Politiquero tradition shapes elections in South Texas

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By Steve Miller

The tradition of voting for a patron in hopes of getting favors such as jobs has evolved, taking on a more modern twist in the South Texas voting arena.

Today, "politiqueros" are going out and delivering the vote for candidates -- though some South Texans say they believe the tradition has been corrupted by political workers who cross the line from legal activism to unlawful fraud.

Politiqueros participate in mail-in ballot schemes to stack votes in favor of candidates, who pay the workers under the auspices of getting out the vote. These efforts are legal up to a point, but cross over into fraud when a politiquero assists with multiple mail-in ballots or exerts undue influence over which candidates voters select on the mail-in ballots.

Politiqueros, and in their female iteration, politiqueras, have worked to shape election outcomes from rural Latin America to Chicago.

In Mexico, ranch bosses would round up votes from employees, asking them to vote a certain way as a sign of allegiance; down the line, perhaps the employee would be favored with a promotion.

In their legal form in the U.S., the "politiquero" increases voter turnout, sometimes gathering people and delivering them to polling places or engaging in other get-out-the-vote activities. In the Chicago variation on the patronage system, a fabled machine would crank out voting results that were almost entirely predicated on the promise of political favors.

"It's a practice commonly used where there is a lot of power and there are undereducated populations," said Aaron Peña, a Democratic state representative whose district takes in Hidalgo County in South Texas. "And it's particularly prevalent among ethnic minorities who can take advantage of the patronage privilege."

But in South Texas, these vote-harvesting agents are referenced in legislative reports on voting problems, especially when the validity of mail-in ballots has been called into question.

"These ladies will go around soliciting mail-in ballots from the elderly, and for every ballot they turn in for the particular candidate they may be working for, they get paid," said Nicole Perez, general manager of the Alice Echo-News Journal, a daily newspaper that has chronicled voting malfeasance.

"They get paid by the vote. I've heard everywhere from $5 to $25 a ballot."

This practice in Texas is a "very modern and wiggly way to attempt to circumvent the law," said K.B. Forbes, a political consultant and Hispanic activist who has served as an elections observer in Durango and Sonora, both states in Mexico.

"In the Latin culture, they have colonias, which is 'little colony,' literally," Forbes said. "In these, they sometimes have the equivalent of a precinct boss, and that's how people move up. They deliver the vote, and when the candidate moves in, the theory is that they get a good post inside the government."

In those countries, the practice is legal. But in the U.S., coercion is not because "the direct vote has always been private, secret and cannot be influenced by anyone, be it a union, the League of Women Voters or a political party," Forbes said.
There are colonias in the U.S., too, and Texas has the most, according to a state Web site that attributes the information to the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas.
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