

TheBakersfieldCalifornian.com

Shirley Waterbury isn't voting on Tuesday. If she did, the 49-year-old El Salvador native who came to the United States 29 years ago would vote Democratic.

"My dad taught me the Democrats are for the poor people," she said.

But Waterbury, a naturalized citizen, looks outside her modest east Bakersfield home and sees too much trouble on the streets, too few chances to make her life better and no politicians trying to help her.

"Right now I don't know who's better for me," Waterbury said.

And she is angry at President Barack Obama, whom she voted for twice, saying he hasn't kept his promises to Latinos.

So she's sitting this election out.

Thousands of her fellow Latinos locally and millions nationally have been doing the same thing, forfeiting the power of their participation to voters who do go to the polls, thereby facilitating the election of people who may not share their views and values.

It also poses a challenge to local Democrats as they fight to take back the Latino-majority 21st Congressional District and similarly diverse 14th Senate District from Republicans David Valadao and Andy Vidak.

In the June primary, only 26 of the 175 Democrats with a Hispanic surname in the small urban precinct where Waterbury lives in the 14th District cast a ballot. That's a 14.9 percent turnout rate.

In the adjacent, four-county 21st Congressional District, only 20.8 percent of Democrats voted, while 31.7 percent of Republicans did.

Vidak and Valadao, two Hanford Republicans of European ancestry, have been expected to win re-election despite the Democrats' dramatic voter registration advantages.

"It's offensively pathetic that we cannot win in Democratic districts that have been traditionally held by Democrats," said former Assemblyman and state Sen. Dean Florez, D-Shafter. "I can't believe these Republicans are sitting in our seats."

Only time will tell whether they continue to.

Hints have begun to appear that Democrats — mostly Latinos — are returning their vote-by-mail ballots at higher levels than in the past. In the past, mailed ballots have gone strongly for Republicans.

Republicans won't keep those seats if vote-by-mail voters move toward Democrats.

LOUSY TURNOUT

Most Latinos don't vote on their own.

You see it in Waterbury's precinct -- Bakersfield Consolidated 50505 -- bordered by Alta Vista Drive, Bernard Street,

King Street and Highway 178.

The tree-lined streets of the older neighborhood are home to a diverse group of poor, working-class and middle-income residents.

Fifty-four percent of the registered voters there have a Hispanic surname. But only 12.9 percent of those Latino voters cast ballots in the June primary; that's half the 26 percent participation rate of their non-Latino neighbors.

It's no aberration.

New data from the Pew Research Center shows the failure of Latinos to vote is a national problem as well.

The raw number of votes cast by Hispanics, boosted by population growth, is steadily increasing as the number of eligible Latino voters shoots upward every election.

A U.S. Census Bureau survey found 11.2 million Hispanics voted in the 2012 presidential election, an increase of 1.4 million from 2008.

But Latino turnout lags behind that of all other cultural groups and is actually dropping, according to Pew.

A Pew analysis of Latino voting in mid-term elections -- like this year's -- shows the percentage of eligible Latino voters who cast ballots nationally was 31.2 percent in 2010, down from 2008.

By comparison, 44 percent of blacks turned out in 2010 and nearly half of whites did.

CAUSES

Democrat Amanda Renteria, who is challenging Valadao to represent the 21st District, said recent immigrants from Mexico and Central America come from communities where "there's not a lot of trust for the government" and they bring those ideas to the United States.

They aren't comfortable going into a public building to vote.

"There's not a lot of trust in institutions here," said Renteria, a former U.S. Senate staffer originally from Sanger in Tulare County. "There's a bit more of a fear in this community than others."

Former Assemblywoman Nicole Parra, who represented the same general area for six years, said vote-by-mail ballots are complicated and intimidating to even college-educated voters. Latinos often need an education about how to handle the document and make sure their vote gets counted, she said.

But one of the biggest things that gets in the way of voting, Parra said, is the hectic pace of life.

She remembers babysitting a voter's children at 7 p.m. one election night so the woman -- who had nobody helping her -- could walk to her polling place across the street.

But Latinos are also more likely to be apathetic or downright alienated by politics, Florez said.

Latino voters ask, "Why would I vote? My schools still suck. My water bill is going up. Government really isn't doing anything for me," he said.

Waterbury and her husband, Vietnam veteran David Waterbury, say they've lost faith in politicians.

"I'm not into it this year," David Waterbury said. "It seems like they just want to fill their pockets."

"They tick you off in your brain," said his wife. "You don't believe (them) any more."

INVITATIONS

Dolores Huerta looks "at the dismal numbers of Latino voters" and sees opportunity -- and challenge.

The Civil Rights icon and co-founder of the United Farm Workers union now fights for social justice and organizes grassroots-level activists through her Dolores Huerta Foundation.

"The Latinos have to be, I use the word, *invited* to vote," Huerta said.

Democrats who have won westside seats in the past poured massive effort into meeting Latinos in their homes and neighborhoods, explaining the ballot and helping them feel comfortable with the process of voting.

"You have to put your money into boots on the ground," Huerta said.

Florez said he did it with small segments of these massive, rambling districts. He said it was a numbers game.

"You have to visit them -- truly visit them," Florez said. "You can win by visiting 20,000 households."

LATINOS ARE REPUBLICANS, TOO

Of course, not all Latinos are Democrats and not all are non-voters.

East Bakersfield resident Xenos Lopez calls himself Latino by birth and Democrat by mistake. But mostly, he said, "I'm American."

He plans to vote Tuesday.

"I would be more Libertarian," the 28-year-old AT&T technician said. "I am probably going to be voting more Republican."

Lopez, whose family came from Mexico "generations ago," said he registered as a Democrat in college because he thought that was what he was supposed to be. Latinos are encouraged to back that party and steer away from Republicans, he said.

"We have friends who are Democrats," Lopez said. "Being Latino, they push for that party. But I feel that morally, religiously, we're more aligned with conservative ideas."

He said poverty and a lack of education contributes to low Latino turnout. But some of the problem is cultural, he said.

"Most Latinos here right now that are citizens are the children of immigrants," Lopez said, adding that those second generation residents never grew up watching their parents vote.

"They don't know how or why they should vote," he said.

For the Army veteran, not voting isn't an option.

"I joined the military," he said. "I fought for the right to vote. I'm going to exercise those rights."

FUTURE

The debate over Latino voting is about something bigger than one win or even one political party.

Vidak's 14th Senate District and Valadao's 21st Congressional District were drawn by the California Citizens Redistricting Commission in 2011 with the express purpose of giving Latinos the opportunity to elect someone who represents their culture, understands their circumstances and can stand up for their beliefs.

But until Latinos in the southern San Joaquin Valley take the initiative and vote on their own, they will never access the political power set aside for them.

"If you don't vote, you're invisible," Huerta said. "If you don't vote, you don't have any power."

Copyright © 2014 The Bakersfield Californian

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [About Our Ads](#) | [Advertise With Us](#) | [Debug](#)