

Growing Latino influence sees praise

Diverse group of lawmakers to bring new perspective

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Two freshmen Latino legislators posted an unprecedented series of wins this year, including \$46 million to extend the Oregon Health Plan to 17,600 undocumented children and prenatal and postpartum care to 48,000 undocumented women.

Rep. Teresa Alonso León, D-Woodburn, also succeeded with a measure requiring cultural competency for university and community college staffs. And Rep. Diego Hernandez, D-East Portland, guided through first-in-the-nation legislation requiring ethnic studies in public schools.

That has many in Oregon politics wondering if 2017 marks a watershed moment for Latino influence in the state.

Latino legislators and activists have had occasional successes before, but never so consistently. "This was, by far, our best session," said Ramon Ramirez, who has lobbied for Latino political and economic power for four decades.

Yet despite Oregon's Latino population growing 72 percent since 2000, to about 500,000, their representation in government lags far behind.

Latino lawmakers make up 4.5 percent of the Legislature, less than half needed to be proportional to the population.

Research in 2015 found only eight of 420 elected county and non-legislative state positions in Oregon were filled by Latinos, according to the nonprofit Women Donors Network.

Still, Alonso León said the 2016 campaign brought in one of the most diverse legislative bodies she's seen.

She and Hernandez were joined by other new lawmakers of color: Rep. Mark Meek, D-Gladstone, Rep. Janelle Bynum, D-Happy Valley, Rep. Tawna Sanchez, D-Portland, and Rep. Andrea Salinas, D-Lake Oswego, who recently replaced Rep. Ann Lininger.

"So we're all brand new legislators of color and that's exciting because it's going to help bring a different perspective," Alonso León said.

2017 success born of urgency

Cover All Kids passed with bipartisan support. Alonso León sponsored the bill, but she said she was in no way the bill's champion.



Rep. Teresa Alonso León, D-Woodburn, speaks in support of the "Cover All Kids" bill in the House of Representatives in July at the Oregon State Capitol. Latino lawmakers make up 4.5 percent of the Legislature. MOLLY J. SMITH/STATESMAN JOURNAL FILE

The Oregon Latino Health Coalition started its push to provide health care to undocumented children more than a decade ago.

In 2015, the House passed the measure on a 36-22 vote. The Senate Health Care committee advanced the bill with a "do pass" recommendation, but in the final budget reckoning, the effort slipped away with other dead bills.

"We used that experience to lay the groundwork (for 2017)," said Linda Roman, a lobbyist for the Oregon Latino Health Coalition. Roman said they learned that not only did they need bipartisan support, they also needed support from both the House and Senate.

Alberto Moreno, the coalition's executive director, said the effort grew in political and financial support over the years, but it was the diverse freshman legislative body this year that got it passed.

"Honestly, Cover All Kids should have been passed a long time ago," Alonso León said.

The bill's passage culminated years of work, including hundreds of Latino activists with the Latino Health Coalition working phone banks, urging constituents to call their legislators, countless conversations with legislators and massaging the bill to what it is today. It takes effect Jan. 1, 2018, providing health care to all Oregon children, regardless of residency status.

Moreno said the bill's passage represents a cultural shift in the state. "There used to be a time as early as 2005 that when you walked the halls of the Capitol, you didn't see any people of color, but that is steadily changing," Moreno said.

He said the Legislature's growing Latino influence allows lawmakers to see issues through the lens of people of color, and as immigrants who have faced historical and institutional barriers.

"Sure, our demographics are changing, sure we're increasing numbers, but that shouldn't be the measure of how we're trying to succeed in terms of representation," Hernandez said. "Equity for me means that we start to undo the things that we've done in the past, that have subverted and subjugated ... communities of color and native communities."

He cosponsored for House Bill 2845, which will implement ethnic studies curriculum in public schools from kindergarten through grade 12. The Oregon Department of Education has until 2020 to make it happen.

Hernandez said this year's bills gained support from Latinos who felt targeted after President Trump's deportation order and subsequent tar-

geted operations in Oregon, and by the spike of hate incidents in the state following Trump's election.

"For officials who represent many of these communities, that definitely created the urgency to do something," Hernandez said.

Earlier legislators blazed trail

Latino representation in the Oregon Legislature has grown incrementally for several decades, slowed by periods of no representation.

"Little by little, it took this long to build the base," said Ramirez, executive director of the Woodburn-based farmworker union Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste. "We're seeing the results of work that went into it for 17 years."

The earliest example is Raul Soto Seelig, a Portland attorney and Cuban-native who was appointed to serve an unfinished Senate term in 1977. He was not re-elected.

In 1986, Rocky Barilla became the first Latino elected to the House. While Barilla said he doesn't credit himself with passage of Oregon's sanctuary law in 1987, he was the primary sponsor of the bill prohibiting local and state police from enforcing federal immigration law.

He calls himself an accidental politician — a legislator who only stumbled into politics after serving as a lawyer for a man interrogated by Polk County Sheriff's deputies who assumed he was undocumented.

Delmiro Trevino was physically detained in the middle of the Hi-Ho Restaurant in Independence in January 1977. He was released after deputies established he was a longtime resident and U.S. citizen.

"I was the most apolitical person in the whole world," Barilla said. "I never intended to be a legislator."

But after months of knocking on hundreds of doors a day in South and West Salem, which at the time was Assembly District 31, Barilla won the seat.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Oregon and Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, or Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United, asked Barilla to introduce a bill restricting local and state police from using resources to enforce federal immigration law.

Barilla said he worked with other community leaders of color, which he jokingly referred to as "just 10 of us back then."

"I just wanted to represent everybody in Oregon, Republican or Democrat, but make sure that people of color were represented because they weren't at the time," Barilla said.

The bill passed the Oregon Senate 29 to 1 and the House 58 to 1. It was signed into law July 7, 1987. Barilla was 38 years old.

Today, three Republican legislators are spearheading an initiative petition that would repeal the law.

For years, Latino representation in Oregon was confined to the rare school board member or county commissioner.

The breakout exception was Susan Castillo, who served in the Senate in the 1990s and in the 2000s as superintendent of public instruction, which used to be a statewide elected position.

As a freshman legislator, Jessica Vega Pederson cosponsored a bill in 2013

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Health care tax referendum going to voters Jan. 23

A referendum asking Oregon voters to decide the fate of portions of the 2017 Legislature's health care tax law will be on the January ballot, the Secretary of State's office announced Oct. 16.

The state confirmed 70,320 valid signatures supporting the referendum, 85 percent of those submitted and 11,531 more than needed to qualify.

The election will be Tuesday, Jan. 23. Residents need to register by Jan. 2 to vote on Measure 101.

"The successful results of this petition effort shows just what Oregonians really think about what kind of job politicians are doing, and they aren't very happy with the bills coming out of Salem," Rep. Sal Esquivel, R-Medford, a

chief petitioner for the referendum, said in a statement.

The measure formerly known as Referendum 301 refers to voters sections of the health care tax law — House Bill 2391 — that passed in the 2017 legislative session. It applies taxes to health insurance premiums and some hospitals.

The bill was a compromise between health care providers, insurance companies and lawmakers, aimed at maintaining funding and participation levels for the Oregon Health Plan.

Contact the reporter at cradnovich@statesmanjournal.com or 503-399-6864, or follow him on Twitter at @CDRadnovich.

Rankings

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10. Zontel Brown, McKay. **Oct. 20 result:** Lost to North Salem 20-9

Defenses

If people didn't believe in the defense of West Salem High School's football team, they do now.

Last week's dominating 55-3 win against South Salem was made possible by a defense that shut down the Saxons all night.

West Salem has held opponents to 105 points this season, best among Greater Valley Conference teams and fifth among Class 6A teams.

Top 10 defense power rankings

1. West Salem. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat South Salem 55-3.

2. St. Paul. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Regis 60-0.

3. Sprague. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat West Albany 42-14.

4. Santiam. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Kennedy 30-16.

5. Scio. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Dayton 26-20.

6. Dayton. **Oct. 20 result:** Lost to Scio 26-20.

7. Central. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Silverton 41-35.

8. Falls City. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Mapleton 66-6.

9. Willamina. **Oct. 20 result:** Beat Taft 56-14.

10. Cascade. **Oct. 20 result:** Lost to North Marion 10-0.