

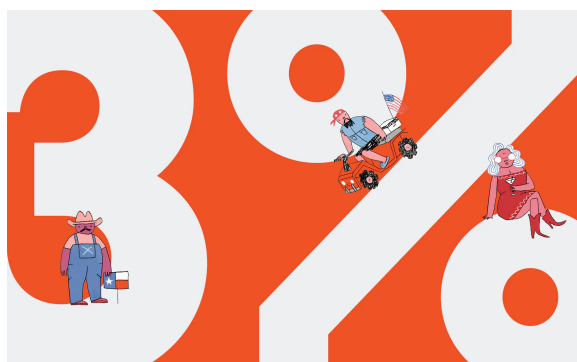
Texas Monthly

Minority Rule: How 3 Percent of Texans Call the Shots for the Rest of Us

Statewide officials and legislators are far to the right of most Texans. Why? Low primary-election turnout and an anemic Democratic party.

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/news-politics/how-3-percent-of-texans-call-shots-for-texas/>

By [Michael Hardy](#)
[November 2022](#)



Illustrations by Brian Rea

If you want to see the future of Texas, take a drive down Synott Road, in Sugar Land, the booming suburb twenty miles southwest of Houston. Start at the intersection with Old Richmond Road. Here, tucked beside a Texaco station, you'll find a Mexican food truck and DD's Ejide African Restaurant, which serves aromatic specialties such as oxtail pepper soup. Heading south along Synott, you'll soon pass Hindu, Buddhist, and Cao Dai temples, a mosque, an apostolic church, and a halal grocery store.

Sugar Land is the largest city in Fort Bend County, one of the fastest-growing and [most diverse](#) areas in the United States. Between 2000 and 2020 the county [more than doubled in size](#), to a population of 823,000. A preponderance of that growth is attributable to Asians, who now account for one in every five residents. As recently as 2000, non-Hispanic white Texans made up nearly half the population of Fort Bend County; today, that group makes up just 30 percent of the population, followed by Hispanic (26 percent), Asian (22 percent, about half being of Indian descent), and Black (22 percent) Texans. It's also one of the best-educated counties in the state, with nearly 20 percent of the adult population holding a graduate or professional degree.

The county's political evolution has been equally dramatic. Between 1968 and 2016, it voted Republican in every single presidential election. In Congress, the majority of the county was

represented by the likes of libertarian icon Ron Paul and former Republican majority leader Tom DeLay. But over the past decade, the pendulum has swung. In 2016 Hillary Clinton [beat](#) Donald Trump here by seven percentage points, becoming the first Democrat to carry the county since Lyndon Johnson. In 2020 Joe Biden won Fort Bend County by eleven points—part of a nationwide suburban backlash against Trump. “Trump made a lot of people uncomfortable,” said County Judge KP George, an Indian American Democrat and the county’s top elected official. “About thirty percent of our population is foreign-born. They didn’t like his rhetoric.”

Fort Bend County is what economists call a leading indicator. Between 2010 and 2020, Texas [grew by nearly four million residents](#), with people of color responsible for 95 percent of that growth. The state is now 40 percent non-Hispanic white, 40 percent Hispanic, 13 percent Black, and 6 percent Asian—with the latter the fastest-growing demographic. As in Fort Bend County, that transformation has been accompanied by political change. Although [no Democrat has won](#) a statewide race in Texas since 1994—and no Democratic presidential candidate has carried the state [since Jimmy Carter](#) in 1976—the party has been chipping away at the Republican advantage over time. In 2012 Mitt Romney [won the state](#) by sixteen points. In 2020 Trump won by less than six.



DD’s Ejide African Restaurant, on Synott Road. Photograph by Christopher Lee



Tacos Hacienda Tapatia, also on Synott Road. Photograph by Christopher Lee

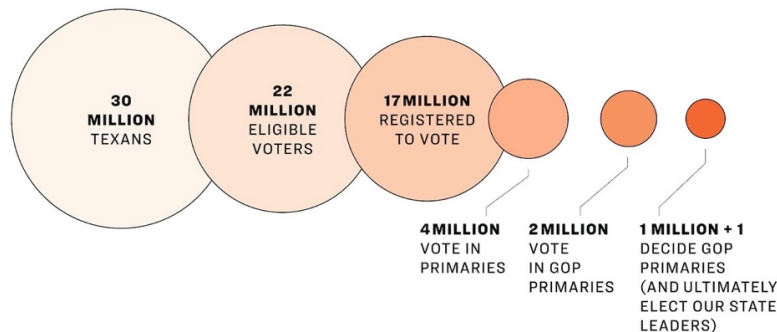
But as the state as a whole has moved toward the political center, its Republican party has lurched to the right, enacting some of the country’s most reactionary policies and helping make Texas [an international byword for extremism](#). During the 2021 legislative session, the Republican majority banned abortion after six weeks, promising a \$10,000 bounty to any citizen

who reports a violation. (The Supreme Court’s overturning of *Roe v. Wade* this summer [triggered another law](#) banning all abortions except to save the life of the mother.) And they [passed a bill](#) allowing Texans 21 and older to openly carry a handgun without a license or training.

Neither of these measures enjoys broad public support; polls show that most Texans hold moderate positions on abortion, gun rights, and many other key issues. But state lawmakers have made sure that doesn’t matter. During a special session last fall, legislators created new districts for themselves (and for members of Congress) as part of the once-a-decade redistricting process that occurs after every census. Drawn [behind closed doors](#), using highly sophisticated computer models, the new maps guaranteed that most incumbents, both Republican and Democratic, remained in safely red or blue districts. As a result of this gerrymandering, few legislators have to worry about the general election. Their only vulnerability comes during the spring primary, in which a small number of voters choose their parties’ nominees. Primary elections are all about ideological purity, about appealing to hard-core activists. Moderation is not a quality in high demand.

How the Minority Rules

Few Texans turn out to vote in primaries—and even fewer effectively choose our leaders.



Texas is home to [around](#) 30 million people, including 22 million eligible voters—17 million of whom are actually registered to vote. Yet only about 2 million typically [turn out](#) for Republican primary elections. (One to two million typically vote in Democratic primaries.) That means that a candidate such as Governor Greg Abbott or Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick needs the support of only a million or so primary voters, representing just 3 percent of all Texans, to win the Republican nomination. Since the Republican nominee has gone on to win every statewide general election for the past 24 years, it is this tiny slice of the electorate—[disproportionately](#) old, disproportionately white, disproportionately affluent, and disproportionately rural—that, in effect, selects our leaders.

“The Republican primary in Texas is among the most consequential elections on earth, because roughly thirty million Americans live directly with the consequences,” said Scott Braddock, editor of the *Quorum Report*, an influential state politics newsletter. “It’s the Republican primary that creates the mandates under which our officeholders operate.”



Men and their sons during midday prayers at the ISGH Masjid Attaqwa, a mosque that is part of the Islamic Society of Greater Houston, along Synott Road in Sugar Land, on September 22, 2022. Photograph by Christopher Lee

In 1980 Hao Trieu and his wife, Chuyen Tu, fled war-torn Vietnam, ending up in Chicago, where they worked minimum-wage jobs while struggling to learn English. In 1991 they moved to Houston. Members of their family were already living there, and they offered to teach Trieu and Tu the convenience store business. The couple opened their own store in Alief, a working-class neighborhood in southwest Houston. The store prospered, and in 2000 Trieu and Tu purchased a two-story redbrick house on a quiet suburban street in Sugar Land. They came to Fort Bend County so that their two daughters could attend better public schools, but they quickly grew to appreciate the diversity of their new community. Now that they're both retired, Trieu has coffee every morning with a group of Vietnamese friends, while Tu goes for walks with her Indian American neighbor.

Sitting at their kitchen table in September, Trieu and Tu told me—with translation help from their 36-year-old daughter Lily—that they don't follow politics and rarely vote, despite being naturalized citizens. Fort Bend County does not print ballots in Vietnamese, which means that Lily or her sister must accompany them to the voting booth. When I asked what they would most like to change about Texas, Tu spoke up. "No guns," she said. "I see school shootings on TV almost every week." But like many Texans, the couple feels disconnected from the political process. They don't understand the primary system or how redistricting works. They aren't sure how to make their voices heard.

In the state Senate, Trieu and Tu are represented by Republican Joan Huffman, a former prosecutor and judge whose district stretches south from the wealthy Houston enclave of River Oaks, where she lived until 2020, through parts of Fort Bend and Brazoria Counties. Since taking office in 2009, Huffman has voted to [expand gun access](#), [outlaw abortion](#) except to save the life of the mother, and [require](#) local law enforcement to cooperate with federal immigration

authorities as they seek to identify undocumented migrants. *Texas Monthly* named her one of the state's ten worst legislators in [2013](#) and [2015](#), citing her efforts to stymie criminal justice reform. "I have never felt like Senator Huffman represented the needs of my parents and their community," Lily told me. "There has not been a single policy issue she's taken a position on where I felt like she's really stood up for communities of color."

During her thirteen years in the Legislature, Huffman's suburban district has steadily become more centrist. In 2020 it [voted for Biden](#) by five points. But rather than changing her politics, Huffman simply changed her constituents. Last year, the Senate redistricting committee, chaired by Huffman, [redrew her district](#), adding rural, deep-red Wharton and Colorado Counties while excising the increasingly blue Houston neighborhoods of Bellaire and West University Place. (Huffman's Democratic opponent in 2018, who came within five points of beating her, just so happens to live in one of those excised neighborhoods.) Her new district would have voted for Trump by seventeen points. After running unopposed in this year's Republican primary, Huffman is favored to easily win the general election this month.

Trieu and Tu's house is still in Huffman's district, but the family is under no illusion that their opinions matter to her. Lily, who now lives in Austin and serves as interim executive director for the civic-engagement group Asian Texans for Justice, testified in front of the Legislature last year about the impact of redistricting on her parents and their neighbors. To maximize the number of safe Republican seats, the mapmakers had [carved up](#) Sugar Land, a city of 111,000, into three state House districts, two state Senate districts, and two congressional districts.

Asians "are the fastest-growing racial group across Texas and have historically been unfairly divided into multiple legislative districts," Lily told lawmakers. "The way the maps are drawn may have detrimental consequences for communities like ours, where resources are needed but cannot be met because our voices and votes are divided in the political process." The Republican majority approved the maps anyway.

The United States is one of the few countries that allow politicians to draw their own electoral districts. In most of the world, these maps are created by independent commissions composed of nonpartisan experts. But gerrymandering is one of America's most time-honored bipartisan traditions. In 1991, when Democrats controlled the Texas Legislature, they pushed through what was [described as](#) the "shrewdest gerrymander of the nineties." The Supreme Court has repeatedly [declined to throw out](#) even the most blatantly partisan gerrymanders. Maps can be struck down only if they are [deemed to violate](#) the Voting Rights Act of 1965 by discriminating on the basis of race.

Last December, the Department of Justice [sued Texas](#) for doing exactly that. Thanks to its growing population, the lawsuit notes, Texas received two additional congressional seats after the 2020 census. Although people of color accounted for 95 percent of the state's growth, both new districts have Anglo majorities. The mapmakers managed to reduce the number of majority-Hispanic districts from six to five. Republicans "have rigged the system to maintain political power," said Domingo Garcia, president of the League of United Latin American Citizens. LULAC is a plaintiff in a separate lawsuit against the state filed by a coalition of Latino civil rights organizations. "It was clearly the intent to crack and pack and disenfranchise Latino and

African American voters in Texas,” Garcia told me. (“Cracking” is a term of art for splitting a minority community into multiple districts to dilute its voting power; “packing” involves squeezing as many people of color as possible into a single district.)

The Republican state legislators who created the new maps vehemently deny any discriminatory intent. “The maps were drawn blind to race,” Huffman told me. “The traditional priorities of redistricting, like equalization of populations, respecting communities of interest, incumbent priorities, and so forth, were taken into consideration, but they were drawn blind to race.” When I repeated Huffman’s quote to George, the county judge, he laughed. “Maybe she only sees white,” he speculated. “I mean, does she think we’re stupid?”

This certainly wouldn’t be the state’s first attempt to suppress voters. For nearly a century after the Fifteenth Amendment gave Black men the right to vote, Texas [used poll taxes](#) and whites-only primaries, [backed by racial terrorism](#), to keep non-white Texans from voting. After the Twenty-Fourth Amendment and the Voting Rights Act eliminated the most egregiously discriminatory tactics, Texas turned to racial gerrymandering—packing minority voters into as few districts as possible, or cracking minority neighborhoods into multiple majority-Anglo districts. In every redistricting cycle since 1970, courts have [found](#) that one or more of the state’s electoral maps disenfranchised people of color.

Because of its dismal civil rights record, Texas was one of the (mostly Southern) states that, under the Voting Rights Act, were [required](#) to receive preclearance from the Justice Department or a federal court before implementing new electoral maps. In 2013 the Supreme Court [struck down](#) this requirement, arguing, in the words of Chief Justice John Roberts, that “things have changed dramatically” in the South. Within 24 hours of the ruling, Texas Republicans [implemented](#) one of the nation’s strictest voter ID laws and adopted electoral maps described by civil rights activists as blatantly discriminatory. Perhaps the South hadn’t changed as much as Roberts claimed.

But the problem with gerrymandering goes beyond the disenfranchisement of non-white Texans. By creating safely red and blue districts, the process reduces incentives for politicians of both parties to appeal to moderate voters. Instead, candidates are beholden mainly to the small cadre of voters who reliably turn out for primary elections. And according to multiple nonpartisan public opinion polls, the policy preferences of these voters are very different from those of most Texans.

Take the issue of abortion. A [February poll](#) conducted by the University of Texas at Austin’s Texas Politics Project (TPP) found that 59 percent of the state’s Republican primary voters want a total abortion ban, compared with 53 percent of all Republicans and just 34 percent of all Texans registered to vote. When it comes to gun rights, the poll found that 64 percent of Republican primary voters favor keeping current firearm policies in place, compared with 57 percent of all Republicans and 34 percent of all Texans. Three-quarters of Texas Republican primary voters say President Biden did not win the 2020 election legitimately, compared with 67 percent of all Republicans and 36 percent of all Texans.

Most Texans hold views that could be characterized as centrist—neither right-wing nor left-wing. A [TPP poll](#) released in July found that 80 percent of Texans believe that abortion should be legal in cases of rape, 78 percent believe that it should be legal in cases of incest, and 69 percent believe that it should be legal if there's a "strong chance of a serious birth defect." The same poll found that 52 percent of Texans favored stricter gun laws. When asked about specific proposals, 78 percent of Texans supported universal background checks, 55 percent backed a ban on high-capacity magazines, 54 percent were for an assault weapons ban, and 70 percent favored raising the minimum age to buy a firearm.

Of course, people don't vote for policies; they vote for politicians. In the United States, that usually means a binary choice between a Republican and a Democrat in general elections. And in spite of their disagreement with many GOP positions, most Texans who vote have pulled the lever for the Republican in every statewide race since 1996. Unhappy as they may be with the current crop of Republican officeholders, many Texas voters simply can't bring themselves to vote for a Democrat.

That's partly because the positions favored by the Democratic base no more align with the views of most Texans than do those of their Republican counterparts. A TPP study of the 2022 primary electorate [found](#) that 90 percent of Democratic primary voters believe that abortion laws should be less strict. When it comes to gun rights, 95 percent of these voters support stricter laws. Around 62 percent feel that parents already have enough say over what their children are taught in public school, compared with 44 percent of all Texans. No wonder the Democratic party keeps nominating candidates who can't win a general election. "Texas Republicans have moved to the right, but national Democrats have moved to the left," said Rice University political scientist Mark Jones. "The Democratic party has not presented itself as a credible alternative."

By creating safely red and blue districts, gerrymandering reduces incentives for politicians of both parties to appeal to moderate voters.

In 2020 Republicans [increased their share](#) of the vote in heavily Latino South Texas, in part by portraying Democrats as radicals who would defund the police and border patrol, eliminate oil and gas industry jobs, allow abortion on demand, and open the state's borders to undocumented immigrants. "Texas Republicans have very skillfully created a caricature of national Democrats, drawing on Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Bernie Sanders, and Elizabeth Warren," Jones told me. "It's really difficult for Texas Democrats to respond to that because if they repudiate those figures, they can run afoul of their base"—the left-leaning one million state Democrats who decide primary elections.

In the face of this dynamic, the Democratic party has made little effort to appeal to a majority of Texans statewide. Under Gilberto Hinojosa, a Brownsville attorney who has served as party chair for the past decade, Democrats have [focused their attention and messaging](#) on the state's six largest urban areas and the Rio Grande Valley, the parts of the state that reliably vote blue. In the process, they have essentially ceded rural Texas—and elections for statewide offices such as governor—to Republicans. "The idea is, that population is red and they're always going to vote red," said Kim Olson, a retired Air Force pilot who unsuccessfully ran against Hinojosa for party chair at this summer's convention. "And I think that's a mistake."

There is substantial evidence that Texas voters are dissatisfied with their political options. Almost 60 percent of registered voters [say the state is on the wrong track](#)—the highest level in the TPP poll’s history. “When most voters look at their choice in the general election, they come away both puzzled and angry,” said Southern Methodist University political scientist Cal Jillson. “They don’t see a choice that makes them feel good. They see a conservative and a progressive, whereas they might feel much more down the middle.”



Plantation Stables, also on Synott Road. Photograph by Christopher Lee



A rider at Plantation Stables on September 22, 2022. Photograph by Christopher Lee

For the past two decades, the state Republican party has controlled the Governor’s Mansion and both legislative chambers. This monopoly on power is what makes the GOP primary, not the general election, the most important date on the Texas political calendar. “What elected officials fear the most is a strong primary challenge,” said Joe Straus, a lifelong Republican who served as speaker of the Texas House of Representatives from 2009 to 2019. A business-friendly conservative in the mold of George H. W. Bush, Straus frequently clashed with Patrick and Abbott, who helped drive him out of the Legislature. “The only thing [current officeholders] need to worry about is warding off a primary opponent. That doesn’t leave you in a very good place when it comes to governing.”

As long as Republicans maintain their iron grip on state politics, the GOP primary will remain the only game in town. “Three million primary voters make the decisions statewide for Texas,” acknowledged veteran Republican strategist Dave Carney, a top political adviser to Abbott. “Sometimes four million.”

“Isn’t that a problem?” I asked him.

“No,” he shot back. “Because all seventeen million [registered voters] could vote in the Republican primary. It’s up to people. There’s no party registration. You could go pick up a ballot and vote in whatever primary you want. Why is that a problem?”

Carney is correct: Texas is one of just eighteen states that [holds so-called open primaries](#) with nonpartisan registration. Voters can participate in either party’s primary—no matter how they voted in the past, and no matter how they intend to vote in the November general election. Voting rights groups have tried for years to encourage more people to participate in these crucial primary contests, but with limited success. In Texas, fewer than one in five registered voters [turned out](#) for this year’s primary elections—more than in the past six midterm primaries, but still well below the 67 percent of registered voters who cast ballots in the 2020 presidential election.

Why do so few Texans vote in primaries? “I don’t think they’re aware how important it is,” said Braddock, the *Quorum Report* editor. “It’s really unfortunate, because people are leaving consequential decisions up to other people.” There have been sporadic attempts to encourage Democrats to vote in Republican primaries and vice versa, usually with the goal of forcing the opposite party to select a less viable candidate. During the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, right-wing radio host Rush Limbaugh famously urged Republicans to vote for Hillary Clinton in hopes of weakening eventual nominee Barack Obama. Limbaugh called it “Operation Chaos.”

Yet Derek Ryan, a Republican political researcher, told me that such crossover voters typically account for less than 5 percent of all primary voters. “People that participate in party primaries typically skew farther from the center than Democratic or Republican general election voters,” he added. Primary voters are also more engaged in politics than is the electorate as a whole, he said. “These are the people who know who their State Board of Education member is. They know the issues, they know the players, and they’ve done their homework.”

To political operatives such as Carney, the fact that the most highly engaged, highly partisan voters wield disproportionate political influence is a feature of America’s democratic system, not a bug. But others see an abdication of responsibility on the part of nonvoters. John Montford, a lobbyist who served as a Democratic state senator from 1983 to 1996, told me, “I just don’t understand why people don’t go vote.” Montford worries about what he called the growing extremism of both parties. “But it’s hard to blame those who vote, because at least they take the trouble to go cast their ballot and vote for their candidates. So, in a way, people sort of deserve what they get.”

Are ignorance and apathy the only explanations for low primary turnout? Perhaps, like a growing number of Americans, voters simply don’t identify with either party. There is evidence that some, especially young voters, can’t stomach voting for the lesser of two evils. Some may be deterred from voting by the escalating Republican attempts to suppress, purge, or incarcerate voters of color; others live in a gerrymandered district where their vote is unlikely to matter—except in statewide races. In some cases, their local polling place might have been shut down—750 Texas polling places [closed](#) between 2012 and 2018, accounting for nearly half of all poll closures nationwide. “When you look at the voter-suppression tactics one by one, they don’t

seem significant,” said Carroll Robinson, the chair of the Texas Coalition of Black Democrats. “But when you look at it cumulatively, it’s like you’re swimming against a tide of conscious efforts to limit participation in the democratic process. And the limitations are focused on low-income and minority folks.”

Beyond encouraging more people to participate in primary elections, are there other ways to increase political engagement in Texas? How do we get from minority rule to majority rule? Part of the problem is that, outside of elections, Texans have few opportunities to express their policy preferences. Unlike in [24 other states](#), there is no provision in state law for citizen-sponsored ballot initiatives. Texans can vote on amendments to the state constitution, but only after those amendments have been approved by supermajorities in both legislative chambers.

University of Southern California political economist John Matsusaka, who researches ballot measures, told me they function as a check on legislative overreach. In recent years, both red and blue states have [legalized marijuana](#) through ballot referenda. California voters have used referenda to effectively [outlaw affirmative action](#) in higher education, while in Florida, voters [approved a measure](#) restoring voting rights to many felons who had served their sentences. In August, 59 percent of Kansas voters [rejected](#) a proposed constitutional amendment that would have outlawed abortion. “My research suggests that what happens when voters actually get to make the decisions themselves is that they tend to choose centrist, sensible kinds of things,” Matsusaka told me. “They push back against extremes from the parties.”

Maybe the primary system itself needs reform. One of Matsusaka’s USC colleagues, Christian Grose, studies “top-two” primaries, in which Democrats, Republicans, and independents compete in a single primary election, with the top two vote-getters typically advancing to the general election. In California, one of the three states that holds top-two primaries, this often means that two Democrats, one moderate and one liberal, advance to the general election. In Texas, it might mean giving voters a choice between a moderate and far-right Republican. “Members of Congress who get elected through these alternative primary systems tend to be less extreme,” Grose told me. “They’re more likely to moderate their positions a little bit to appeal to centrist voters.”

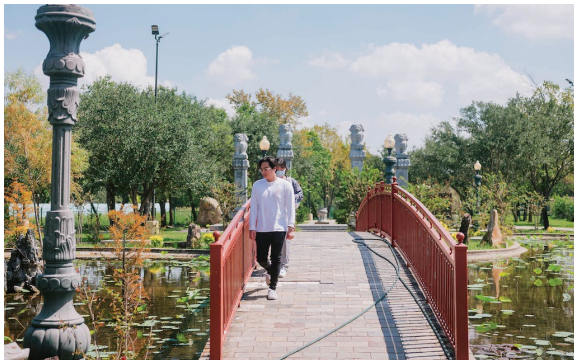
Other alternative primary systems exist, such as ranked-choice voting, in which voters have the opportunity to name their second- (and sometimes third- and fourth-) choice candidates. If no candidate garners a majority of first-place votes, the second-choice candidates of voters whose first choice was eliminated are counted. In Alaska, which recently implemented ranked-choice voting, the primary whittles the field to four candidates, regardless of party affiliation. In the general election, Alaskans can vote for any or all of the four in order of preference. In a recent special congressional election, Alaskans [selected](#) Democrat Mary Peltola over Republican Sarah Palin using the new system. New York City has adopted ranked-choice voting for local elections—[resulting in the election](#) of centrist Democratic mayor Eric Adams—and this month Nevadans will [vote](#) on a constitutional amendment to institute ranked-choice voting.

David Daley, a senior fellow at the voting rights group FairVote and the author of *Ratf**cked: Why Your Vote Doesn’t Count*, is in favor of multimember electoral districts, in which voters elect two or more politicians to represent them in the legislature. [Ten states](#) currently have at

least one legislative chamber elected in this fashion. “The more I study elections, the more convinced I am that we have to move towards a system that’s more proportional if we’re really going to represent everyone,” Daley told me. “To me, that means legislatures that are elected not by winner-take-all districts where the lines dictate winners and losers, but a system of larger, multimember districts elected proportionately through ranked choice. If we’re going to defeat the scourge of redistricting, we need to empower people to choose their representatives again.”

Another solution to the gerrymandering problem is to simply take away lawmakers’ ability to draw their own districts. Nine states—Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Michigan, Montana, New York, and Washington—have [delegated redistricting authority](#) to independent commissions of the type used by most countries around the world. But the Republican elected officials I interviewed expressed skepticism about this idea. “Most of these independent commissions have in themselves become political in some way, shape, or form,” state senator Huffman told me. Her reluctance didn’t surprise Jillson, the SMU political scientist. “As long as Texas is a one-party state, the Republicans have no incentive whatsoever to allow a nonpartisan redistricting commission, because they have benefited so handsomely from the current Legislature drawing boundaries,” he said.

The Legislature could change the primary system with a simple majority vote. Appointing an independent redistricting committee or allowing citizen-sponsored ballot initiatives, on the other hand, would require Texans to approve an amendment to the state constitution. But amendments can be put on the ballot only after receiving the support of supermajorities in both legislative chambers—a high hurdle to clear. “The people who get elected tend to think the election laws are pretty good,” said University of Texas adjunct law professor Randy Erben. “After all, they got elected under them.”



The Vietnam Buddhist Center, on Synott Road. Photograph by Christopher Lee

Texas history teaches us that nothing lasts forever. The Democratic party enjoyed a political monopoly in the state for more than a century after the Civil War. And when the Democrats finally started to crumble in the eighties, they clung to power with the same tenacity that today’s Republicans are demonstrating. Those in the GOP know all too well that time isn’t on their side. The same demographic changes that transformed Fort Bend County from a Republican bastion into a Democratic stronghold are playing out across the state. Democrats can’t count on demography alone—they still need a winning message, strong fund-raising, and compelling candidates. But Texans are becoming more centrist by the year, even if our politics don’t yet reflect that.

Of course, if Texas does eventually turn blue, Democrats could simply go back to gerrymandering the state to their own advantage. That's why the state's best chance at structural reform might come during a period of divided rule. "Someday we're going to have to share power with the Democrats," said longtime Republican state senator Kel Seliger, who represents a district that stretches across the Panhandle and Permian Basin. "And when we have to share that power, we're going to relearn the spirit of compromise." (At least some Republicans already appear to be getting the message. Huffman, despite voting last year to outlaw abortion except to save the mother's life, told me she now supports adding exceptions for rape and incest.)

Seliger's independent streak—he has refused to support school vouchers, among a handful of other deviations from right-wing orthodoxy—has made him a target of Lieutenant Governor Patrick. The legislator announced his retirement last year after his district was redrawn to allow a Trump-endorsed primary challenger from Midland to run against him. I asked Seliger whether he was optimistic or pessimistic about the state's political future. "I'm always optimistic," he said. "I think we'll try authoritarianism and demagoguery for a while. And then we'll move away from it."

This article originally appeared in the November 2022 issue of Texas Monthly with the headline "The Reign of the 3%."