texas Court of Criminal Appeals, which is composed entirely of Republican judges, ruled in an 8 to 1 decision that a state statute granting the Texas attorney general the authority to prosecute violations of election law is unconstitutional primarily on separation of powers grounds. Judge Kevin Yeary was the only dissenting jurist.
The court, which serves as the final arbiter of adult criminal matters in Texas, handed down its decision two days after the deadline to file for a place on the primary ballot. The only way the ruling could be reversed is in the unlikely event the court grants a rehearing.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who is facing several opponents from both political parties, lashed out at the court and suggested the decision calls into question whether misconduct in elections will be prosecuted.

“Now, thanks to the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals, Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas. This ruling could be devastating for future elections in Texas,” Paxton tweeted.

The ruling jeopardizes the effectiveness of the Election Integrity Protection Act of 2021, the GOP’s signature legislative achievement this year partially intended to respond to concerns of fraudulent activity in the 2020 presidential election.

The law relies heavily on the attorney general’s involvement in pursuing potential fraud cases. Enlisting the cooperation of Democratic district and county attorneys for more aggressive election fraud prosecutions will be challenging for Paxton or a Republican successor.

Democrat Christian Menefee, the county attorney of Harris County, tweeted that the ruling was a “big win for local government and Texans who are tired of state officials exaggerating voter fraud claims to undermine elections.”

Though there are provisions in the act that call for civil penalties against entities that violate the law, the onus would be on local prosecutors to file charges against

individuals suspected of fraud, illegal voting, or other violations.

At the center of the case is the Democratic sheriff of Jefferson County, Zena Stephens. Paxton charged Stephens in 2018 with one count of tampering with a government record and two counts of making or accepting a contribution in violation of the Texas Election Code.

She allegedly incorrectly filled out campaign finance documents and improperly accepted cash donations.

During an investigation in a different case, the Federal Bureau of Investigation had contacted the Texas Rangers after discovering Stephens may have committed a crime. The Jefferson County district attorney decided against prosecuting Stephens, instead kicking the case to Paxton's office, according to the Court of Criminal Appeals' ruling.

The statute in question is Texas Election Code 273.021, which delegates to the attorney general the authority to charge individuals with violations of election law.

The whole statute reads as follows: "(a) The attorney general may prosecute a criminal offense prescribed by the election laws of this state.

(b) The attorney general may appear before a grand jury in connection with an offense the attorney general is authorized to prosecute under Subsection (a).

(c) The authority to prosecute prescribed by this subchapter does not affect the authority derived from other law to prosecute the same offenses."

Agreeing with Stephens' argument that the law is unconstitutional, Judge Randy McDonald, the state district judge in Chambers County who is presiding over the case, dismissed the tampering with a government record charge. The First Court of Appeals reversed that decision last year, but the Court of Criminal Appeals ruling on Wednesday reinstated McDonald's decision to throw out the charge.

Justice Peter Kelly, a Democrat, joined Chief Justice Sherry Radack, a Republican, in the First Court of Appeals ruling in 2020 that would have allowed the first charge against Stephens to go to trial. Democratic Justice Gordon Goodman dissented.

The Court of Criminal Appeals based much of Wednesday's ruling on the rationale that each branch of government — legislative, executive, and judicial — should stay strictly in its own lane. The court reasoned that the attorney general is an executive officer, while district and county attorneys are part of the judicial branch.

Unlike the U.S. Constitution, the Texas Constitution contains a provision that explicitly requires each branch of government to avoid encroaching on the duties of another branch.

However, Yeary contended in his dissent, among other arguments, that the Texas Constitution contains language explicitly allowing the legislature to delegate responsibilities to the attorney general in addition to his constitutional role.

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Texas lawmaker calls on US Senate to stay in session through holiday to pass voting rights legislation
Michael McCardel

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WFAA-TV
December 18, 2021
https://www.wfaa.com/article/news/politics/inside-politics/texas-lawmaker-calls-on-us-senate-to-stay-in-session-to-pass-voting-rights-legislation/287-a2f76f59-d951-4f7e-975c-9a1e2a6683e8

DALLAS — State Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer thinks members of the U.S. Senate should work as long as it takes to pass two pieces of legislation, even if it means working through the holiday.

The Democrat from San Antonio recently sent a letter to Senate leadership asking them to stay in session until the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act are signed into law.

More than 200 other state lawmakers from 41 different states and Guam also signed the letter.

“This is a very fluid conversation. And very recent, last couple of days, we’ve all realized that Build Back Better is now sort of moving to the sideline as Senator Manchin and the White House negotiate the finer points. And so you now see an opportunity to maybe put voting rights back in front,” Martinez Fischer said on Inside Texas Politics.

The John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act and the Freedom to Vote Act would strengthen voting rights and overhaul the nation’s elections systems. The U.S. House has already passed both measures.

Democrats argue they’re necessary to protect voters after Republicans have change election laws in many states, which they say make it harder for some people to vote, particularly minorities. In his letter, Martinez Fischer says 19 states passed 33 laws this year alone that restrict access to the ballot.

After releasing the letter, Martinez Fischer says he and a few colleagues traveled to Washington, D.C. to once again lobby national lawmakers in person, visiting with some Senators and other voting rights advocacy groups.

“What I’m beginning to realize is things move very, very slow in Washington,” said Martinez Fischer. “I know the inside game in Austin. I legislate behind the scenes. And I know sometimes it takes a while. But in Washington, they have this manana mentality where everything’s going to get done tomorrow.”

Martinez Fischer says many of the folks he meets with express concern with what’s happening in Texas after he explains how high the hurdles are to vote.

And the Democrat says when his group recently visited West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a fellow Democrat, they drove home the point that voting in Texas is much different than voting in West Virginia.

“In West Virginia, if you’re a shift worker, if you’re a nurse or a firefighter, you get to vote by mail. We don’t get to do that in Texas. In West Virginia, if you’re afraid to go stand in line at the polls because of COVID, you get to vote by mail. You can’t do that in Texas. In West Virginia, if you have a DWI and you’re sitting in the county jail, you get to vote by mail. You can’t do that in Texas,” said Martinez Fischer.

Martinez Fischer also filed one of the first lawsuits challenging the state’s new redistricting maps. His lawsuit specifically targets the lines drawn for Congressional

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District 35, which stretches from Austin to San Antonio, and argues the maps violate the Voting Rights Act and discriminate against Latino voters.

For Martinez Fischer, it's all part of an overall battle to protect voting rights. And he says he's not alone.

"Texas Democrats have been very bold on this issue. We find ourselves in the center of the conversation across the country."

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Trump road show comes to Dallas after weak ticket sales in Florida
Sabra Ayres
Spectrum News
December 17, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/austin/news/2021/12/17/trump-road-show-comes-to-dallas-after-weak-ticket-sales-in-florida

DALLAS — After failing to get the audience numbers in Florida he had hoped for, former President Donald Trump is bringing his "History Tour" roadshow to North Texas this weekend to rally supporters.

Trump will headline two events in Dallas Sunday. The first will be at the downtown First Baptist Dallas Church, where he will take the stage with one of his most ardent supporters on the Christian Right, Dr. Robert Jeffress.

Later in the afternoon, Trump will be at the American Airlines Center with Bill O'Reilly, a former Fox News host, where they will put on their fourth stop in what he's calling the "History Tour."

The show appears to be a mix of Trump talking about his administration during his term as president, with a bit of campaigning for a possible second run at the White House in 2024.

"I will be focusing on greatness for our Country, something seldom discussed in political dialogue," Trump said in a statement promoting the tour. "If we don't make our Country great again, we will soon no longer have a Country!"

The event comes a few days after a similar Trump event in Orlando, Fla., which only sold about 62% of the 8,700 seats reserved for the event in the city's Amway Center, according to the Orlando Sentinal.

The paper reported that audience members who purchased less expensive seats were moved down to empty, more expensive seats to make the stadium appear full. The night before, Trump's roadshow was in Sunshine, Fla., where there was also a smaller-than-expected crowd, the Sentinal reported.

Trump and O'Reilly will be in Houston Saturday, where his tour is scheduled at the 19,000-seat Toyota Center. There appeared to be plenty of tickets left for that show on the Ticketmaster website.

In July, Politico reported that pre-sale tickets were slow to pick up ahead of the tour's schedule, despite the fact that Trump promised "fun, fun, fun for everyone who attends."

Tickets for the Dallas show on Ticketmaster showed some seats still available with

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prices ranging from $106 to $206. The American Airlines Center did not immediately return calls asking about the number of seats allotted for Sunday's event in Dallas and how many have sold. The stadium, the home court and ice rink of the Dallas Mavericks and Dallas Stars, respectively, can seat 20,000.

Jeffress, the senior pastor at the First Baptist Dallas megachurch, has called Trump the "greatest president of my lifetime" and has frequently defended the former president on Fox News.

Last year, just days after an attack on the Capitol, led by Trump supporters who claimed the 2020 election was stolen, Jeffress hosted a Christmas sermon entitled "How Should Christians Respond to President Joe Biden?"

Jeffress has condemned the Jan. 6 Capitol riots but remains a strong Trump supporter.

His sermon for this Sunday's Christmas event is themed "What If There Were No Christmas?" Trump is scheduled to speak after in the church's large auditorium on its sprawling, downtown campus.

"President Trump is known for his love for Christmas and what it represents. We are thrilled to have him join us this Sunday morning," the church's website said about the event.

Former Vice President Mike Pence has spoken at the Frist Baptist Dallas Church at least twice.

While Trump won Texas in the 2020 presidential election, Joe Biden carried Dallas County and the other large, metropolitan centers in the state. Still, a large number of North Texans have been arrested and charged in the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. At least 19 people from the suburbs of Dallas have been charged in connection with the Jan. 6 attack, one of the largest groups involved in the event from any state.

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Republicans resist saying 3 simple words: 'Joe Biden won'
Associated Press
December 18, 2021
https://www.kxxv.com/news/republicans-resist-saying-3-simple-words-joe-biden-won

(AP) — They are just three little words, but they have become nearly impossible for many Republicans to say: "Joe Biden won."

Eleven months after the Democrat's inauguration, Republican lawmakers and candidates across the country are squirming and stumbling rather than acknowledging the fact of Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. In debates and interviews, they offer circular statements or vague answers when asked whether they believe Biden won.

Yes or no?

In Minnesota this week, five GOP candidates for governor came up with 1,400 other words when asked by conservative radio host Hugh Hewitt for an answer.

On NBC's "Meet the Press" on Sunday, GOP Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas would only concede: "Joe Biden was sworn into office."

The hazy statements are one measure of election denialism within the Republican Party. Former President Donald Trump's lies about a stolen election have so taken hold among GOP voters that many of the party's candidates either believe them or fear the political repercussions of refuting Trump. That sets up a surreal dynamic for next year's elections, where the toughest question posed to GOP candidates — particularly in primaries — may be one with a one-word answer that they're reluctant to give.

Biden received more than 81 million votes to Trump's 74 million, according to the tally of the Federal Election Commission. The tightest margin was in Arizona, where Biden won by 10,457 votes. More important, he won 306 votes in the Electoral College, more than the 270 required to become president. Trump got 232.

Even a GOP-led "audit" of votes in Arizona's largest county came up with a Biden win. Dozens of state and federal courts, as well as the Trump administration's Justice Department, have dismissed claims of widespread voter fraud.

When The Associated Press set out to count every fraud claim in the states disputed by Trump, it found fewer than 475 potential cases — 15 hundredths of 1% of Biden's winning margin in those states.

And yet, many Republican candidates may be eying another number: A July Associated Press-NORC Poll found 66% of Republicans said Biden was not legitimately elected president. More than two-thirds of Americans overall said Biden was legitimately elected.

The doubt has been fueled by Trump, who has argued without evidence that the election was "rigged" and has urged his supporters to reject the outcome. He's set out to oust fellow Republicans who voted to certify the results.

Kansas' Marshall was among five senators who voted against certifying the electoral votes for Arizona and Pennsylvania in January, the day a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol in a violent effort to prevent the final step that sealed Biden's win.

While Marshall hangs his answer on process, other Republicans go further. Arizona Republican Rep. Andy Biggs, who was part of a group of GOP congressmen who pushed false claims, recently answered a question from a colleague about who won by saying flatly, "We don't know."

"There's the problem," Rep. Jamie Raskin, a Maryland Democrat, replied at a hearing of the House Oversight Committee. "Donald Trump refused to accept the results, and unfortunately we have one of the world's great political parties which has followed him off of the ledge of this electoral lunacy, and it's dangerous for democracy."

There are some Republicans who clearly, without squirming, acknowledge Biden's win. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is among them, along with Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who was the GOP's 2012 presidential nominee, and Nebraska Sen. Ben Sasse, for instance. Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel uttered the words last month.

"Painfully, Joe Biden won the election, and it's very painful to watch. He's the president. We know that," McDaniel told Washington reporters at a breakfast hosted by The Christian Science Monitor.

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But it's clear not all Republicans know. In October, the second-ranking House Republican, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, repeatedly stopped short of disavowing Trump's claims of fraud, asserting without evidence that "a number" of states "didn't follow" their election laws.

On Friday, Josh Mandel, a GOP candidate for Senate in Ohio, called for more investigations into the vote in battleground states. "I think Trump won," he said in an interview on Hewitt's radio show.

"It is an important question and needs to be framed, I think, as I did. I expect it will be often asked and answered (or not) of many candidates in the year ahead," Hewitt tweeted after the Minnesota debate.

The answers demonstrate the pressure for Republican primary candidates to appeal to, or at least not offend, the vocal Trump wing of the party, strategists say.

"In today's grim Republican Party, the was-the-election-legit question has become a litmus test for whether you are truly loyal to the Republican Trumpist tribe or not," said Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican strategist and Trump critic.

It took a while — that is, winning the Republican nomination for Virginia governor — for Glenn Youngkin to get there. In May, he said in an interview, "I mean, the reality is, and I have said this before, Joe Biden was legitimately elected our president."

But in February, though he stopped short of saying Biden "stole" the election, he was equally hesitant to declare Biden had been "legitimately elected," according to the nonpartisan political watchdog group Politifact.

Other candidates have moved in the other direction — away from the facts. In Ohio, where Republicans are vying for the nomination for an open Senate seat, candidate Bernie Moreno began airing an ad this week where he is quoted as saying, "President Trump says the election was stolen, and he's right."

Yet, just days after the election last year, Moreno urged conservatives on Twitter to "accept the results of the 140+ million votes cast," and tweeted a congratulatory note to Biden for a "hard fought victory."

On Wednesday, the discomfort for Republicans played out in full view from the debate stage in suburban Minneapolis.

One-by-one, five Minnesota Republicans running for governor talked around Hewitt's question: "Did President Biden win a constitutional majority in the Electoral College."

State Sen. Michelle Benson spilled 240 words recruiting Republican poll-watchers and blasting Minnesota's Democratic secretary of state before Hewitt bluntly asked again: "Did President Biden win?"

Her answer: "He was certified by Congress as having won the Electoral College."

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Texas officially starts construction on border wall, Gov. Greg Abbott says
Ariana Garcia
Houston Chronicle
December 18, 2021
https://www.chron.com/politics/article/Texas-starts-construction-on-its-own-border-

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wall-16710994.php

Gov. Greg Abbott announced Friday that Texas has officially commenced construction on a partial wall to finish work along the state's southern border with Mexico started by former President Donald Trump's administration. The wall's panels, which went up this week on the edge of Starr County in the Rio Grande Valley, are designed to help fill empty sections remaining along the federal border wall.

Photos shared on Twitter by Fox News reporter Bill Melugin show progress being made on the wall, which Melugin explained uses “state land, state money” instead of federal funding. Texas is also using the same contractor deployed by Trump before plans to finish the wall were eventually canceled by President Joe Biden, Melugin says.

“These are the first panels in what will be a 1.7-mile stretch designed to help fill gaps where there is no federal wall,” Melugin tweeted. “More projects planned.” Abbott quote tweeted Melugin Friday, opining that “Biden allows open border policies and refuses to enforce laws passed by Congress to secure the border and enforce immigration laws. Texas is stepping up to do the federal government’s job.”

The wall project is part of Abbott’s “Operation Lone Star” which launched in March to combat the alleged "smuggling of people and drugs into Texas.” The effort has been heavily criticized by immigrant and civil rights organizations, including the ACLU of Texas, Civil Rights Project and Texas Defense Project, which on Wednesday, along with seven other groups, filed a complaint with the Department of Justice over the border arrest program’s discriminatory nature.

“The true intent of this program is to punish migrants, expand Texas’ massive correctional system and deter future migration,” Liz Castillo, organizer with the Detention Watch Network, told the Houston Chronicle.

In September, Abbott passed a $1.88 billion spending bill for border security funding to supplement another $1.05 billion the state approved in the spring, according to the Texas Tribune. About $750 million of the bill will go toward the construction of a “border barrier” in addition to $250 million the state approved over the summer as a down payment for the wall. In the meantime, Abbott has used shipping containers, razor wire and, most recently, boats to craft makeshift barriers that deter migrants from entering the state.

In an appearance on Fox Business Network Friday, Abbott said $3 billion of tax payer money has been contributed to border security efforts. He said the wall will cost less than it did for the Trump administration because “unlike the Trump administration, we’re not having to devote money to acquire the land…The state of Texas owns [land] on the border itself," he explained. "Secondly, there are property owners of massive acreage on the border who are fed up with Biden’s open border policies, and they are donating their land to Texas for us to be able to use that land for free to build a wall on their property.”

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Border merchants finally seeing business picking up since travel restrictions were lifted
Salvador Rivera
Border Report
December 17, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/trade/border-merchants-finally-seeing-

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business-picking-up-since-travel-restrictions-were-lifted/

SAN YSIDRO, Calif. (Border Report) — During recent visits to Carolin Shoes along San Ysidro Boulevard, manager Olivia Campos always had plenty of time to sit down and discuss the pandemic-related financial woes at her store and others in the area.

But as Border Report checked in Friday morning, Campos found herself running back and forth in the store helping customers.

Gladly, our interview would have to wait, and it would have to be quick.

… Finally, she stopped and turned her attention to this reporter.

“We better do it now because I won’t have time to stop and talk later,” she said.

Since Nov. 8, when essential travel restrictions were lifted to those who are vaccinated for COVID-19, merchants just north of the San Ysidro Port of Entry had been eagerly anticipating the return of shoppers from Mexico.

As it turned out, the wait was longer than anyone could’ve thought.

“I was expecting a lot more people,” Campos said.

She admitted that after a few dismal weeks, there is room now for optimism.

“Slowly, slowly I see it getting a little bit better. Last Saturday everything started to pick up,” she said.

According to Campos, her store saw a surge in customers two Saturdays ago and it’s been steady ever since.

“Hopefully, it keeps going the same way,” she said.

And with one more full weekend of shopping before Christmas, she is hoping to finish the holiday season and start the new year on a strong note.

“I hope we can see more, to be honest with you, I really hope so.”

Campos told Border Report it looks like things are getting back to normal; she said most of her neighboring businesses were also doing better.

“It’s good, I just hope they don’t close the border again,” she said.

On the west side of the San Ysidro Port of Entry, where there is a large outlet mall, two workers at a shoe store and one at a suitcase discounter said they were seeing a lot more people from Mexico and that their sales were “way up.”

Since the coronavirus pandemic began, and essential travel restrictions were put in place, more than 200 businesses in San Ysidro closed their doors permanently due to the lack of customers from Mexico.

The area, according to its chamber of commerce, also sustained more than $1.3 billion in losses.

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Massacre in the desert? 13 migrants feared dead in cartel feud along Texas-Mexico border
Alfredo Corchado and Annie Rosenthal
Dallas Morning News
December 20, 2021
https://www.dallasnews.com/news/immigration/2021/12/20/massacre-in-the-desert-13-migrants-feared-dead-in-cartel-feud-along-texas-mexico-border/

OJINAGA, Mexico — Thirteen migrants kidnapped in Chihuahua may have been killed during a turf war between drug cartels — part of an increasingly violent feud between rival gangs over smuggling routes in this northern state bordering Texas, according to Mexican and U.S. sources.

Some of the migrants were headed for the Midland-Odessa and Dallas areas, according to family members and a human rights advocate. They hope the group, all men mostly from the state of Chihuahua, is still alive or at worst, being held for ransom or forced into labor for cartels.

But a Mexican security official close to the investigation told The Dallas Morning News and Marfa Public Radio that investigators are “looking for bodies, or pieces of them, of what’s been left behind” out in the desert. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal, and added, “I can tell you, they’re not alive.”

The mass kidnapping, which happened in late September, is part of a growing pattern of disappearances of migrants in the area between Ciudad Juárez, across from El Paso, and the town of Ojinaga, across from the small Big Bend community of Presidio. That corridor had until recently been relatively quiet, but has a long history of cartel-related violence.

“It’s like no man’s land,” said Gabino Gómez Escárcega, a veteran human rights activist who works with an organization called Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres.

Last week, Gómez stood with family members of the missing migrants outside the state capitol’s office in Chihuahua to demand answers, holding posters emblazoned with their loved ones faces and signs with messages like: “It’s not just 13; they’re many more disappeared.”

Among those gathered was Sheila Arias, whose nephew, Omar Reyes Lopez, a 20-year-old from Hidalgo who has vision problems, went missing at the beginning of November near the area where the 13 disappeared a month earlier.

“Something is happening in Chihuahua, something is happening on the border, and we can’t close our eyes,” she said.

Veteran security and immigration experts are concerned that the violence is, in part, spurred on by restrictive U.S. immigration policies that have left tens of thousands of migrants in limbo along the border, lingering in dangerous Mexican towns where they can easily fall prey to criminal groups.

The Migrant Protection Protocols, commonly known as Remain in Mexico, require that asylum seekers who arrive in the U.S. turn around and wait in Mexico, often for months, for their U.S. immigration court dates. The Biden administration initially suspended the policy, which began in 2019 under former President Donald Trump, but reinstated it in early December following a court order.

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And under the Title 42 policy implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic emergency, hundreds of thousands more who arrive in the U.S. are quickly and routinely expelled back to Mexico. Many remain at the border seeking other opportunities to cross back into the U.S.

Critics say such policies have created a booming industry for smugglers. David Shirk, director of the Justice in Mexico program at the University of San Diego, said the policies “add to the number of people who are sufficiently desperate that they’re going to put their lives in the hands of a migrant smuggler.”

Smuggling is no longer a “mom and pop” operation, he said, but an increasingly lucrative industry in which cartels have become more intimately involved.

Andrew Selee, president of the Migration Policy Institute, sounded a similar alarm, saying, “Drug cartels used to look down on human smuggling because they saw it as a secondary business and a much less lucrative business. And obviously, the numbers are changing. And when the numbers change, it becomes much more attractive to try and control it.”

Jorge Contreras Fornelli, head of FICOSEC Juárez, a nonprofit clearinghouse of business and community leaders that promotes safety, estimates that in Chihuahua alone, human smuggling brings in nearly $30 million per month.

The takeover of human smuggling in Chihuahua by the cartels means “the consequence, as in the example of the 13 disappeared, is that we think they are no longer alive,” said Contreras, who is also a member of the national security council. “I hope we are wrong, but it has been a long time.”

Across the country, more than 95,000 people have been declared missing by Mexico’s National Search Commission. In late November, following a tour of Mexico to meet with officials and families of victims — including relatives of the 13 missing outside Ojinaga — members of the United Nations Committee on Enforced Disappearances noted that migrants in Mexico are particularly vulnerable to disappearance.

Human Rights First has documented more than 7,000 violent attacks against people returned to Mexico or forced to wait there during the Trump and Biden presidencies under the Remain in Mexico policy. Many more are thought to go undocumented.

While families remain desperate for answers about what happened to relatives who went missing on the journey north, others have evidence of the brutality their loved ones encountered. In February, several Mexican police officers were charged in the massacre of 19 migrants, mostly Guatemalans, in the state of Tamaulipas. The grisly event brought echoes of other brutal killings of migrants — including the murder of 72 migrants by the then Zetas cartel in the same state in 2010.

Along the Chihuahuan desert between Ojinaga and Juarez, Gómez estimates the number of disappeared Mexican migrants at 30 in more than a year, 15 of whom have gone missing within the span of just 40 days this fall — including the group of 13.

Violence isn’t new to the region where the migrants went missing. A splinter group of the Juárez Cartel, known as La Linea, and their rivals, the Sinaloa Cartel, once terrorized this remote region in the state of Chihuahua that extends between Coyame de Sotol and Ojinaga, and up the Rio Grande in what is known as the Valle de Guadalupe, outside Ciudad Juárez.

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During the 2008-2010 period, nearly 10,000 people were killed just in Juárez, a result of a turf war over coveted drug smuggling routes. A death squad made up of soldiers operated out of Ojinaga, targeting rival cartel members, said Howard Campbell, a border anthropologist at the University of Texas at El Paso, who documented the violence in his book, Drug War Zone.

The general who led the military garrison in Ojinaga during those years, Manuel Moreno Aviña, was later sentenced to 52 years in prison for the torture, murder and incineration of a civilian in Ojinaga.

Historically, Campbell said, the region around Ojinaga has been under the control of La Linea, “which has been the dominant group in the state with some exceptions.” And for the last decade the area has been relatively quiet — a sign that La Linea was in control.

The Mexican security official described this “quiet period” as a “simulated peace, a purchased peace” adding that the cartel has a stranglehold over the city of an estimated 25,000.

Ojinaga Mayor Andres Ramos denies organized crime exists in his city, which he calls “a calm town.”

The city has not taken kindly to the recent increase in migration through the area. Ramos said migrants “bring problems, big and small,” adding that the city receives “not one peso” from the federal government to care for them, and that local resources should be spent on locals.

But most of the men who disappeared in September were from communities surrounding Chihuahua City, almost three hours south of Ojinaga. The group of 13 men left behind wives, parents and children in Chihuahua. Some had decided to make the trip to reunite with family members in the U.S., while others sought jobs that would help them better support those back in Mexico.

Benigno Alvarez, 36, had worked as a delivery person in Chihuahua City. He quit his job over the summer when he heard from a cousin in Arlington who promised him a job in construction, installing sheetrock.

His wife, Rocío Martinez de Alvarez, 33, was reluctant to let him go, insisting they could somehow make ends meet in Mexico. He responded that Mexican wages wouldn’t help them provide for his eldest daughter’s schooling, or pay for his other daughter’s quinceañera. He promised he’d return for Christmas and stay for the birthday party, planned for February, before leaving again. And he vowed in three years he’d return for good with enough money saved to even buy their own home.

“He had dreams,” said Martinez. “He was determined.”

Her husband had faith he’d make it to North Texas, she said. He knew a local guide, a person who would navigate the complicated interactions with a smuggler and eventually members of organized crime.

Alvarez used a severance package to pay the 20,000 peso fee, a down payment charged by organized crime. He waited through months of delays, some because of summer’s monsoon season, before finally leaving Chihuahua City with the rest of the 13, a group organized by the guide, on September 24. He would still owe more than $6,000 for the journey, to be paid after he started work in the U.S., his wife said.

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On the evening of September 25, Alvarez called Martinez from a safe house in the town of Coyame, just south of Ojinaga. He said that all was going as planned and that they would lose phone service for the next stretch of the trip.

“He called me and told me, ‘We’re in Coyame, I’m going to turn off my phone and I won’t be able to talk to you until I get there,’” said Martinez.

The men were headed for Interstate 10, where a smuggler awaited them for transportation to the Permian Basin and Dallas. But first they had to go through Lomas de Arena, a tiny Mexican village right up against the Rio Grande, neighboring Hudspeth and Culberson counties in far West Texas.

The U.S. side of the river has seen a stark rise in both apprehensions of large groups and deaths in the desert of migrants from Central America, Ecuador and Mexico, said Culberson County Sheriff Oscar Carrillo. This year, his office has recovered 28 bodies from the desert, compared to what he said “had been the average for years: One.”

By Wednesday, a day after the group was supposed to arrive in North Texas, Martinez still hadn’t heard from Alvarez. Then she got a call from another person with a family member in the group who said that a teenager who’d been traveling with the group had returned to Chihuahua. According to the state prosecutor’s office, the teen testified to local authorities that the group had been stopped by armed men who told him “vete” – go – before taking the men away in vehicles. He said he ran toward the U.S., where he was detained by Border Patrol and soon deported back to Juárez.

In early October, Martinez and relatives of other members of the group filed formal missing persons reports with the state attorney general’s office. Martinez said officials collected DNA samples from each of them and promised to begin searching.

The state attorney general’s office is now offering a 200,000 peso reward for “useful and true information” about the whereabouts of several of the missing men.

But Martinez said they have not allowed family members to accompany them, citing the danger of the area.

Unwilling to watch from the sidelines, Martinez quit her job as a factory worker to commit herself fully to the search. She and a group of other wives, mothers, aunts and sisters of the missing men have taken to social media, posting photos of the missing men with messages asking people to send tips anonymously to their page, “13 desaparecidos Coyame-Chihuahua.”

“We beg you who has seen or knows something to help us find them, give us a clue about where they are so we can go search for them,” reads a typical post. “You can be those eyes, those ears, so that they can return home, where a child, a wife, parents are waiting for them.”

The families also requested assistance in the investigation from María Eugenia Campos Galván, known as Maru, the governor of Chihuahua, and Mexico’s President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. The president drew their outrage when, during an early October news conference, he said he had not heard about the disappearance of the 13 migrants. But during López Obrador’s recent visit to Chihuahua, the administration promised the group the use of a helicopter to assist with their search.

A spokesperson for the state attorney general’s office says it has carried out “permanent and uninterrupted” searches for them in recent months. Working with several other agencies — including the army and National Guard — the office says it

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has conducted land and air searches of the municipalities surrounding the area where the migrants disappeared. During those searches, they encountered 60 other migrants, but still have no answers about the missing 13 or Omar Reyes Lopez.

But officials on both sides of the border have privately spoken of a likely version of events: A confrontation between members of the Sinaloa and La Linea cartels the week that the 13 disappeared. According to the Mexican security official close to the investigation, the group had been taken hostage by members of the Sinaloa cartel, who planned to hold them for ransom.

When members of La Linea realized that Sinaloa was encroaching on their territory and interfering with their human cargo, the official said, they brought dozens of trucks to Bosque Bonito, near Lomas de Arena, to “rescue” the migrants. The Sinaloa cartel had fewer people but more weapons, and La Linea retreated. At some point during or after the confrontation, the official believes the migrants were taken elsewhere and killed.

The official said houses around the small community of Bosque Bonito were abandoned, as though the few residents had left in a hurry. In one known stash house, the official said, investigators found bloody fingerprints and other evidence of torture.

The state attorney general’s office confirmed this week that investigators found traces of the conflict, including bullet casings and burned vehicles. Still, they said in a statement, “it cannot be established that [the group of thirteen migrants] was involved in any way, since there is no evidence to determine it.”

The state attorney general’s office also would not confirm whether investigators have used DNA testing on any of the evidence from the site of the confrontation, nor whether cartels were involved in the confrontation.

The Mexican official, however, was firm in the assertion that the migrants are no longer alive, and has a message for the families: “There are no words I can say to fill the void you feel for your sons, for your husbands, for your fathers. But there’s a divine law that can give you comfort.”

Contreras of FICOSEC agreed. “I think the important thing is that what we’re looking for here is not to have another San Fernando,” he said, referring to the 2010 and 2011 massacres of migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas. Many say a lack of consequences for those killings has resulted in continued violence. “And to prevent us from having another San Fernando, we need to fight impunity.”

Martinez is not ready to conclude that her husband and his companions were killed. “My heart tells me he’s still alive, but I can’t blind myself to that possibility,” she said. “But if that’s the case, then where are they?”

Christmas Day will mark three months since the families last heard from their loved ones, and Martinez said each day is more difficult.

“Why shatter the dreams of so many families?” Martinez asked. “Because that’s what they were going for, a dream, and they destroy it in an instant.”

She said the search will not stop until the men are home. “We’re not looking for guilty parties,” she said. “We just want to know what happened, where they are. Where the person is that we’re waiting for at home.”

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'We're working very hard': US Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar visits El Paso, Juarez, addresses border visa backlog
Lauren Villagran
El Paso Times
December 17, 2021
https://news.yahoo.com/were-working-very-hard-us-215034696.html

Working through a backlog of border crossing card applications is a "priority" for the White House, according to U.S. Ambassador to Mexico Ken Salazar.

The U.S. Consulate in Juárez, one of the State Department's nine consulates in Mexico, currently lists a wait time of 701 days for non-immigrant visas, which include the B1/B2 tourist visa available to Mexican nationals that is known as a "border crossing card."

The coveted cards allow tens of thousands of Mexico residents in the Borderland to crisscross to El Paso and southern New Mexico to shop at stores, visit family and friends or travel for tourism. For those unable to renew their border-crossing visas — a staple of life for those able to qualify and afford one — half of the binational community is cut off to them.

"The pandemic really created huge issues for everybody, including our consulate's ability to process visas," Salazar said in a Friday news conference at the Ysleta-Zaragoza International Bridge. "We have a huge backlog, and that's what's creating the wait time. We're working very hard on it. It's a priority of Secretary of State (Anthony) Blinken and the White House and we will do as much as we can to catch up."

Salazar met with border security, business and education leaders in El Paso and Juárez on Friday as part of a tour of border communities for U.S. government's top diplomat in Mexico.

Salazar was sworn in as U.S. ambassador to Mexico in August 2021.

In Juárez, a visa application or renewal process that used to take a few weeks pre-pandemic has stretched to nearly two years. U.S. consulates in Mexico reduced staffing hours during the COVID-19 pandemic, while many border crossing card applicants put off renewing or applying for visas while restrictions on non-essential travel remained in place for 20 months.

U.S. consulates were hit with thousands of applications after the U.S. lifted the border restrictions for vaccinated foreign nationals in El Paso on Nov. 7.

"We're aware of the problem and we're doing our very best to bring the wait time down, not only for temporary visas — that includes people who want to travel for tourism, people who want to travel for temporary work, people who want to travel as students," said U.S. Consul General in Juárez Eric Cohan.

"We've had some good success in immigrant visas," Cohan said. "Here in Juárez is the only place to get an immigrant visa, and we're working very hard to do both, to bring down the wait time for temporary visas and for permanent resident visas."

In his visit to El Paso, Salazar toured border installations including the Ysleta port of entry and met with U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials to discuss border

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security, according to a spokeswoman for the U.S. Consulate in Juárez .

He met with University of Texas at El Paso President Heather Wilson to discuss student exchanges with Mexico, as well as technology and innovation, and he visited with U.S. business leaders on facilitating cross-border trade.

"We're here because our goal for the United States is to create a modern, efficient, secure border," Salazar said. "That means that we now, coming out of the pandemic, need to make sure that this and other ports of entry are working well for the United States and our partners in Mexico."

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'The vote suppressors won 2021': Federal inaction leaves Texas advocates dismayed
Erica Grieder
Houston Chronicle
December 18, 2021
https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/columnists/grieder/article/The-vote-suppressors-won-2021-Federal-16711366.php

This year's fight for voting rights has ended with a whimper, rather than a bang.

The U.S. Senate recessed Friday for the winter holidays without having passed the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act or any other major legislation related to voting rights.

The bill would have, among other things, restored a version of the "preclearance" protections established by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, under which states with a history of discrimination had to get federal approval before making changes to voting procedures. That section of the act was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013's Shelby County v. Holder ruling.

The (supposedly hardworking) men and women of the upper chamber also whiffed on the chance to pass the Build Back Better bill, among other things. And, in fairness, they've had a long year, which began with a deadly insurrection at their workplace Jan. 6.

But according to advocates, the U.S. Capitol insurrection — perpetrated by Americans whipped into a frenzy by defeated President Donald Trump and others peddling the "Big Lie" that the election was stolen from Trump — is precisely the kind of horror that illustrates the need for federal voting protections. A fair point.

"There is a spirit of fair play that Democratic leadership is relying on that our opponents are not," said Lee Merritt, a civil rights attorney who is one of several Democrats vying to challenge embattled Texas Attorney Gen. Ken Paxton, a Republican, next year. "I know they take it seriously, I know they believe it's urgent, but they're not willing to do whatever it takes, the way our opponents are."

"It's really enraging, and disappointing, and frightening, all at once," James Slattery, a senior staff attorney at the Texas Civil Rights Project, said Friday. "Voting rights advocates here in Texas and in other states have been working night and day, literally, and sacrificing so much, to just hold the line — and at the end of this year, Congress can't even manage to pass preclearance or any other federal voting rights legislation?"

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In Texas, for example, Democratic members of the Legislature broke quorum twice, decamping to Washington, D.C., for over a month in the second case, in a bid to stall passage of a GOP-led “election integrity” package — and to pressure President Joe Biden and the Democrat-led Congress, to act. The Legislature ultimately passed a package of “reforms” that targeted innovations such as drive-thru and 24-hour voting, placed limits on early voting hours and enacted new requirements for voting by mail.

Some responsibility for the ensuing disappointment is borne by U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. Both are moderate Democrats who support the Senate’s current 60-vote threshold for most measures and apparently don’t see a need to make an exception for voting rights legislation, as some of their colleagues have urged. The Senate is split 50-50 between Democrats and Republicans, with Democrats holding a narrow majority only because of Vice President Kamala Harris’ tie-breaking vote.

But there’s plenty of blame to go around. Biden, for example, declared voting rights a priority while campaigning in 2020; just this week, he called it “the single biggest issue” facing the country, at least on the domestic policy front. And yet he hasn’t thrown the weight of his presidency behind the cause so far.

Blue-state Democrats, with their access to online voter registration, may not fully appreciate what’s at stake in states such as Texas, Georgia and Arizona, among others. In October, the nonprofit Brennan Center for Justice called 2021 an “unprecedented” year for voting legislation, noting that 19 states had enacted 33 laws “that will make it harder for Americans to vote.”

Meanwhile, Republicans in states such as Texas are continuing to press false claims about the 2020 election, which Trump lost badly, as well as hyperbolic claims about voter fraud, which is quite rare.

Between October 2020 and September 2021, my colleague Taylor Goldenstein reports, the election integrity unit of Paxton’s office devoted more than 20,000 hours and $2.2 million of taxpayer money to investigating reports of voter fraud. It closed a whopping three cases. That’s three cases, in a state with more than 17 million registered voters.

Paxton has also thrown the power of his office behind efforts to prosecute Texans such as Crystal Mason, a Black mother and grandmother from Tarrant County who cast a provisional ballot in 2016 without realizing she was ineligible to vote.

“It’s clear now that in order to provide support for the baseless lie that Trump won the election, Ken Paxton is using the power of his office to target, primarily, Black and brown voters,” Merritt said. “That is going to have a chilling effect.”

With that said, he continued, it’s worth noting that Paxton has also drawn several Republican primary opponents, including Land Commissioner George P. Bush and longtime Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzmán. And this week, Paxton was dealt a blow by his fellow conservatives: the all-Republican Court of Criminal Appeals on Wednesday issued an 8-1 opinion striking down a state law that gives the attorney general the power to unilaterally prosecute voter fraud and other election-related offenses.

“Now, thanks to the Texas Criminal Court of Appeals, Soros-funded district attorneys will have sole power to decide whether election fraud has occurred in Texas,” Paxton tweeted, somehow managing to blame 91-year-old billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros, a favorite target of conservatives.

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Merritt, however, said he was cheered by the news.

“I think that is a sign of the times — that even within his own party, this is embarrassing,” the Dallas-based Democrat said.

The Texas Civil Rights Project’s Slattery, for his part, reckons that this year’s attacks on voting rights are particularly ominous because they may be intended to lay the groundwork for efforts to undermine, or overthrow, future elections. The entirely unnecessary “audits” underway in states such as Texas, for example, are nominally focused on the 2020 election but also serve to normalize such audits, in the eyes of the electorate.

“The vote suppressors won 2021,” Slattery concluded gloomily.

That will make it easier for them to win, fairly or not, in 2022 and beyond.

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The time for Wolff to appoint an interim county commissioner is now, not later
Robert Rivard
San Antonio Report
December 19, 2021
https://sanantonioreport.org/nelson-wolff-trish-deberry-bexar-county-precinct-3/

Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff has built a 50-year record of public service thanks in no small part to his keen political instincts and singular ability to shepherd big projects from vision to completion.

No one, however, is infallible. Wolff and the Bexar County citizens he represents would be better served if he would reconsider his decision to “hold over” Precinct 3 Commissioner Trish BeBerry, now a Republican candidate for county judge, in office through February.

State law requires DeBerry to resign from commissioners court to run for another county office. Wolff has 60 days to name a replacement, but the time to replace DeBerry’s interim successor is now, while voters decide in November who should serve out the remainder of her four-year term. There is no overriding reason to justify keeping an actively campaigning candidate in office.

Leaving DeBerry in office, despite the law, creates the perception, if not the reality, that Wolff is putting his thumb on the scales and giving DeBerry greater weight in what promises to be a competitive and hard-fought race as voters prepare to select a new county judge on Nov. 6.

The individual Wolff appoints will serve as an interim county commissioner until the winner of the Nov. 6 race for the Precinct 3 seat is sworn into office in January 2023. In the latest twist to this political drama, the Texas secretary of state’s office issued a new ruling Friday clearing the way for the county chairs of the Republican and Democratic parties to hand-pick candidates for the November ballot. A Wednesday announcement inviting candidates to file by Monday for the March 1 primary is now off the table.

The primary campaigns for the county judge seat Wolff will vacate at the end of his fifth term are already underway. DeBerry is likely to have an easy time leading up to the Republican primary on March 1. Why not enjoy two more months in office while

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worrying little about her underfunded, largely unknown opponent, Nate Buchanan, who ran unsuccessfully for Precinct 3 Constable in 2016 and 2020?

There are three credible candidates in the Democratic primary. Those candidates deserve to be on an equal footing with DeBerry. That's why state law forces county-level officeholders seeking higher office to resign. A 2010 opinion issued by then-Attorney General Greg Abbott clearly states that an official candidate announcement by a county commissioner triggers an immediate resignation.

DeBerry has been in office for a scant 11 months, which makes her bid for the county judge seat now seem premature and even grasping. The immediate political cost to her should be losing the right to represent the voters who put her in office.

The "resign to run" law does not apply to state officeholders, so Democratic state Rep. Ina Minjarez is allowed to continue to serve in the Texas House, which is not in session. Prior to his candidacy, Judge Peter Sakai ended his long and distinguished career as a state district court judge and pioneer in the realm of protecting vulnerable children and families. Ivalis Meza Gonzalez, who is seeking elected office for the first time, stepped down as Mayor Ron Nirenberg's chief of staff after making her announcement to run.

DeBerry should make the moment easier for Wolff by announcing she has reconsidered and will vacate her office immediately.

Wolff's argument that keeping DeBerry on the court for an extended period is necessary to see through key initiatives rings hollow. The vetting process to appoint a caretaker for the vacant Precinct 3 seat can be handled in a way that assures the chosen individual understands his or her obligation to respect projects already underway or nearing completion.

The interim commissioner does not have to rubber-stamp every agenda item, but sound judgment should be a prerequisite for the appointment. Wolff would be wise to assemble a distinguished panel to vet the qualified candidates and not exercise his unilateral power to hand-pick DeBerry's successor.

For voters to make an informed decision, there is one other important step DeBerry can take. She should provide the media and the public with a full list of her public relations and marketing agency's clients, and disclose any contracts they have with Bexar County. She should document her assertion that she no longer has a controlling interest in the agency or its management.

One effective way for candidates to demonstrate complete transparency with voters is to release recent income tax returns. There might not be a precedent for such a measure locally, but Wolff leaves this important administrative and leadership position after 20 years. Bexar County has grown enormously in that time, and with that growth has come a significant increase in tax collections and the power of county judge.

The best start to the campaign to replace Wolff would be a Deberry resignation now and the appointment of a credible interim commissioner, preferably a Republican, to represent the people and interests of Precinct 3 until the November special election leads to the seating of a new county commissioner on the first day of 2023.

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Republican redistricting maps disenfranchise voters of color
Eric Holder

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Philadelphia Inquirer
December 17, 2021
https://www.inquirer.com/opinion/commentary/redistricting-pennsylvania-state-maps-voters-republican-20211217.html&outputType=app-web-view

Our country is getting more diverse and less rural. This is a fact confirmed by the 2020 Census data which serves as a roadmap for redistricting in every state. If congressional and state legislative maps follow the data we see in the Census, we should see more districts that reflect both the expanding urban population and the growing population of people of color across the country.

But so far in states where Republicans are in charge of redistricting, they are drawing maps that ignore the data altogether.

Republicans have gone out of their way to draw maps that empower rural, predominantly white regions. They do so at the cost of disenfranchising voters in the diverse urban and suburban areas that have seen an increase in population. Republicans have deployed several tactics, but the most egregious are those that purposefully diminish the voting power of the communities of color: “packing” and “cracking.”

Both tactics are anti-democratic, and diminish the voting power of communities of color either by reducing the number of representatives they’re able to elect or diluting their influence altogether. For example, in Ohio, Republicans packed Black and Latino communities in Cuyahoga County, which includes Cleveland, into just one district, purposefully reducing representation of these communities in Congress. Meanwhile, in the same county, Republicans also split apart Asian American and Pacific Islander communities into separate districts, diminishing their voting power. In Texas, despite the fact that 95% of the population growth over the last decade has come from communities of color, Gov. Greg Abbott and the Republican legislature put in place maps that will actually increase the number of majority-white districts and reduce the number of competitive districts in Texas to just one. They purposefully drew these maps to ensure that rural, white areas electorally overpower the vote of more diverse communities.

There is no legitimate justification for these actions. It’s evident that Republicans have no qualms about bending or breaking the rules for their own gain and these maps show that. Their actions speak loudly to their unwillingness to implement fair redistricting processes and create fair maps that accurately represent voters, and they must be stopped — in the courts and in the states. Given what we have seen elsewhere in the country, it is essential for Pennsylvanians to pay attention as the map-drawing process reaches the critical juncture of considering draft maps.

Similar to the rest of the country, Pennsylvania is an increasingly diverse state. According to Census data, communities of color have driven the state’s population growth over the past decade. While the number of Pennsylvanians who identify as white dropped by more than 541,000, the number of Pennsylvanians who identify as Black, Asian, Hispanic, or Latino increased by more than 532,000. That growth did not just occur in and around urban centers like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh — it also occurred in places like Lancaster County, where minority population growth accounted for more than 71 percent of the county’s overall population growth.

Pennsylvania is losing a seat in Congress because of slow population growth, particularly in the central, northern, and western regions. To achieve fairness, the congressional map should eliminate the 15th congressional district in western Pennsylvania, reflecting the movement of voters and statewide population changes.

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While the total number of state legislative districts will not change, the Census data indicates that three state House districts should move from western to eastern Pennsylvania to reflect the population shift.

An increasingly diverse state should have maps that accurately reflect that trend with congressional and state legislative districts drawn in a manner to empower growing and diverse populations. Yet, Republicans in the state House introduced a draft congressional map that would do the opposite by “cracking” and “packing” communities of color to make Republican seats safer and put as many Democrats as possible into as few seats as possible. That is inconsistent with the Census data and is dangerously anti-democracy.

Pennsylvania’s Legislative Reapportionment Commission has a chance to show Pennsylvanians that redistricting can provide appropriate representation to urban neighborhoods and communities of color at the legislative level. Commission Chair Mark Nordenberg has shown a commitment to fairness and has created a direct line of communication between citizens and the commissioners, which is continuing with the 30-day public comment period. If he and the commission listen to all of the public input and allow for a fair process, the final legislative maps they produce will provide appropriate representation to urban and increasingly diverse communities in places like Lancaster, Reading, and Allentown, without “cracking” or unnecessarily “packing” communities of color. No matter who draws the maps, following the best available data and considering public input are each required to lead to a fair outcome. Citizens can and should play a role in a process that reflects the best of Pennsylvania democracy and not the political desires of a party afraid of a changing electorate.

Eric H. Holder, Jr., is the 82nd Attorney General of the United States and chairman of the National Democratic Redistricting Committee.

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From:	Sam Taylor
Subject:	SOS Morning News Clips 12/23/21
Date:	Thursday, December 23, 2021 7:46:43 AM
Attachments:	image001.png
Sensitivity:	Personal

Texas Secretary of State
Morning News Clips
December 23, 2021

Harris County prevails in court challenge over Democratic 'gerrymandering,'
Houston Public Media, December 22, 2021

Additional details released on purchase of 100 new voting machines,
Brownwood Bulletin, December 22, 2021

Brown County Commissioners to replace existing voting machines with new hybrid versions, *KTXS-TV*, December 22, 2021

Biden says he supports filibuster carve-out for voting rights, *CNN*, December 23, 2021

US delays intelligence center targeting foreign influence, *Associated Press*, December 23, 2021

Mexico says U.S. approves Deer Park refinery deal, sees completion early 2022, *Reuters*, December 22, 2021

Juarez mayor explains why 1,000 National Guard troops left the city in the middle of a drug war, *Border Report*, December 22, 2021

Column: Getting Ahead, *Rio Grande Guardian*, December 22, 2021

A By the Numbers Look at Voter Suppression in 2021, *Texas Signal*, December 22, 2021

Harris County prevails in court challenge over Democratic 'gerrymandering'
Andrew Schneider
Houston Public Media
December 22, 2021
https://www.houstonpublicmedia.org/articles/news/politics/2021/12/22/416146/harris-county-prevails-in-court-challenge-to-redistricting-plan/

A Harris County Judge on Wednesday tossed a lawsuit from Republican commissioners and voters over new county maps that favor Democrats.

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Judge Dedra Davis ruled in favor of Harris County, finding that Republican commissioners Jack Cagle and Tom Ramsey and three voters did not have jurisdiction to sue.

The Republicans' attorney, Andy Taylor, indicated that he planned to appeal the ruling.

Cagle, Ramsey and the three voters filed the lawsuit against Democratic County Judge Lina Hidalgo and against Harris County last month. The suit alleged that the redistricting map proposed by Democratic Commissioner Rodney Ellis, known as the Ellis 3 plan, amounts to an unconstitutional gerrymander that would deprive more than 1.1 million voters of their right to vote.

Texas election law staggers county precinct elections every two years. All county commissioners serve four-year terms, but commissioners in even-numbered precincts and those in odd-numbered precincts take place at two-year intervals.

The next election for even-numbered precincts is in 2022. The lawsuit alleges that the Ellis 3 plan shifts more than 1.1 million voters from even-numbered precincts to odd-numbered precincts, depriving them of their right to vote until 2024.

"Plaintiffs submit that there is a very simple explanation for why this occurred," the lawsuit reads. "Commissioner Ellis wanted to do whatever it would take to draw a new map that would create three...Democratic seats. Thus, the Ellis 3 Plan does just that."

Specifically, the suit charges, it strengthens Ellis' position in Precinct 1 and Democratic Commissioner Adrian Garcia's position in Precinct 2, and it renders Ramsey's Precinct 3 a more solidly Republican district at the expense of Cagle's Precinct 4.

Ellis himself has argued that the previous precinct maps ratified in 2010 were gerrymandered by Republicans, and his map seeks to correct that by reuniting communities of interest.

The Ellis 3 plan trades much of the territory now represented by Cagle in northern Harris County with territory now represented by Ramsey in the west. The new Precinct 4 is also majority-minority, with a combined non-Anglo population of more than 70%.

The likelihood is that Cagle's seat would flip to a Democrat in 2022, shifting the current 3-2 Democratic majority on the court to a 4-1 Democratic supermajority. That would enable Democrats, among other measures, to push through tax increases that Republicans can currently block by breaking quorum, as Cagle and then-Commissioner Steve Radack did in 2019, and which Cagle and Ramsey again threatened to do in 2021.

During the commissioners' debate over the Ellis 3 plan, Cagle said he viewed the map as Democrats' revenge for the 2019 quorum break.

"You're inclined to vote for the Ellis 3 because you view that vote as a referendum to the public, in essence on taxes," Cagle told Hidalgo. "You feel because of our disagreement on taxes that you need to move me into a precinct that I have not served, to let me face the public on that referendum of the tax issue."

Hidalgo acknowledged that the tax issue had influenced her decision, particularly because Cagle and Ramsey had recently threatened to break quorum again to block

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a Democrat-proposed tax cut, forcing a deeper tax cut as well as cuts to county services.

That threat was ultimately averted, when commissioners negotiated a slightly larger tax cut than Democrats initially wanted.

"I am concerned that your party's on a race to the bottom, to literally not be able to pay for life-saving services, when you're rejecting a tax cut so that you can defund the hospital district by $17 million in the middle of a pandemic," Hidalgo said. "I haven't forgotten that."

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Additional details released on purchase of 100 new voting machines
Brownwood Bulletin
December 22, 2021
https://www.brownwoodtx.com/story/news/2021/12/22/additional-details-released-purchase-100-new-voting-machines/8997883002/

Brown County Judge Paul Lilly's office issued the following press release about the county's purchase of new voting machines:

On December 20, 2021 Brown County Commissioners voted unanimously to replace the existing voting machines with new hybrid voting machines that combine use of electronic voting stations and paper ballots to further ensure the integrity of the voting process for Brown County voters and provide additional voting machines to reduce the voters waiting time.

With an expenditure of $647,611.00 voters will see 100 new voting machines along with the variety of companion equipment required. Funds for this project are coming from the 2020 Elect SEC grants, 2020 Elect Fund Matching State funds along with $14,597.70 Brown County matching funds.

Lilly said the new system will provide more security for voters over the previous equipment used in Brown County in that they feature a digital touch screen as well as a paper copy of the voter's selections that the voter can verify before submitting the ballot into a secure on-site ballot box. Lilly stated that the collection of paper ballots and triple data backup allows for easier election audit tracking. The machines will also offer more accessibility for voters, Lilly said, as they feature Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible controls and screen toggling features that make for an easier, faster voting experience. According to Larry Franks, Brown County Elections Administrator, Hart InterCivic Inc. is one of two voting equipment companies certified by the Texas Secretary of State's Office. The county chose Hart InterCivic Inc. due to Brown County’s familiarity with the company and their approval by the “Texas State Buy Board”. Hart InterCivic Inc. is an Austin-based company that designs and manufactures its voting machines in Texas.

"My commitment to Brown County voters is to provide an open, transparent and accountable voting process - moving to the new paper based, Hart InterCivic Verity Voting System, does just that by giving Brown County voters a more accessible, secure and verifiable ballot to improve the voting experience for all Brown County voters," Lilly said.

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Brown County Commissioners to replace existing voting machines with new

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hybrid versions
Sarah Burns
KTXS-TV
December 22, 2021
https://ktxs.com/news/local/brown-county-commissioners-to-replace-existing-voting-machines-with-new-hybrid-versions

ABILENE, Texas — Brown County Commissioners voted this past week to replace the existing voting machines with new hybrid ones that combine electronic voting stations with paper ballots to better ensure voting integrity, and reduce voter waiting times.

According to a press release, a total of 100 new voting machines will be added by an expenditure of $647,611.00 coming from the 2020 Elect SEC grants, 2020 Elect Fund Matching State funds along with $14,597.70 Brown County matching funds.

The new machines will provide higher security and feature a digital touch screen along with a paper copy of the voter's selections that the voter can verify before submitting their ballot, according to Judge Lilly. The collection of paper ballots and triple data backup will allow for audit tracking. In addition to this, the machines will feature Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible controls and screen toggling features to enhance the voting process.

"My commitment to Brown County voters is to provide an open, transparent and accountable voting process - moving to the new paper based, Hart InterCivic Verity Voting System, does just that by giving Brown County voters a more accessible, secure and verifiable ballot to improve the voting experience for all Brown County voters," Judge Lilly said in a statement.

Brown county chose Hart InterCivic Inc. due to its familiarity with the company and their approval by the “Texas State Buy Board”. Hart InterCivic Inc., which is an Austin-based company that designs and manufactures its voting machines in Texas.

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Biden says he supports filibuster carve-out for voting rights
Kyle Blaine
CNN
December 23, 2021
https://kvia.com/news/2021/12/23/biden-says-he-supports-filibuster-carve-out-for-voting-rights/

President Joe Biden says he supports making an exception to the Senate filibuster rules in order to pass voting rights legislation.

“If the only thing standing between getting voting rights legislation passed and not getting passed is the filibuster, I support making the exception of voting rights for the filibuster,” Biden told ABC News’ David Muir in an interview that aired Thursday morning.

It’s the most direct answer Biden has given on his position on the filibuster and voting rights.

CNN’s Anderson Cooper asked Biden at a CNN town hall in October, “When it comes to voting rights, just so I’m clear though, you would entertain the notion of doing away with the filibuster on that one issue, is that correct?”

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“And maybe more,” Biden responded.

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US delays intelligence center targeting foreign influence
Associated Press
December 23, 2021
https://spectrumlocalnews.com/tx/south-texas-el-paso/ap-top-news/2021/12/23/us-delays-intelligence-center-targeting-foreign-influence

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Russia was working to subvert U.S. elections and sow discord among Americans, Congress directed the creation of an intelligence center to lead efforts to stop interference by foreign adversaries. But two years later, that center still is not close to opening.

Experts and intelligence officials broadly agree the proposed Foreign Malign Influence Center is a good idea. The U.S. has lacked a cohesive strategy to fight influence operations, they say, with not enough coordination among national security agencies. Adversaries that tried to interfere in the last two presidential elections continue to bombard Americans with disinformation and conspiracy theories at a time of peril for democracy in the U.S. and around the world.

But the intelligence community and Congress remain divided over the center's mission, budget and size, according to current and former officials. While separate efforts to counter interference continue, a person identified this year as a potential director has since been assigned elsewhere and the center likely will not open anytime soon.

“It really is just giving a gift to Russia and China and others who clearly have their sights set not only on the midterm elections but on ongoing campaigns to destabilize American society,” said David Salvo, deputy director of the Alliance for Securing Democracy and a senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund.

The nation's top intelligence official had advocated for the center before taking office. Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines last year co-chaired a German Marshall Fund task force supporting it. In a statement, spokeswoman Nicole de Haay said the director's office "is focused on creating a center to facilitate and integrate the Intelligence Community’s efforts to address foreign malign influence.”

But some lawmakers are concerned about further expanding the mission of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. ODNI was originally envisioned as a small coordinating body to address the intelligence-sharing failures preceding the Sept. 11 attacks. It has several centers that critics say are well-meaning attempts to solve problems but end up causing unnecessary duplication.

Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Mark Warner said that while he supports the center, there were “legitimate questions about how large such an organization should be and even about where it would fit" with existing government efforts to fight foreign interference.

“We want to be sure that this center enhances those efforts rather than duplicating them or miring them in unnecessary bureaucracy,” the Virginia Democrat said in a statement. “I don’t have any real doubt that we will ultimately stand the center up in the relatively near future, but we need to be sure we get it right.”

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It's unclear who would lead the center. Separately, there is also a vacancy for a new election threats executive after the previous executive, Shelby Pierson, ended her term and returned to another intelligence post. Pierson had been in the spotlight last year after giving lawmakers a closed-door briefing on Russia's efforts to intervene in the 2020 election in favor of former President Donald Trump. That angered Trump, who berated the then-director of national intelligence and later replaced him. Trump has promoted falsehoods about elections and pushed Republicans to follow his lead.

Experts on democracy have long warned that what the government refers to as “malign influence” is a national security threat. Social media has helped make disinformation a cheap and powerful tactic for adversaries who can push false or altered stories, videos and images, and amplify falsehoods already circulating among Americans to promote their own interests and create chaos.

U.S. and other Western authorities have accused Russia of spreading disinformation about the coronavirus and vaccines, stealing data from local and state election servers, and pushing false stories intended to exploit divisions over race and civil rights. Intelligence agencies have found that Russia used influence operations to interfere with the 2016 presidential election in favor of Trump's campaign and conducted operations in Trump's favor in 2020.

The U.S. assessed China ultimately did not interfere in the 2020 election, but Beijing has been accused of promoting false theories about the COVID-19 pandemic and trying to sway businesses and all levels of government. Iran was accused of sponsoring emails intended to intimidate Democratic-leaning voters into supporting Trump.

Experts say the new center can warn Americans about interference and produce better information for policymakers. While the FBI, the National Security Agency and several other government agencies have long worked on foreign interference, “we are not organized in a way where we are building a coherent threat picture,” said Jessica Brandt, an expert on foreign interference and disinformation at the Brookings Institution.

But there are risks in the intelligence community ramping up its monitoring of what Americans see and read. The FBI and NSA have been accused of unlawfully spying on Americans. That history contributes to many Americans' distrust of the intelligence community, as do Trump's attacks on intelligence professionals and what he has derided as the “deep state.”

Opponents note the U.S. also has a history of covert interference in other countries and has helped overthrow governments seen as anti-American. A column published by the Kremlin-backed RT.com alleged the proposed center “is just official cover for American intelligence interference in domestic politics.”

The intelligence community also risks being seen as political or infringing on First Amendment rights if it takes the same untruths spread by Americans and labels them as foreign interference when they're spread by an adversary.

The center “is going to have to figure out this enormous challenge to convey threats to American elections, American democracy, at a time when there seem to be two completely different realities,” said Salvo of the German Marshall Fund.

Congress authorized the center in late 2019 and directed ODNI to create it. Several people who worked in intelligence matters at that time, speaking on condition of anonymity to describe confidential discussions, say they didn't know of any effort by

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the Trump White House to stop the center. Instead, leaders within ODNI disagreed on how to structure the new center or whether it should be a “virtual center" without an office.

According to one of the people, William Evanina, the former chief of ODNI's counterintelligence center, offered to take the malign influence center under his authority, but the office ultimately did not choose that option. Evanina declined to comment.

After President Joe Biden took office, ODNI presented a plan for a small center with a few dozen staff members to the intelligence and appropriations committees in the House and Senate. But even as Congress required the center's creation, key lawmakers from both parties have expressed concerns about the plan.

A proposal to fund the center this summer failed and it is unlikely to be completed while the government is operating with temporary funding. The center may now be included if a full spending plan is approved in early 2022.

Suzanne Spaulding, an election security expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, called for the U.S. government to act quickly.

“Time is not on our side,” Spaulding said. “Disinformation is a national security threat and should be treated with the urgency that a national security threat engenders.”

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Mexico says U.S. approves Deer Park refinery deal, sees completion early 2022
Reuters
December 22, 2021
https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/mexico-says-us-government-approves-deer-park-refinery-deal-2021-12-22/

MEXICO CITY, Dec 22 (Reuters) - The U.S. government has authorized the purchase by Petroleos Mexicanos (Pemex) of Royal Dutch Shell's (RDSa.L) controlling interest in a Texas oil refinery in a transaction that should conclude early next year, Mexico's government said Wednesday.

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador told a regular news conference that the U.S. government had on Tuesday approved the purchase of the Deer Park refinery stake by state-run Pemex, calling it "very good news."

"The idea is to finalize the purchase during the first weeks of 2022," Pemex Chief Executive Officer Octavio Romero said, speaking alongside Lopez Obrador.

At the same conference, Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard displayed a letter showing that the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States (CFIUS) had concluded there were no unresolved national security concerns regarding the deal.

Last week, Shell said the sale of its Deer Park stake to Pemex was pending CFIUS approval.

Lopez Obrador, who backed the purchase as part of a plan to make Mexico self-sufficient in gasoline, thanked U.S. President Joe Biden for his support during the authorization process.

Shell in May disclosed an agreement to sell its 50% interest in the 302,800 barrels-

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per-day (bpd) Deer Park refinery outside Houston to its partner Pemex for some $596 million.

CEO Romero told the news conference that the terms of the deal had not changed since May, and that Mexico would pay off the existing debt of both Shell and Pemex in the refinery, which he said amounted to around $1.2 billion in total.

Shell confirmed the CFIUS approval in a message to Deer Park refinery employees.

"In the coming days, we will work on finalizing the closing date for the deal," the oil refinery's general manager, Guy Hackwell, told workers.

A Shell spokesperson was not immediately available to comment.

Once CFIUS completes its investigation, the White House has up to 15 days to approve or reject the recommendation.

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Juarez mayor explains why 1,000 National Guard troops left the city in the middle of a drug war
Julian Resendiz
Border Report
December 22, 2021
https://www.borderreport.com/hot-topics/border-crime/juarez-mayor-explains-why-1000-national-guard-troops-left-the-city-in-the-middle-of-a-drug-war/

EL PASO, Texas (Border Report) – Mexico City has recalled nearly 1,000 National Guardsmen from Juarez, but the mayor of that border city says replacements will be sent.

“We are told more will come. I imagine (the recall) has to do with the holidays, but we will be paying attention because (Juarez) needs the support of the (federal and state) governments,” Mayor Cruz Perez Cuellar said.

Mexican news reports set off alarms earlier this week in reporting the departure of most National Guard troops from Juarez, a city where drug-related murders remain rampant. The nonprofit Citizens Observatory reported 1,377 homicides for Juarez so far in 2021. Local authorities say 90 percent of the murders are drug-related.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador shored up National Guard presence in Juarez at the request of former Chihuahua Gov. Javier Corral. The president in August inaugurated new National Guard barracks and said more than 2,000 troops would remain in the city to help local authorities quell crime.

As of last Sunday, only 300 soldiers were still in the city, El Diario reported.

Perez Cuellar characterized the move as “staff rotation,” meaning the Army periodically reassigns troops to different regions of Mexico.

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Getting Ahead
M. Ray Perryman
Rio Grande Guardian
December 22, 2021

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https://riograndeguardian.com/perryman-getting-ahead/

The latest jobs report for Texas is replete with good news. November data shows strength across the economy and a new record for total state employment. In less than two years, Texas has completely overcome the devastating loss of about 1.5 million jobs that occurred in early 2020.

For November, Texas added 75,100 jobs, the eighteenth gain in the last 19 months, and the unemployment rate has dropped to 5.2%. There are now almost 13.0 million nonagricultural jobs in the state. Topping pre-pandemic employment levels this quickly is quite impressive.

One noteworthy aspect of the increase is that it represents nearly 36% of the national gain for the month (210,000 net new jobs). Other significant increases occurred in Florida (up 51,100) and California (45,700).

It is also notable that every major industry group expanded during the month. In the past, we've seen periods where gains in some segments of the economy were offset by drops in others. The COVID-19 uncertainty and measures required to slow the spread caused extreme volatility in sectors such as travel, retail, and energy. There were times when the state added jobs in retail, while core groups such as manufacturing or construction retrenched. In November, expansion emerged across the board.

Additionally, this very positive report comes just as the energy sector is beginning to ramp up. Employment in mining and logging (which is virtually all oil- and gas-related in Texas) was up 3,700 for the month. When you consider all of the linkages across the state, energy accounts for 13-14% of business activity in normal times. As recovery continues with additional rigs added every week (275 as of December 17), the positive patterns in the industry should lead to additional gains across a broad spectrum of businesses and communities.

There are still risks to reckon with, both short-term and long-term. A major surge in serious COVID-19 cases could certainly slow progress (a particular vulnerability as the spread of the omicron variant accelerates), and the lingering supply chain issues will dampen growth in specific industries at times. Long-term Texas challenges include ensuring an adequate workforce for the future through enhancing educational quality and access, providing adequate infrastructure, and assuring inclusiveness.

On balance, however, the state is well positioned to be among the stellar performers. The Texas economy is diverse, with a strong and varied base of production categories as well as ongoing emergence in advanced manufacturing and other technology sectors. The Lone Star State also has a favorable cost structure and premier economic development programs.

There's indeed a lot to like in the most recent jobs report. As we enter the final weeks of the year, the Texas economy is hitting on all cylinders. Stay safe!

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A By the Numbers Look at Voter Suppression in 2021
Fernando Ramirez
Texas Signal
December 22, 2021
https://texassignal.com/a-by-the-numbers-look-at-voter-suppression-in-2021/

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

Voting rights experts at the nonprofit The Brennan Center for Justice recently released their roundup of restrictive voting laws passed in 2021.

At least 19 states passed 34 bills into law restricting voting access, including Texas' Senate Bill 1, which banned drive-thru and 24-hour voting, made it more difficult for disabeled Texans to vote, and prohibited election officials from sending out unsolicited mail ballot applications.

At least 49 states saw legislatures introduce some sort of legislation to restrict voting access.

More than a third of all restrictive voting laws enacted since 2011 were passed this year, and they were the most restrictive laws in a decade according to The Brennan Center for Justice.

Texas was also among six states in 2021 to enact politically motivated reviews or audits of the 2020 presidential election.

The Lone Star State continues to conduct an audit of the results, and earlier this year, the Republican-controlled state legislature attempted to pass a provision in their sweeping voter suppression bill that would have made it easier for judges to overturn elections.

Texas also continues to face two federal lawsuits for violating the Voting Rights Act with SB 1 and the state's new district lines. Other civil rights groups and organizations have also filed litigation, bringing the total amount of lawsuits faced by the state to at least 20.

"The department's career voting law experts have accessed Texas' new redistricting rights plans, and determined that they include districts that violate the Voting Rights Act," U.S. Attorney General Merrick B. Garland said in December when announcing the department's second lawsuit against Texas.

On Monday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer told Democratic colleagues the Senate would consider federal voting rights legislation in early January.

The legislation, the Freedom to Vote Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, has been stalled in the upper chamber by Republicans who have blocked their advancement with the 60-vote filibuster rule, which at least two Democratic Senators, Joe Manchin and Kyrsten Sinema, support keeping in place.

"If Senate Republicans continue to abuse the filibuster and prevent the body from considering this bill, the Senate will then consider changes to any rules which prevent us from debating and reaching final conclusion on important legislation," Schumer said.

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AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: tana hensley
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: TX Full Forensic Audit
Date: Monday, November 22, 2021 2:11:02 PM

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Hello,

Where would one go to apply to volunteer in the audit?

Thank you,

Tana Hensley
Concerned Texan

Thank you for requesting this audit. I hope its an honest, extensive, and thorough audit. Arizona's audit was incomplete do after all the hard work and time spent on that audit, 'America's Audit' and still no one held the Elections Committee in contempt for not turning over the data from the machines and other router reports, then it was only another failure and the only reason for the failure is because no one is holding anyone accountable and clearly when you're not following a subpoena you should be held in contempt and the machines should have been confiscated. So no one really wanted to find out the truth in the AZ Audit. They did it for show and only people who are paying attention bc we are the ones that know there's a reason why the democrats won't turn over the equipment and even erased data that is illegal to do, they are hiding something.

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Sam Taylor
To: Keith Ingram
Date: Thursday, December 30, 2021 12:33:42 PM

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let me know if/when you hear back from Scarpello or any of his staff on their partial manual count

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Lynn Q
To: Elections Internet
Subject: Volunteer for Tarrant County Audit
Date: Monday, November 22, 2021 12:50:30 PM

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Good afternoon,

I am reaching out again to offer my time to the forensic audit that will be conducted in Tarrant County.
Please let me know how I can help. I can be reached best be email: Lynn76021@yahoo.com

GOD bless Texas and the United States of America.
Lynn Quincey

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: Robert Battaile
To: Sam Taylor
Subject: What a waste of time
Date: Monday, November 22, 2021 12:06:06 PM

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Can you really not think of anything better to do than a "forensic audit."
What a waste of time, money and deception.

Do the Republicans have ANYTHING POSITIVE to offer?

Robert Battaile,
Travis County Voter

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT