

Inside the Democrats' battle to take back Texas

Will shifting demographics and anti-Trump energy be enough to reverse the state's long Republican dominance?

Demetri Sevastopulo 13 MINUTES AGO

The first time Sima Ladjevardian experienced a political revolution, she was 12 years old and sitting in a classroom in Tehran in the middle of what felt like an earthquake. “Everything was shaking,” she says, recalling the uprising that engulfed Iran four decades ago and led to the country’s Islamic republic. “We all came out and it was a sea of people throwing acid into the school and shooting guns in the air. Very scary.”

There had been whispers at home about the dangers of the revolution. Ladjevardian’s grandmother had helped women secure the right to vote and then become a member of parliament. Her father was also an MP at the time. But after that eventful day, those rumours turned into a harsh reality when her mother told her and her brother that they would go to Paris — just for a short while. “I had a really weird premonition that we were just never gonna go back,” she says.

She was right. Her family spent two years in France, before moving to California to pursue the American dream. As a teenager, Ladjevardian perfected her English by watching *Star Wars*. Now 54, she talks to me from Houston, Texas, where in next month’s US elections she will embark on her own political quest with the Democratic party: [she is campaigning to oust Dan Crenshaw](#), a freshman Republican in the second congressional district in Texas.

The turning point for Ladjevardian was watching Donald Trump win the White House in 2016. “That night when Trump won, I honestly had so much anxiety and flashbacks to everything that had happened in my life, to kind of thinking, ‘Oh my god, there’s going to be a revolution in this country,’” she says, explaining that she felt Trump had given licence to people to be racist and xenophobic. There was only one answer. “I decided to get more involved.”



Democratic candidate Sima Ladjevardian decided to run against former Navy Seal Dan Crenshaw after he voted against a bill to lower drug prices. Theirs is the eighth most expensive congressional contest of the 435 races next month © Rahim Fortune

Four years later, Ladjevardian is one of many Democratic candidates in Texas hoping to convert anti-Trump sentiment into victories at the state and national level on November 3. [Women are at the forefront of this push](#) — from MJ Hegar, a retired Air Force pilot who is taking aim at Senator John Cornyn, to those such as **Natalí** Hurtado and Keke Williams, who are fighting for seats in the Texas House of Representatives — the lower house of the state legislature.

Expectations for their party are rising. Joe Biden, the Democrat presidential candidate, is trailing Trump in Texas by just four points and has invested several million dollars there to boost his campaign and help other races. [Democrats are also raising record amounts of money](#), helping to return the Lone Star state to serious battleground status for the first time in years. The Ladjevardian-Crenshaw fight is the eighth most expensive congressional contest of the 435 races this November.

Republicans in the state take the threat seriously. Steve Munisteri, former head of the Texas Republican party, says: “We have to treat it like the largest competitive state in the union. Democrats are pouring a lot of money into the state, but Republicans are not.” Yet the former Trump White House official, who is [advising Cornyn in his race](#), says the Republican National Committee is convinced that “Texas is pretty solid” for them, even if he thinks the president is only “slightly ahead”.

Such optimism stems from the fact that Democrats have long fared badly in Texas. The south-western state is critical due to its 38 electoral college votes — the second-highest after California — but no Democratic presidential candidate has won there since Jimmy Carter in 1976. It has not elected a Democratic senator since 1988 or governor since 1990.

Over the past two decades, Republicans have also held sway over the redistricting of congressional seats that follows each US census. This is partly due to their majority hold on the Texas House of Representatives since 2002, after more than a century of Democratic domination. In 2003 and 2013, Texas congressional districts were [redrawn in a way that helped Republicans](#) control a large majority of the state’s 36 congressional seats.



No Democratic presidential candidate has won Texas since Jimmy Carter in 1976 and the state has not elected a Democratic senator since 1988 or governor since 1990 © AP/Charles Harrity

During 2018's midterm elections, however, Democrats saw hopeful signs that they could become a force in Texas again. In [a campaign that took the state by storm](#) and catapulted him on to the national stage, Beto O'Rourke, a former El Paso lawmaker, came very close to ousting Ted Cruz, the former Republican presidential contender, in the Senate race. The energy that he helped create has continued, feeding on a growing sense of opposition to Trump over everything from the president's handling of Covid-19 to his sowing of division over race.

But Democrats are most excited about the possibility that years of rapid demographic change could now return them to a strong foothold in Texas. That would energise the party and dramatically help fundraising. It would also increase the chances of future Democratic presidential candidates winning the state, a development with huge consequences for Republican prospects of taking the White House and one that could change American politics for a generation.

Ladjevardian encapsulates many of the trends in play. After graduating from law school in California three decades ago, she moved with her husband to Houston, which was then 40 per cent white. Recent census estimates suggest that the share of white residents has now fallen below 25 per cent. Months after Trump took office, she joined the O'Rourke Senate campaign, mobilising local voters. "This area is probably one of the most diverse counties in the nation . . . [But] the fact that not everybody was necessarily politically involved was a big deal," she says.

O'Rourke dropped out of the Democratic presidential race last November. But Ladjevardian was spurred to further action the following month, when [Crenshaw voted against a bill that would have lowered drug prices](#) — breaking a campaign promise. Ladjevardian was furious, partly because her own experience of breast cancer had taught her about healthcare costs. She decided to run against Crenshaw. "I came in literally the last hour of the day that you could declare," she says. "I just thought to myself, this country has given me so much . . . If I don't actually step up and do this, I would never forgive myself. I would never even be able to look at my kids."



Former Texas congressman Beto O'Rourke is heavily involved in the effort to mobilise Democrats to vote in the state House races. He says, 'The real story [of this election] is that you've got all these amazing voters in communities of colour who are showing up in record numbers in what had been the lowest voter turnout state in the country' © Paul Ratje/AFP via Getty Images

The Ladgevardian-Crenshaw race is still one of the tougher targets for Democrats.

Crenshaw is a former Navy Seal who wears a patch over the eye he lost in Afghanistan.

A strong fundraiser, he was the only Texas Republican invited to speak at the Republican National Convention in August. Munisteri says it is “not out of the realm of possibility” that Ladgevardian could win, but that a victory for her would signify a “big wave” for Democrats.

Whatever the result, the Democrats will probably struggle to make a large dent in the 22-13 advantage that the Texas Republicans have in the US House of Representatives, because of the way districts are drawn. Their main target, however, is the Texas House of Representatives. Having flipped 12 seats out of its 150 in 2018, [Democrats need just nine more to win the majority.](#)

My entire focus for this past year has been on the State House. There's nothing more important for the future of this country

Beto O'Rourke, former presidential candidate

[O'Rourke is heavily involved in these campaigns.](#) After withdrawing from the presidential contest, he formed a group called Powered by People that is mobilising Democrats to vote in the state House races. For him, these are the contests that matter most in the long term. Control of the state legislature would give Democrats more influence over the next [redistricting](#), which will see Texas gain more congressional seats because of its expanding population. The state will also secure a corresponding increase in its electoral college votes, making it even more important in future presidential races.

“My entire focus for this past year, with every breath in my body and every waking minute of the day, has been on the state House,” O'Rourke tells me on the phone after returning from two days campaigning in north Texas. “There's nothing more important for the future of this country.”

One of the candidates that Powered by People is promoting is [Natalí Hurtado, who is contesting a seat in Houston.](#) Ladjevardian tells me that Hurtado is a “big fighter”, and when I reach the 36-year-old, I see what she means. Hurtado's mother came from Honduras and received political asylum. Her father, a sailor from Uruguay, left his ship in New York. Hurtado was raised in Houston. When she was 19 and still in college, her parents, who came from conservative backgrounds, presented her with an ultimatum over the boyfriend she had been with for four months: “Get married or break up.”

They got married and one year later Hurtado gave birth to a daughter. But one day, after she had dropped her husband off at work, her life came crashing down. “I received a call from a detective who said my husband had been involved in a crime before we married,” she says.

The crime was murder and her husband received two life sentences. “It made me a young single mother overnight,” Hurtado says. Back with her parents, she survived with the help of food stamps and Medicaid, the federal health insurance programme for low-income Americans. But she also graduated college, winning an internship in a congressional office in Washington as Barack Obama came to power. “That was a life-changing moment,” she tells me. “It was when I decided that I wanted to become a public servant.”



Natalí Hurtado, a Democratic candidate for the state House in Houston, is campaigning to those the party has overlooked. She says she has often heard the same refrain: 'I've lived here for 20 or 30 years and nobody has asked for my vote' © Rahim Fortune

In 2015, Hurtado moved to north-west Houston with her new husband. When Donald Trump was elected president, she had the same reaction as Ladjevardian. "The question was, 'Had I done enough to make sure that it didn't happen?', and the answer was no," she says. "I was six months pregnant and decided that I was going to run for office."

She ran for the Texas House against Republican candidate Sam Harless in 2018 and lost but stayed optimistic, reasoning that demographic changes would make the Houston district a riper target. Once 60 per cent white, Hurtado says, it is now majority-minority, with Latinos accounting for almost a quarter of the residents. It is precisely that kind of change that is putting Democrats in a stronger position across big cities in Texas.

As the centre of the US oil industry, Houston had been a magnet for white workers. But that trend halted abruptly after 1982 when oil prices collapsed. This helped turn it into one of the cheapest big cities in America, as Stephen Klineberg, a Rice University expert on state demographic trends, explains. Today, it is the poster child for US demographic change, as younger and more ethnically diverse Texans — some born in the state and others from elsewhere — overtake older, more conservative voters. As Klineberg puts it: “This southern city, which was dominated and controlled by white men, is now [the most ethnically diverse city in the country](#).”

Harris County, home to Houston and the third most populous county in the US, was 63 per cent “Anglo” in 1980, according to Klineberg. Black people made up one-fifth of the population, Hispanic people 16 per cent and Asian people 2 per cent. According to the 2010 census, [Hispanic Texans were the largest ethnic group at 41 per cent](#), while the percentage of white people almost halved. That trend will only have continued when the 2020 census results are released.



Late President George Bush with his wife Barbara in 1966 — he began his political career in Harris County and helped turn Texas into a Republican stronghold © Corbis

Yet while the demographic trend favours Democrats, the party has not been able to convert that into big national victories. One reason that they have not always been able to capitalise on population changes is that [voter turnout in Texas](#) is frequently the worst in the country. Democrats attribute that to voter suppression, but some say the party also has to take some of the blame. As Hurtado has campaigned over the past two years, she has frequently heard the same refrain: “I’ve lived here for 20 or 30 years and nobody has asked for my vote.”

She believes O’Rourke started to change that dynamic in 2017 by travelling to all 254 counties in Texas to reach voters, many of whom had long been ignored. “I started seeing people I had never seen in my life going to political events,” Hurtado says. “Younger folk were excited because he was relatable.”

If demographics were destiny, we would already be a Democratic state. The Democrats are always too optimistic

Dave Carney, political adviser

Last week, O’Rourke organised a virtual phone bank with Oprah Winfrey which reached 2.9 million Texans over 24 hours. He says other groups, such as the Texas Organizing Project, which is working to get disengaged voters in communities of colour to vote, have also made a huge difference. After our call, he texts me a link to a video of Winfrey calling a man named Christian who exclaims “holy smoke!” before telling her that he is going to vote at 8am the next day — the

first day of Texas’s early voting.

That same day, Harris County, which Hillary Clinton won in 2016, saw record turnout. For O’Rourke this underscores an often-ignored point about the 2020 race. He says the focus on whether Biden can win back the white rust-belt voters who went for Trump overlooks a much bigger story. “The real story is that you’ve got all these amazing voters in communities of colour who are showing up in record numbers in what had been the lowest voter turnout state in the country, and one that had to contend with the [worst voter suppression laws](#) in the country,” O’Rourke says. “That’s what is so exciting about this moment.”

According to Ben Wexler-Waite from Forward Majority, a group that is focused on helping Democrats win seats in legislatures in states that have been prone to voter suppression and gerrymandering: “Republicans have always been more strategic investing in downballot races and using control of state legislatures to have a profound impact on national politics.” Forward Majority has invested \$12m in Texas this year, up from \$2m in 2018. “It’s long past the time that Democrats should fight back,” Wexler-Waite says.

Candice Quarles, an African-American Dallas councilwoman, tells me that young black voters have also been energised following the killing of George Floyd, a black man who grew up in Houston, by a white police officer and the [fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor](#) in Kentucky. “There was a lot of first-time activism this summer,” she says. “Young voters of colour are taking that to the polls.”



Candice Quarles with her daughter — the Dallas councilwoman says young voters of colour have been energised by racial justice activism © Demetri Sevastopulo

Another group trying to get Texans to the polls is Voto Latino, the biggest Hispanic voter registration group in the US, which is spending \$8m-\$10m in the state.

Illustrating their potential voting power, Klineberg told me that 51 per cent of Harris County residents under the age of 20 were Latino. Voto Latino’s president, María Teresa Kumar, says Texas is “in play” because young Hispanics are angry at Republicans over their immigration stance.

“You have a slew of candidates who are young and hungry and grassroots activists who are mobilising,” she says, adding that her group ended up registering 267,000 Texans, far above their goal of 190,000. Kumar says many Latinos are reacting to [a Texas anti-immigrant law](#) passed in 2017 that echoes a move in California in 1994 to deny public benefits to illegal immigrants. Pete Wilson, the California Republican governor at the time, attached himself to Proposition 187. It passed and he won re-election, but the measure energised Latino voters and crippled the Republican party, which has not won the state in a presidential race since 1988. Kumar, who grew up in California, says: “Texas is Pete Wilson on steroids.”

Steve Munisteri has a different take on Texas’s demographic question. He says Democrats have long benefited from urban trends and stresses that Trump is actually doing better with Hispanics in the state than Cruz did two years ago and Mitt Romney did in 2012 when he lost to Barack Obama. “The state has never been as rock-solid Republican as people think,” says Munisteri, adding the real problem for Trump is not so much the demographic changes, but more that he is losing white people and particularly white women. He adds that people tend to forget that Trump scraped by with only 52 per cent in Texas four years ago.

Dave Carney, a political adviser to Texas Republican governor Greg Abbott, agrees the presidential race is “tight”, but stresses there is “zero chance” Democrats will win a majority in the Texas House, pointing out that O’Rourke far outspent Cruz but still lost. For Carney, the idea that demographic changes only help Democrats is a fallacy; he cites the fact that Abbott won 42 per cent of the Hispanic vote when he was re-elected two years ago. “If demographics were destiny, we would already be a Democratic state,” adds Carney, who served as White House director of political affairs for President George Bush. “The Democrats are always too optimistic. It happens every two years in Texas. It has always been the same meme, that this time it will happen.”

Munisteri says while the Trump campaign and national Republicans are not investing heavily, the Texas Republican party has raised plenty of money “from Texans to Texans”. He adds: “We already assume there are no reinforcements coming, so we’re geared up for battle.”



People line up to cast their ballots in Houston. In 2016 Donald Trump won 227 of the 254 counties in Texas, but the Democrats won the major cities © Reuters

In 2016, Trump won 227 of the 254 counties in Texas, but the Democrats won the major cities: Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, Austin and El Paso. While the rural congressional districts are generally much tougher for Democrats, they are hoping for some success there this year. [Gina Ortiz Jones](#), a gay former Air Force intelligence officer raised by a single mother from the Philippines, is running in the 23rd district, which stretches over 800km along the border with Mexico from El Paso to San Antonio. It is one of the swing battlegrounds after the Supreme Court ruled in 2006 that the redrawing of the district violated the Voting Rights Act. Two years ago, Ortiz Jones lost by 926 votes to Will Hurd, a former CIA officer. Now she faces Tony Gonzales, a former US Navy cryptologist who, like her, is an Iraq war veteran.

Echoing both Ladjevardian and Hurtado, Ortiz Jones says healthcare is a huge issue. That is partly because of the pandemic; when we spoke, she had just returned from Eagle Pass, a city on the border where the Covid-19 positivity rate is almost 22 per cent (compared with the national rate of 5.4 per cent and a rate of 7.1 per cent for Texas). But it is also because [Trump and the Republicans are trying to gut Obamacare](#) legislation. Texas is the least insured state in the US and this could have an oversized impact on election day.

Ortiz Jones adds that Texas is also a battleground partly because Republican women are angry at how Trump has handled the pandemic. “The fact that [women] are having to stay at home, work from home, the fact that their kids are not in classrooms, the fact that this economic recovery has also impacted their ability to return to work — these are the types of things that I am hearing about from voters,” she tells me.



Air Force veteran Gina Ortiz Jones is the Democratic nominee for the 23rd district, one of the state's swing battlegrounds. She believes women who usually vote Republican are angry at how President Trump has handled the pandemic © AP

Sherri Greenberg, a former Texas House representative and now professor at the University of Texas in Austin, agrees with Ortiz Jones that women are suffering more than men in the economic downturn, and are concerned about healthcare as they lose insurance attached to their jobs. “The suburbs are changing and women are getting out there and voting. There are more women candidates and if they support the issues you care about that helps.” A recent Washington Post/ABC poll found that Joe Biden had a 23-point advantage with women — far higher than Hillary Clinton’s edge in 2016.

When I first spoke to Greenberg in July, she was sceptical that demographic changes would help the Democrats win in Texas. “You can talk to me until the cows come home, but demographics don’t vote,” she said at the time. But she has watched the amount of money that the party has raised with amazement.

This is not a reality TV show, these are people's lives at stake

**Keke Williams, Democratic candidate,
Texas House of Representatives**

Scott Braddock, editor of Quorum Report, a Texas politics newsletter, says the current situation reminds him of the Republican effort in 2002 to win the state House. “It’s that aggressive,” he says. But it’s also a sign of how big a challenge it will be. “A majority victory isn’t possible unless they win in some of those unexpected places,” says Braddock.

The Texas Democratic party is targeting 22 Texas House districts — nine where O’Rourke beat Cruz and 13 where he lost with a margin of less than 10 points. In one district that is home to the Fort Hood military base, Keke Williams, a black retired army captain, is trying to oust Brad Buckley. Just before my call with O’Rourke, I read that Williams said she had raised more than \$330,000 in seven weeks. O’Rourke says it is “phenomenal” that the veteran has raised so much money in an area that “is not a liberal bastion”.

Williams later tells me that her district too has become more diverse, mirroring the changes seen in the big cities. That has contributed to her strong fundraising, which has been powered by small donations. She believes Trump is deflecting attention from key issues such as healthcare and education. “This is not a reality TV show, these are people’s lives at stake,” Williams says.

For Braddock, the combination of fundraising, shifting demographics and growing concern about Trump among suburban Republicans means Texas is really in play for the first time in a long time. “The feeling right now is that the Texas House majority is a coin flip.”

What if the Democrats win? “I think there’s a certain poetic and political justice that the defeat of the most openly racist, nativist president in our history will be delivered by an electorate that is the most diverse in the country,” says O’Rourke. He argues that taking Texas would also allow Biden to fend off any effort by Trump to claim he had not lost the election. Ladjevardian puts it more colloquially: “If we get the 38 electoral votes, it’s game over.”

Klineberg does not think that the Democrats will win the Texas House or White House this year. But he believes demographics will eventually catch up with the Republicans, and stresses that when they do, the stakes are existential, since the GOP has no path to victory in the presidential race without Texas. “If the Republicans lose Texas, that is the end of the Republican party,” he says.

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