

Texas Legislature, Advocacy, and Latino Interest

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The current 87th Texas legislative session and the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on Latino families has added to Latino and ally's advocacy challenges. How will Latino issues and priorities fare when measured against bills proposed, passed, and signed by the Governor -- voter suppression, education, employment, health, housing, immigration, environment, social justice, and taxes?

Follow the money. The state legislature is proposing a budget in the \$250 billion range which has yet to include billions of federal Medicaid and Covid-19 stimulus relief dollars. Transparency has been sorely missing regarding the allocation and use of relief funds. Given Latinos represent 40% of the state's population one would expect their interest and concerns among the budget priorities.

As important, higher U.S. Census counts will prospectively increase the amount of federal dollars the state receives that help support numerous safety-net, infrastructure, and other programs. Indeed, because of Latino population growth the U.S. Census announced that Texas will gain 2 congressional seats for the next 10 years - (*thank you Latinos*).

The combination of political rhetoric, aim of legislative bills, and use of federal Covid-19 relief funds amplify Latino families' concerns. Texas is set to receive \$27.2 billion from the recently passed American Rescue Plan Act - \$16.8 and \$10.4 billion to state and local government, respectively. The Biden administration's legislative policy initiatives have placed increased importance on concerns that the state continues to neglect.

First, Texas congressional and state-level republican leadership are demonstrating the states' legacy of political and policy conflicts with federal initiatives. They have labeled the newly elected administration somewhere between too progressive to outright socialist. Arguably, the opposition is hyper-partisan and anti-democratic given many accept and perpetuate the 'big lie' of a fraudulent presidential election.

In unison, the Texas republican delegation and state leaders are opposed to President Biden's policy proposals. Policy proposals that regardless of their focus (Covid-19 stimulus, infrastructure, policing, environment, immigration, etc.) are also based on equity, economic opportunity, and social justice. Perspectives which are often not acknowledged by the opposition as problems that require federal policy nor funding investments – nor issues that exist in our state.

Secondly, the state's obsessive pro-business, anti-regulatory, and minimal human capital investment policy approach worsened the effects of the Covid-19 and winter storm disasters exemplified by:

- The slow and uncoordinated implementation of prevention policies and accessing of needed resources to mitigate the Covid-19 impacts.
- Inadequate public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic because of decades of underfunding.
- Continually undermined and failed to take funding and regulatory advantage of the Affordable Care Act ('Obama Care') to improve health care access and reduce the state's uninsured crisis – worsening the Covid-19 pandemic's impact.

- Like the public health system, the unemployment system was overwhelmed and exposed as underfunded and outdated to respond adequately to the pandemic.
- State diverted over 1 billion of Covid-19 stimulus education funds to fill other area budget gaps.
- Department of Housing and Community Affairs had only released 3% of the \$1.17 billion rent support funds between the period February-April 2021.
- The February 2021 winter storm power outages resulted from a failure to regulate and implement prevention methods, preceded by decades of neglectful decision-making. The deaths, suffering, and economic losses were staggering and still being calculated.

People of color, particularly Latinos, have/will continue to share a disproportionate share of the excess deaths, suffering, economic losses, and recovery period from these policy decisions and disasters.

Finally, it appears the ‘Texas Way of Policy Making’ (minimal human capital investments) is being exacerbated for people of color and marginalized groups because ‘extremism’ (white supremacy, Trumpism, nativism, etc.) has penetrated the 87th Legislative session.

Numerous state and national articles have described the Texas legislature’s efforts to curtail voter access using the following terms – voter suppression, Jim Crow, racist, and anti-democratic. Texas introduced the largest number (49) of restrictive voting bills in the nation. Senate Bill 7 and House Bill 6 are two of the most damaging in scope and barefaced demonstrations to keep a political ideology and party in power.

Similarly, there are large number of ‘anti’ gender, labor, abortion, immigration, and a litany of bills damaging to racial/ethnic equity concerns that target education, housing, and basic economic mobility (regressive tax and anti-wage/benefit bills).

Admittedly, the preceding discussion did not mention Latino responsive bills’ that are among the thousands introduced in the 87th Legislative Session. There are some responsive bills targeting education, health, housing, immigration, criminal justice, and other important concerns. Latinos and allies are advocating for bills aligned with Latino concerns as well as opposing the ‘bad’ bills harmful to our community.

The perspective here is an overarching view of the legislative environment and what it could mean for social and economic mobility of Latino families. Specifically, in the 4 weeks left in the current legislative session:

1. How will Latino families be impact by the legislative bills ultimately signed; and
2. What influence did Latinos have on the outcomes?

In summary, these questions assume there is a Latino ‘agenda’ from which our issues and concerns are monitored and analyzed across the multitude of legislative politics and bills. The current divisive political and racial/ethnic polarization demand it.