

## CANDIDATE SPOTLIGHT January 2020

[Jessica Cisneros, TX-28](#)

[Cristina Tzintzun-Ramirez, TX U.S. Senate](#)

[Gina Ortiz Jones, TX-23](#)

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**Jessica Cisneros, TX-28**  
**Progressive Dem Pick Up**  
**Election: March 3, 2020**

**Jessica Cisneros** is a first-time candidate, who was born and raised in the Texas border town of Laredo. Her family immigrated from Mexico when her older sister was in need of medical care. **Jessica's** story exemplifies what it means to be from South Texas, and gives her a unique ear on the ground that informs her primary campaign. She received both her undergraduate and law school degree from the University of Texas in Austin, and returned to Laredo immediately upon graduation to practice immigration law dedicated to keeping immigrant families safe and together. Recruited by Justice Democrats to run, she is challenging conservative and NRA backed Congressman Henry Cueller, an eight term incumbent who she calls "Trump's favorite Democrat."



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### **On the Issues**

- **Health Care:** Like many places in the US, affordable healthcare is largely unavailable in TX-28. Many go to Mexico to receive health care because they don't have insurance in the US or can't afford a needed procedure. If an individual is unable to travel to Mexico, there is a culture of community fundraising via raffles and selling food to raise money for health care costs.

**Jessica** has experienced firsthand what inequitable access to healthcare in the district means, having lost a family member to cancer because they were unable to afford treatment. **Jessica's** opponent opposes Medicare for All and has accepted \$58,574 in donations from Health Care Professionals in 2019. Additionally, Representative Cuellar is pro-life, while **Jessica** has named reproductive freedom as a priority on her issues page.

- **Immigration:** As an immigration lawyer, this issue both defines the district and **Jessica's** own story. She supports a pathway to citizenship for undocumented people, revamping the visa system, strengthening family reunification, and creating a humane border and immigration policy by scrapping disastrous laws like the 1996 IIRIRA bill. As a border town, U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE) is one of the largest employers in the district. **Jessica** advocates for the Department of Justice to initiate special investigations into the human rights violations at the border. She also believes ICE should be thoughtfully reformed over time, with consideration for TX-28 residents who work in the industry. She is also an advocate for an independent immigration court system that would not be subject to the whim of any administration. [Rep. Cuellar has voted for border wall funding twice](#). GEO Group (a Florida-based company specializing in privatized corrections, detention, and mental health treatment) is his top donor, and they operate ICE internment camps.
- **Jobs and Trade:** Unemployment in TX-28 is [lower than the national average](#), however many residents are working multiple jobs to get by. The ongoing dismantling of workers and union rights has deeply impacted the district. With the needs of working families and people of low income specifically in mind, **Jessica** supports the Protecting the Right to Organize Act, which takes critical steps toward ensuring workplace fairness. She also supports using the joint-employer standard outlined by the National Labor Relations Board in 2015 and opposes the prohibition of union security agreements between companies and labor unions, often referred to as "right to work".
- **Gun Reform:** Representative Cuellar was the only Democrat with an A rating from the NRA in 2019 and [refuses to return these donations](#). Given the recent mass shootings in communities such as El Paso, and police brutality across Texas, **Jessica** deeply believes that it is deadly to maintain a community with unfettered access to guns. She believes supporting the second amendment and supporting common sense gun legislation are not mutually exclusive. **Ms. Cisneros** believes in instituting violent background checks and a ban on bump stocks, high capacity magazines, assault weapons, and weapons of war. She has pledged not to take a dime from the NRA or the gun lobby.

**Status of Race:** [TX-28](#) is a pivot county, meaning they voted for President Obama in both 2008 and 2012, by 2.25% and 1.16% respectively. However, in 2016 TX-28 voted in favor of Donald Trump by .48%. TX-28 is located in the southern portion of the state and includes Atascosa, McMullen, Starr, Webb and Zapata counties along with areas of Bexar, Hidalgo, La Salle and Wilson counties. The two largest

cities in the district - Laredo and San Antonio - have 4 state senators and only one is a Democrat.

Cuellar first ran for Congress in 2002 in TX-23 against 5 term incumbent Representative Henry Bonilla. Cuellar had a weak primary opponent in 2016 who had run against him as a Republican in 2012, but switched parties to run as a Democrat in 2016. Cuellar won that primary election with a 90% margin (49,993 votes). Cuellar has a close relationship with many Texas Republicans, including former Governor Rick Perry. In 2018, he endorsed and raised money for Rep. John Carter who was being challenged by MJ Hager. This seat will belong to a Democrat after the 2020 election, but this race will determine whether southeast Texas is ready to elect a justice democrat that can build a cross-cultural coalition that truly reflects the values of the district and the future of the Democratic Party.

***Deep Democracy Dynamics of Race:*** This gerrymandered district is a reliable Democrat seat, so this race will be a Democratic Primary Battle between **Jessica** and Rep. Cuellar on Super Tuesday, March 3rd, 2020. The district is 77% Latino, with Spanish as the primary language used at home of 65% of residents. Laredo, comprising 45% of the district's vote total, is the hometown of both candidates. Although Cuellar has been in office since 2004, he was under voted during primaries in which he did not have a primary opponent. In the 2018 primary, 139,226 voters turned out in TX-28. Cuellar received 66% of the voter (117,494 votes) while 21,000 voters chose not to vote for him. Candidates who were below him on the ballot received 88% of the vote. San Antonio is a potential area of growth for **Jessica** - it has the highest voter turnout in the district, and has the largest opportunity for an expansion electorate. This expansion electorate is key to **Jessica's** path of victory and to tilt the scale, overall, to possibly flip Texas blue in 2020. They are unfamiliar with Cuellar, and he does not spend much time in the area. San Antonio is also a critical turnout city for two additional Maria's List endorsed candidates: community organizers Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, who is running for the US Senate and Gina Ortiz-Jones, who is running again for TX-23 and only fell short by almost 600 votes in 2018. Both races are red to blue races and will help drive voter turnout. This will be further augmented by the [Texas Organizing Project Education and Action Fund \(TOP\)](#), who organizes Black and Latino communities in Dallas, Harris and Bexar counties. TOP, who was supported by Maria's List in 2019, will have one of the largest multiracial voter engagement strategies in the state, reaching over 200,000 voters. They are led by Michelle Tremillio, considered [one of the top women of color](#) strategists in the country. This race, and Texas overall, will become a national spotlight for how Democrats can win with their values in the face of Trumpism.

***Campaign Status:*** **Jessica** is building a grassroots campaign across a district so large that it takes 6 hours to drive through it. In Texas, candidates [can pay to be on the ballot](#), however her campaign used this as an opportunity to run a signature collection program that established a motivated volunteer base. In 2019, **Jessica** raised over \$500,000 in two quarters, and has over 13,000 individual contributions with an average donation of \$32. Her goal is to raise a million dollars before the year closes out. Being endorsed by Senator Elizabeth Warren, and Reps. Alexandria

Ocasio-Cortez and Ayanna Pressley grew the campaign’s capacity to fundraise from individual donors. **Jessica** has also been endorsed by EMILY’s List, Planned Parenthood, NARAL, and the Justice Democrats. In 2018, Rep Cuellar raised \$1,739,697 into his committee, and had \$2,545,003 cash on hand at the end of the year [via Open Secrets](#)). In 2019 alone, he has raised \$1,097,493 and has \$3,244,434 cash on hand. In Texas, your support will go a long way to flip the Senate, strengthen the House, and increase turnout in a Presidential battleground state while supporting women of color to run.

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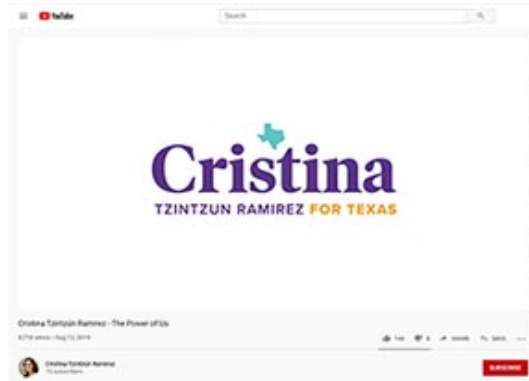


**Cristina Tzintzun-Ramirez, TX U.S. Senate  
Red to Blue Race**

**Democratic Primary: March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

**General Election: – November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

**Cristina Tzintzún-Ramirez** is a first-time candidate who has spent the last fifteen years working as a deep democracy strategist, community organizer and activist to deliver progressive victories for Texas workers and Latinos. **Cristina** founded the [Workers Defense Project](#) to protect Texas workers from wage theft and other corrosive anti-union initiatives. In 2016, she founded [JOLT Texas](#), an organization dedicated to building a state-wide movement of Latinos focused on year round, multi-issue organizing and elections. **Cristina** is running because she wants a Democratic Party, state, and country that understands the need to adopt an intersectional government that puts families first while building the economy.



>> Click image to view YouTube video<<

**On the Issues:**

- **Putting Families First:** **Cristina** believes that paid family leave, Medicare for All, and unfettered access to reproductive health care is critical to the longevity of Texas. When discussing Medicare for All, she centers her support in it being the most efficient and cost-effective way to make sure every American has quality healthcare. She also wants to address the concerns of small businesses and entrepreneurs who are uniquely burdened by the current healthcare system. With Medicare for All, she believes small businesses can accelerate their growth instead of worrying

about how to cover the cost of healthcare for themselves and their employees.

- **Building the Economy:** **Cristina** wants to advocate for policies that center on the [40% of Texans](#) making under \$47,000 a year. She believes in increasing the minimum wage to \$15 and will vote to enact the [Lilly Ledbetter Act](#) to provide equal pay to women, especially women of color. **Cristina** also believes in restoring workers' rights to negotiate for fair wages and proper working conditions. **Cristina** specifically names fully funding the Department of Labor Wage and Hour Division, OSHA and the EEOC to ensure American workers' rights are protected.

**Status of Race:** For Democrats, the [US Texas Senate seat](#) involves both a competitive primary, and general election. **Cristina** is currently in a [twelve-way Democratic](#) primary, and is one of three women running for the Democratic nomination. Moderate candidate and two-time challenger [MJ Hegar](#) recently received the endorsement of the [Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee](#). Nonetheless, this is still an open Democratic primary without a clear frontrunner. While Hegar does lead the field in fundraising at this moment, **Cristina** has remained competitive and in-line with other challengers. At the end of Q3, she had raised \$500,00, matching similarly raised totals by fellow candidates such as Amanda Edwards and Royce West.

While money is a conventional metric of success, our deep democracy research demonstrates that in a primary where only a plurality of votes is required, **Cristina's** deep grassroots network could be the key to unlock an expansion electorate and win. Other primary competitors include Sema Hernandez, Beto O'Rourke's 2018 primary opponent who received a stronger-than-expected 24% of the vote, and Michael Cooper, the runner-up in the 2018 primary for lieutenant governor. Traditional logic is that incumbent Senator Cornyn is seen as a statesman that is not viewed divisively in TX.

**Cristina** is best positioned to beat John Cornyn in the general election because of her state-wide grassroots network, and her experience history of deep engagement with Latinos across the state of Texas. She will defeat Senator Cornyn by expanding the electorate and growing progressive political power that could have a lasting impact on the state of Texas politics.

**Deep Democracy Dynamics of Race:** **Cristina Tzintzún-Ramirez** is a case for a new progressive strategy in Texas. For over two decades, activists in Texas have been working to steadily build political power for a multiracial working-class coalition of voters and non-voters. These organizers have awakened millions of new voters of color by leaning in on the serious issues facing Texans, registering and activating hundreds of thousands of voters and reshaping the Texas electorate. **Cristina's** campaign is run by the most recent crop of operatives and campaign staff of Beto O'Rourke 2018 senatorial campaign. Their political savvy combined with **Cristina's** relationships with folks leading long term organizing efforts could lead to a political upset in the primary.

This is the culmination of efforts in large part supported by social and electoral justice activists and donors across Texas. Additionally, **Cristina** is joined in the primary by Congressional candidate Jessica Cisneros in TX-28 who is running a movement building campaign, and Gina Ortiz Jones in TX-28 who is reigniting her loyal base from 2018. Because Jessica, Gina, and **Cristina** share a core base of support, **Cristina's** organizing efforts can only bolster the chances of a progressive victory in TX-28. Texas came closest to flipping a senate seat from red to blue in 2018, and 2020 presents the best chance to make good on this looming flip. We have no idea what 2024 will look like and the electorate numbers are on their side in 2020.

**Campaign Status:** **Cristina's** biggest challenge is that she does not have the support of the national Democratic establishment and only tepid support of local labor organizations. The DSCC has endorsed MJ Hager. This endorsement has pitted **Cristina** and MJ's camp against one another, as some see this as another tone-deaf moment of the national Democratic establishment overlooking the need to support women of color. Additionally, Texas does not have a progressive donor class. Hager has been able to raise over a million dollars, while **Cristina** has only been able to raise half. **Cristina** has the full support of [Way to Win](#), the "home base for progressive donors and organizers seeking a strategic approach to funding that advances transformative policy, wins elections, and builds lasting power". She also has the support of Labor, however they have concerns about her capacity to win. She has been endorsed by the [Working Families Party](#), a grassroots multiracial party of working people who are committed to electing the next generations and building durable, independent progressive power. **Cristina** raised nearly half a million in the two months after she announced in Q3 of 2019.

With the primary being in March 2020, Q4 of 2019 is a critical fundraising quarter for the campaign. She will need to raise an additional \$500,000 by the end of Q4 to remain competitive.

She is best positioned to beat John Cornyn in the general election while expanding the electorate because of her state-wide grassroots network, and her experience of deep engagement with Latinos across the state of Texas. Given the deep democracy dynamic of two competitive Congressional races and the bench of movement building organizations like [Texas Organizing Project](#), Texas is a key early 2020 priority. In Texas, your support will go a long way to flip the Senate, strengthen the House, and increase turnout in a Presidential battleground state while supporting women of color to run.



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### **Gina Ortiz Jones, TX-23**

**Preliminary Election: March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

**General Election: November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020**

**Gina Ortiz Jones was a 2018 Maria's List endorsed candidate.** She is running for TX-23 for a second time, and the seat is open. **Gina** and her sister were raised by their mother in San Antonio, who immigrated from the Philippines. She deeply understands the importance of social safety nets, as her family was able to prosper because of access to public housing and federal meal assistance programs. **Gina** went on to graduate in the top ten of her class at John Jay High School in San Antonio, went on to study at Boston University, and then served in the Air Force, including being deployed to Iraq under the Bush Administration. **Ortiz Jones** went on to work as an intelligence analyst for the Administration, and worked as a U.S. Trade Representative under the Obama Administration. As a lifelong public servant, **Ortiz Jones** was troubled by the types of people being [brought in to the intelligence community at the beginning of the Trump administration](#). She took the opportunity to return home to San Antonio and serve in a different way - by running for Congress. As a first time candidate in 2018, she surprised local and national Democrats, losing to incumbent [Congressman Will Hurd by 900 votes](#). Many [within Texas](#) hold then US Senate candidate, Beto O'Rourke, partially responsible for this short margin for failing to not endorse **Gina** over his friend ([he has changed his mind!](#)) She announced her second run for [TX-23rd](#) in May of 2019, followed by an impressive [\\$1 million fundraising haul](#) in the fall. With and Congressman Hurd announcing he would not seek re-election in 2020, **Gina** is now facing an open seat, a well coordinated deep democracy (see more below!). We can flip a House seat, in an important presidential battle state, while potentially tipping Texas closer to the Democratic Party.

#### ***On the Issues:***

##### ***According to her 2018 campaign website***

- **National Security:** **Gina** is a National Security expert and is running for Congress because she believes we need leaders who are capable of getting ahead of the domestic and foreign security challenges our country is facing. A former military intelligence officer and veteran with an extensive career as a national security expert, **Gina** has spent over 14 years serving. Her decision to run for Congress was informed by her commitment to public service and her concern for our national security after Trump was elected. She has the knowledge and experience to be a leader on national security and foreign policy decisions that strengthen our relationships with our allies and protect the long-term interests of the United States. She will be a strong voice to protect the building blocks that truly make our country secure – access to quality education and affordable health care services for all Americans.
- **Accessible Affordable Healthcare:** For **Gina**, affordable Healthcare is one of her core campaign issues. **Gina** watched as her mother faced a

diagnosis of colon cancer and understands that her mother's survival was possible because of the health care coverage she had as a public employee. The importance of affordable and accessible health care services is particularly critical in Texas, as is a state with one of highest uninsured rates. **Gina** knows that too many families are just one medical emergency away from years of financial hardship or bankruptcy. In Congress, **Gina** will make affordable, accessible, quality healthcare for every American a top priority. **Gina** supports a single payer system.

- **Higher Education and Skilled Job Training:** **Gina** attended Boston University through a four-year Air Force R.O.T.C. scholarship, but believes access to higher education should be an option for all who choose to pursue it. She is concerned by the rising cost of student loan debt, and will fight for access to quality, affordable higher education **Gina** also believes strongly in a path to success that doesn't go through college. Her experience in the military led her to understand the high level skill training that can lead to success, outside of a University. When elected, legislating around specialized job training and vocational programs that give students the skills they need today's economy will be a top priority.

**Status of Race:** In September of 2019, Representative Hurd announced he would not be seeking re-election, leaving the seat **Gina** lost by 900 votes in 2018 vacant. TX-23 is the only true swing district in Texas, and Hillary won the district by 3.4 points in 2016. Additionally, [there is no district in the country that holds more of the US-Mexico border](#), and 60% of voters are Latinx. With organizations like the Texas Organizing Project and Care In Action targeting low performing or non-registered in Bexar County, there could be a surge to benefit **Gina**.

There are five individuals running in the Democratic Primary, however **Gina** is favored after her strong performance in 2018, and head start on 2019 fundraising ([\\$1.4 million cash on hand in October filling](#)). There are nine Republicans running in the Republican Primary. Tony Gonzales has been identified as a favorite, however the path to victory is more challenging in a Presidential general election voters are younger,, more people of color, and unmarried women - all whom are likelier to vote Democratic up and down the ticket. i. Nonetheless, issues like guns rights, border control, and abortion are wedge issues the the former incumbent used to eek out his victories and build his voter coalition.

**Deep Democracy Dynamics:** 2020 is a big year for Texas up and down the ballot. Organizations like Texas Organizing Project and Annie's List have been working diligently for the past decade to create the current electoral climate. In 2018, Democrats flipped 12 seats in the Texas House and two in the Senate. In 2020, Democrats are targeting 15 to 18 legislative seats, with the majority of the targets in North Texas and Harris County. Looking to increase their share of the House and Senate. [TX-23](#) is the state's only true swing congressional district, with a nearly evenly split between Republicans and Democrats, stretches from El Paso to San Antonio and is more than 70 percent Hispanic. In 2020, Care in Action if focusing on registering and turning Latinas in Texas, in tandem with other on the ground civic engagement groups. Additionally, Texas Organizing Project has been



working closely with its members in San Antonio to organize around climate justice, meaning their member base is active in core parts of **Gina's** district. The investment in this area by the Texas Organizing Project and Care in Action in Bexar Country also means candidates in the competitive Senate primary and general election will spend additional resources for deep voter turn out in this region.

**Campaign Status:** In 2018, Gina **was** undersupported by national Democratic party affiliates. The DCCC put millions of dollars into other Texas congressionals, but only put \$219,000 into her race. Additionally, Senate candidate Beto [O'Rourke chose not to endorse in the race](#), because Representative Hurd was a "colleague." In 2019, DCCC is behind **Gina**, and Beto "[likely endorse](#)" **Gina's** campaign. However from the onset of the campaign, **Gina** was committed to building a stronger foundational base to power her own campaign. The decision to start raising money early turned out to be prescient, as Representative Hurd announced he was not seeking re-election. As of September of 2019, [Gina has raised \\$1.6 million](#). She raised one million dollars in the 3rd quarter of 2019. The other two candidates who had filed in Q3 have only raised \$5,000. **Gina is running** the same campaign but with focus on earlier fundraising to build stronger TV and ground game. Her path to victory requires base voters (reliable Democratic turnout) and swing voters (persuasion). **Gina** is also a priority for EMILY's List, and she has been endorsed by VoteVets, NARAL, League of Conservation Voters, The Victory Fund, Bend the Arc, and LPAC.