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Dallas, Texas, 20 mai 2019.

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Interview with Domingo Garcia, LULAC¹ National President

Dallas, Texas, 20 mai 2019.

Romain Gilibert

ROMAIN GILIBERT (R.G.): What is your perception of the Hispanic vote in Texas?

Domingo Garcia (D.G.): There's been a lack of investment by political parties, whether Democrat or Republican, and by non-profit groups in terms to get the vote out. So, Texas has one of the lowest voting turnouts in the entire country but, for example, in the state of Nevada, Senator Harry Reid just spent five million dollars to get the Hispanic vote out in Las Vegas, Nevada, alone. Nobody spends five million dollars in Texas to get out this vote. The last individual who even tried to do that was Beto O'Rourke² and he was very successful in increasing Latino turnout in a non-presidential year, and he came really close to defeating the Republican Ted Cruz. So, we see that if you invest, you get a higher turnout, if you don't invest then you get low turnout.

R.G.: How do you 'invest'? What do you do when you 'invest'?

D.G.: You knock on doors. For Latinos to vote, normally you have to have, what I call, a five-touch policy. You got to knock on the door three times, and you got to call them twice, and now you got to text them. If you do that, then they'll be bothered enough to go vote, about eighty percent of them will go vote. So, it's just really how many times you can talk to the voters, and if you don't, if you never knock on the door, if you never call them, if you never text them and you're not on social media, then you're just not there and they don't respond.

R.G.: The Democrats told me, for instance, that a lot of Latinos are scared to vote because of intimidation or they're scared that they're going to get in trouble.

D.G.: ...what happens is we have in Texas a voter suppression campaign being launched by the Republican Party. For example, just two weeks ago, LULAC filed a lawsuit because the state of Texas was trying to remove 95,000 naturalized citizens. These are mainly Mexican Americans who became U.S. citizens, registered to vote, and the state of Texas was trying to remove them from the rolls (Electoral rolls),

under a guise that they had not proven their citizenship, and they were getting letters in the mail saying: “if you can’t prove you’re a citizen then we will take you from the rolls, and by the way, you might be committing a felony, and you might go to prison.” So, that was all part of a voter suppression to try to scare people into not voting. Especially new citizens. Then we’ve had all kinds of attempts in the history of Texas. For example, there used to be an all-white primary, the only people that could vote were white. Then you had a poll tax, you had to pay to vote. Then you had a voter ID bill³ and you had to show two or three kinds of ID to vote. So that means you would have to take your driver’s license, your passport, and your social security card or your birth certificate to vote, which is kind of a hassle. So, those laws were struck down by the courts, but we see attempt after attempt to rig the system to get only their voters to vote and to keep primarily Mexican American and African American voters from voting.

R.G.: What does LULAC do in terms of the Latino vote and Latino representation in Texas?

D.G.: Okay, so, we’re the oldest Latino organization in Texas. We were founded in 1929 to fight voter suppression back in that time period, and we’ve been fighting until today, like I said, last week, we just won a victory over the state of Texas. They could not purge the 95,000 voters and they had to pay attorneys’ fees of 450,000 dollars, and they had to promise not to do it again. And if LULAC had not filed a lawsuit, [...] we would have lost 95,000 voters. We’re also a volunteer organization so we have councils all over the state of Texas and the country, and so we are registering people to vote. We go for naturalization. When immigrants are naturalized citizens, we register them to vote. When seniors turn eighteen in high schools, we register them to vote. And then third, we go out there and register regular people to vote and then we are the civic engagement trying to get them to vote. We’re volunteers so that means we’re limited in resources as opposed to a political party or a political organization that has millions of dollars or lots of staff. It’s hard to do it when you’re just a volunteer organization.

R.G.: Is there a particular focus on the Latino youth, to get them to vote?

D.G.: I think the future is Latino millennials. I think Latino millennials, especially those between the ages of eighteen to thirty-five, have the greatest potential because they can be motivated by a Facebook or Instagram scroll. They can be motivated by a text to their phones so they’re very wired to their cellphones and to social media and so that, I think, is where we may be able to get them to turnout to vote and we have issues popping up such as climate change, and immigration, and education, I think, those are issues that, maybe, motivate them to come by to vote and so that’s an untapped generation of voters that could make a difference in a state like Texas or Florida.

R.G.: Do you feel like Latinos have been more politically involved in Texas since the 90’s?

D.G.: In the 90’s, 80’s and 70’s we had the first Latino civil rights movement, college kind of movement, and there was a lot of activism. We had set up our own separate party [...] but it was very nationalistic, very separatist but it got people involved to register. And then, that sort of died down, over the last fifteen years it has been sort of very low-key, but what we’re seeing is, over the last five to six years, there’s been a re-energizing of the Latino youth primarily to go out and vote and that’s been led, by a large extent, by DREAMers who are Latino immigrants who came here as little kids but they are active and they are trying to pass the DREAM Act⁴ and I was the author

of the original DREAM Act in 2001. So, you have a lot of energy and you have young leaders like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez⁵ in New York and the County judge of Houston, the largest county in Texas, Lina Hidalgo, 28 years old, and so, you're seeing them move up and get elected. We've had young Latinas here in Dallas county who've been elected state representatives who are all in their twenties and thirties so, you're seeing a change but it is still slow. It's not where we need to be but it's much faster than it's been over the last two decades.

R.G.: Is it going to take a long time?

D.G.: I think four to six years...

R.G.: ...that sounds really optimistic, don't you think?

D.G.: When California [became a majority-minority state], there was a backlash [...] and the white population in California passed an immigrant law called Proposition 187⁶. And so, Governor Wilson passed all this, and California was a solid Republican state. Ronald Reagan came from California. Most of the congressmen were Republicans. The governor was a Republican. After they did Prop. 187 there was a backlash and the Latino community mobilized, organized, and turned out to vote, and the effect has been that now Latinos have turned California into a blue state. All Democrats, fewer and fewer Republicans. Texas is sort of on that cusp. We're right there, where California was, back about fifteen years ago, and once we switch then Texas will become blue and Latinos will be the dominant political force in Texas but we're still four to six years away from that, although 2020 could happen if Donald Trump continues, you know, spewing his anti-Latino, anti-immigrant rhetoric which elected him the first time but which now, I think, might produce an upset victory by the Democrats in Texas. Like Beto came close, he only lost by three points so, if you have the right candidate on the Democratic side and if you have a bigoted racist campaign being run by Trump and the Republicans, you could have a higher than expected turnout that will defeat the Republicans in Texas.

R.G.: There's a lot of voter suppression with the ID laws, there's gerrymandering too. Doesn't that hurt the Latino vote?

D.G.: LULAC was involved in a case in Dodge City, Kansas. [...] Dodge City is now 64% Latino, and what the Secretary of State in Kansas did was, he moved all the polling places outside of Dodge City, for the first time in history, twenty miles away. So, to vote in Dodge City, you had to drive twenty miles and that was a way to suppress the Latino vote. An eighteen-year-old young man named Alejandro Lopez filed a lawsuit for LULAC. LULAC vs. Kansas, and we won the lawsuit and now we have three polling places in Dodge City, but that type of voter suppression where they're literally not allowing you to vote unless you drive or here, in Texas, where they try to take your name off the board of rolls (Election Board). It's happening across the country as a repression from very conservative elements in the Republican Party that are still trying to fight the battle of ideals: "here this is our platform, vote for us" as opposed to the Democrats vote for them. They want to rig the system. They don't want us to even be allowed to vote. They don't want to even have an opportunity to make a difference because they're afraid of our numbers, and demographics is destiny and the demographics is going against them. If they continue to have this type of anti-immigrant, anti-Latino rhetoric, they will sink.

R.G.: Should we rely on the Latino youth?

D.G.: Yes, because they are people who are not afraid, and they want to take on the establishment and the system. And I think that's happening and the numbers are there. Like in Dallas county, every six months, every semester, about five thousand Latinos turn eighteen and we register them to vote, all of them. And so, our numbers are gradually increasing, and I think that's what scares the Republican power structure.

R.G.: Registering them to vote doesn't mean that they're actually going to vote...

D.G.: ...you still have to go out there and get them to vote and young people are difficult to go vote. The most reliable voters are the seniors. And right now, a majority of seniors in Texas are white. The demographics are that a majority of the young people are Latino, but they still haven't become eligible. The Republican Party is trying to do everything they can to postpone the day when they won't have the votes to win fair and square.

R.G.: Why don't they just change their strategy and try to appeal to the Latino vote?

D.G.: When George W. Bush was running for president, he got 40% of the Latino vote. He spoke Spanish, he talked about conservative social issues like religion, prayer in schools, and abortion. I'm pro-choice, but a lot of Catholics are pro-life so there's a percentage they could appeal to and you know the "pull yourself up by your boot straps," "make it on your own," appeals to a certain percentage of the Latino vote but they're driving all that away through these politics that they've been doing over the last two years.

R.G.: So, instead, they use gerrymandering?

D.G.: So, we also saw the rigging of the system which was called at-large systems⁷ so that everybody in the city of Houston, or Dallas or San Antonio had to vote. The white vote always dominated the African American or Latino vote, so we never had enough votes to win. So, we filed a lawsuit under the Voting Rights Act to say that it was a discrimination of the past that we should do single-member districts.⁸ The city of Dallas was divided into fourteen parts. Two parts were majority Latino, four parts were majority African American. This is 1991. I became the first Latino elected to Dallas city council from a single-member district, and then we've had to continuously file lawsuits to allow our people to choose a candidate of their choice because otherwise they rigged the system through gerrymandering to make sure that we are not allowed to elect the candidate of our choice and to put all the Latinos in one district so that they only get one vote out of the fourteen and that's happening in Congress and it's happening in the state, at local levels. So, again, we've had to fight those battles against gerrymandering, and I had to go to court all the time. Every ten years, I can guarantee you, in 2020 after the census, the state of Texas will be gerrymandering the districts [...] like, for example, in 2010 [...] but they created no Latino congressional districts. They did the "cracking" and the "packing", but they created no new ones, and we had to file a lawsuit just to pick up two, when we were down to four. And now with the Supreme court being majority Republican, we don't know if we can even win now in court, and that would, again, make it difficult and allow them to rig the system as long as they can control the levels of power in the Texas House, Texas Senate and governor's office. Again, LULAC vs. State of Texas.

R.G.: Do you receive support from the Democrats?

D.G.: Our membership has Republicans and Democrats but a lot of the former Hispanic Republicans who supported the Republican Party because they were against abortion, religious issues, and they were conservative, are starting to leave the Republican Party because of their politics on immigration, and their politics on voter suppression, and their politics sort of just appealing to, you know, the white superiority, white ethnicity as a part of their main way to get votes. So, that's driving a lot of Hispanic Republicans away. There are some Republicans that we work with like, for example, Senator John Cornyn from Texas has been very middle of the road Republican. George W. Bush supported immigration reform, supported the DREAMers but we've seen that the party of Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush is being pushed to the outside by the extremists and the Republican Party led by Trump, Steve Miller and others like Senator Tom Cotton from Arkansas who are pushing a far right-wing anti-immigration, anti-Latino agenda. That politics, it's actually a worldwide phenomenon but especially in Europe where you see far right-wing anti-immigrant, anti-them politics...

R.G.: How would you account for this phenomenon in the United States?

D.G.: ...America has a history of denying the right to vote to women, to Native Americans, Latinos, to African Americans [...] It's always an ongoing battle for civil rights, and even now I can't believe that here we are in 2019, and we're struggling to keep people on the voter rolls. The other thing that's happened is, the legislature has a bill right now in Texas, SB 9 (Senate Bill 9^o), that will make it a criminal offence to help three people to go to the polls. So, if you help three senior citizens to go to the polls, that will be a crime. It's called SB 9. It may pass, it may not. Republicans are criminalizing voter registration, they're criminalizing voting.

R.G.: Do you think they're aiming at Latinos in particular?

D.G.: Specifically, yes. They're trying to make it impossible to vote by mail for senior citizens, primarily minorities, African Americans and Latinos who cannot get out of the house, to be able to vote by mail right now. They're trying to make that extremely difficult or impossible to do and it's going to make it impossible, it could be a crime for a grandson to help his grandmother fill out a ballot to vote. You can get offence. Here in Fort Worth, which is just twenty miles from Dallas, an African American female who was a convicted felon thought that if she was out of jail she could register to vote and vote. She voted, which is a crime in Texas, so she went to trial and they gave her ten years in prison for illegal voting. A Latina, who was a U.S. resident, legal, but got here when she was two and not a U.S. citizen, her husband who was a U.S. citizen, said: "oh, you can register if you are a U.S. resident." She registers to vote, she votes, then the Attorney General of Texas prosecutes her, he gives her six years in prison for voting. And the message clearly is: "if you're a Latina, you're an African American and you forgot to dot an I or cross a T, you're going to prison, and they always do the sentences right before the elections to have what's called a "chilling effect" on people voting. And it works because people are afraid, especially senior citizens because they don't want to get in trouble with the law, they don't want to go to prison, they don't want people asking them questions about: "why did you vote?", "who filled out your ballot?" or "who took you to go vote?". And if somebody with boots and badges and guns shows up, it just makes you not want to go

vote. It's intimidation. Voter intimidation, voter suppression, and attempt to rig the system.

R.G.: I've heard of ICE agents waiting for voters at voting stations to intimidate Latinos...

D.G.: ...yes, that happened in El Paso. We had to go and get a court order to remove the ICE agents from the polling place...

R.G.: What's the point having ICE agents at polling places if the people who go and vote are U.S. citizens?

D.G.: You might have a U.S. citizen married to an undocumented worker, an undocumented immigrant. So, he's taking his wife and his children, she's undocumented, he's a citizen: "oh, oh, I better leave because my wife could be arrested or my husband or my grandfather." They're mixed families. We had to remove the ICE agents from a school in El Paso last year, no, two years ago. We had to file a lawsuit to remove them.

NOTES

1. LULAC, League of United Latin American Citizens, is the largest and oldest Hispanic organization in the United States. Created in 1929, it seeks to advance the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, housing, health and civil rights of Hispanic Americans (<https://lulac.org/>).
2. Beto O'Rourke ran for U.S. Senate for the Democratic Party against Ted Cruz during the mid-term elections of November 2018. He lost to his Republican opponent by less than 3 points.
3. See website: <https://www.votetexas.gov/mobile/id-faqs.htm>.
4. The DREAM Act (The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) was a bill in Congress whose legislative goal was to provide a means for undocumented immigrants who arrived in the U.S. as children to gain a pathway to permanent legal status.
5. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez is a Congresswoman who serves as the U.S. Representative for the 14th district of New York (the Bronx and Queens). She was elected during the mid-term elections of November 2018.
6. Proposition 187 was a law proposed and voted by California voters to make immigrants residing in the state without legal permission ineligible for public benefits (medical care, public education).
7. A system where all voters in the city elect the mayor and city council members.
8. A system where the city is divided into election districts, and only the voters living in that district elect the council member from that district. Only the mayor is elected at large.
9. See website : <https://capitol.texas.gov/tlodocs/86R/billtext/html/SB00009I.htm>. SB 9 was finally adjourned sine die.

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