Roiling politics, population growth fuels record number of San Antonio area residents registered to vote

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Photo: Josie Norris, Staff Photographer / The San Antonio Express-News

As San Antonio’s population continues to grow and presidential politics gets hotter virtually every day, Bexar County has seen an increase in the number of residents registered to vote, marking a new record high.
That continues a trend that has held fairly steady for the last 10 years.

On ExpressNews.com: Bexar County voter growth among highest in state, but it’s become the norm

Following the Oct. 7 registration deadline to vote in the November election, 1,113,894 Bexar County residents were registered. That's more than 80 percent of all eligible county residents.

Based on the reported number of registered voters a year ago, it's an increase of nearly 9,150 people. And it's nearly 65,000 more voters than were on the rolls at the time of the 2016 presidential election.

It is also the largest increase in an “off-year election” — elections that don't involve statewide elected offices or the presidency — in at least a decade.

“We have an incredible political situation in which many Democratic constituents are feeling insecure,” said Walter Wilson, associate professor in the University of Texas at San Antonio’s Department of Political Science and Geography. “On the other side, many Republican voters also fear what will happen.”

“We can speculate this may well be driving people to register to vote,” Wilson said.

Traditionally in off years, there are fewer voters. This year’s November ballot includes 10 proposed amendments to the Texas constitution as well as suburban cities’ elections on bond issues and to fill council seats.

On ExpressNews.com: San Antonio's suburban voters head to the polls for early voting

In the last off-year — from November 2016 to November 2017 — an additional 396 voters registered, according to data from Bexar County. From November 2014 to November 2015, there was an increase of about 1,110. In other off-years, the number of registered voters declined.

H. Drew Galloway, executive director of the voter advocacy group MOVE Texas, said with the “constant narrative, not only from state but also national headlines,” people are paying attention to
In 2017, the non-profit, which holds registration events throughout Texas, helped to register 5,500 new voters. In 2018, the number rose to 30,000. So far this year, MOVE Texas has registered 21,000 people. Galloway said he expects the number to reach or exceed 30,000.

“We believe if we can get a young voter to vote in a city election, school board election or constitutional amendment election, then they will naturally pay attention to a larger election,” Galloway said.

**Population booms**

In 2018, San Antonio had the largest raw numeric growth in population among U.S. cities of 50,000 residents or more, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Between July 1, 2016, and July 1, 2017, San Antonio gained 24,208 residents — an average of 66 people per day, the Census Bureau calculated.

In 2018, 1,331,662 residents of Bexar County were of eligible voting age — 18 or older. Of those, 1,104,746 were registered to vote. That means 83 percent of eligible voters were registered to cast ballots.

In 2017, about 80 percent of the county's eligible voters were registered. In 2016 — the last presidential election — the percentage was 82 percent.

By comparison, in 2015, also with off-year elections, it was 76 percent.

Bexar accounts for 6.9 percent of the state's total registered votes. Based on state data from earlier this year, Harris County accounted for 15.1 percent, Dallas 8.2 percent, Tarrant 7.1 percent and Travis 4.9 percent.

Earlier this month, two of those counties — Harris and Dallas — reported fewer registered voters than they had 11 months ago. Harris County reported that its voter rolls shrunk by 4,416 since Election Day in November 2018 and Dallas County reported losing 19,400 voters from the rolls.

Ana Flores, the Harris County public information officer, suggested the number dropped because
Harris County removed 127,852 voters from the rolls between November 2018 and August, according to a cancellation list published by the Texas Secretary of State’s elections division. The number Bexar County removed was not readily available.

Texas as a whole added a little more than 30,000 voters between November 2018 and September. Overall, about 15.8 million Texans are registered to vote, according to state elections officials.

And although Callanen said she is happy to see the number of registered voters increase, the real year to watch will be next year.

“I think there will be a big push in 2020,” Callanen said.

Wilson echoed the sentiment.

“It’s going to be a very active year,” Wilson said. “If the previous numbers are any indication, we may see a larger surge. We may even hit 100,000 (additional registered voters).”

What matters in the end is whether voters actually go to the polls.
cast ballots. In 2017, an off-year-election, the voter turnout in Bexar County was a mere 3.7 percent.

“Voter registration is the very first step of getting someone engaged,” Galloway said. “We just have to keep them involved and educated so they turn out.”

**November ballot**

Early voting for the November elections began Monday and ends Nov. 1. Election Day is Tuesday, Nov. 5.

For most Bexar County residents, the only items on the ballot are the 10 constitutional amendments.

**On ExpressNews.com:** Bexar County rolls out new voting machines

In Castle Hills, Converse, Sandy Oaks, Schertz and Windcrest, voters will fill city council seats. Hill Country Village has an $8.5 million bond issue on its ballot for streets and other infrastructure and Sandy Oaks voters will decide on an $800,000 bond issue for the same purposes. Somerset Independent School District residents are voting on a $20 million bond issue to renovate existing facilities and build a new Fine Arts center.

Voters will also elect a district director for the San Antonio River Authority and fill two seats on the board of directors of the Green Valley Special Utility District. Residents in two Bexar County Emergency Services districts are voting on a sales and use tax of 1.5 percent.

A copy of a sample ballot for all elections in Bexar County is at bexar.gov/elections.

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