

Electoral Power and Latino Family Economic Mobility

Juan H. Flores, MUP

Will the election of President Biden lead to improvements in the social and economic mobility of Texas Latinos families? First, let's note that Texas has a history of political and policy conflicts with federal initiatives, particularly when the elected administration is democratic and considered progressive, liberal, etc. Second, while one objective of government is the *bienestar* (well-being) of all its people, Texas ranks high nationally in continually falling short on numerous equity and justice measures.

America's current ideological, partisanship, and racial/ethnic divisive environment is occurring during the Covid-19 pandemic and presents difficult challenges for Latino families. Two core divisive issues are the rise of extremist right-wing groups and seemingly daily displays of America's hypocrisy of equality and justice to people of color. Former President Trump's racist rhetoric and policies helped fuel this environment and has severely damaged the social contract between government and the people it's there to serve.

The prospects for Latino social and economic improvement are more favorable with President Biden compared to the 4 years of President Trump's administration. Arguably, some Latinos supported and benefited from the former President's administration policies; however, most Latinos did not, and many were marginalized and victimized. His policies and rhetoric were much aligned with Texas's repeated voter suppression, immigrant blaming and inequitable human capital investments in education, health care, employment, housing, and economic development.

In contrast, the Biden administration promises a respectful and ethical administration with policy goals grounded in social justice and equity. Advocates will need to hold him to his promises. Nonetheless, reliance must not be on President Biden's administration. Changing Texas's political power structure and policymaking approach must be the priority.

Since the late 1960's, Latino family social and economic progress in Texas continues at a "drip, drip, drip" pace, such that nearly one-half of the population remains disadvantaged by most objective measures.

The nation's recent record high voter turnout failed to turn Texas "blue." Nonetheless, Texas must maintain year-round organizing efforts to fuel high voter turnout for even greater Latino and Black voter participation and to shift the state's power structure. Long-term, on-the-ground strategic investment in Black and Latino communities in Georgia and Arizona produced a result that marked a substantial power shift. In Texas, organizing and building similar electoral power driven by community grass-roots leaders cannot be over-emphasized.

The urgency is underscored by renewed state legislative effort that includes:

- Continuing to introduce voter suppression bills.
- Appointing a team member of President Trump's legal team to overturn the 2020 election to House Election Committee leadership.

- Appointing an individual who steered the last redistricting process, which was met with extensive challenges for discriminating against Latino and Black voters, to House Redistricting Committee leadership.
- Changing the Texas Senate rules to allow bills to be brought to the floor without support of any Democrat.

The state’s ideological and political conservatism and racialized biases have always been part of the policymaking landscape. However, “conservative” policy ideas appear to have disappeared. This is evident from the near unanimous rejection by local, state, and congressional Republicans who rejected the Presidential election results as legitimate. The implications for more regressive and inequitable state policymaking that will perpetuate inequalities and racial and ethnic divisions are ominous.

Texas Republican leadership has made it clear it will fight President Biden’s “socialist” policies. They will pursue all possible means to obstruct President Biden’s progressive policy agenda. Early examples are demonstrated by AG Paxton’s immigration lawsuit against the President’s Executive Order for a temporary moratorium on child-parent separations and Republican opposition to the Covid-19 relief package.

The Covid-19 pandemic worsened the existing health and economic inequalities among people of color and further exposed the inequitable policies and institutionalized racism that helped create them. It’s projected to have a more lasting effect on people of color than the recession of 2008.

The state’s failure to adequately collect racial and ethnic pandemic data and its targeting of recovery support to Latino and Black high-risk employment industries and communities is unconscionable. The same scenario is occurring with the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out. Local governments, non-profit service providers and advocates have assumed the front-line leadership respond to the pandemic, albeit with haphazard collaboration from the state.

The Governor’s comments regarding economic recovery amid the ongoing pandemic in his recent “State of the State” address and his legislative session priorities affirm the preceding. Most major newspapers judged the address as “red meat” for his right-wing base with limited substance targeting critical state needs. Recent statewide surveys ([2036](#), [Lyceum](#)) underscore the lack of attention from the Governor’s stated priorities to that of the pandemic effects—jobs, health, and other concerns of most Texans.

Texas history is replete with obstruction of federal initiatives to reduce poverty and improve family economic mobility. The stated arguments focus on state rights, government intrusion, and purported creation of dependency from federal program handouts. Federal government overreach can be a legitimate concern; however, too often the state has taken steps to protect corporate interest as opposed to embracing program initiatives that invest in human capital to advance equity and prosperity opportunities.

As a result, the state consistently ranks among the top ten states with the highest rates of poverty and minimum wage earnings, income inequality, lack of health insurance, teen birth rates and poor

access to quality healthcare, food insecurity, and high rate of sub-prime mortgage home loans. In addition, Texas ranks among the ten states with the lowest rates of state aid per pupil and funding for early childhood education, low-income population covered by Medicaid, and family economic assets and home ownership.

Texas's social and health policies have marginalized populations and created barriers to economic mobility by limiting Texans' opportunities to earn a living wage, prevent and reduce poverty, graduate from high school, complete a college degree or improve their health. Additionally, these unjust policies have resulted in numerous legal actions against the state for their discriminatory impacts. The list of these impacts is long: education, Medicaid, foster care, mental health, criminal and juvenile justice, family planning services, immigrant rights and voter suppression.

While news stories of personal pain and loss from the pandemic are many, the full scope of its impact on the Latino population requires more investigation, documentation, and accountability. The state's botched response and inequitable human capital investment will probably extend the economic damage into the next generation of Latino families. Latino families risk facing additional barriers to building wealth and future opportunities for their children. Wealth means making a living wage or more and building assets (home, health insurance, saving, retirement fund, etc.) that create more choices and resources for their children.

In summary, political power and policy influence must be acquired for most Latino families to achieve middle-class *bienestar*. Latinos and allies must continually increase their organizing and advocacy from the local to state level to change the lingering institutionalized racism and inequitable minimalist policymaking that permeates Texas body-politics.