



Hays County Tejano Democrats
Primary Election March 2024
Candidate Questionnaire: House District 45
(Alphabetical Order)

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Current Member of the Hays County Tejano Democrats

Why are you seeking the office of State Representative District 45? What is your background and how does it pertain to the office you are seeking?

District 45 is in jeopardy. We are currently plagued with a representative who has poor relationships with local representatives throughout the county and others which affects our ability to get things done for Hays County and District 45. In the 88th Regular Session, not a single bill was passed that was independently written by our current representative and only one bill was passed that was coauthored by our representative. Potential foster parents are now burdened with taking an additional class on the procedures in the event of a runaway. It is time to pass the torch to someone who has the ability and vision for healing the relationships between local officials and the office of the state representative. More importantly, it is time to pass the torch to someone who can offer hope of getting things done on behalf of District 45.

How do you plan to collaborate with other legislators and navigate the legislative process to effectively advocate for your district?

The first step will be to heal strained relationships. By reestablishing relationships that have presently been written off, we will be able to reopen lines of communication to engage other legislators to sympathize and empathize with the needs of District 45. We are confident that the skills of a seasoned attorney will allow for navigating the legislative process. First, as attorneys, we keep abreast of the legislative process. We often follow bills that will affect our practice from beginning to end. Moreover, as part of our practice, we often argue the legislative intent of laws which requires regular research on bills from their infancy through committee hearings and, ultimately, becoming law. We also believe that our currently existing relationships at the Capitol will allow for the effective navigation of the legislative process to serve the citizens of District 45.

What do you see as the current challenges facing public education in our state? And which specific challenge would you take on if elected or re-elected to office?

Our public schools are where we leave our most valuable assets for the future--our children--and it receives the least support and respect from our state government. Our current challenges range from school finance to the Charter School Fraud to the Voucher Scam. Guns in our public schools and standardized testing continue to plague our public school system. Finally, our retired teachers and other workers continue to suffer because of our current state legislature failing to fund a cost of living adjustment. In a perfect world, we would increase the basic allotment, guarantee a pay increase for teachers, quit funding Charter Schools, move on from the voucher scam, stop talking about putting more guns in our schools, come to the realization that standardized testing is not a true judge for all students so it cannot be tied to teacher performance and, finally, we would give all of our retired teachers a cost of living adjustment. That said, the specific challenge I would take on if elected would be to prioritize increasing the basic allotment which would increase teacher and staff pay and would provide additional funds for student needs.

In a Nov 2023 survey conducted by UnidosUS, the United States's largest Latino nonprofit advocacy organization), when asked about the Democratic Party, 49% of Texas' Latino voters say the party cares about Latinos, 37% say it doesn't care too much, and 14% say it is hostile toward the Latino community. If elected, how does being a Democrat impact how you carry out the duties of your office?

My grandparents were illiterate farmworkers and my parents were farmworkers. They have told stories of working on large ranches watching the rich ranch owners mistreat and underpay their workers while they

made millions off of their ranches and, often, from the oil and gas wells on those ranches. One of my earliest memories about politics is when I was in elementary school and I asked my parents what the difference between a Democrat and a Republican was. I recall part of that explanation being that my family history is being from the working class and, as the working class, we fight for the working class. Over time, my thoughts on being a Democrat have evolved to fighting for the working class by fighting for equality. For years, I have fought for equality on all fronts, whether from the perspective of fighting for the working class or fighting for racial equality or gender equality or equal rights for the LGBTQIA+ community. From those ranches, my dad learned the value of an education. He saw those ranch owners pay the way for their children and put them in places that the working class could only dream of. It was instilled in me at an early age that I would get an education and do great things to reach back and lift others up. If elected, I will carry those values forward in hopes of benefiting all members of District 45.

Can you share a personal story or experience that highlights your commitment to public service?

Our body of work of public service is deep. From holding an annual Christmas Party to benefit children in need, to representing many of the forgotten members of our community on a pro bono basis, to working for free to oust a crooked Republican constable, to fighting the naming of a major thoroughfare "Fajita Drive," we have jumped in where we can to do good for our community. If I had to pick one experience that highlights my commitment to public service it would be our work during Winter Storm Uri. People were out of water. The news stories were incredible. Bottled water was sold out at all the stores. People were desperate. I could have kept my family home and watched the debacle on tv. We jumped on the phone and found pallets of water to give away. We immediately drove to Austin to purchase pallets of water and scheduled a free giveaway. It was one of the best feelings to see the relief people had when they drove up to pick up a case of water that they could not find at the stores.



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Why are you seeking the office of State Representative District 45? What is your background and how does it pertain to the office you are seeking?

I am seeking a fourth term as your state representative, because I don't know how to leave a job half-finished. When I first ran for office in 2018, few people believed that House District 45 could turn blue. In fact, no one had run in 2016. I worked with Democrats across the county, including Hays Tejano Democrats, to boost turnout and bring persuadable voters over to the Democratic side. I'm so grateful every day that we proved the naysayers wrong and turned Hays County blue. If only the Texas Legislature was so easy to flip. Work in the legislature is always tough and sometimes excruciating when the majority is determined to cause harm. I'm running again because I know two things. 1. I block a lot of harm by using the rules to disrupt extremist members from amending bills to hurt Texans. I've blocked amendments that would have required ISDs to report on undocumented students, made it more difficult for Texans to travel out of state, or banned schools from discussing LGBTQ issues. 2. I'm a trusted voice on both sides of the aisle and am making incremental progress where I can. I secured funding this last session for fentanyl awareness curriculum, helped increase funding to Texas State, took steps to reduce running away among foster youth, and delivered property tax relief. I won't walk away when my work isn't done.

How do you plan to collaborate with other legislators and navigate the legislative process to effectively advocate for your district?

The Democratic Caucus is a team, and I'm proud to be an integral member of that team fighting for our constituents and pushing back against harmful legislation. I'm also proud to have the endorsements of its leaders including Mexican America Legislative Caucus Chair Victoria Neave, Legislative Black Caucus Chair Ron Reynolds, Texas LGBTQ Caucus Chair Mary Gonzalez, and Women's Health Caucus Chair Donna Howard. As members of the minority party, we are often called to fight and fight hard for things such as voting rights, abortion rights, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights. However, once one fight is over, we also have to be able to hit pause on fighting and work with our colleagues across the aisle. I'm particularly proud of building the Texas Energy and Climate Caucus. I founded the caucus in 2021, the first time the Texas Legislature has had an environmental caucus, and in a few short years, it's grown to 56 members, both Republican and Democratic. Last session, we stopped far right attacks on renewable energy and started building a bipartisan coalition to advocate for innovative, low-carbon energy in Texas. Climate change is an existential threat, and I am proud of my work to pull the legislature's head of the sand and spur collaboration on this critical issue.

What do you see as the current challenges facing public education in our state? And which specific challenge would you take on if elected or re-elected to office?

Extremist Republicans are trying to break our public school system and funnel money to private schools. I was proud to hold the line against voucher scams that would have funneled taxpayer dollars to private schools through five separate legislative sessions last year. However, now the extremists are trying to starve our school system, and we must secure more resources so that our schools can recruit and retain great educators and provide necessary services to our students. In addition, we must protect our schools from far right culture wars. Last session, I established a "banned book shelf" in my office and led the effort to build the legal case on the floor against HB 900, the book banning bill that was designed to target stories of diverse Texans such as *Out of Darkness* by Ashley Hope Perez and *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* by Benjamin Alire Saenz. Just last week, the Fifth Circuit overturned much of that bill after attorneys used the record we built in committee and on the floor to show how the bill is unconstitutional. We need to restore educator

confidence in their ability to teach the truth without being targeted by groups like Moms Demand Liberty. Lastly, we must rein in out-of-control testing so that teachers can focus on teaching curriculum instead of teaching to a test. I've passed legislation through the House to allow school districts to opt out of writing standardized tests and use a portfolio for evaluations instead. I will continue to work to make this bill law.

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The Democratic Party is a coalition of groups that are all stronger if they stand together. To me being a Democrat means never leaving anyone behind and always remembering that together we are greater than the sum of our parts. It means that injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere, and it is all our responsibility. I believe in a Texas where everyone has access to a great education, affordable health care, clean air and water, opportunities to thrive, and respect from their community and their government. I believe that Democrats, if we stand together, can achieve that for all Texans.

Can you share a personal story or experience that highlights your commitment to public service?

During the acute days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I used every connection I had to leverage resources for Hays County. This included flagging the testing deficit on the east side of Hays County and securing testing from the state for these communities. The testing revealed that Hays County was a hot spot with the highest community spread in the state. When vaccines became available, I personally built a spreadsheet of the regional vaccine allocation across the state that showed that Hays County and central Texas were being shorted. I then worked with other central Texas legislators and Senator Zaffirini to pressure state agencies to increase our allocation. I also personally put up fliers in both Spanish and English across the county to get the information out to voters, and my office partnered with Tejano Democrats to call Hays County residents and help them get signed up for the vaccine. When the Omicron wave hit near the holidays and testing at pop up centers were impossible to get, I secured rapid tests from the Texas Department of Emergency Management and worked with Mano Amiga in San Marcos to set up a pop up testing site on both Christmas Eve and New Years Eve. I worked the site myself both time and rang in the new year while we closed up the location.