

RIO GRANDE VALLEY

Post-Election Report

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PREPARED BY

CAMBIOTEXAS
ORGANIZING FOR A NEW TOMORROW

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About Cambio Texas

CambioTexas is a Progressive organization aimed at increasing voter turnout and electing new leaders that better reflect the changing face of our state.

The youth and Latino community, along with other minority communities have traditionally voted in lower percentages. Texas has recently been ranked as one of the least civically engaged states with some of the lowest voter turnout in the nation.

Our leadership is not yet properly investing in our infrastructure, healthcare, fair immigration policies, environmental protection, economic justice, economic development and public education.

We can change this by organizing and voting. We can participate more in the political process and demand the changes our communities need. This means voting for candidates we feel best to represent us, it means engaging a new generation of young people to seek public office and produce a system that works fairly for all, not just a few.

Introduction

In the wake of the 2020 General Election one of the more widely covered topics was the unexpected gains Republicans made in the Rio Grande Valley. One of the last Democratic “strongholds” of Texas, conventional wisdom holds that if we can increase turnout in the RGV, we can net enough Democratic votes to flip the entire state. We believe this edict still holds true but what we learned from 2020 is that the RGV is much more complex than Civis partisanship scores and primary voting history.

While the RGV rarely gets attention from upstate organizations and stakeholders, a large spotlight was shone on our region as we learned that Donald Trump nearly doubled his vote share from 2016 and even won Zapata County (which is not part of the RGV but was mentioned in several articles in the days after the election just the same). But to a lot of people on the ground, the folks who have been working down here for years doing voter registration, working local elections, etc., it was easy to understand how we got here.

In compiling this document we drew from our Executive Board’s experience in the last five years working with over 135 candidates across 45 different campaigns at the Federal, State, County and Local level. Since Election Day we conducted 217 in-depth interviews with consultants, activists, vendors, party officials, judges, county electeds, federal electeds, school board members, attorneys, congressional staffers, state legislative staffers and also commissioned a poll of over 500 self-identified Trump Voters in Hidalgo, Cameron, Starr, Willacy and Webb county.

We offer insights and recommendations in the following areas:

1. Understanding RGV Politics
2. Messaging
3. Campaign Mechanics

This document hopes to serve as an insider's view to any statewide organization or campaign looking to organize in the RGV. We freely admit to taking a consultant's approach to RGV organizing where our ultimate goal is to win a statewide election in 2022. The RGV turned out at around 54% in 2020, our goal is to increase that number

to 65%. While we do not consider this document to be by any means definitive, we hope that our report leads to honest, substantive conversations with upstate organizations and stakeholders required to “get it right” in 2022.

Politicá in the RGV

The RGV plays little, if any, role in General Elections. With the four counties that make up the RGV (Willacy, Hidalgo, Starr and Cameron) being so blue, Republicans hardly ever put up candidates for County or State offices in November and this creates a turnout problem for the RGV.

With no natural opposition to the Democratic Party, the RGV exhibits some of the classic traits of an area that has been under one-party control for so long. It may be surprising for outsiders to learn that despite being bluer than Austin, party affiliation is not very strong in the RGV. People do not necessarily identify as Republican, Democrat, Progressive or Conservative. It's more common for someone to say they are a supporter of a specific candidate. “I'm with _____” or “Yo estoy con _____” is a much more common response when you ask people how they are voting instead of party affiliation.

Compounding this issue is the general reputation of the RGV being mired with corruption. We find this generalization offensive but acknowledge how the headlines about the RGV make donors and party officials hesitant to invest in our region.

The RGV also suffers from a lack of competent local party leadership. Our county party chairs are widely reviled by local electeds and donors which means that

the official party infrastructure is routinely underfunded. It is very difficult to recruit, train and keep volunteers. As such, the RGV has fractured itself into small kingdoms dominated more by political families and corporate interests instead of party machinery.

There isn't time to properly address and deconstruct the years of bitter infighting and disputes that plague the local party in time for the 2022 elections. But understanding this dynamic early on is important so that time isn't wasted engaging with party officials who will do little towards the work needed to increase voter turnout in the RGV. It would be way more productive to engage directly with local organizers and volunteers. They aren't hard to find.

Blue but not “Blue” Blue

It's said that Hidalgo County has not elected a Republican to a county-wide position since Reconstruction. We don't know if this is true, but if you look past the partisan elections you will find that Conservatives win elections down here all the time.

The city commissions of McAllen, Edinburg, Pharr, Harlingen, Brownsville and Mission (the largest municipalities in the RGV) are controlled by self-identified Conservatives who were largely elected on common Republican talking points like lower taxes and support for law enforcement. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. In September over 100 electeds, community leaders and business owners announced their endorsement of Republican U.S. Senator John Cornyn. This was the biggest warning sign that things would not go as we would hope on election night.

This may seem surprising for an area that Hillary Clinton carried by 40 points but it makes more sense when you understand our culture.

There are a number of well-researched, thoroughly vetted studies which examine, in-detail, the geo-political nuances of Hispanic voters. But for the purposes of this document, we'd like to share some unscientific truisms we have learned through the course of our work.

- Despite what local unemployment numbers and poverty rates indicate, we aren't poor, we're broke. There's a difference. We see plenty of wealth in our community, we're just one big "break" away from attaining it if we tried hard enough.
- Religion plays a bigger role in our community than people (especially Democratic political operatives) would care to admit.
- The changing curriculum in our schools as it relates to Hispanic representation throughout history has created a generation of us who grew up with an intense desire to assimilate. While we are proud of our Mexican heritage, we consider ourselves inherently American.
- "Empathy" and "Compassion" are ineffective persuasion concepts unless you're specifically referencing Family. In the RGV, folks are apt to believe that if

something bad happened to someone, they likely did something to deserve it.

- Conversely, "work ethic", "pride", and "respect" are three words that resonate strongly within our community and are more likely to earn support.

Many Progressive organizers may disagree with our statements above but we can point to three recent campaigns in the RGV where we saw these tenets upheld by the electorate and we have no reason to believe they will change in 2022.

June 2019: Seby Haddad vs. John Ingram, McAllen City Commission Runoff Election

John Ingram came into the local municipal elections as a 16-year incumbent who was widely known for his annual trash pick ups and his constant blockwalking whether it was an election year or not. He was considered a heavy favorite for re-election despite facing two challengers, one of which was Seby Haddad, a local banker and son of a doctor. Haddad had never run for office before and had little name recognition but was very well funded. Ingram nearly won the race outright but was denied a victory on election night when he came just a single vote short of the 50%+1 required. That's right, one vote. A recount did not change the outcome and a run-off ensued. It was during this period that the race became fueled by intense immigration rhetoric.

Since 2014, federal authorities have dropped off asylum-seeking immigrants at the Respite Center in McAllen where a local non-profit called Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley has temporarily cared for

these immigrants before they depart the city to connect with family or sponsors elsewhere in the United States. CCRGV was in the process of finding a new home for the Respite Center and found a location in a residential part of town and required a new permit to continue operations. Ingram voted in favor of granting the permit which immediately ignited campaign rhetoric. McAllen is considered the reddest part of the RGV yet a Republican has never been able to carry the area at the county or state level. Locally however, four of the seven city commissioners are self-identified Conservatives, one of them was even the former chair of the Hidalgo County Republican Party.

Soon after Ingram voted in favor of granting the permit, Radio ads and campaign material began circulating accusing him of attempting to turn McAllen into a “sanctuary city”. Opponents of the Respite Center cited crime and lower property values as reasons to shutter the center. People posted doorbell camera videos to social media showing shadowy figures walking across their yards saying they were “strays” from the Respite Center, no doubt looking for something to steal. Door hangers depicting a shirtless Ingram vacationing in Mexico accusing him of encouraging illegal immigration were dropped anonymously throughout the district and soon, the Respite Center was the only thing anyone could talk about.

Ingram responded with mailers attacking Haddad’s political donor and business acumen. Real wonky stuff. While the Haddad campaign itself didn’t directly engage in this rhetoric, he definitely benefited from it and ultimately won the election with 54% of the vote.

It’s of note that Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley is headed by Sister Norma Pimentel, an adored community leader who has held court with Pope Francis and was recently named one of the 100 Most Influential People of 2020 by Time Magazine. And despite having a messenger of such stature, it was not enough to overcome the bad faith messaging that likely ended Ingram’s political career.

March 2020: Jessica Cisneros vs. Henry Cuellar, US Congress TX-28

Henry Cuellar was first elected to office in 1986 as a State Representative and served as Secretary of State as a Democrat under Rick Perry before being elected to Congress in 2005. His brother Martin has been sheriff in Webb County going on 12 years, his sister Rosie has been Laredo’s municipal judge for over 10 years. As far as political dynasties in the RGV go, the Cuellars are about as institutional as Ruby Red Grapefruit.

Jessica Cisneros, 26 years old at the time, was one of Cuellar’s former interns who became an immigration attorney in New York and returned to the Valley specifically to run for office after being recruited by Justice Democrats.

There’s no better example of the complexities that Progressive messaging faces in the RGV than examining the messaging and tactics used in this race. Cisneros campaigned as an unabashed liberal, attacking the oil and gas industry and styling Cuellar as “Trump’s Favorite Democrat”. Aided by Progressive allies across the country and earning endorsements from heavy-hitters like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, Cisneros became a

fundraising rockstar as her campaign would go on to raise millions.

The Cisneros campaign placed Cuellar's Conservative voting record front and center. Cuellar, the Cisneros campaign charged, had an A rating from the N.R.A., a poor record on climate change, and backs severe restrictions on abortion rights. In the 115th U.S. Congress, about 70% of Cuellar's house votes sided with the GOP. Factoids which became standard inclusions in fundraising emails and texts the Cisneros campaign sent out all across the country.

But in the RGV, it's very easy to campaign on these issues because most folks in our community either like guns (or don't really mind them) and consider abortion to be nasty business. Additionally, these voters have not really been engaged on climate change and may be fairly apathetic to the issue.

The Cuellar campaign responded by leaning into these attacks, embracing and staunchly defending his faith and his positions on oil & gas, abortion and LGBTQ issues. It launched attack ads of its own and sent out mailers painting Cisneros as an out-of-touch carpetbagger that is bringing those Snowflake *Mamádas* to South Texas.

While Cisneros talked about the lack of economic opportunity in the Valley, Cuellar reminded voters about the billions he's been able to earmark from D.C. by way of his seat on the powerful U.S. Congress Appropriations Committee.

In the end, despite losing Bexar and Hidalgo county by significant margins, Cuellar eked out a victory by 2,690 votes with the winning ballots coming out of Starr where Cuellar

carried the county by 3,902 votes. Just to offer some perspective, in 2016, Donald Trump received just 20.1% of the vote in Starr County. In 2020, Trump received 47%.

July 2020: Sara Stapleton-Barrera v. Eddie Lucio Jr, Texas State Senate District 27

Encouraged by Cisneros's close-loss-almost-won campaign in March, a large number of her volunteers and staffers, including Cisneros's former campaign manager, joined a runoff race to help attorney Sara Stapleton-Barrera defeat political giant Eddie Lucio Jr.

Like the Cuellars, the Lucios are synonymous with politics in South Texas. Lucio's son, Eddie Lucio the III, is a State Representative in the same area. Also like Cuellar, Lucio has a long Conservative voting record and has consistently bucked his party on a number of controversial topics, including abortion, gay marriage and private school choice programs.

Stapleton adopted the same model Cisneros attempted against Cuellar, her campaign quickly sought to preserve the Cisneros coalition and courted the support of local organizations with statewide and national backing like the Texas Freedom Network and Planned Parenthood. Stapleton's emails to supporters often echoed, sometimes word-per-word, the same general themes about her opponent being a feux-Democrat who votes like a Republican.

While she took a more moderate approach during the primary, Stapleton's messaging quickly turned hyper-progressive as the campaign put LGBTQ issues and abortion at the forefront of their messaging strategy.

Texts, social media posts, mailers and TV ads sought to depict Lucio as an enemy to progressivism. Lucio responded by painting Stapleton as an enemy to the RGV who doesn't care about regular people and is more concerned with preferred pronouns and killing babies.

Lucio, and the outside money backing his campaign, were relentless, launching attack after attack on Stapleton's lack of respect for life and endorsement of "sinful" values. Over 12 mailers were sent out in the weeks leading up to early vote highlighting Stapleton's "radical" positions including one particularly terse mailer that highlighted one of Stapleton's old cases as a private defense attorney where she represented a suspected member of a cartel who was on trial for murdering a Border Patrol agent, along with his wife and their young son while picnicking on Boca Chica Beach. Prolife, Anti-LGBTQ, Pro Law Enforcement. That's a Conservative messaging trifecta.

This was another close race as well but Lucio still retained his seat with 54% of the vote on the strength of Conservative messaging.

So what can we learn from all this as we look into 2022? Before we talk about messaging at large, let's delve into the Xs and Os behind running a campaign in the RGV.

Campaign Mechanics

This time after the election offers us a chance to take a 360 degree view at how campaigns are run in the RGV, what statewide candidates and stakeholders should know, and some suggestions about how we can improve the way we campaign in the RGV.

Elections Administration

Making inroads and organizing a few projects around increasing the number of polling sites in the RGV would be an unsexy, but worthwhile endeavor for non-partisan organizations. In Hidalgo County, Elections Administrator Yvonne Ramon has been slowly closing polling locations in more rural areas of the county in favor of Vote Centers and eliminated the use of mobile polling sites. The Elections Department disputed claims of voter suppression and cited fiscal reasons for shuttering the sites. In August, Ramon successfully lobbied the Hidalgo County Commissioners Court to send every registered voter over the age of 65 an application to vote by mail-in ballot, a first-of-its-kind undertaking for any county in Texas. The practice of being able to vote at any location, even on election day, has been implemented in Hidalgo County but not Cameron, the second largest county in the RGV and 15th largest in the State.

If the RGV is to turn out at the desired 65% or higher, we need to work with our county commissioners and elections administrators to increase the number of polling sites and also implement creative covid-era solutions like drive-thru voting which was used to great success Harris County.

Vendors

When we talk about the RGV we often mention how the area consistently "lacks investment". A popular edict in Progressive spaces is that you should "Hire Local." A less talked about notion but is just as important is "Purchasing Local." For example, most statewide campaigns enact a well-intentioned policy of only using Union printers for campaign materials and propaganda. We completely agree and

understand that we should go union whenever possible. In the RGV, however, the closest Union printer is 240 miles away in San Antonio. On top of creating a logistical problem for RGV organizers, it strips RGV businesses of a chance to earn a share of the massive budgets statewide and federal campaigns have at their disposal.

We understand the importance of a Union bug on all the campaign material, but we propose a workaround for situations where Unions were not available but the campaign still made the conscious decision to print locally.

Spending money locally is a little talked about issue in campaigns, but it's worth noting that Conservative activists and Republican candidates purchased the vast majority of their merch locally. We spoke with several print shops in the RGV that worked with the Hidalgo County Republican Party, all those Trump Flags that adorned the F-150s in those "Trump Trains"? They were printed locally. The Republican candidate for Congress TX-15 used a print shop from La Joya, Texas to get all her campaign materials printed. So did the Republican candidate for Texas House District 41. This matters. It's easy to overlook the goodwill they earned by doing business locally and it made people that much more willing to accept Republican leadership in the RGV.

Print shops are just one aspect of it. The RGV has a workforce that can work efficiently and in almost every case, a lot more inexpensive, since fair pay in the RGV is a lot lower than what one would consider "fair pay" in Houston or Dallas. Another added benefit that is rarely talked about is

the institutional knowledge that local video producers, graphic artists, pollsters, consultants, etc. can offer from having worked in our community for their entire careers.

Data Integrity

Data is considered Manna from heaven in our line of work. From shifts filled, to polls, positive IDs, rsmps and on, we rely on data for every major decision a campaign makes.

But are we being completely honest with the public when we report the scope of our outreach? After all, we can't be there with our volunteers on every porch. We can't listen to every phone call. And with the constant pressure that donors place on our operations, it's not unreasonable to suspect that those reports get padded a little. Who's it really hurting?

We do our best to verify our data. We follow up with reported IDs, we do spot checks on our walkers when they are in the field and so forth but for our Executive Board; the thought always lingers in the back of our mind that the stats we're seeing on the spreadsheet may not be 100% accurate.

You often see organizations across the country tout grandiose outreach numbers on social media. "Our Volunteers made A MILLION PHONE CALLS", "We hit 75,000 doors this weekend", these claims get read by reporters who then write articles about how Democrats are "making great strides" or how "All signs of a blue wave are there." These articles are then used in emails to Republican donors urging them to pony up more cash because "the radical left is working non-stop".

No one is calling anyone a liar, but we

wonder what kind of role, if any, did claims of vast voter outreach play in raising expectations for Democrats on election night. Are we hurting ourselves when we announce the millions of texts we sent off, or the calls that we made? We don't exactly have an answer, we aren't even sure if this is a real problem that is prevalent in politics, but we believe the topic merits an honest discussion.

Volunteer Management

Recruiting, training, maintaining and promoting volunteers is an ongoing struggle for campaigns in the RGV. Since state and federal races are hardly ever contested, a young person with an interest in politics would have to leave the RGV if they wanted to work on a competitive campaign (and a lot of them do).

Additionally, it's more difficult in the RGV to sustain a reliable roster of volunteers who are willing to work for no compensation. It takes the right kind of candidate to inspire folks in the RGV to donate their precious time for free, and that usually doesn't happen.

Distributed organizing solves a portion of this problem since it's very feasible to build a roster of people who can call or text from anywhere in the world, but when it comes to canvassing (the most important element in any field plan) any budget aimed at organizing the RGV should expect to run paid canvass operations.

The RGV, and Democrats across the state, could also benefit from expanded access to training materials. The Texas Democratic Party has a useful "Training" tab on its website with a plethora of useful resources, the only problem is that the content can be

difficult for volunteers to engage with. Investment in quality training videos, courses and programs that cater specifically to the RGV would go a long way in making sure that our volunteers have the tools and skills they need to succeed in their work.

Planning

If you want the RGV to turn out like Harris County, you're going to need to spend Harris County dollars across an extended period of time. As previously mentioned, local county leadership needs improvement, as a result, coordinated campaigns in South Texas are often not given enough time to scale properly. It usually isn't until a few weeks before Early Vote that most statewide campaigns look to set up some sort of turnout operation. Over time we have learned that \$10 spent in January can be more impactful than \$100 spent in October.

100% legit, organic grassroots organizing takes time. Canvassing in the RGV takes time. This is a problem that can't be solved overnight and will require the most commitment from Progressive organizations, party leadership and statewide campaigns.

We estimate that getting the RGV to turn out at 65% or higher is a 16-20 month endeavor. Canvassing operations should be commencing eight months before early vote. This might seem like a tall task, but it is a fairly reasonable estimation when you consider that most top-tier campaigns already last this long when you factor in the Primaries. Detractors may say that there isn't enough funding to work the RGV this long or you can talk about diminishing returns until you're blue in the face, but at the end of the day it's really just a simple matter of priorities.

Politiqueras (*Po-Lee-Tea-Ke-Ruz*)

What is a Politiquera?

In the broadest sense, a Politiquera is an independent contractor who is responsible for building and turning out the vote. Few institutions are as old or as ingrained in RGV Politics as the Politiquera System. The word itself connotes a specific kind of political identity. For these workers, who are almost exclusively working-class people of color, being a politiquera is honest work that they take pride in. It gives a lot of people an avenue for upward mobility that is not available to them otherwise. After all, how many other professions that require no formal training or prestigious degrees would put you in a room with future judges, state representatives, county and local officials in a working dynamic where the candidates/electeds are more dependent on you than you are on them?

This industry is often regarded as mysterious and shady when in reality their job descriptions are not very different from what most would consider a “community organizer”. And the concerns about Politiquera work are not all that different than the concerns you’d have for a community organizer either. Are they really doing the work? Can we trust the data that they are giving us? Are they meeting their metrics?

Like any other profession; lawyers, doctors, police officers, there are good actors and bad seeds. There are Politiqueras that spend their time between election cycles organizing food drives and fundraisers in their communities. During this pandemic, Politiqueras have been essential missionaries organizing events and

delivering food and supplies to our most at-risk residents. There are Politiqueras with full-time jobs or who own small businesses and do election work on the side. There are some who suffer from chemical dependency issues and substance abuse. And there are a small minority of them who have been convicted of crimes ranging from petty shoplifting to election fraud.

Coverage of these crimes has marred the profession as a whole and has led to a hesitancy for upstate shareholders to invest in our region. Overcoming this stigma should be a priority to any statewide electoral operation looking to organize in the RGV because the hard truth is that no RGV electoral machinery will be successful without contracting a significant portion of the politiquera community.

How does it work?

A Politiquera will spend the majority of their time building their list of potential voters in preparation for Early Vote. They do this year-round whether or not there is an election as the size of their list plays an important role in negotiating their compensation. Politiqueras are efficient and no other local organization, club, or political dynasty grinds out the kind of reliable output they offer.

There is no official database that tracks exactly how many practicing Politiqueras there currently are in the RGV, but since 2015 we estimate that there are about 250-300 working politiqueras in the RGV. You can break these workers down into three tiers, a top-tier politiquera will account for anywhere between 125-200 votes and can be compensated as much 1,500 a week plus a vehicle rental and fuel. Some Politiqueras work in pairs, just like

canvassers, and require higher rates of compensation for the extra manpower.

There is a steep drop off between Tier 1 and Tier 2. A mid tier politiquera can account for about 50-100 votes and can be contracted for an average of 700 dollars a week plus daily stipends for meals and fuel.

Bottom tier Politiqueras bring in less than 50 votes and are either paid out \$60 daily or 300 a Week. They spend most of their time manning polling locations, waiving political signs and attempting last ditch persuasion efforts by shouting slogans, cheers and chants at voters as they walk into the polling stations. These kinds of polling site theatrics are generally disliked by voters and the practice has diminished a lot over the years but will not disappear entirely anytime soon.

Within these tiers there is a hierarchy as well. Oftentimes one Politiquera will have a team of people that they work with and they will lobby hard to get as many of their team members on the same campaign as well. You can make a deal with one Politiquera and gain a team of 15-30 additional workers as part of the deal.

Types of Politiqueras

Politiqueras use several methods to turn out votes but the following three are the most common.

Knock and Drag - Politiquera will coordinate with the voter for a ride to a polling location and walk inside and “assist”. These workers will often be provided a rented vehicle from the campaign, the car is marked and tracked for quality control and to keep a tally of how many votes the Politiquera has walked in.

Mail Ballots - Politiquera will focus on voters over the age of 65 to help them request and fill out a mail ballot. They require a budget for mileage and for postage as they often provide the stamps needed to get the ballot in the mail. Since 2013, this practice has really fallen out of favor as it became the specific focus of criminal activity. However, the pandemic created a massive need in mail ballot coordination cycle saw a large resurgence of this kind of work.

Day Cares - The easiest votes to lasso are vans full of senior citizens taking a break from their daily routines to go vote. There is an entrenched network for this specific kind of organizing. You can’t simply walk into a daycare and ask people if they want to vote. A lot of times that is coordinated by the day care administrators themselves who are compensated for the access they provide campaigns.

Problems and Difficulties dealing with Politiqueras

Because of the “underground” nature of the industry, formal contracts and agreements are not always signed between Politiqueras and campaigns. Although now more and more local campaigns are forcing Politiqueras to sign contracts, Politiqueras sometimes favor a more loose arrangement because it allows them opportunities to invoice campaigns for expenditures that were not initially approved and are very dubiously related to their campaign work. If you talk to enough candidates you’ll hear stories about Politiqueras requesting additional funds for car repairs, medical bills, rent and utilities etc.

Engaging with the politiquera community may be a challenge for campaigns or organizations who are not from the Valley

because this community does not advertise its services. They don't hold meetings or conventions where they discuss their goals as a workforce. You can't put an ad online and expect to get hits for this kind of work. You need someone local with the institutional knowledge to treat and negotiate with them.

Politiqueras and 2020

In years past, the local Republican party would constantly point to Politiqueras as the boogiemer at the root of political corruption. In recent cycles, the Politiquera community has been alienated by Democratic leaders. They feel unfairly maligned and ostracized for a bevy of reasons. It's important to understand that Politiqueras do not usually identify themselves as Republican or Democrat. So it was no surprise for us to learn that a number of them contracted with Republican candidates and others even pushed Trump for President before urging their people to support their down ballot candidates. As local Republican leadership is looking to gain a stronger foothold in local elections we are seeing more and more Politiqueras work for the Republican party. This helps (partially) explain how Trump achieved such significant gains in South Texas but it doesn't tell the entire story.

Politiqueras and 2022

If we're looking to turn out the RGV, we should embrace the well-oiled infrastructure that the Politiqueras offer. One of the biggest issues about working with politiqueras is the lack of central leadership in the community. Politiqueras are hyper-local and made up of numerous factions across South Texas.

Our suggestion would be for Democratic leadership to formalize the role that

Politiqueras play in our GOTV operations. A point person should be appointed to vet, hire and support a full election roster. We need to open up the lines of communication between this group of dedicated workers and campaign HQ and benefit from the access to voter information that cannot be acquired through V.A.N, surveying or polling.

Surveying the 2020 “Red Wave”

Between December 2 and December 11, 2020. Cambio Texas commissioned a small survey of 516 self-identified Trump voters in the RGV and Webb County. Our survey was conducted in English and Spanish, we dialed cell phones and landlines, we excluded March primary voters and segmented our targeting so that it is representative of the RGV electorate at large.

Our survey was broken down into three parts, first a series of questions asking if the respondent had been contacted by the Trump campaign or an organization supporting the Trump campaign either via phone, text, radio or TV. Then each respondent was read a series of statements with their responses recorded on a Likert Scale, and finally a series of open-ended questions which proved to be the most illuminating.

Republican Outreach in South Texas

We set out to get a sense of how much outreach was carried out by Republicans in South Texas and we learned the following:

- A majority of the voters we surveyed were primarily reached by TV and Radio
 - 54.06% of respondents (279) said they saw a Pro-Trump TV ad
 - 24.03% of respondents (124) said they heard a Pro-Trump radio ad.
- Republicans invested more in texting than any other method of grassroots organizing.
 - 38.17% of respondents (197) said they received a text message from the Trump Campaign or an organization supporting the Trump Campaign.
 - 21.12% of respondents (108) said they received a phone call from the Trump Campaign or an organization supporting the Trump Campaign.
 - Just 13.17% of respondents (68) said they received a home visit from the Trump Campaign or an organization supporting the Trump Campaign.

South Texas Trump Voters and Media Consumption

We wanted to know where these voters got the majority of their news and we learned the following:

- Social Media (Facebook, Twitter) and websites (Newsmax, OAN, Fox News) are just as influential as National Cable News and substantially more influential than radio and print newspapers.
 - 40.11% of respondents (207) said they get their news from Natl’ Cable News
 - 37.01 of respondents (191) said they get their news from Social Media
 - 31.97% of respondents (166) said they get their news online (not social media)
 - 31.97% of respondents (155) said they get their news from Local TV
 - 10.07% of respondents (52) said they get their news from Local talk radio
 - 13.95% of respondents (72) said they get their news from National Talk Radio
 - 11.04% of respondents (57) said they get their news from Newspapers

South Texas Trump Voters, Law Enforcement and Oil and Gas

A very common assumption about the RGV is that since a substantial portion of our workforce is employed by law enforcement agencies and oil & gas companies, Joe Biden’s positions on

clean energy and the rise of “Black Lives Matter” and “Defund the Police” led to an increase in Republican turn out. Our data indicates that while these issues are popular among the voters we surveyed, the notion that “everyone has family that works there” is a bit of myth. We asked:

- Do you or someone in your immediate family work for a law enforcement agency?
 - 77.13% of respondents (398) said NO
 - 22.87% of respondents (118) said YES
- Do you or someone in your immediate family work in the oil & gas industry?
 - 70.9% of respondents (366) said NO
 - 30.1% of respondents (150) said YES

South Texas Trump Voters and perceived biases

Each respondent was given a series of statements and were asked if they agreed, disagreed, strongly agreed, strongly disagreed or were neutral. We found that South Texas Trump Voters have general disdain for progressivism as it exists in the zeitgeist but not necessarily the policies that Progressives push for. We also learned that their opinions about their local politicians were vastly different than their opinions about federal politicians.

For example, when prompted, “Democrats only care about issues that don’t affect me” 67.05% of respondents (346) either agreed, strongly agreed or said they were neutral. Then, when prompted “At the end of the day, I think the Rio Grande Valley is headed in the right direction,” 70.93% of respondents (366) either agreed, strongly agreed or said they were neutral.

In another example, when prompted “Democrats are tearing our country apart.” a whopping 87.98% of respondents (424) either agreed, strongly agreed or said they were neutral. Then when prompted “Most of our local politicians are ultimately good people.” 75.96% of respondents (392) either agreed, strongly agreed or said they were neutral.

These findings make sense when you consider the fact that a lot of local politicians are self-identified Conservatives, even if they run as Democrats.

We also included two statements that centered around what the respondent’s thoughts about political discourse in general.

For instance, when prompted, “I don’t like to share what I truly think because people might get offended” we were surprised that 58.4% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed with that statement. Not because they don’t feel they hold controversial opinions, but because they don’t care about offending others when they express them.

Subsequently, when prompted, “People are so sensitive these days,” 91.1% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed.

These numbers make a lot of sense if you've ever read the comment section on KGBT's Action 4 News facebook page. More on this topic in the "Messaging" section of this document.

The Money Question

The final part of our survey consisted of a series of open-ended questions. Answers were sorted for common responses and their answers were simultaneously illuminating and unsurprising.

When we finally asked "What is it about Donald Trump that inspired you to vote for him", their responses were consistent with a voter who gets most of their news from social media and "alternative" news websites. The following were our four most common responses:

- 20.93% of responses (108) were most closely related to the economy and included the words "Businessman", "Regulations," and "Taxes".
- 16.47% of responses (85) were most closely related to Nationalism and included the phrases "America First", "Freedom", "Make America Great", "Love of country" and "Patriotism."
- 13.95% of responses (72) were most closely related to Trump's oratory style and included the words "Honesty" and "Tells it like it is".
- 11.82% of responses (61) were most closely related to Trump's perception as a political outsider and included the words "Not a politician", "anti-establishment" "billionaire" and "Drain the swamp".

Other common phrases we heard were about matters involving National Security like "Loves our military" and "Keeps us safe" (4.38%), "Prolife" (2.63%) and a general theme about Donald Trump "Getting things done" and that he "Did what he said he was gonna do." (8.77%)

South Texas Trump Voters On the Issues

When prompted "What policies or issues would you say are most important to you?" The following were our most common responses:

- "Economy" - 26.31%
- "Healthcare" - 21.9%
- "Border Security/Immigration" 14.03%
- "Pro-life" - 7.89%
- "National Security" and "Military" - 6.14%
- "Freedom", "Constitution", and "Rule of Law" - 4.38%
- "Guns" or "Second Amendment" - 1.75%

Messaging for 2022

As soon as we woke up on November 4, 2020 the first thing that came to mind was November 8, 2022. One of the central questions that arose after the General Election was “how do we connect with hispanic voters.” Once we sit back and analyze everything we’ve learned, we believe that in order to understand the Valley, people need to stop thinking of us as a Progressive region. For messaging purposes, Democratic leaders should think of the Valley as a rural Conservative county.

One of the people that we spoke to while conducting research for this document was a prominent Hispanic consultant based in Houston. Let’s call them “Jaime”. During our conversation they offered a soliloquy that astutely highlighted one of the chasms that exists between Progressive messaging and Hispanic voters.

Jaime talked about a popular game that middle-school aged Mexican boys play called “Bamba”. However calling it a “game” is kind of a stretch. Essentially, a group of kids will get together and then randomly, for seemingly any arbitrary reason, one of the kids will get singled out and physically attacked by the rest of the group. The beating only lasts a few seconds and no one usually gets hurt. It’s an unwritten rule that you don’t want to hit whoever is getting “Bamba” too hard because eventually it’ll be your turn to take the beating too. Treat others the way you’d like to be treated and all.

To Progressives this display would be horrific. It’s basically gang violence that

should be banned and prosecuted. But to those kids, it’s a bonding experience. No one is being “attacked.” There is no “victim” here. Everyone is just having fun. This is how boys become men. And those men, according to Jaime, grew up to be Trump voters.

When you consider Jaime’s example alongside the responses to our survey and the performance of Progressive candidates at the ballot box, we get a clearer sense of who we need to talk to and how we need to talk to them.

One of the most common themes we encountered while preparing this document is a sense that Progressives are thought of as “weak” and “untrustworthy”. This narrative is nonsense, but a lot of times in politics it’s not about facts, or logic or data, it’s about feelings. And no one likes feeling like a victim. No one wants to side with the loser. While state-wide Democrats have taken an electoral beating, RGV Democrats have a long victorious history. We haven’t lost a race since Reconstruction!

So how can we break the stigma and package progressivism with a twist of conservatism in a way that engages our community but does not alienate our allies across the state who might feel like we are “running to the middle” and abandoning our beliefs?

We recommend creating a messaging silo of sorts around the RGV where we are allowed to create our own truth about what it means to vote Democrat. The RGV should have its own messaging plan that includes

way more input from everyday people and less input from upstate pollsters and consultants. It's completely OK if our message to RGV Hispanics is different than our message to El Paso or San Antonio Hispanics. This is what organizing locally means.

What kind of “reframing” are we actually talking about?

Take the top two issues that Trump voters told us were most important to them: the Economy and Healthcare. Progressive messaging is often bastardized by Conservatives and depicted as some sort of crusade to take back the wealth that corporate interests and oligarchs have stolen from the working class. But where Progressives see a fair redistribution of wealth, people from the RGV see a handout. But our Mexican pride won't allow us to accept your handouts. Remember that we're not poor, we're broke. We should instead present our policies as that one little “break” that everyone thinks they need in order to get started. Just a little *alivianada*. We're not here to cut you a welfare check, we're here to connect you with this person we know who's hiring right now. We are offering a hand up, not a hand out.

The same can be said for Healthcare. “Medicare for all”, and “Healthcare is a Human right” are noble policies that have taken on toxic meaning. Healthcare being a “right” bemoans the notion that you're entitled to something from the government in exchange for simply living in the United States. We have found that people from the RGV think of healthcare as more of a service you pay for. If it's free then that means there's probably a catch involved and

it's low quality. After all, you get what you pay for. We can frame our conversation as more of a re-negotiation between patients and doctors. “We are willing to pay for the service we need, but right now we are getting a bad deal.”

In this way, we frame the conversation as a transaction where the voter feels in control of their own decisions, not an empty bystander at the mercy of whatever the government gives them.

Additionally, now is the perfect time to analyze some of our tent-pole issues and examine if we could benefit from a change in approach. Abortion and LGBTQ issues, two message areas that most directly clash with religion, make it that much harder to engage with Hispanic RGV voters. And it's worth exploring if we are spending too much ink talking about these issues. This isn't a suggestion that we should stop fighting for a woman's right to choose and protections for marginalized communities, what we mean is that we don't have to include these talking points on every piece of campaign material we print.

We we asked the respondents of our survey “what is it about Democrats that you find so offputting” the most common responses we received were related to Abortion, LGBTQ issues, and “Cancel Culture”. According to our results, these are the three major message areas that drive RGV Hispanics to Republicans.

It's time to add new songs to the playlist, new issues that may make it easier to make friends and influence voters. There is one issue that is massively popular across the

state, has broad bi-partisan support and directly addresses the economy and healthcare: legalization.

In 2018 a firm out of Michigan commissioned a poll on the popularity of medical marijuana in Texas. Unsurprisingly, the constituent group which expressed the LOWEST support for medical cannabis were Conservative christians. The poll found that 57% of christian Conservative voters are in favor of medical cannabis. **Fifty-seven%**.

Recreational Cannabis is a slightly different matter and we could not acquire any polling data about recreational use specifically but the arguments in favor of creating a retail recreational market in Texas are pretty overwhelming.

At the top of this list is the fact that cannabis is a cash crop that could do for Texas what tobacco did for Jamestown. Legalization would create huge wins for us in the areas of economic development, healthcare and criminal justice. There is no other issue that seems better suited for RGV organizing (and Progressive messaging in general) than legalization.

Lastly, and this is difficult to talk about. But we need to lighten up. No two people exist in the world that agree on absolutely everything. Without getting too deep into "cancel culture" (which is a dubious concept anyway), we need to allow the RGV the breathing room it needs to feel comfortable with itself. We need to go out of our way to assume positive intent with every voter we talk to and draw from a deeply held belief that most people are inherently good. It's one thing to demand someone use

preferred pronouns when you're in a Progressive space, but when you're on somebody's porch it's customary to show respect to that person's household and refrain from invalidating their beliefs. We can't earn their support if we are constantly scolding them and calling them ignorant racists. Even if they *are* those things. We don't need to adopt their policies, we only need their votes.

Conclusions

- Start early
- Hire local
- Spend Local
- Train better
- Invest in TV
- Lighten up!

This document is by no means definitive, we hope that it's insights and perspectives can help any candidate or Progressive organization get a better understanding of the Rio Grande Valley and what it means to campaign in this region.