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Texas Secretary of State

Morning News Clips

March 14, 2022

[At least 18,000 Texas mail-in votes were rejected in the first election under new GOP voting rules](#), *Texas Tribune*, March 11, 2022

[Votes of over 18,000 urban Texans were tossed because of new elections law](#), *Houston Chronicle*, March 11, 2022

[Local GOP turmoil comes to a head in election violation lawsuit against party chair](#), *Denton Record-Chronicle*, March 11, 2022

[Disqualified Mission candidate allowed to run as write-in](#), *McAllen Monitor*, March 12, 2022

[The election snafus that lead to a resignation in Harris County](#), *Texas Standard*, March 11, 2022

[Nearly 1 in 5 mail-in ballots in Houston area were rejected because of Texas voting law, election officials say](#), *CNN*, March 11, 2022

[Damage control: Hidalgo Co. Democratic Party tries to mitigate primary hiccups for runoff](#), *McAllen Monitor*, March 13, 2022

[On-campus voting is big incentive, students say](#), *The Daily Cougar*, March 11, 2022

[At SXSW, Texas Democrats who broke quorum say their goal was 'bigger than Texas.'](#) *Austin American-Statesman*, March 12, 2022

[Honest Elections Project official: 'No evidence' of voter suppression in Texas primary](#), *Lone Star Standard*, March 11, 2022

[Mike Lindell seeks access to secret voting machine report](#), *Washington Examiner*, March 11, 2022

[Some in GOP want ballots to be counted by hand, not machines](#), *Associated Press*, March 13, 2022

[UPDATED: Study: South Texas land ports can benefit from gridlocked West Coast sea ports](#), *Rio Grande Guardian*, March 13, 2022

[Federal spending bill includes money for New Mexico border crossings](#), *Border Report*, March 11, 2022

[Sixty-five businesses sign ad in newspaper calling on Texas governor to abandon anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives](#), *CNN*, March 13, 2022

[One Elon Musk Tweet Supercharged a Texas Region's Transformation](#), *Bloomberg*, March 11, 2022

[Guest commentary: Voting issues will not deter us from making a difference](#), *Galveston County Daily News*, March 11, 2022

[Opinion: Why are pickups so expensive? Blame the Chicken Tax](#), *Dallas Morning News*, March 13, 2022

[Trump falsely claims his election was stolen — but what happens if one is?](#), *The Hill*, March 12, 2022

[Seven Steps to Destroy a Democracy](#), *New York Times*, March 13, 2022

[Editorial: 27,000 rejected ballots is unacceptable](#), *Dallas Morning News*, March 13, 2022

At least 18,000 Texas mail-in votes were rejected in the first election under new GOP voting rules

Alexa Ura and Mandi Cai

Texas Tribune

March 11, 2022

<https://www.texastribune.org/2022/03/11/texas-mail-in-voting-lawsuit/>

Thousands of Texans who attempted to vote by mail in the March primary were disenfranchised in the state's first election conducted under a new Republican voting law. The state's largest counties saw a significant spike in the rates of rejected mail-in ballots, most because they did not meet the new, stricter ID requirements.

Local ballot review boards met this week to finalize mail-in ballot rejections, throwing out 18,742 mail-in ballots in just 16 of the state's 20 counties with the most registered voters. That includes Harris County, the state's largest county, where 6,919 ballots were scrapped — all but 31 of them because of the new ID requirements. The final statewide count for rejected ballots is still unknown; counties are still reporting numbers to the Texas secretary of state's office.

The rates of rejections range from 6% to nearly 22% in Bexar County, where almost 4,000 of the more than 18,000 people who returned mail-in ballots saw their votes discarded. In most cases, ballots were rejected for failing to comply with tighter voting rules enacted by Republicans last year that require voters to provide their driver's license number or a partial Social Security number to vote by mail, according to rejection data collected by The Texas Tribune. A few counties' rejection rates also included ballots that arrived past the voting deadline, but problems with the new ID requirements were the overwhelming cause for not accepting votes.

The impact of the ID requirements was particularly pronounced in several larger counties, including Harris and Bexar. Votes lost to the ID rules accounted for 99.6% of rejections in Harris County, which reported an overall rejection rate of roughly 19% among ballots that were received in time. By contrast, the county's rejection rate in the 2018 primary was .3%.

In Dallas County, ID issues were also to blame for nearly all of the lost votes reported, accounting for 682 of the 694 ballots that were rejected. Most ballots that were rejected because of the ID requirements were missing an ID number altogether. The county had an overall rejection rate of 6.5%

In Hays County, a suburban county south of Austin, all but one of the 208 rejected ballots were lost to ID issues. The county's total rejection rate was 8.2%.

In Hidalgo County, just five of the 526 mail-in ballots that were rejected were scrapped because they arrived late. Most were rejected because of the ID requirements, officials said. The county had an overall rejection rate of 19.4%.

In Williamson County, roughly 73% of the 521 rejected ballots were lost to ID issues. The second main reason for rejection was late returns. Overall, 11.6% of ballots were rejected in the county.

"The rate of rejections is unprecedented in our county and, from what I'm hearing from my colleagues, in other counties as well," said Chris Davis, the elections administrator for Williamson County.

The rejection rates easily outstrip those seen in previous elections. The U.S. Election Assistance Commission found less than 2% of mail-in ballots were rejected statewide in the 2018 midterm election. The statewide rejection rate in the 2020 presidential election was less than 1%. In that higher-turnout election, the commission found 8,304 ballots were tossed.

Texas' strict eligibility criteria for voting by mail means the thousands of tossed votes most likely belonged to people 65 and older and people with disabilities. The requirements were championed by Republicans as part of a package of voting changes and restrictions, contained in legislation known as Senate Bill 1, which they argued was meant to enhance the security of the state's elections — despite no evidence of widespread irregularities.

"Make no mistake: The rate of rejection of mail ballots in the primary is catastrophic and undemocratic," said James Slattery, a senior staff attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project. "This is a direct result of the new ID number requirement in SB 1. Those who chose to pass this law are directly responsible for disenfranchising tens of thousands Texas voters."

Slattery was among various voting rights advocates who warned state lawmakers of the potential fallout of the new ID requirements. The rejection numbers in the new law's first test make it vital for the Legislature to "recognize the grievous harm that it inflicted on voters" and repeal the requirements, Slattery said.

Texas Republican leaders who championed the law, including its author, state Sen. Bryan Hughes, and Gov. Greg Abbott, have not responded to requests for comment about the ballot rejection issues. Hughes often said the legislation would make it easier to vote and harder to cheat.

For months, the possibility that a crush of Texans' votes would be lost under the new rules loomed over the March primary election — the first election since the voting law went into effect — even though primaries typically see fairly low turnout. Just 17.5% of registered voters participated, according to preliminary turnout data.

The earliest signs of trouble came in January when counties reported an alarming increase in the number of rejected applications for mail-in ballots based on the new ID rules. When the actual ballots began arriving at local elections offices, the surge continued, as ballots were initially rejected by the hundreds and then thousands because many voters appeared unaware of the new ID requirements.

Early rejection rates hovered between 30% to 40% but dropped as thousands of voters worked to safeguard their votes, often by visiting county elections offices after their ballots were flagged for rejection. Hundreds of other voters canceled their mail-in ballots and opted to vote in person instead, according to county data.

That included more than 300 voters in El Paso County who had initially requested absentee ballots but voted in person, with several voters surrendering their ballots at polling places. The county ended the election with a 16% rejection rate, throwing out 725 votes — 94% of them because of the ID rules.

"In the 2020 primary, we rejected 39 ballots," Lisa Wise, the elections administrator in El Paso, said ahead of election day when the county had flagged more than a thousand ballots for review. "You don't have to be a math wizard to see it."

But the opportunity to resolve rejections — or to alternatively head to a polling place — was out of reach for some voters. County officials have said mail-in voters often include people for whom voting in person can be a challenge or who are unable to travel to the county elections office, which for voters in some counties can be a long distance away.

Voters facing a rejected ballot because of ID issues were also directed to the state's new online tracker to try to validate their information, but technical issues with the tracker's setup shut out nearly a million registered voters from even accessing it.

Under state law, a voter must provide both a driver's license number and the last four digits of their Social Security number to log in to the tracker; both numbers must be on file in their voter record even though voters are required to provide only one number when they first register to vote.

Despite the secretary of state's office's efforts to backfill ID numbers in the state's voter rolls, more than 700,000 voters lacked one of those ID numbers on their voter records as of Dec. 20. Another 106,911 voters didn't have either number.

It's likely not all of those voters are eligible to vote by mail, but the barrier risked hindering enough of Kara Sands' voters that she pulled references to the online ballot tracker from the guidance she was providing Nueces County voters. Sands, the Republican elected county clerk, said most of the older voters in her county first registered to vote with a Social Security number and that remained the only ID on file for them.

"Why am I going to send them [materials saying] 'Go here to fix it' knowing they can't fix it?" Sands said in an interview ahead of election day.

Implementation of the ID rules also came amid a voter education crunch in the quick turnaround between when the law was enacted and when the first applications to vote started coming in at the start of the year.

The ID requirements forced a redesign of those applications and the specialized envelope to return completed ballots, but those were not finalized until December. Even if there had been room for earlier voter education, county officials said they feared running afoul of a different provision of the voting law that prohibits them from "soliciting" requests for mail-in ballots from voters.

Several were forced to abandon specific outreach to regular mail-in voters that could've included instructions about fulfilling the new ID requirements. Before the new voting law went into effect, election administrators in some counties would proactively contact eligible voters who previously cast mail-in ballots at the start of every year to remind them they needed to reapply if they wanted to continue receiving absentee ballots.

"We kind of have to watch what we do or say because of how the bill is worded," Roxzine Stinson, the elections administrator for Lubbock County, said during early voting. "We have to stay as close to the intent of the bill."

Even the Texas secretary of state's office felt the pressure as it prepared formal guidance to counties on how to implement the raft of changes contained in the voting law. For example, when the state's new online portal for mail-in voters launched mid-January, county election officials had not received training from the state on how to interface with it so voters could use it.

Despite the rule changes, the Legislature did not appropriate funding for voter education.

But the secretary of state added the mail-in requirements to the education campaign the office has been required to carry out since a 2016 court order in the litigation over the state's photo ID requirements for voting in person. That campaign largely focuses on sending voters to votetexas.gov, the state's main website containing voting information.

"This year is a new challenge due to the new ID requirements for mail voting in Texas, but we are confident we have the data and research we need to apply any lessons learned during the primary campaign to a more robust campaign heading into the November General Election," Sam Taylor, a spokesperson for the secretary of state, said in an email.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Votes of over 18,000 urban Texans were tossed because of new elections law

Cayla Harris and Jasper Scherer

Houston Chronicle

March 11, 2022

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/politics/texas/article/Votes-of-over-18-000-urban-Texans-were-tossed-16995949.php>

Thousands of Texans could not vote in the March primary election because their mail ballots were rejected under the state's new voting law.

The primaries were the first election since the GOP's sweeping voting legislation took effect, instituting new ID requirements for mail-in ballots and the applications for them. As counties finalized their election results on Thursday and Friday, local officials reported unprecedented rejection rates for mail ballots — an outcome that voting rights advocates had feared.

"Everything that people warned about has come to pass, that there would be an enormous jump in both the application rejection rate and the ballot rejection rate," said James Slattery, a senior staff attorney for the Texas Civil Rights Project.

More than 18,000 ballots were tossed across 15 of Texas' 20 most populous counties, according to tallies posted by Friday afternoon. Elections administrators said nearly all the ballots were rejected because voters had submitted newly required identifying information — either a driver's license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number — that did not match what the county had on file.

Republicans who championed the election bill say the legislation makes it "easier to vote and harder to cheat." But critics say the new ID requirements haven't made mail-in voting more secure.

Voters with flagged ballots had the opportunity to correct them, but thousands missed the deadline and were unable to cast ballots.

"The curing processes were not sufficient to save every eligible vote," Slattery said.

Republicans have said they expect to see the mail ballot rejection rates drop as voters grow accustomed to the new requirements.

State Sen. Paul Bettencourt, a Houston Republican who helped craft the voting bill and formerly oversaw the Harris County voter rolls as tax assessor-collector, last month attributed the high rejection rates to a learning curve. He also predicted the initially reported rates, which totaled as high as 40 percent early on in Harris County, would fall.

In all, 7,750 mail ballots were flagged in Harris County "specifically due to ID issues," according to the county elections administrator's office. Less than 11 percent of voters resubmitted ID information and got their ballots corrected, despite efforts by Harris County that included sending letters instructing them how to correct their ballots and doubling the number of staff assigned to help handle voter questions.

The total of 6,888 ballots that were ultimately rejected accounted for nearly one in five of all mail ballots received by Harris County. The total far outpaced the 135 mail ballots rejected during the 2018 primary, or about 0.3 percent of the more than 48,000 received.

Other counties saw similar issues. In Bexar County, about 22 percent of more than 18,000 mail ballots were rejected.

In Travis County, about 2 percent of mail ballots were rejected in 2018 — but this year, the final number was 8 percent, or roughly 900 ballots.

Initially, about 16 percent of all mail ballots there had been flagged, but half of those voters were able to fix the mistakes.

“A majority of finally rejected ballots had ID issues,” said county spokeswoman Victoria Hinojosa.

In nearby Williamson County, officials reported a nearly 12-percent rejection rate, mostly linked to ID requirements. In total, 379 ballots were not counted there because of the new mandate.

And in El Paso County, local officials told El Paso Matters that 15 percent of mail ballots were rejected over the ID requirements, amounting to 683 voters. In previous elections, about 5 to 10 percent of ballots were not counted.

The ID requirements came under criticism from Democratic state lawmakers last year as they embarked on their quorum-breaking trip to Washington, D.C., in an unsuccessful bid to stop the voting bill. Democrats in both chambers of the Legislature, along with voting rights advocates, argued that the ID provision would create a dilemma for the nearly 2 million Texas voters who used only their Social Security or driver’s license number — but not both — when registering to vote.

Last month, the Harris County elections administrator’s office began advising voters to include both pieces of identifying info when submitting their ballot, in case they were unsure or had remembered incorrectly which number was on file.

About 3.2 million Texans voted in the primaries, accounting for roughly 18.3 percent of the state’s registered voters. It’s slightly higher than 2018’s turnout of 17.2 percent, as more Republican voters turned out to the ballot box.

There are nearly 17.2 million registered voters in Texas.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Local GOP turmoil comes to a head in election violation lawsuit against party chair

Justin Grass

Denton Record-Chronicle

March 11, 2022

https://dentonrc.com/news/politics/local-gop-turmoil-comes-to-a-head-in-election-violation-lawsuit-against-party-chair/article_d8b794ba-1295-5052-b9d3-d75c8a231322.html

Brewing turmoil within the Denton County Republican Party, largely based on the party's chair election, has resulted in a lawsuit alleging election violations against outgoing DCRP chair Jayne Howell, who says she's being "viciously slandered" at the end of her term.

The lawsuit was filed Feb. 17 by five plaintiffs in the 393rd Judicial District Court against Howell and DCRP Executive Director Belinda Small. The list of plaintiffs includes Alana Phillips, a current DCRP precinct chair. The other four, according to one who was reached for comment, have applied for leadership roles in the party.

The lawsuit is multifaceted but stems from one overarching grievance — the party leadership's handling of the 2022 DCRP chair election. Howell announced last year she wouldn't be seeking reelection after four years at the helm of the party, and the race for her replacement came down to two candidates: Brent Hagenbuch and Connie Hudson.

Hagenbuch is currently the party's vice chairman of political affairs, and Hudson was formerly the party's vice chairman of precinct development. But Hudson did not end up making it on the March 1 ballot because her application was never approved. As of March, it is one of only three county chair applications in the entire state to be listed as "rejected" by the Texas Secretary of State's Office.

Hudson's filing, according to numerous interviews with DCRP officials, has caused a rift within the party. That's because she, along with others in the party, allege Howell and Small "sabotaged" her campaign, claiming they didn't fulfill an obligation to provide her with all the requirements she needed and properly notify her that her application wasn't complete.

The heart of the issue comes down to a Texas primary election rule, Section 172.021(f) of the Election Code, which states "a political party's state executive committee by rule may require that an application for the office of county chair be accompanied by a nominating petition containing the signatures of at least 10 percent of the incumbent precinct chairs serving on the county executive committee."

In the case of the DCRP, that equates to a nominating petition including 15 precinct chair signatures. According to a letter from Howell, it's required because the Texas State Republican Executive Committee has opted to require it.

What about the red folder?

Filings for county and precinct chairs opened up Nov. 13 and needed to be complete by Dec. 13 at 6 p.m. An online post from Hudson, posted to her campaign Facebook page Dec. 21, includes her allegations and provides a timeline. In it, she writes that she went to turn in her application Dec. 8, asking Small several times if everything was correct.

It wasn't until the evening of Dec. 13, Hudson wrote, that she returned to the party's headquarters and was told about the missing form for the signatures. She stated Howell told her it was too late to accept her application because the signatures were not included.

Her post includes other events between her filing and the day of the deadline and addresses "key points," including that a red folder containing election information was given to other candidates and not to her.

“Why wasn’t I given a red folder?” Hudson wrote. “Is it because Jayne and the GOP establishment had already chosen a candidate? ... We knew that Brent was their choice, but I thought they would be honest in their dealings.”

The lawsuit, for which Hudson is not one of the five plaintiffs, makes mention of that red folder and other points. It also alleges Small used a checklist when taking applications from other candidates and did not use a checklist when accepting Hudson’s.

“The evidence would rather suggest that Chairman Howell and Executive Director Bell Small willfully conspired together to make sure that other candidates received the appropriate filing forms, while ensuring that Hudson did not,” the lawsuit reads. “If Executive Director Small made a mistake by not notifying Hudson of the missing nominating petition, Chair Howell had the final responsibility to notify Hudson, provide the nominating petition, and to do so in a timely manner.”

Ultimately, the lawsuit asked for an emergency injunction against Howell and Small, which would have barred them from serving in DCRP roles for the March 1 primary election. A hearing was held prior to the election, at which Hudson testified, but the injunction was not granted. Hagenbuch was the only candidate on the ballot come election day.

The lawsuit also asks the Denton County District Attorney’s Office to “open a speedy investigation of criminal and fraudulent election violations and allegations henceforth provided in this complaint.” In an interview, Hudson said Howell “defrauded the Denton County voters by not allowing me to be on the ballot.”

“Had she followed the law, I would’ve been on the ballot,” Hudson said. “The one thing they’re trying to twist on this is that Election Code 1.010. It’s very specific and says it’s the office’s job to give us all the paperwork. ... I should’ve never walked out of that headquarters without those papers.”

Hudson was referring to an affidavit included in the lawsuit, which states: “This is where the law was not followed. The authority (Bel Small) did not furnish the forms (withdrawal and ten percent of Precinct Chair signatures) that I requested several times, asking if everything was complete for my application filing, according to Texas Election Code Section 1.010.”

Hudson said she’s OK with the lawsuit being pursued because Howell is “not trustworthy” to be handling elections. She and one of the plaintiffs directed specific questions about the lawsuit’s status to Alana Phillips, but Phillips could not be reached after multiple phone calls and messages.

“It’s not about me anymore,” Hudson said. “We are looking at different routes. I really did hope that we could’ve taken care of it in-house.”

A ‘frivolous allegation’?

A December letter from Howell, included in the lawsuit as Exhibit A, addresses Hudson’s allegations, stating the county chair has five business days to review and accept a filing, and that Small is a notary who provided that service to Hudson as a courtesy.

“Immediate review and notice of rejection are not required as has been posted on social media by some,” Howell wrote. “I arrived at headquarters on December 13th at approximately 5 pm (3 Business days after Connie Hudson’s filing). ... I informed her we needed her Precinct Chair nominating petition. This was less than 30 min after I reviewed her application. Thus, it was immediate.”

In an interview, Howell called the idea of her endorsing Hagenbuch over Hudson a “frivolous allegation.” As far as Hudson’s application is concerned, she said there was no reason to believe Hudson didn’t know about the signature requirement, because Hagenbuch had brought up the petition on more than one occasion and at one point asked Hudson for her signature to use in his own campaign.

Regarding Hudson not receiving a candidate information folder, Howell said she was not there on the day Hudson filed, but that she would typically pick one up along with a blank filing form for any candidate. Hudson’s application, however, was already filled out. Howell added there are dozens of red folders stacked on a counter in the front door area.

“When Connie walked in, she brought in a completed filing form — well, who printed that off for her?” Howell said. “She brought it in filled out, and she walked straight into [Small’s] office to get it notarized. We just didn’t think about the red folder. ... It was sitting on the counter that she and several others had to pass several times. We would offer it to any candidate.”

Howell said it’s the candidate’s responsibility to know the filing requirements, and the DCRP’s responsibility is to provide any information that a candidate needs upon request.

“We had several candidates file early in the period that were missing items or made mistakes on their filing forms that we had to reject,” Howell said. “But they filed early in the period, so they had an opportunity to correct it and get on the ballot.”

Howell called the lawsuit’s premise “meritless” and said she is being criticized for exercising her responsibility to the election laws. She said it’s “illogical” to think she would try to purposely keep Hudson off the ballot.

“There would be no reason for me to want to do that,” Howell said. “I kept Connie in leadership as one of our officers for four years. ... To be slandered here so viciously at the end of my term is very disappointing.”

Case nearing the end?

Denton-based attorney Sam Burke, representing Howell, said his understanding of the lawsuit is that the legal question comes down to whether or not Howell notified Hudson of the defects in her application within the five-business-day period.

“There’s not an immediate obligation to review it because there are a lot of applications they’re receiving, so the law gives them five days to do it,” Burke said. “They did it. If you file your application less than five days before the deadline, this is a problem you can have. There’s a way to get control of this: You can file your application 10 days before.”

Burke said the plaintiffs first needed to prove there was a failure to respond and then that the injunction barring Howell from a role in the election would remedy the issue. The court denied the request, he said.

“They got a hearing on it, and the court denied the request,” Burke said. “They would have to change what’s in their pleading and then ask the court to do something else.”

Regarding the request for a Denton County District Attorney’s Office investigation, Burke said it’s a “novel request” and that he doesn’t believe the court would have the authority to initiate that. He said he’ll be sending over a written order this week, which could end up closing the case after the plaintiffs get a chance to respond.

“Only the judge decides this,” Burke said. “It didn’t appear to me that the judge found it credible, but I don’t know what’s in the judge’s mind.”

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Disqualified Mission candidate allowed to run as write-in

Berenice Garcia

McAllen Monitor

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<https://myrgv.com/featured/2022/03/12/disqualified-mission-candidate-allowed-to-run-as-write-in/>

A candidate for Mission’s upcoming municipal election who was previously disqualified from running, is back on the ballot after he and the city reached a settlement.

Joe Vargas, who is running for the Place 3 seat on the Mission City Council, will be allowed to run as a write-in candidate for the seat as a result of a settlement reached in a lawsuit he filed against the city.

In his petition which he filed on Feb. 28, Vargas sought a restraining order against the city after they disqualified him to run for the city’s May 7 election because he had not changed his voter registration from McAllen to Mission until just a few days before he applied to be on the ballot on Jan. 27.

The registration change also did not become effective until a few days after the Feb. 18 deadline for candidates to file their application to run.

City Secretary Anna Carrillo stated in an affidavit that she contacted the Texas Secretary of State’s Office on Feb. 22 to further confirm whether he was eligible to run for office.

In response to her inquiry, Chuck Pinney, an attorney for the elections division of secretary of state’s office, wrote that he did not meet the requirements.

“(I)f a candidate is not currently registered within the city and wanted to update their registration to meet the voter registration requirement in time for the February 18, 2022 filing deadline, then they would have needed to submit their voter registration application (or have it postmarked) no later than the 30th day before the filing deadline, which was January 19, 2022,” Pinney wrote. “If the candidate’s registration was not effective until after the February 18, 2022 filing deadline, then they would not

meet the voter registration requirement for candidate eligibility outlined in Election Code 141.001 (a)(6).”

Carrillo declared Vargas ineligible on Feb. 24 and in a letter sent that same day, Mission City Attorney Gus Martinez notified Vargas of his ineligibility and that he therefore would be removed from the ballot.

But in his petition seeking an injunction, Vargas argued that the election code allows cities to set their own candidate requirements and noted that the city charter only requires city council candidates to have been a citizen of Mission at least six months before the election. Vargas says he moved to the city about a year ago.

He also said that before he was declared ineligible, he had already taken on campaign expenses such as hiring political consultants, purchasing signs and incurring other election-related costs.

State District Judge Marla Cuellar granted the restraining order against the city on March 2 and ordered the parties to meet with a mediator to try to reach an agreement.

After attorneys for the city and Vargas met with a mediator on Wednesday and, after a few hours of deliberation, agreed to allow Vargas to run as a write-in candidate.

“I think it is the best resolution possible; I believe that it is only fair in accordance with the election code and also following the laws that surround our electoral process,” Vargas said Friday of the agreement. “My position has been that I didn’t want this to drag out into a long legal battle because it would cost the constituents money, it would cost the city money, and that was not what the objective was.”

Vargas said running as a write-in candidate would not change his plans going forward, though he acknowledged it would take more work.

“It takes extra effort and extra work to educate the voters on how to cast their vote if they’re going to vote for me,” Vargas said. “It takes additional steps but my position has always been let the people choose, let the people decide.”

“Ultimately, it is their right to choose who’s going to represent them on the city council,” he said.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

The election snafus that lead to a resignation in Harris County

Alexandra Hart

Texas Standard

March 11, 2022

<https://www.texasstandard.org/stories/the-election-snafus-that-lead-to-a-resignation-in-harris-county/>

It’s time for the week that was in Texas politics with James Barragán, political reporter for The Texas Tribune.

What went wrong in Harris County?

That's the question elections observers are asking, after delayed results and uncounted ballots lead to the resignation of Harris County Elections Administrator Isabel Longoria.

Barragán says Election Day results may have been complicated by the county's switch to new voting machines.

"Then the Harris County elections office misplaced or didn't count 10,000 mail votes ... and that made issues even worse," he said.

"It looks like all the election results held," Barragán said, but the snafu led to Longoria's resignation.

That's one of the stories from the week in Texas politics. Listen in the audio player above for more, including Democratic attorney general hopeful Lee Merritt's suspension of his campaign, and news of a new county joining in Gov. Greg Abbott's problem-plagued border security mission.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Nearly 1 in 5 mail-in ballots in Houston area were rejected because of Texas voting law, election officials say

Kelly Mena

CNN

March 11, 2022

<https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/11/politics/harris-county-primary-2022-mail-in-ballot-rejections/index.html>

(CNN)Thousands of mail-in ballots were rejected in Texas' most populous county for the March primary because they did not meet requirements set by the state's new voting law passed last year by the Republican-led state legislature, according to Houston-area election officials.

Harris County election officials on Friday announced that of the 36,878 mail ballots received for the March 1 primary, a total of 6,888, or 19%, were rejected "as a direct result of Senate Bill 1."

Under the law, voters had to include a Texas identification number or a partial Social Security number when returning their mail-in ballots. However, the identification number used must match one of the numbers on the voter's registration record. Officials noted that the mail ballots were flagged for rejection "specifically due to ID issues."

The rejection rate is a significant jump from previous years. In 2018, Harris County rejected only 135 mail-in ballots of a total of 48,473 received, officials said in a news release.

For comparison, fewer than 1% of mail-in ballots -- or about 8,300 ballots statewide -- were rejected in Texas in the 2020 election, according to the US Election Assistance Commission.

The Harris County election office was also inundated with calls from voters due to the confusion and frustration surrounding the new ID requirements. Officials said that since January, the call center received 8,000 calls from people asking for help navigating the voting process -- which was higher than the monthly call volume in the lead up to the November 2020 and November 2021 elections.

Officials said the elections office doubled its staff in order to help voters navigate the new rules, including sending voters a letter on how to fix their ballots so they would be counted.

"Nearly 20% of votes cast by mail were not counted as a result of SB1. That's 6,888 registered voters who were silenced. These restrictive voting laws continue to undermine our efforts to expand voter access and will have repercussions for many elections to come," said Isabel Longoria, Harris County elections administrator.

Earlier this week, Longoria, who has overseen elections in the county since 2020, announced her resignation amid a mail-in ballot counting discrepancy in Election Night results. She said her resignation would be effective July 1.

Meanwhile, in Travis County, home to the state capital of Austin, the rejection rate was 8%, or 948 mail-in ballots were rejected of a total 10,656, according to Victoria Hinojosa, a spokeswoman in the election office. Hinojosa previously told CNN that the county's rejection rate in 2018 was about 2%.

Because of the rejection rates, the office of Secretary of State John Scott said it would focus on voter education outreach efforts on the new mail-in voting requirements, spokesman Sam Taylor said.

"While in years past we have focused our voter education efforts on in-person ID requirements, this year we are also devoting a significant portion of our voter education campaign to enhancing awareness of the new mail-in ballot ID requirements," Taylor said. "We are confident we have the data and research we need to apply any lessons learned during the primary to an even more robust voter education campaign heading into the November General Election."

Following reports of the high rejection rates, voting rights advocates called again for federal voting rights legislation.

"The federal Voting Rights Act must be restored to ensure that every voter in Texas ... has equal access to the ballot box and is protected from unfair laws and practices that make it harder for people to vote," said Grace Chimene, president of the League of Women Voters of Texas, in a statement to CNN.

"It is a tragedy for our democracy when state leaders choose to support a partisan agenda instead of voters when writing state election law resulting in a massive rejection of vote-by-mail ballots," Chimene added.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Damage control: Hidalgo Co. Democratic Party tries to mitigate primary hiccups for runoff

Naxiely Lopez-Puente

McAllen Monitor

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<https://myrgv.com/local-news/2022/03/13/damage-control-hidalgo-co-democratic-party-tries-to-mitigate-primary-hiccups-for-runoff/>

The Hidalgo County Democratic Party is trying to piece itself together after stumbling on Election Day, when it closed more than a dozen polls voters expected to be open throughout the county.

The leaders of the local and state party have since said the closures were caused by a perfect storm of issues, including a new state law, a lack of training opportunities for election workers and an overall unwillingness to work.

“A lot of people are concerned about the status of where the runoffs are going to be, and they just don’t want to see the same situation occur for these really important races coming up,” incoming Hidalgo County Democratic Party Chair Richard Gonzales said last week.

Gonzales, who was elected to lead the local party in March, will not oversee the Democratic runoff election because he won’t take charge until June 13. Instead, the duties will once again fall on Patrick Eronini, who was appointed chair in December after the elected chair, Norma Ramirez, stepped down to run for county judge.

Two weeks ago, Eronini was heavily criticized for closing the number of advertised Election Day polling locations from 56 to 41 — a little less than 24 hours before polls opened. Still, he argued, the 41 locations he did open were more than the 28 sites the county elections department opened during the early voting period — which, by law, it has to administer — and more than twice the amount the local Republican Party opened on Election Day.

“I opened up over 40 locations,” Eronini said about available polling sites on Election Day. “The Republicans had 18 — but I’m the one getting the bad rap?”

The local Republican Party opened the 18 polling locations it advertised.

Most of Eronini’s criticism, however, stemmed from his decision to close a majority of the polls in western Hidalgo County. Some even called for his resignation.

“I’m not resigning,” Eronini said last week. “I have a job to do. I still have an election to finish running.”

But whether the party will open more sites on the western side of the county for the runoff election remains to be seen.

“I don’t know — we’re gonna see how many of the critics want to step up and work,” Eronini said last week.

His biggest challenge is a lack of manpower.

“I hope you guys can be more positive about the issues and realize that this is a statewide problem,” he told *The Monitor* three days after the primary.

Texas Democratic Party Chair Gilberto Hinojosa agreed, though he still had some concerns about possibly disenfranchising a large portion of the population in the west.

“Anytime you advertise that you’re gonna open a polling place and you don’t open it — and you leave out big segments of a part of a community — yeah, it’s a concern. It’s a big concern,” Hinojosa said. “But I know in other parts of the state they had to close polling locations as a result of the party being unable to find election workers.”

The problem is not unique to Hidalgo County, he added.

Instead, the state's Democratic Party chair blamed SB 1, a new state law Republicans passed last year, which he said criminalized "innocent" mistakes made by poll workers and gave them little time to train.

"The laws are so complicated and confusing that election workers just decided they didn't want to deal with it," Hinojosa said. "And then when they imposed these criminal sanctions for basically innocent conduct — if it was a mistake — a lot of workers said we don't need this in our lives. So they had a hard time across the state of Texas getting people to actually volunteer for election workers."

Some of it also came down to training, they said, with Hinojosa blaming the Texas Secretary of State's office and Eronini blaming the Hidalgo County Elections Department.

"The Secretary of State's office didn't help at all," Hinojosa said. "They didn't do the necessary voter education or education for election workers in time to be able to get people confident that they were gonna be able to do it and at the same time not get prosecuted."

Eronini noted that all of the election workers in Hidalgo County had to learn the new laws and be retrained to use the voting machines the county was recently forced to upgrade due to another state law.

And the county only gave the party one day to train their election workers — two days before Election Day.

"So why does the election department think it's OK to give us one day of training," he asked.

Hilda Salinas, assistant director for the county elections department, said the county initially offered both parties two days of training.

"But at the request of the parties" the training was reduced to one day, she said, with the first half dedicated to training the election workers for the Democratic Party and the second to the Republican Party.

Still, she indicated, there was an obvious miscommunication between the county and the Democratic Party. And it was most apparent during the training, when the party failed to provide a final list of the election workers it planned to train.

"It did prove to be very difficult for us to actually communicate with the proper poll workers that were going to be opening and working Election Day," Salinas said.

Eronini, however, said he found it difficult to work with Yvonne Ramon, the head of the county elections department, and her staff.

"The relationship has to be more friendly," he said. "She was very adversarial in the relationship. I don't think they (went) out of their way to make us be successful for that one day."

Eronini criticized the county elections office for not sharing the list of qualified election workers it hired during early voting, but Salinas said some of the workers signed official forms that indicated they did not want to share their information with political parties.

She was adamant the elections office went “above and beyond” in helping the political parties carry out their Election Day duties and said the county went as far as asking its own employees, who chose not to be contacted by political parties, to work Election Day.

“Mind you, we’ve been working with them already for four years,” she said about the leaders of the local Democratic Party. “So this information has already been shared with them in the past.”

Ultimately, she said, it was the parties’ responsibility to procure enough election workers to man the polling locations on Election Day.

“You can see the difference. Early voting was administered by our department and it went smoothly,” she said.

Eronini, however, disputed that assertion.

“Remember it’s easier to fix something over a two-week period, than to fix something over a one-day period,” he said. “Because if you screw up on the first day of two weeks, well you fix it the second day and the screw up is over. But if I screw up on the one day that I’m responsible for, you know, people are going to complain.”

He also criticized the county for not lending its voting machines to the party so that it could conduct its own training.

“Why can’t (we) borrow dummy voting machines for training to train people year round,” he asked.

Salinas said it’s a security matter.

“We have certain measures that we have in place to make sure that those voting machines are constantly secure,” she said. “We have to abide by the laws that are mandated by the Texas Secretary of State to make sure that those machines are only used to administer elections.”

Gonzales believes the Hidalgo County Democratic Party should have been more aggressive in recruiting election workers earlier and said the party needs to have a more amicable relationship with the county elections department.

“We should never have allowed it to get to that point. There’s a way to solve that problem months in advance,” the chair-elect said. “What I would like to do is have a better working relationship with Ms. Ramon and say, ‘Look, how can the party and the county better work together to streamline these processes with enough time to make sure that we do not encounter a situation like this again?’ Because it can’t just fall on the county, and it can’t just fall on the party. We work with each other.”

Gonzales suggested hiring a public relations firm and using media outlets to recruit workers.

“So in a situation like this, we would’ve already been saying months in advance we need workers,” he suggested.

Eroni said he didn’t reach out to the media because he felt it was useless.

“Because we have sent you guys before news announcements,” he said. “You guys just ignore them, so why would I bother?”

“We don’t find you guys too friendly to the Democratic Party.”

Eronini, however, could not recall any news releases he previously issued that The Monitor did not publish. Outside of a 2021 news release from Eronini announcing that then-party chair Ramirez would serve as a guest speaker at Edinburg’s FridaFest Women’s Empowerment Program, and reaction to news of Sen. Eddie Lucio Jr.’s retirement, The Monitor hasn’t received any news releases from the party over the last several elections.

It wasn’t until Monday that Eronini submitted a release asking for more poll workers for the upcoming runoff, which The Monitor published Tuesday.

Those interested in working the Democratic runoffs should contact Eronini at (956) 309-5315, or submit their name, phone number, email and home address to hidalgocountydemocraticparty@gmail.com.

But whether those recruitment efforts will bear fruit remains to be seen because Salinas said the county elections department is not planning on hosting any more training sessions for election workers.

“There’s really no additional training in regards to the runoff because they’ve already had the training,” she said.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

On-campus voting is big incentive, students say

Logan Linder

The Daily Cougar

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<https://thedailycougar.com/2022/03/11/on-campus-voting-student-turnout/>

While voter turnout in Texas primary elections is notoriously low, this year’s primaries brought the highest turnout rates since the past six midterm elections.

Some students said if it weren’t for the University’s on-campus voting, they wouldn’t have taken the time to vote.

Between classes and work, political science freshman Danielle Gomez wouldn’t have voted in this election. She believes the voting opportunities available on campus benefits students, allowing them to cast their vote without needing to travel to an entirely new location.

“My family and I being Mexican-born and/or Mexican-American, we understand the importance of voting as minorities,” Gomez said. “We talked about this election being particularly important because of the controversial policies put forward by conservatives.”

Voting on Election Day, political science senior Janice Sandoval brought her friends with her, making sure all of her registered friends are able to vote.

As a member of UH Democrats, Sandoval works to educate and register voters. She believes that making voting accessible to all harms no one.

“Making sure your voice is heard throughout the entire process is so important when we want to make tangible change in our communities and our state,” Sandoval said. “I make sure to vote in every election because I know my vote and my voice are important and matter. If it didn’t, people wouldn’t be working so hard to take it away.”

While Sandoval utilizes the on-campus voting opportunities, political science junior and advocacy director for Deeds Not Words Dawn Trevino believes the University could be doing more to encourage students to vote.

“If UH at least posted it on their social media, I feel that a lot more students would show up to vote,” Trevino said. “I also feel that the University should promote voting in general due to the significance it holds in our democracy.”

Public policy freshman JP Moreno said while not everyone they knew who wanted to vote was able to, those who found time said the campus voting was a good option since they didn’t need to travel.

“I had one specific candidate in mind that I wanted to vote for,” Moreno said. “I was happy to be a part of the ones this year.”

The general election takes place on Nov. 8 between current Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and former U.S. Senate and presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

At SXSW, Texas Democrats who broke quorum say their goal was 'bigger than Texas'

Niki Griswold

Austin American-Statesman

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<https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/state/2022/03/12/sxsw-2022-lineup-texas-democrats-describe-walk-out-elections-bill/9441156002/>

Texas House Democrats who led a quorum break last summer told a South by Southwest festival audience the effort was “bigger than Texas,” as Republican-led legislation on elections, transgender student rights and abortion access spreads across the country.

State Reps. Jasmine Crockett, D-Dallas, Trey Martinez Fischer, D-San Antonio, and Claudia Ordaz Perez, D-El Paso, reflected on the group's effort to oppose GOP-priority legislation, including an

elections overhaul bill, during a panel discussion Saturday. The panel was moderated by WFAA journalist Tashara Parker.

“People don’t realize that Texas is setting the stage for the entire country, and that is the problem,” Crockett said. “Now bad legislation, whether it’s on voting rights, whether it’s on trans children, whether it’s on women’s rights, they are all spreading like the worst cancer ever throughout the entire country. And that is why we have to have very strong members that are fighting for what’s right every single day, because it’s bigger than Texas.”

Crockett, Martinez Fischer and Ordaz Perez, along with nearly 60 of their Democratic colleagues, left the state last summer in an attempt to deny the House a quorum and stall the progress of the Republican-led elections overhaul bill.

Republicans said the legislation was needed to safeguard the state’s voting system and restore public trust in election outcomes, despite the lack of evidence of widespread voter fraud. Democrats and some voting rights groups said the measure would make it harder for Texans, particularly people of color, to cast ballots.

Aware that their absence could only temporarily delay the bill’s passage, Democrats spent weeks in Washington meeting with members of Congress and advocating for federal changes to election procedures.

Their effort captured national media attention, and drew the ire of their GOP colleagues back home, who authorized arrest warrants for the absent legislators.

When enough Democrats returned to Austin to have a quorum, Republicans passed the voting bill in a special legislative session in August. March’s primary election was the first test of the new voting rules, and Democrats on Saturday claimed that thousands of rejected mail-in-ballots was evidence of the new law’s negative impact.

The Democrats said they were frustrated that federal election measures remain stalled in Congress, but they called the quorum break a success in drawing national attention to the issue.

“We all knew that this was an important narrative, and was a now or never moment for our democracy. And we happened to be the folks that had the voice the country was listening to,” Martinez Fischer said.”

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Honest Elections Project official: 'No evidence' of voter suppression in Texas primary

W.J. Kennedy

Lone Star Standard

March 11, 2022

<https://lonestarstandard.com/stories/621681008-honest-elections-project-official-no-evidence-of-voter-suppression-in-texas-primary>

Texas voters came out in big numbers in the March 1 primary, undercutting arguments that the sweeping election reform bill signed into law last year would restrict voter access to the polls, says Jason Snead, executive director of the Honest Elections Project.

“Some in the media and on the Democratic side were eager to say that the law restricted voter access, but there was just no evidence of it,” Snead told the Lone Star Standard.

Overall, 2.9 million Texans voted in the primary, up from approximately 2.6 million in 2018. Snead noted that the use of mail votes dropped by about 10 points on the Republican side but only one point on the Democratic side. He attributed the Republican drop-off to a continuing distrust in the election process, not to the new law.

“On the Democratic side the drop-off is within the margin of error,” he said.

Hundreds of mail ballots were returned for noncompliance to a new Texas ID requirement for the ballots, the Texas Tribune reported, but Snead argued that the law gives voters six days after the election to cure, or fix, their ballots and still have them count.

“There is learning curve to this that will be ironed out in future elections,” he said.

Besides adding an ID requirement for mail ballots, the law bans 24-hour voting, drive-thru voting, unsolicited distribution of mail ballots by third parties, and requires the Texas secretary of state to make monthly voter roll checks.

Controversy surrounding the election legislation, Senate Bill 1, made national headlines when Democratic state lawmakers last July boycotted the session, boarded a charter flight to Washington, D.C, and left Republicans without the necessary quorum to pass the bill. The Democrats trickled back, and in September Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, signed the legislation into law.

The Townhall reported that besides the robust voter turnout Texas Democrats need to be concerned about areas where “GOP turnout surged in the primary.”

“In every congressional district that lies along the U.S.-Mexico border, more Republican voters cast ballots [March 1] than in the 2020 or 2018 primaries,” the publication reported.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Mike Lindell seeks access to secret voting machine report

Daniel Chaitin

Washington Examiner

March 11, 2022

<https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/mike-lindell-wants-secret-report-on-alleged-georgia-voting-system-vulnerabilities>

MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell hopes to get his hands on an unredacted copy of a secret report detailing alleged vulnerabilities in Dominion Voting Systems equipment, machinery he claims was hacked during the 2020 election.

Attorneys for Lindell shared with the Washington Examiner two filings submitted this month in federal court in Georgia, where there is a long-running lawsuit seeking to get the state to ditch electronic voting machines for hand-marked paper ballots. Although Lindell is not directly involved in that case, his lawyers argue an assessment done for the plaintiffs by J. Alex Halderman, a computer science professor at the University of Michigan, will help in their fight against Dominion's \$1.3 billion defamation suit against MyPillow and Lindell.

"The Halderman report strongly supports the conclusion that Dominion's electronic voting machines are vulnerable to intrusion, manipulation, and fraud," said a memo in support of their motion to intervene for a limited purpose.

The analysis, which remains under seal, has become a flashpoint in the debate over election security. U.S. District Judge Amy Totenberg, who is presiding over the Georgia case, has largely resisted pressure to disseminate the report's findings, even in redacted fashion. The judge allowed the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, an arm of the Homeland Security Department, to review the findings last month. The agency is expected to provide some sort of a status report in the coming days, but a CISA spokesperson told the Washington Examiner on Friday they had no update to share at this time.

David Cross, an attorney for the plaintiffs, said a version of the analysis's findings, even if it is only an executive summary, should be released soon. But Cross supports a release for the public — creating a way voters at the very least can know about the reliability of ballot-marking devices and make informed decisions on how they want to cast ballots before early voting begins for the May primaries — rather than a targeted disclosure to people like Lindell "who don't have a track record of being accurate in public claims," he told the Washington Examiner.

Halderman, who conducted a similar analysis in Michigan after the 2020 election, was granted access to Dominion voting equipment in Fulton County and produced a 25,000-word report. Halderman found that malicious software could be installed in voting touchscreens to alter QR codes printed on ballots that are then scanned to record votes, or a hacker could wreak havoc by gaining access to election management system computers, according to court records reported by the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. While Halderman may have found vulnerabilities in the election technology, he has not said there is evidence they were actually exploited to create widespread fraud, as Lindell has been claiming since the 2020 election.

Lindell is one of the most vocal boosters of former President Donald Trump's cries of a stolen election and has often talked of trying to overturn the results despite the courts and election officials nationwide rejecting claims of widespread maleficence. Just in the past couple of days, Lindell, who was at a campaign event in Arizona, said he is planning a class-action lawsuit against "all" voting machines.

Dominion filed its lawsuit against Lindell in February 2021 in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, claiming the businessman "exploited another chance to boost sales: marketing MyPillow to people who would tune in and attend rallies to hear Lindell tell the 'Big Lie' that Dominion had stolen the 2020 election."

Lindell's lawyers, in their Georgia filings, argue Halderman's report will help in the fight against "Dominion's baseless defamation actions," and assist the "MyPillow parties" in similar defamation

litigation brought by another electronic voting machine manufacturer, Smartmatic. They seek "unrestricted" access to the report in accordance with the court's confidentiality order and insist the "MyPillow parties do not seek in any way to delay or affect the adjudication of the claims and defenses between the original parties."

The Washington Examiner reached out to Dominion's media email address for comment on the Lindell filings in the Georgia case but has not received a response.

While it remains to be seen if the judge allows Lindell access, election officials in other states and Fox News, which faces a \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit from Dominion, have also expressed interest in Halderman's report. Louisiana Secretary of State Kyle Ardoin asked to see the report, as his state also uses Dominion touchscreen technology for elections. However, this was denied by Totenberg, who said she "remains concerned about the risks associated with further dissemination of the report." The judge further said granting access to Louisiana could "open the floodgates" to similar requests from others, "which would also increase the potential for hacking and misuse of sensitive, confidential election system information."

In Georgia, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, a Republican official who has vehemently defended the integrity of the 2020 election in the face of fraud claims by Trump and his allies, has supported the analysis's release. His focus, however, has been to denigrate Halerman's analysis as "not an objective, academic study by a non-biased actor" and warn that media reporting about it is sowing distrust ahead of the 2022 midterm elections.

Dominion also cut at the credibility of Halderman's review in Georgia and voiced support for releasing his findings.

"Security assessments of any system, including voting systems, should always include a holistic approach of all safeguards in place, including procedural and technical safeguards. There is a reason why US voting systems rely on bipartisan election officials, poll-watchers, distributed passwords, access controls, and audit processes. The review conducted in the Curling case did not take this approach," John Poulos, president and CEO of Dominion, said in a statement released by Raffensperger's team in January. "Dominion supports all efforts to bring real facts and evidence forward to defend the integrity of our machines and the credibility of Georgia's elections."

The federal government warned against a premature release of Halderman's report before CISA, and the vendor got a chance to take appropriate mitigation action, Justice Department lawyers wrote in a filing submitted in the Georgia case in February.

"CISA's goal is to disclose any confirmed vulnerabilities and associated mitigations to the public in a coordinated way, so the entire cyber ecosystem can benefit while minimizing the risk of harm to election security," they wrote.

"CISA works regularly with companies and researchers to identify, mitigate, and disclose vulnerabilities in a timely and responsible manner. We are working through the established Coordinated Vulnerability Disclosure Process with the relevant parties pursuant to the Court's authorization. Otherwise, we are not able to comment on ongoing litigation," a CISA spokesperson told the Washington Examiner last month.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Some in GOP want ballots to be counted by hand, not machines

Associated Press

March 13, 2022

<https://www.kxxv.com/news/national/some-in-gop-want-ballots-to-be-counted-by-hand-not-machines>

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Growing suspicion about the security of voting systems has kindled a back-to-the-future moment among conservatives in some parts of the U.S.

Republican lawmakers in at least six states have introduced legislation that would require all election ballots to be counted by hand instead of electronic tabulators. Similar proposals have been floated within some local governments, including about a dozen New Hampshire towns and Washoe County in the presidential battleground state of Nevada.

The push for hand-counting ballots comes amid mistrust of elections among many Republicans who believe the false narrative that widespread fraud cost former President Donald Trump reelection in the 2020 presidential contest. Despite no evidence of widespread fraud or major irregularities, conspiracy theories have proliferated among his allies that voting systems were somehow manipulated to favor Democrat Joe Biden. That has prompted calls to ban electronic tabulators used to scan ballots, record votes and compile race tallies.

“It’s our responsibility, and it should be our desire, to count every vote and to imbue confidence in our citizenry that our elections are fair and free, and that their vote is being counted,” said New Hampshire state Rep. Mark Alliegro, sponsor of a hand-counting bill that is similar to ones proposed in Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, Washington and West Virginia.

Alliegro said he was motivated by his analysis of recounts in nearly 50 New Hampshire state legislative races, not by the 2020 presidential election.

But some of the bill’s supporters reference the 2020 election to explain why they feel his hand-count legislation is needed. They cite a belief that Trump actually won a landslide victory and that cheating is the only way to explain how New Hampshire voters elected a Republican governor and GOP majorities in the Legislature, but then backed Democrats for federal office.

Critics of the proposals to ditch electronic ballot tabulators and return to hand-counting are blunt about what they see as the motivation.

“It’s coming from conspiracy theories and lies,” said Sylvia Albert, director of voting and elections for Common Cause, a nonpartisan group that advocates for expanded voter access. “It’s attempting to lower people’s confidence in elections.”

Albert and others said it’s unrealistic to think election officials can count millions of ballots by hand and report results quickly, given that ballots often include dozens of races. The partisan review last summer of the 2 million ballots cast in Maricopa County, Arizona, which included a hand count, took several months and hundreds of people to complete.

“If you have a jurisdiction with 500 voters, you might be OK. But if you have a jurisdiction with thousands of voters, tens of thousands of voters, hundreds of thousands of voters, it’s just not going to work,” said Jennifer Morrell, a former elections clerk in Colorado and Utah who now advises state and local election officials.

Even in New Hampshire’s small towns, hand-counting is a complicated, lengthy process when a typical ballot might include 50 questions, said Milford Town Clerk Joan Dargie, who spoke against the proposed legislation on behalf of the New Hampshire City and Town Clerks Association. She estimates her town would have to increase its number of election workers from 200 to 350, and said many of her fellow clerks have said they will quit if they have to tabulate every ballot by hand.

“People who are asking to get rid of machines obviously haven’t worked in an election,” she said.

As one example, Cobb County, Georgia, performed a hand tally ordered by the state after the 2020 election. It took hundreds of people five days to count just the votes for president on roughly 397,000 ballots, said Janine Eveler, elections director for the county in metro Atlanta. She estimates it would have taken 100 days to count every race on each ballot using the same procedures.

Counting by machine isn’t just faster. Multiple studies have shown it’s also more accurate, said Charles Stewart, professor of political science at The Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The first research on the topic was done almost two decades ago comparing recounts of New Hampshire races that were originally tabulated by hand to those tabulated by machines. In that study and subsequent research, the machines won, he said.

“Counting votes is very tedious. Human beings are bad doing tedious things, and computers are very good at doing tedious things,” Stewart said.

Most states also conduct post-election audits that are designed to identify any irregularities with ballot scanning and counting. But with many Republicans believing Biden was not legitimately elected, election machines have become a popular target.

In Nevada, a Republican county commissioner is pushing a proposal that would require hand-counting of all ballots, along with a return to primarily in-person voting and beefing up uniformed security at polling places.

“I’m 82 years old and I’ve been through a lot of elections,” said Washoe County Commissioner Jeanne Herman. “I know that something is not right.”

The proposal has drawn opposition from other commissioners, the biggest labor union in the state and a rare front-page editorial in the largest newspaper in northern Nevada, which said the measure could cost taxpayers “millions of dollars to chase down Facebook rumors of illusory election fraud.”

In West Virginia, a bill to repeal the state law governing tabulation machines died in committee earlier this month. In Missouri, lawmakers have not yet acted on a proposal that would ban electronic voting machines and tabulation equipment and require hand-counting to be livestreamed and recorded.

The bill's sponsor, Republican state Rep. Mitch Boggs Jr., said he has no proof elections have been manipulated but is responding to constituent concerns.

"You file what the constituents are asking for," Boggs said. "But at the end of the day, what they're really wanting is just the transparency. They want to know that our elections are secure."

Republican state Rep. Petty McGaugh said the legislation would delay election results and likely undermine their accuracy. When she became clerk of rural Carroll County in 1995, election staff were still hand-counting ballots by marking tallies in blocks of five on paper. She noticed multiple errors and eventually switched the county to an electronic tabulation system.

"I don't really think that in this day and age we need to go back to hand-counting where it's so susceptible to human error," she said. "We've got to start trusting electronics and computers."

In New Hampshire, that message seems to have gotten through. This past week, a state House committee unanimously recommended killing the hand-counting legislation and voters in nine towns where the question was on the ballot in local elections rejected it.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

UPDATED: Study: South Texas land ports can benefit from gridlocked West Coast sea ports

Steve Taylor

Rio Grande Guardian

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<https://riograndeguardian.com/study-south-texas-land-ports-can-benefit-from-gridlocked-west-coast-sea-ports/>

PHARR, Texas – The fact that imports from Southeast Asia are increasingly bypassing California's gridlocked sea ports is great news for Mexico's West Coast sea ports and South Texas land ports.

So says Eddie Gutierrez, president of Blue Stone Capital Solutions and a consultant to the Pharr Bridge Board.

Gutierrez spoke about the opportunity for South Texas land ports to garner more imports from Southeast Asia at a recent Pharr Bridge Board board meeting. In support of his contention he referenced a recent study by Juan Arias, a strategic consultant with CoStar Advisory Services in Boston. Arias' study is titled "Latest Supply-Chain Shift Favors Trading Partners Who Are Closer to Home."

After the board meeting, Gutierrez gave an interview to the Rio Grande Guardian International News Service.

"The study basically indicates that because of the supply chain fallout, there are going to be some big winners. And the winners are going to be Mexico, Canada and their sea port of entries. Because they have the ability to take on more cargo," Gutierrez said.

“Texas was highlighted as being one of the big winners, also. Specifically South Texas because much of the infrastructure is already in place and there is more infrastructure coming in. So, we expect South Texas, the Rio Grande Valley to really benefit from the fall out, through the land port of entries.”

Asked if South Texas land ports, such as Pharr, would only benefit in the short term, until such time as California’s sea ports become more efficient, Gutierrez said: “I think the benefits to our region are going to be felt in the long term. The infrastructure is already in place and we can pass products through here much faster. The products, coming in through Mexico, can go up to the central United States and the eastern coast of the United States much faster.”

Gutierrez added: “The study indicates they (Mexico’s West Coast ports) are all ready to take on extra cargo and ready to operate. It is already happening as we speak. The numbers are showing it.”

In his study, CoStar Advisory Services’ Arias said U.S. East Coast ports are already seeing more traffic from Southeast Asia.

“From July 2020 to November 2021, monthly imports from Southeast Asia to the East Coast rose by an average of 32 percent above 2019 levels. Trade route traffic has continued to shift as higher shipping costs, tariffs and pandemic disruptions roil overseas supply chains,” Arias wrote.

“Meanwhile, trade clarity provided by the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement is driving import growth with trade partners closer to home, specifically Mexico.”

Arias said trends for U.S. trade in goods show a strong rise in imports from Mexico and Canada after the USMCA went into effect in July of 2020.

“Monthly import values from July 2020 to November 2021 have come in 14 percent and eight percent above 2019 values, respectively, for Mexico and Canada. Imports to the U.S. have surpassed pre-pandemic levels for both countries, though this has occurred faster for Mexico.”

Arias said the “swift and strong recovery” in U.S.-Mexico trade is most apparent in inbound truck figures.

“The number of inbound trucks from Mexico to the U.S. surpassed pre-pandemic levels, growing around 11 percent in 2021, after contracting only two percent in 2020,” Arias wrote, citing information from U.S. Department of Transportation’s Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Meanwhile, inbound truck counts from Canada shrank by eight percent in 2020 and failed to recover to pre-pandemic levels, despite seven percent growth in 2021. “Both trade partners have largely benefited from a strong recovery in U.S. consumer demand, although Mexico appears to be faring better,” Arias said.

A key paragraph in Arias’ study: “After the implementation of USMCA, shifts in consumer spending significantly expanded global trade in goods. But the logistical pressure from this surge in demand has upended global supply chains as well, driving shipping costs higher. In this environment, Mexico appears to benefit due to its proximity and competitive import costs compared to China.”

Arias pointed out that since the China-U.S. trade war started, tariffs placed on Chinese imports have remained elevated along with higher shipping costs.

“Costs to import Chinese goods as a share of customs import value grew from around eight percent in 2018 to over 18 percent in 2021, while costs for Mexico have remained at around two percent over the same time period.”

Arias said Mexico “consistently provides both a lower shipment and tariff cost alternative.”

Arias said that as U.S. retailers and manufacturers develop shorter and lower-cost supply chains, Mexican exporters are poised to benefit, specifically maquiladoras.

Arias said Mexico’s National Institute of Statistics and Geography tracks the performance of the country’s maquiladoras. He said export figures since 2015 have shown continued revenue growth.

“Maquiladora revenues for 2021 have surpassed pre-pandemic levels, albeit with diverging performance across the multinational cities on the U.S. Mexico border. These border cities typically grow in tandem, with Tucson, Arizona/Nogales, San Diego/Tijuana, McAllen, Texas/Reynosa, El Paso, Texas/ Juarez and Laredo, Texas/Nuevo Laredo performing relatively better since 2019.”

Arias also pointed to research by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.

“A ten percent increase in maquiladora production on the Mexican side of the border results in a 7.1 percent increase for Nogales, Arizona, employment, along with increases in Texas of 6.6 percent in McAllen, 4.6 percent in Laredo, 2.8 percent in El Paso, and 2.2 percent in Brownsville,” Arias wrote, citing the Dallas Fed report.

“Recent employment trends for El Paso, McAllen, Brownsville and Laredo, which together make up over 60 percent of maquiladora revenue for the cities analyzed, show a strong performance through the pandemic as maquiladora business remained consistent.”

Arias’ study also discusses unemployment levels and consumption in the major cities along the Texas-Mexico border. For more information about the study, telephone CoStar Advisory Services at 800-613-1303 and ask for Juan Arias.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Federal spending bill includes money for New Mexico border crossings

Julian Resendiz

Border Report

March 11, 2022

<https://www.kxan.com/border-report/federal-spending-bill-includes-money-for-new-mexico-border-crossings/>

EL PASO, Texas (Border Report) – The Senate’s \$1.5 trillion omnibus spending bill includes funds for improvements at two New Mexico international ports of entry, a lawmaker says.

The Columbus Port of Entry is slated to get \$1 million for drainage work that includes the construction of berms to prevent flooding on both sides of the border; the Santa Teresa border crossing is getting \$500,000 for a feasibility study deemed as a cornerstone for a future \$170 million expansion and modernization project.

“We have been working hand-in-hand with communities in every corner of the state to ensure that more federal dollars find their way to New Mexico [...] Everything from road, emergency services, waste and water infrastructure,” said U.S. Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-New Mexico, a member of the Senate Committee on Appropriations.

The House on Thursday approved the omnibus with bipartisan support, with the Senate following suit a few hours later.

Heinrich said another \$2.25 million is earmarked for hangar expansion at the Santa Teresa-based Doña Ana County International Jetport. That should bring more business to the jetport and the industrial parks at Santa Teresa.

“There is a list of 60 individuals and organizations that want to lease hangars out there, so that’s going to help a lot,” said Jerry Pacheco, president and CEO of the Border Industrial Association. The jetport supports private and commercial aviation.

But the money for the border crossing feasibility redesign and expansion study, though only at half a million dollars, has the potential to bring major trade expansion at the Mexico-New Mexico border, Pacheco said.

“With that money we can get the study to make the case that we need a new port of entry. Then we can go on to the next steps, like design, to have a modernized port of entry.”

Pacheco said Santa Teresa has become the second-busiest commercial port of entry in Far West Texas and Southern New Mexico, surpassing El Paso’s Bridge of the Americas and trailing only the Ysleta-Zaragoza crossing.

“Columbus a few years ago got \$84 million for a new port of entry; Tornillo, Texas, also received \$120 million and we are bigger than both of them combined,” he said. “We are breaking records every year and we’re going to hit a point that we get a bottleneck that’s going to affect our (truck) crossing times, which are the fastest in the region at less than 30 minutes.”

According to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 12,066 commercial trucks, most with cargo, used the Santa Teresa Port of Entry in January. The Ysleta facility in El Paso’s Lower Valley processed 56,108 trucks that month.

But with Ysleta being in a growing urban area, Santa Teresa has become the preferred crossing point for 160-foot-long wind blade turbines manufactured in Juarez, Mexico, and shipped to wind power farms in the Midwestern United States.

Pacheco said an expanded port would handily accommodate such oversized cargo as well as the increased truck traffic that’s making Santa Teresa one of New Mexico’s top economic development engines.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Sixty-five businesses sign ad in newspaper calling on Texas governor to abandon anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives

Joe Sutton

CNN

March 13, 2022

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/13/business/businesses-sign-newspaper-ad-texas/index.html>

(CNN Business)A number of high-powered global businesses called on Texas Governor Greg Abbott (R) to abandon the state's anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives.

Sixty-five companies including Apple (AAPL), Capital One (COF), Google, Ikea, Johnson & Johnson (JNJ), LinkedIn, Macy's (M), Microsoft (MSFT), PayPal (PYPL), and Yahoo signed the open letter. "Discrimination is bad for business" the headline read in an advertisement in Friday's The Dallas Morning News newspaper.

The letter was done in partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

"Our companies do business, create jobs, and serve customers in Texas. We are committed to building inclusive environments where our employees can thrive inside and outside of the workplace," the letter said. "For years we have stood to ensure LGBTQ+ people — our employees, customers, and their families — are safe and welcomed in the communities where we do business."

"The recent attempt to criminalize a parent for helping their transgender child access medically necessary, age-appropriate healthcare in the state of Texas goes against the values of our companies," the letter said. "This policy creates fear for employees and their families, especially those with transgender children, who might now be faced with choosing to provide the best possible medical care for their children but risk having those children removed by child protective services for doing so. It is only one of several efforts discriminating against transgender youth that are advancing across the country."

The companies went on to "call on our public leaders — in Texas and across the country — to abandon efforts to write discrimination into law and policy. It's not just wrong, it has an impact on our employees, our customers, their families, and our work."

In February, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton declared gender-affirming surgical procedures and treatments in children, including prescribing drugs that affect puberty, to be considered "child abuse."

In response to Paxton's legal opinion, the governor directed the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) "to conduct a prompt and thorough investigation of any reported instances of these abusive procedures in the State of Texas."

On Friday, Judge Amy Clark Meachum in Travis County blocked the state from enforcing Abbott's order.

"The court finds sufficient cause to enter a temporary injunction," Meachum said. She said Abbott's order was "beyond the scope of his authority and unconstitutional" and that the parents of a transgender child and a psychologist who filed suit against the governor were likely to succeed at trial, which is set for July.

Paxton said on Twitter Friday that he is appealing.

CNN has reached out to Abbott's office for a comment.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

One Elon Musk Tweet Supercharged a Texas Region's Transformation

Sophie Alexander

Bloomberg

March 11, 2022

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-03-11/how-an-elon-musk-tweet-is-fueling-a-boom-near-the-texas-home-of-spacex?sref=ytoldrow>

Evan Wood routinely gets text messages from strangers asking if he wants to sell his South Padre Island condo, which boasts a direct view of Elon Musk's Texas spaceport six miles to the south.

"There's no way I would even consider it," said Wood, a software engineer and space enthusiast based outside of Austin, who bought the condo during the pandemic after visiting with his family. To him, it's "mind-blowing" to see what Musk's SpaceX is doing at its launch site near the Gulf of Mexico.

Over in Brownsville, the first semblance of civilization you hit when exiting the barren 20-mile road from SpaceX's Starbase, similar tales are common. Bruno Zavaleta, a local real estate agent, had one client drive 16 hours from Atlanta and snap up two properties in cash the day he arrived. That buyer is now under contract for two more homes that are being built in a development called Palo Alto Groves, which touts its location as "home of Elon Musk's SpaceX Control Center."

These types of things didn't used to happen in Cameron County, affectionately referred to as the 956 (its area code) by locals, which has the kinds of small towns where everyone knows everyone, one in four people lives in poverty and kids often grow up to leave and never come back. Now money and people are pouring into the Texas border region, thanks to the world's richest man and his promise of a space revolution.

SpaceX has been in the area for years. But the craze really intensified, as these things do with Musk, after a tweet:

"Please consider moving to Starbase or greater Brownsville/South Padre area in Texas," Musk wrote in March 2021 to his millions of followers, 10 minutes before he promised \$10 million to Brownsville's downtown revitalization and \$20 million to its Cameron County schools.

Almost a year later, the Cameron County economy has been transformed by Musk supporters, space junkies and investors betting on his name. Zavaleta says it was that tweet that spurred his client to jump in his car and buy Brownsville houses. The city — located on the Mexico border, with a \$39,000 median household income — has a new identity as the "gateway to Mars." Some locals are

embracing the opportunity. Others are protesting the influx of wealth, fearing that the future of the area doesn't include them.

“Literally overnight, our market went nuts,” said Laurie Howell, a real estate agent in the South Padre area who sold Wood his condo. “One tweet, it changed everything.”

So goes the power of Musk, the rare billionaire whose fame and mystique are untethered to his net worth (now at \$216 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index). He tweets, and 77 million people listen — many of them die-hard fans, and others who are simply aware of his ability to move markets and act accordingly. If Musk were to tweet “jump,” many of his devotees would respond, “how high?” while another cohort would go buy trampolines. When Musk tweets a picture of a Shiba Inu, someone buys cryptocurrency based on the dog breed. When Musk tweets that people should to move to Brownsville, someone drives 16 hours to South Texas and buys four homes.

Across Cameron County, the Musk effect has been profound. New businesses are given names such as Launchpad Crossing and The Moon Rock; existing spots are flaunting portraits of Musk and spaceships on merchandise, or creating products like a five-pound “SpaceX burger” that’s “out of this world.” The local schools are tailoring kids’ educations to the billionaire’s interests — spaceships, electric cars and solar energy — to create a “pipeline of skilled workers” for his companies, said Juan Chavez, director of the career and technical education program for Brownsville schools. Aerospace-related companies like flying car company Paragon VTOL, the Space Channel and venture capital firm Spaced Ventures are moving to the area.

“It’s like we’re going from the Flintstones to the Jetsons,” said Felipe Romero, director of communications and marketing for Brownsville, the county’s largest city.

Musk, 50, is becoming an outsized presence across Texas, moving to a home near SpaceX’s Boca Chica site and bringing Tesla Inc.’s headquarters to Austin. Outside the city, he’s building out a Gigafactory that’s 23% larger than the U.S. Pentagon, and plans to eventually employ more than 20,000 people to build Tesla’s Model Y and Cybertruck. That growth is contributing to a boom in Austin, where legions of tech workers are pouring in to take advantage of new jobs and cheaper real estate than places like Silicon Valley.

But Brownsville, population 187,000, is quite different from the bustling state capital. It’s one of the poorest places in the country, with its quiet downtown marked by rundown thrift shops, empty storefronts, and now, two colorful murals funded by Musk. Almost 94% of residents are Hispanic or Latino, and until SpaceX broke ground in the area in 2014, its economy was almost exclusively characterized by its port and cross-border activity.

Tensions have flared in the past few weeks alone. In late February, one of the Musk murals was vandalized with the words “gentrified” and “stop SpaceX.” It was the culmination of months of complaints about the bright pink painting because, people said, it doesn’t reflect Brownsville culture and it was done by a Los Angeles artist instead of a local. Mayor Juan “Trey” Mendez, who has posted pictures of himself smiling with Musk on social media, was criticized for putting a mug shot of the woman arrested for the graffiti on his Facebook page and noting her opposition to SpaceX.

SpaceX didn’t respond to emailed requests for comment.

The success of Cameron County's great pivot largely hinges on the success of SpaceX, which has, in Musk's own words, a "genuine risk of bankruptcy." The billionaire held an event at Starbase in February with much fanfare, telling a crowd that he expected Starship to be ready for a launch in "a couple of months." The 394-foot-tall spacecraft that Musk envisions will one day carry people to Mars provided a dramatic backdrop.

The last time Musk made such a formal presentation, in 2019, he said the rocket would have its first orbital test flight within months and would carry people on a mission within a year. But several test launches, with no one aboard, ended in flames. It took until last May before Starship was able to take off and settle back near its launchpad without violent incident. One of those failed attempts was in March 2021, the day Musk sent his fateful tweets.

Real estate investors are betting that once the rocket is successful, tourists will flock to watch the blast offs — and they'll need a place to stay. Then there are the SpaceX employees who moved to the region. Howell, the South Padre area agent, said her client base has partially switched from second-home buying "Winter Texans" to 20- and 30-somethings buying houses for the first time because they're going to work for the company.

The median price of a home in Brownsville soared 21% to \$185,000 last year, according to the local board of Realtors. In South Padre Island, it was a 29% increase to \$330,000. Even with the sharp jumps, those values are still low compared to the national median house price of \$350,000, and are particularly inexpensive for the types of people investing in the region.

"\$300,000? I'll take two!" joked Norma Ibarra-Cantu, an administrator at the Brownsville Independent School District, imitating some of the newcomers.

For many residents, though, that price point is out of reach. Back in 2019, Ramiro Gonzalez was looking and says he was overwhelmed with options in his \$200,000 price range. Gonzalez, a registered nurse who lives with his parents, son, brother and niece in a one-story home near the airport, said he put off purchasing a place of his own because he didn't expect the market to change so dramatically.

"Now I can't because it's so expensive," said Gonzalez, 41, adding that now the types of homes he was looking at are going for \$350,000 and there are hardly any on the market. He's considering moving outside of the city, but he'd prefer to stay close to his family. "I need to put in more overtime to buy a place."

Andrea Rudnik, co-founder of Team Brownsville, a nonprofit that helps migrants along the Mexican border, said the newcomers have affected her work. One of the group's main services is providing the migrants with hotel rooms for the night, but last year there were times when SpaceX employees filled the spots first.

"We've had weekends or days where there weren't any hotel rooms," Rudnik said. "Then you run into problems. If you have to house a migrant, if you have a very, very vulnerable family and you need to house them, where are you going to house them?"

Howell's brother Larry Hodgson is hoping to capitalize on some of that demand for hotel space. Hodgson and his family have owned 75 acres of land between the SpaceX site and downtown

Brownsville for about half a century. Right now, the 20-mile road connecting the areas has little more than a shooting range, historical markers and a border patrol checkpoint alongside brush and cacti.

Hodgson, a 75-year-old former seafood wholesaler, has partnered with local developer Katherine Zeigler to build “Launchpad Crossing,” a 20-acre commercial park that will include a convenience store and gas station, restaurants, retail shops and one or two hotels. Hodgson said his nephew, who helps clear SpaceX debris following launches, has been in touch with the company’s travel and lodging team and they told him “Build it and we’ll fill it.” Stripes, a local convenience-store brand, has committed to fill one of the corner lots, Hodgson and Zeigler said.

Despite SpaceX’s impact on the local economy, there’s little sign of the new employees. Unlike in other instances of techies invading small towns, crowding their coffee shops and trashing their nature trails, SpaceX employees haven’t had the same impact on Cameron County. Outside of Starbase’s campus, which is relatively insular, they’re not all that visible. “They’re too busy working,” said Howell, laughing.

It’s also unclear just how many SpaceX employees there are in Cameron County. Helen Ramirez, deputy city manager of Brownsville, estimates roughly 2,000 jobs with many of them being filled by locals. It seems everyone in the city knows someone who knows someone who works at the company. SpaceX has more than 70 job listings on its website in Brownsville, from engineers to a human-resources manager, sous chef and barista.

Christian Zanca, a 27-year-old Cameron County native, said it’s the opportunities for locals that are so exciting. He co-owns a food truck park and bar called the Broken Sprocket that features murals paying homage to the nearby spaceport, including one of Musk smoking marijuana, a scene from his famous cameo on the Joe Rogan Experience. Zanca’s starting a new food truck park — the Moon Rock — because of the Sprocket’s success, which he credits to patronage of SpaceX employees. He hopes the company will create opportunities for local kids.

“We’ve never really had anything besides the Port of Brownsville and agriculture going on,” Zanca said. “If it wasn’t maritime, it was agriculture and if it wasn’t that, you were leaving to get out.”

Others are more skeptical that SpaceX’s presence will benefit locals and not just wealthy outsiders. The controversy surrounding the vandalized Brownsville mural led to a demonstration on Feb. 27 over the space-ification of the city.

“SpaceX will provide opportunities,” said Alexfaith Larios, an organizer of the protest. “It’s just not the kinds of opportunities for the people who live in Brownsville.”

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Guest commentary: Voting issues will not deter us from making a difference

Rev. James E. Daniels

Galveston County Daily News

March 11, 2022

https://www.galvnews.com/opinion/guest_columns/article_2c9948bc-de29-52fa-b99e-0ad282708680.html

Now that the primaries are over, it's fair to grade the efficiency of the voting system. As a disabled senior citizen, I've given it a grade of "F."

Those of us who've been voting by mail found that the state legislators, with their restrictive voter laws, made it more difficult for us to vote by mail.

Whether it was intentional or not, senior citizens, who sacrificed and fought to get the right to vote by mail, discovered that their elected officials did a lot to prevent them from casting their votes. We all became victims of the "big lie" regarding voter fraud. No such animal existed.

I agree that some form of identification should be used in order for one to vote. But to remove easy access to voting from all voters, Democrats, Republicans and Independents, is a shame and a sin.

It appears that our legislators cared little about sacrificing some in their own party in order to achieve their authoritarian goals.

Senior citizens and handicapped individuals of all races and ethnicities are affected.

Texas legislators aren't the only group that enacted these Jim Crow laws; it happened all over the country. Criminal or not, what has happened to common decency and the "golden rule?"

There's an old saying that says, "If it isn't broken, why fix it?"

The answer in this case is simple. You cannot win unless you rig the game. Draconian voter restrictions and gerrymandering are major tools for rigging the election game.

Why are the people who have invoked these measures so afraid to let their record speak for them?

Our county judge and his commissioners gerrymandered Precinct 336, my former large Democratic precinct, into three sections. Currently, I'm in Precinct 196, and my immediate neighbors (less than a quarter of a mile away) are in precinct 436. They were determined to dilute our strength by whatever means necessary.

As I go into this new precinct I will do so with great drive to make my community a better place to live and raise children. I will work as diligently and fight as hard in this precinct as I always have for Precinct 3.

I will expect the same respect in Precinct 1 as I received in Precinct 3.

We're not asking for favors, just fairness. This community's resilience and determination has been shown by our willingness to work together to see P.S. Simms rise from the rubble, the beautiful structure that's the new Sarah Giles La Marque Middle School being built and the family and community of Greater Bell Zion Baptist Church begin to rise from ashes.

We have strong roots here. Our roots rise from the soil of the Earth and bind us together. We're like trees that are planted by waters and shall not be moved. We sway, we bend, we break, but we come back each time, stronger and wiser. Transition is always difficult and is meant to be accomplished. We believe.

The Rev. James E. Daniels is founder and chairman of the Eagles' Nest community organization, co-chairman of the Westend Ministers and Alliance, and lives in Texas City.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Why are pickups so expensive? Blame the Chicken Tax

Daniel Griswold

Dallas Morning News

March 13, 2022

<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/commentary/2022/03/13/why-are-pick-ups-so-expensive-blame-the-chicken-tax/>

Americans love their pickup trucks, and nowhere more than Texas. But through a conspiracy of factors, new and used light trucks have become more expensive and harder to buy in 2022, and Washington is a big part of the problem.

Chip shortages and supply-chain disruptions because of COVID have played a role, but so too have U.S. government policies. A prohibitive 25% tariff on imported trucks continues to restrict competition in the domestic market, inflating prices and leaving supply chains even more vulnerable to disruption.

As Texans know, pickup trucks are not necessarily a luxury item. Families find them useful for work and for chores at home, especially in rural areas. Light trucks are indispensable for towing trailers, boats and RVs, and trucks are popular for transporting family members safely and comfortably to school or the football game.

Yet owning a pickup truck has become harder to reach for middle-class households. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, prices for new cars and trucks in January were up 12% from a year earlier and prices for used vehicles up a whopping 40%. Fewer units are available on dealer lots, and Ford has been forced to suspend orders altogether for its lower-priced Maverick pickup truck because of production shortages.

Higher truck prices and production shortages impose an outside cost on many Texas drivers. Even though fewer than one in ten Americans lives in Texas, Texans buy one out of every six full-size pickups sold in the U.S., according to MOTORTREND.

Contributing to the shortages and lack of affordability is a 25% tariff on pickup trucks that dates back to a trade dispute with Europe in the 1960s. When the European Economic Community raised tariffs on imported chicken from the U.S., President Lyndon Johnson retaliated with a 25% "chicken tax" on imported trucks and other items. The tariff was originally aimed at vehicles made by Volkswagen in West Germany, but even though the original issue over chickens has been resolved, and Germany no longer makes light trucks for the U.S. market, the tariff remains in place out of political inertia.

The truck tariff enables U.S. automakers to dominate the domestic market. Ford F series, GM Silverado and Sierra, and Dodge Ram trucks account for 95% of light truck sales in the United States. Toyota employs more than 3,000 workers at its Texas facility near San Antonio producing its Tundra line of pickup trucks, but they account for a small share of the market, and almost no trucks are

imported from outside North America because of the tariff. In 2021, Ford and GM posted record profits of nearly \$10 billion each, with light trucks their most profitable line of products.

Instead of trying to repeal the tariff to make trucks more affordable, the U.S. government in recent years has been moving in the wrong direction. A 2011 U.S. free trade agreement with South Korea was supposed to allow light trucks made in that country to be imported to the United States duty-free starting in 2021, but the Trump administration strong-armed the Koreans into postponing the tariff elimination until 2041. If those tariffs had been allowed to expire last year, the U.S. International Trade Commission estimated in a June 2018 report that an additional 14,000 to 32,000 more light trucks would have been available for sale each year in the domestic U.S. market.

The Trump administration also renegotiated the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, replacing it with the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The revised agreement tightens the rules of origin to require that 45% of the parts in trucks be made by North American workers who are paid more than \$16 an hour. This no-Mexicans-need-apply provision will make it more costly to manufacture pickup trucks in Mexico for duty-free shipment to the United States.

A USITC study in April 2019 concluded that the USMCA's tighter rules on motor vehicles will result in higher prices for consumers and fewer vehicles available for sale in the U.S. market. Unfortunately, the Biden administration is fighting to make the rules even more restrictive.

If the truck tariff were repealed, domestic production would continue at a robust level. For a number of reasons, it makes sense to manufacture trucks in the market where they're sold. Domestic production reduces transportation costs while making it easier to tailor vehicle design to local consumer preferences. That's one reason why international automakers, such as Toyota, Nissan and BMW, produce hundreds of thousands of cars in the United States each year even though the tariff on imported cars is a relatively low 2.5%.

Congress and the president should work together to lower or eliminate the steep duty on imported pickup trucks. The result would be enhanced competition, more flexible inventories and lower prices, making it more likely that Texans will find the right truck at the right price.

Daniel Griswold is an adjunct scholar with the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. He wrote this column for The Dallas Morning News.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Trump falsely claims his election was stolen — but what happens if one is?

Douglas MacKinnon

The Hill

March 12, 2022

<https://thehill.com/opinion/white-house/597512-trump-claims-his-election-was-stolen-what-happens-if-one-is>

In the early morning hours of Nov. 4, 2020, then-President Trump began speculating that votes were stolen from him in certain counties and states. He has only amplified these false claims since giving the White House over to President Biden.

To be sure, some counties and states discovered voting “irregularities.” But the question was to prove whether those irregularities rose to a level where the outcome in a certain locale could be challenged, or even reversed. (Answer: They didn't) The burden of proof fell to Trump and his supporters, and they failed a number of times to prove their contentions — embarrassingly so, considering Trump put forth Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell as the faces of his defense team.

That said, the charges, countercharges and deeply polarized political atmosphere have caused the thought to cross my mind — as I'm sure it has for other Americans: “What would happen if, with some future election, it were proven that a presidential candidate and his team managed to successfully ‘steal’ an election but were found out after taking office?”

Some may want to deny it purely for partisan reasons, but the fact of the matter is that electronic voting, mail-in ballots and “harvested” ballots can potentially be manipulated. Even without those, voter fraud is as old as the voting process itself.

At the moment, I am re-reading what I consider to be one of the greatest political memoirs of all time: “A Political Education” by Harry McPherson.

In full disclosure, I had the honor of working with McPherson in the late 1990s when he was a partner at the law firm Verner Liipfert Bernhard McPherson & Hand, then one of Washington's most powerful law firms, which was not surprising when you stop to consider that, at the time, it employed former Senate majority leaders Bob Dole and George Mitchell and former governors Ann Richards of Texas and Jim Blanchard of Michigan.

Before he became a partner, McPherson started off his political life in 1956 as a proud liberal Democrat working for then-Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson. During that time, McPherson morphed into one of the best political minds and political writers in the history of U.S. politics. Although partisan, he was incredibly honest and honorable; he called the shots as he saw them. His book should be required reading for anyone serving on Capitol Hill or in the White House.

In the book, McPherson gives a thumbnail sketch of those who populated the U.S. Senate in 1956. Speaking of then-Sen. Dennis Chavez of New Mexico, he related a funny but relevant anecdote: An Associated Press reporter was said to have phoned a county clerk in the middle of Chavez's political territory on an election night to ask, “How many votes does Sen. Chavez have in your county?” The clerk, believing he was talking to a friend of Chavez, replied: “How many votes does he need?”

Again, I say all that to emphasize that it always has been the case that votes can appear or disappear in mysterious ways. So, what if enough of them “appeared” or “disappeared” to alter the legitimate results of a presidential election?

Well, the Constitution does address this issue. Although “experts” may have different interpretations of Article II of the Constitution, it still comes down to this: When the Electoral College certifies a winner, that's it — no do-overs.

To be sure, the history of American presidential elections is rife with controversy. At various times, a number of voters thought the administrations of John Quincy Adams, Rutherford B. Hayes, John F. Kennedy, George W. Bush, Donald Trump and now Joe Biden were “illegitimate” in one way or

another. For those outraged by those elections, it came down to: “You can cry me a river, but we are getting back to the business of governing the nation.”

Still, what if one day irrefutable proof surfaced that a presidential election was “stolen”? Some experts and scholars believe if this happened, the evidence could be turned over to the House for possible impeachment. But then, the House might impeach, and the Senate might not convict. Or, the House might impeach and the Senate convicts, but then what happens? The guilty president might be removed, but what if the vice president also was involved in the theft of the election?

At a time when it seemingly has become easier for votes to be manipulated or “lost” — in Harris County, Texas, for example, 10,000 votes were discovered uncounted during the March 1 primary — and our nation has become so politically polarized, common sense screams out for an amendment to the Constitution to address this potential nightmare scenario.

Of course, we could go back to a strict system of voting in person, with paper ballots, which apparently was more difficult to game, but I fear that option is gone. We have what we have and we’re likely to have accusations and threats intensify in coming elections. Let’s amend the Constitution.

Douglas MacKinnon, a political and communications consultant, was a writer in the White House for Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, and former special assistant for policy and communications at the Pentagon during the last three years of the Bush administration.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

Seven Steps to Destroy a Democracy

Charles Blow

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/13/opinion/republicans-democracy.html>

We are now living through a fully fledged attack on nonwhite power in this country, as conservative white people assert their authority. Until now, the effects of this crusade were somewhat unclear. Data needed to be collected after new conservative laws and policies had gone into effect.

Well, we now have some of the first data, and it is devastating.

According to The Texas Tribune, during the primary elections in Texas this month, 18,742 mail-in ballots were rejected in 16 of the 20 counties with the most registered voters. It was there, too, that the ruinous effects of Texas’ new voter ID requirements were particularly obvious.

The paper pointed out that these counties rejected 6 percent to nearly 22 percent of the mail-in ballots cast in the primaries, rates that could easily set a record, since fewer than 2 percent were rejected statewide in the 2018 midterm elections.

It might be tempting to view each election outrage as discrete or to focus on the specific rather than zoom out and see the bigger picture. But when you do, you see that Republicans are following a step-by-step plan to transform elections and the electorate.

1. First, undercount the number of Black and brown people who are in the country, in order to skew congressional districts and the Electoral College.

Any attempt to prevent the Census Bureau from fulfilling its duty can contribute to these efforts.

Last week, The New York Times reported that the bureau had grossly undercounted people of color in this country in 2020:

Although the bureau did not say how many people it missed entirely, they were mostly people of color, disproportionately young ones. The census missed counting 4.99 of every 100 Hispanics, 5.64 of every 100 Native Americans and 3.3 of every 100 African Americans. In contrast, for every 100 residents counted, the census wrongly added 1.64 non-Hispanic whites and 2.62 ethnic Asians.

2. Use census data to racially gerrymander states.

Pack as many Black and brown voters into the fewest districts so that no matter how high the voter turnout is, the number of seats they can win in Congress or state legislatures is capped.

Take Texas again. The state experienced strong population growth over the past 10 years, earning it two new congressional seats. Ninety-five percent of that growth was among people of color. Even so, as The Texas Tribune reported in December, Texas Republicans placed the two new districts under white voters' control, reduced the Hispanic-majority districts from eight to seven and dropped the Black-majority districts from one to none.

3. The next step is to erect barriers to when, how and if people can cast a ballot.

According to the Brennan Center for Justice, 19 states passed at least 34 laws restricting access to voting in 2021 — the most since the center started tracking these laws in 2011. And as of January, at least 13 bills restricting access to voting had already been filed for 2022.

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4. Then allow big money to operate virtually unchecked to influence the electorate.

The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision allowed unlimited corporate and anonymous dark money donations in our elections. Money buys influence, and influence can translate into power. Now the wealthy can press their thumbs more heavily on the scale, anonymously in some cases.

5. Reject as many ballots as possible.

This is where the mail-in ballot data from Texas comes in.

6. Change “the referees” of elections, as States United Action put it.

By the nonpartisan group States United Action’s accounting, as of March 1, over 80 people who denied the results of the 2020 presidential election are now running for governor, attorney general or secretary of state — the state officials who run, oversee and protect our elections.

One of Georgia’s new election laws would even let the state temporarily take over some election boards. (As you may recall, Donald Trump said to Georgia state officials after the election, “I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have.”)

7. Finally, have a Supreme Court stacked in such a way that it is hesitant to step in and beat back these restrictions.

In January three federal judges blocked an Alabama redistricting map because they said it most likely discriminated against Black people. But in February the conservative majority on the Supreme Court stepped in and allowed Alabama to use the map anyway.

Chipping away at voter protections has become a theme of the court. Ever since its 2013 decision gutting a key part of the Voting Rights Act, which forced states with a history of racial discrimination to seek federal approval before changing their voting laws, the court has made it increasingly difficult for liberals to prove that state officials are violating the law. Just last year, the conservative majority endorsed Arizona’s highly restrictive voting laws, passed by the Republican-controlled State Legislature after the 2020 elections.

And just like that, in seven easy steps, a democracy can be destroyed. In fact, it is being destroyed.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)

27,000 rejected ballots is unacceptable

Editorial Board

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<https://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/2022/03/13/27000-rejected-ballots-is-unacceptable/>

Does your vote count? Probably. Maybe. If you got the paperwork right. And if it didn’t count this time, we’ll make sure it does next time.

That seems to be the message to many Texas voters — Republicans and Democrats alike — after more than 27,000 mail-in ballots were rejected in 120 counties for the March 1 primary, according to reporting by The Associated Press. Though many of those rejections may yet be remedied, early returns put the rejection rate among mail voters at about 17%, dramatically higher than in the 2020 general election, when fewer than 1% of mail-in ballots were rejected statewide, according to The AP.

To put it simply, that’s unacceptable.

Updates to Texas election law passed last year were supposed to make it “easier to vote and harder to cheat.” That’s what we kept hearing from Republican supporters of the reforms. But apparently, the

new voter ID provision for mail-in ballots has failed in at least half that charge. There are 27,000 reasons to think it's now harder to vote in Texas, particularly for seniors and disabled Texans.

One frustrated voter, Pamiel Gaskin, 75, of Houston, told The AP: "It took me three tries and 28 days, but I got my ballot and I voted."

We supported some of the voting reforms, and we are generally in favor of common-sense measures to verify voter identity and to scrap outdated practices like signature matching. But a plan is only as good as its execution, and the execution here flopped.

Most of the rejected ballots appear to be the result of confusion over procedure. Do I put my ID number on the ballot application or the envelope carrying the actual ballot? Do I use my driver's license number or Social Security number? Voters were unsure because the changes were poorly executed, with too many confusing messages, and no adequate statewide education campaign to prepare voters.

Meanwhile, some county elections administrators feared that voter outreach efforts would get them in trouble under the new law. They pointed to a new provision banning those officials from "soliciting" mail ballots from people who haven't requested them.

Elections officials, including Texas Secretary of State John Scott, say the rejection rate should drop in future elections, once the changes have had time to shake out. But "this will sort itself out" isn't very reassuring to voters like Gaskin.

Voting is sacrosanct. Americans get understandably upset when they get the feeling that someone is erecting barriers to exercising that right. Texas already has problems with low turnout, especially in primary elections. This news will only reinforce the creeping suspicion among voters that their vote doesn't count.

Scott and his office must work with county election officials to fix this mess right away.

[\[BACK TO TOP\]](#)