

Small town in Idaho elects first full Latino city council

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — A small town in rural Idaho broke political barriers earlier this month by electing its first fully Latino city council after voters chose to replace more than half of its local leaders in the November election.

The town of Wilder near the Idaho-Oregon border has a population of 1,500 that is about 75 percent Hispanic.

Community advocates say recent changes in the tiny town mark a huge step for the state's growing Latino population, which has historically experienced a lack of political representation. As of 2012, Idaho's Commission on Hispanic Affairs estimated there were 20 Hispanic elected officials representing various offices throughout the state, with just five serving in city positions. Meanwhile, Idaho's overall population is more than 11 percent Hispanic.

"We are happy to finally see Wilder have the representation that reflects its population," said Margie Gonzalez, the commission's executive director. "We're starting to see this more and more, not just on city councils but also on school boards and other elected seats."

In November, Wilder voters replaced two of their four-member city council with Latino candidates to join the two other Latino members serving on the council dais. Voters also ushered in a Latina, Alicia Almazon, as the town's first female mayor after the long-serving incumbent declined to run for re-election.

"The Latino community does not have a history of being represented, especially in Idaho," said Ismael Fernandez, 19, who will become Wilder's youngest city council member once he takes office in January. "I think I'm part of something more, something that spans outside of Idaho to a national level, by helping the Latino representation increase. I don't think I was elected because I am Latino, but it's hard to separate the two."

Fernandez said he didn't expect to win, especially when four other candidates threw their hats into the race. However, the college freshman secured the most votes despite facing competition from candidates who were more experienced and older.

"The city had been run by the same people throughout the years, and there hadn't been much change on the city council, he said. "I hope to bring new ideas."

Wilder's election results stand out because minority candidates don't always succeed in at-large voting systems as supposed to by-district voting, said Jaclyn Kettler, an assistant professor of political science at Boise State University.

For example, a federal court struck down a county's at-large method in Georgia in 2013 after critics argued that black candidates were virtually guaranteed never to be elected in the predominantly white region. The case is being appealed.

"In Wilder, they have a large enough Latino population where this isn't a problem, which is really interesting," Kettler said. "It can be hard to beat out incumbents, and that's not the case here."

Once in office, it's also just as important to carry out long-term plans to build a new generation of Latino leaders, said Maria Mabbutt, a community activist from Nampa.

Latino candidates tend to be at an advantage in smaller city election because the seats are non-partisan and don't always require a high number of votes to win, she said.

"This is very exciting, but what are we doing to secure our successors?" Mabbutt said. "I hope to see that in Wilder."

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