OPINION

# Dems continue waiting for voters who don't vote



RONELL SMITH

## Demographic optimism keeps colliding with Texas' electoral math



Staff Photo

**Despite a record number of Texans** registering to vote last November, participation among those groups lagged, writes Ronell Smith.

Less than 12 hours after conceding the Democratic Senate primary to James Talarico, Rep. Jasmine Crockett posted on X that "Texas is primed to turn blue." Her post reminded me of friends who declare every January they will finally eat better and exercise. Good intentions, as they soon discover, are not a strategy.

For more than three decades, Texas Democrats have relied on the same premise: demographic change will eventually produce victory. Yet the result remains the same: no Democrat has won statewide office in Texas since 1994.

Crockett is not wrong that conditions may be improving for her party. Trump's approval in Texas has softened, Republicans face a Cornyn/Paxton runoff, and Democratic primary turnout reached its highest midterm level in more than five decades. But those facts do not erase the structural problem: Texas Democrats have spent decades waiting for voters who rarely show up.

### The demographics didn't arrive

The bedrock of Democratic optimism about Texas has long been demographic math: a fast-growing Hispanic population would eventually tip the state left. The 2024 election delivered a serious blow to that theory.

Exit polls showed a double-digit swing among Hispanic voters toward Republicans compared with 2020. In heavily Hispanic South Texas, Trump flipped counties that had not voted Republican in generations. Democratic turnout also declined in Harris, Bexar and Dallas counties — urban centers Democrats rely on.

Trump's raw vote total in Texas surpassed his own 2020 record while Democratic turnout fell.

Republican pollster Patrick Ruffini, whose book *Party of the People* predicted this realignment, argues Democrats lost ground on kitchen-table economics while cultural priorities filled the void. Many working-class voters, including Latinos, now see the party as reflecting its college-educated wing.

Demographic growth does not automatically produce political alignment. Voters still have to be persuaded.

### Primaries that reward the wrong coalition

The Crockett-Talarico primary exposed a broader structural problem.

Post-election analysis by Ruffini found that despite talk of a Latino surge, turnout rose more sharply in white, college-educated suburban counties — the coalition behind Talarico's victory.

The pattern reflects a broader reality: Texas Democratic primaries are increasingly shaped by college-educated white liberal voters whose preferences sit to the left of the statewide electorate Democrats must win.

The pattern isn't unique to Texas. Democratic strategist Liam Kerr of WelcomePAC found in nationwide research that moderate Democrats outperformed the party baseline by more than five points in both 2022 and 2024.

Progressive candidates, meanwhile, have not flipped a single red seat to blue anywhere in the country during that same span. The primary produced a familiar Texas Democratic dilemma. Crockett entered the race with stronger general-election instincts — a sharper message and a record of confronting Republicans on economic issues. But her coalition proved too narrow to win the nomination.

Talarico assembled the broader primary coalition, but it may prove less durable in November. Republicans are already framing his comments describing "radicalized white men" as a domestic terror threat, his claim that "God is nonbinary," and his calls to divert ICE funding as evidence of a "radical" agenda out of step with many Texas voters.

### Mobilization is not a strategy

Crockett's candidacy rested on driving historic turnout among Black and young voters, a theory Democrats in Texas have relied on for decades — one that increasingly looks like a pipe dream. A record number of Texans registered to vote last November, but participation among those groups lagged. Even as turnout reached modern highs, the electorate's composition barely changed.

Meanwhile, Brookings Metro demographer William Frey found that Hispanic Texans remain underrepresented in the electorate relative to their share of the eligible voters. The voters who consistently show up are older and less aligned with the progressive priorities dominating Democratic primaries.

A strategy built on unprecedented participation from low-turnout groups — in a state where Republicans have spent three decades building political infrastructure — is not a general-election strategy.

It is a hope.

### What would actually work

None of this forecloses a Democratic future in Texas. If Trump continues to alienate the Hispanic voters who backed him in 2024, Talarico could benefit. The Cornyn-Paxton runoff also creates Republican vulnerability.

But those advantages require a party willing to compete for voters it does not already have.

Texas Democrats love to talk about the electorate of the future.

Republicans compete for the one that votes.

Demographics do not vote. Coalitions do.

When Texas eventually elects another Democratic senator, it will not be because demographics finally arrived. It will be because Democrats built a coalition capable of winning.

*Ronell Smith is a business strategy consultant and a former Southlake City Council member. He is a Dallas Morning News contributing columnist.*

# Downtown Dallas must thrive for region to succeed

## Philanthropy has driven growth, and we can come together again

By WAYNE WHITE



File Photo/Staff

**The story of downtown Dallas** is, in many ways, the story of Dallas philanthropy, writes Wayne White, president and CEO of Communities Foundation of Texas.

There is no North Texas miracle without a thriving Dallas, and no thriving Dallas without a strong downtown.

We rightly celebrate the remarkable growth of the Dallas-Fort Worth region. Frisco, Plano and our growing suburbs are strengths of our region and national symbols of opportunity, places where families build lives and businesses take root. Their success reflects the entrepreneurial spirit that defines North Texas.

But great regions are not built on growth alone. They are anchored by great urban cores.

Downtown Dallas is the civic, economic and symbolic center of the entire region. It is not merely a neighborhood on the map. It is where culture gathers, where commerce concentrates and where Dallas introduces itself to the world.

And if there is one truth that experience teaches regions over time, it is this: *you've got to dance with the one that brung ya.*

For North Texas, the one that brought us here is Dallas.

Communities across the region do not thrive in spite of Dallas. They thrive because of Dallas.

When the core of a great city pulses with energy, the benefits radiate outward: Talent flows more freely, investment follows confidence, and the region's identity becomes unmistakable.

For generations, our region has understood this truth.

The story of downtown Dallas is, in many ways, the story of Dallas philanthropy. Visionaries across our history helped define a culture of civic generosity that continues to shape our skyline and strengthen our institutions.

I've lived in a lot of major metros throughout my career before coming to Dallas to lead Communities Foundation of Texas (CFT), and I truly believe that there is nowhere in the country as philanthropic and generous.

Forward-minded leaders past and present believe that investing in downtown Dallas means investing in the future of the entire region.

This collective vision has produced lasting civic assets, places like Klyde Warren Park and the remarkable Dallas Arts District, spaces that have transformed how residents and visitors experience the heart of our city.

These investments have not only beautified downtown, they have strengthened Dallas' national reputation and reinforced the economic engine that powers the region.

But history carries a lesson, as well as inspiration.

Downtown Dallas now stands at a pivotal moment. Like many great American cities, it faces real challenges around public safety, housing affordability, economic transition and perceptions about vitality in a post-pandemic era.

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While these challenges are not unique to Dallas, how we respond to them will define the future of our great city.

The opportunity before us is not simply to solve problems. It is to renew our shared commitment to the heart of our city.

Philanthropy has long served as a catalyst for downtown's evolution, and it will continue to play that role. Yet this moment requires something much broader than individual generosity. It calls for alignment across philanthropy, business, civic institutions and government.

Great cities are built through collaboration.

A thriving downtown will not emerge from fragmented efforts or isolated initiatives. I agree with *The Dallas Morning News*: it requires a unified vision and the discipline to move toward it together.

We are already seeing the power of this approach. Collaborative efforts to improve public safety and address homelessness downtown are bringing together service providers, civic organizations, law enforcement and philanthropic partners (including CFT and others) in ways that are beginning to produce visible progress.

Housing affordability is another example. Regional efforts, including CFT's recent $100 million commitment to advancing housing solutions, depend on partnerships with developers, employers, municipalities and community organizations.

Part of CFT's housing strategy includes ensuring the success of downtown for our workers, businesses and residents. And I believe that there is opportunity to add more workforce and attainable housing downtown.

Downtown is a key connector to opportunity in southern Dallas and is essential to helping our southern neighborhoods thrive.

At CFT, we are committed to continuing to investing in downtown, and we welcome partnership with those who want to collaborate on a unified vision.

This is not a zero-sum equation. We have built generational civic infrastructure in downtown Dallas. Strengthening it is not optional. It is a regional responsibility.

If we want Frisco to flourish, Plano to prosper and every neighborhood across the region to continue to succeed, we must remain committed to a thriving Dallas: the place that *brung* us here.

*Wayne White is president and CEO of Communities Foundation of Texas.*