

Hispanics in GOP get boost

New group seeks to recruit and finance state, local candidates.

Juan Hernandez is co-founder of new group.

By [Corrie MacLaggan](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

At the Texas Capitol, there are about three dozen Hispanic lawmakers in the House and Senate. The number of those who are Republicans: zero.

That's what Hispanic Republicans of Texas is trying to change.

The new group, co-founded by George P. Bush (son of Jeb, nephew of George W.), seeks to recruit, elect, support and defend Hispanic Republican candidates and elected officials in Texas, where Hispanics represent 37 percent of the population.

But at a time when an Arizona law has emboldened Republicans nationwide who are opposed to reforms giving illegal immigrants a streamlined path to citizenship and when one statewide officeholder in Texas with a Hispanic surname couldn't survive his GOP primary, the political action committee is certain to face challenges.

"We just need to do a better job of reminding our Latinos that Republicans don't have horns and don't all live in country clubs," Jacob Monty, a member of the board of directors, said at a news conference Tuesday marking the group's formal launch.

Earlier this year, Texas Railroad Commission Chairman Victor Carrillo blamed anti-Hispanic bias when he lost his re-election bid in the Republican primary to a relatively unknown candidate named David Porter.

"Yeah, there have been some setbacks, and we wish we would have had different results in those races," said Monty, referring to Carrillo's loss and that of Harris County tax assessor Leo Vasquez, "but don't write us off yet. ... The Hispanic values are conservative values, so we have a bright future ahead of us."

The political action committee said it will seek candidates who "share our common values of faith, family, lower taxes, less regulation and less government spending."

George P. Bush, who recently moved to Fort Worth after a stint in Austin, wasn't at Tuesday's event because he has been deployed with the U.S. Navy Reserve, committee officials said. The group, which started last September, was also founded by George Antuna, a former state House candidate who works in the financial services industry (and was not at Tuesday's event, either) and Juan Hernandez, a Fort Worth native who was a member of the cabinet of former Mexican President Vicente Fox.

Hernandez said Tuesday that the group isn't a policy-setting organization. But Hernandez himself is an outspoken advocate of comprehensive immigration reform, and Monty said at the news conference that such reform is needed.

"We need comprehensive immigration reform, and a lot of Republicans are in favor of that, but I think that's a real distraction," said Monty, a lawyer. "There are other issues we're concerned about. We're also concerned about small businesses, the rising deficit."

Committee leaders on Tuesday unveiled ads they plan to run on Fox, CNN and Univision that celebrate Texas' Hispanic heritage and encourage Hispanics to run for office.

State Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, a San Antonio Democrat who is chairman of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus, said his first reaction to the launch of Hispanic Republicans of Texas is: "a resounding bienvenidos. Welcome to the debate."

But Martinez Fischer, whose group is open to Republicans but includes only Democrats, also said that "the 900-pound elephant in the room" is that "there are some very mean-spirited, divisive positions that the Republican Party has on Latinos."

"Let's see if the Hispanic Republicans of Texas can make some inroads in changing the mind-set of the Republican Party in Texas," Martinez Fischer said.

Hispanic Republicans of Texas says it has already distributed more than \$50,000 in direct and in-kind donations to 10 state and local candidates, and, according to filings with the Texas Ethics Commission, it has about \$12,000 on hand.

Larry Gonzales, a Republican from Round Rock who is seeking to unseat Democratic state Rep. Diana Maldonado, received \$13,500 from the group, and Raul Torres, who is vying for Solomon Ortiz Jr.'s Corpus Christi seat, got \$18,200.

Gonzales said at the news conference that when he first filed for office, some Hispanic friends in Round Rock had some questions for him.

"Hispanic Republican? Why should we vote for you?" Gonzales recalled them saying.

He said he responded that what they had worked for in the '40s, '50s, '60s and '70s, "every path you said you were clearing, and every trail you said you were blazing, you were doing so for one reason. It was always for the next guy," to give the next generation a chance to succeed.

Glancing around at the fellow candidates and supporters of Hispanic Republicans of Texas at the launch event, Gonzales said: "We're a room full of the next guy."

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