

An Adult's Guide to Changing Texas Politics: An Electoral Strategy by the Texas IAF 2016

On April 30, 2016, leaders from across Texas will come together to celebrate more than 40 years of organizing in Texas that began with the founding of COPS (Communities Organized for Public Service) in San Antonio. Since its inception, the broad based organizing and non-partisan model has been replicated and reinvented through the creation of projects in every major metropolitan area of Texas including San Antonio, Houston, Dallas / Fort Worth, Austin, and El Paso, as well as in the Rio Grande Valley, Lubbock and Del Rio. These organizations, now part of the Network of Texas IAF Organizations, have worked together with our friends and allies to make political life more inclusive for all of Texas' citizens and residents. However, our April celebration will not just focus on the past. It will also mark the beginning of a new vision for the future of organizing in our state.

The new Texas reality

The 2012 elections ushered in a new reality for Texas politics. Locally and nationally, the voices became more extreme. The traditions of compromise and the often-messy process of politics were jettisoned for a new ideological winner-take-all strategy that takes no prisoners. The end result: a divided political electorate where compromise is a dirty word and political opponents are considered enemies that must be obliterated.

This new reality has left us with two competing political trends. One is embodied in attempts to turn Texas "blue" by emphasizing campaign tactics rather than issues affecting the well-being of families. The other trend is embodied in a rabid insistence that the best government is no government. Both trends leave people throughout the state to wonder if anyone seeking public office will represent the real interests of their families. The issues that Texas IAF organizations deal with every day are mysteriously absent from most political conversations.

Our vision for the future – into the suburbs and exurbs

This year, the Texas IAF Network is stepping up to the plate to force candidates and our elected officials to have adult conversations about important issues, instead of adolescent rants and name-calling. To do this, we are beginning to expand our reach into suburbs, exurbs and rural areas to undertake the time-proven work of leadership development within our faith and civic institutions. Our goal is to create new cultures of relationship and collective action. Only by developing capable civic leaders within our churches, schools, synagogues, and civic centers, can we bring the hopes, dreams, and struggles of families to the attention of leaders of both political parties. This expansion of our efforts is essential to articulate a non-partisan, political vision and strategy that can unite Texans for a major get out the vote effort for 2020 local and state races.

Why is 2020 a critical year for Texas?

The Texas legislature elected in 2020 will create new electoral districts based on the 2020 U.S. Census. Decisions made by these officials will shape Texas public policies for the next ten years. The last redistricting process eliminated most competitive and swing-vote districts, which proved disastrous for working families. Extremist office-holders have had no incentive to move to the center because their legislative districts are gerrymandered to the point that moderate competition has been all but eliminated.

This new focus of our organizations will set the stage for a return to a culture of discourse, compromise, and bipartisanship that seems to have been long forgotten. Only by organizing a strong constituency of voters around issues like education, workforce training, healthcare, infrastructure and economic development can we provide opportunities for moderate candidates of both parties to take stances on these issues without committing political suicide.

Our plan is to push the front line of locally driven (small “d”) democratic politics beyond the metropolis and into the homes of families still strongly connected to religious institutions, school PTAs and workers’ associations. Organizers would work with these families to develop what Pope Francis referred to as our full humanity – including our politicalness or the “animal politicus” identified by Aristotle as an essential element of personhood. This includes non-partisan voter education and get-out-the-vote efforts in targeted state legislative districts where both Democrat and Republican candidates can be influenced to support this agenda of issues. This would be a four year campaign so that by the 2020 there are enough Democrat and Republican representatives committed to these issues to make a difference in the direction of the state.

We cannot do this alone

Our community leaders and organizations are going to need strong allies from the business community to make this a reality. Key to our success will be amassing the resources necessary to undertake this effort. Our statewide network has set a goal to raise \$2.5 million over two years to expand into areas like Corpus Christi, Alice, Starr County, and Kingsville, along with Bastrop, Victoria, and other small towns throughout the state. We intend to organize a statewide constituency to bring sanity and rational thinking to Texas politics.

By picking strategic districts in which to focus our time and money, statewide politics can begin to change. Only by starting now to work across lines of partisanship, geography, and socioeconomic status can we develop the political infrastructure to create a more mature political discourse that will ensure a brighter future for all of Texas’ children.

Network of Texas IAF Organizations

COPS / Metro in San Antonio, TMO / GCLC in Houston, Valley Interfaith in the Rio Grande Valley, EPISO & Border Interfaith in El Paso, Austin Interfaith, ACT in Fort Worth, Dallas Area Interfaith, The West Texas Organizing Strategy, The Border Organization in Del Rio and Eagle Pass