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OUTSIDE EDGE

The Democratic party's attempt at turning Texas blue is in the hands of an unexpected candidate for governor:
a gay Latina ex-cop whose campaign fund is dwarfed by her incumbent Republican rival. But, as Lupe Valdez
explains, she may well represent the future of the Lone Star State.

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Texas is Americana on steroids. It likes its government small, its trucks big and its politicians Republican. Or so the common misrepresentation goes, according to Lupe Valdez, the Democratic nominee bidding to be its next governor. "Those people who are the loudest are not the majority in Texas," she says in a hotel café in the state's capital, Austin. "That's not the brand of Texas; the brand of Texas is yet to be seen."

Valdez is one of the most exciting candidates running in November's mid-term elections, which are essentially a referendum on Donald Trump's belligerent presidency. The Democrats will be hoping to flip at least one of the two chambers of Congress and wrest back a smattering of governorships while they're at it. Valdez has the sort of profile that seemed impossible for a politician in Texas not so long ago – a sign that, buoyed by its increasingly diverse demographics, this red state is turning at the very least purple. "I am Texas. I *am* Texas," she says, raising her voice to stress the repetition. "And the majority of Texas identifies with me."

Her compelling story is one she has been quick to exploit in her *Small Thing* promotional campaign video. In the two-minute spot, a re-enactment shows a young Valdez – the daughter of migrant farm workers – trekking across San Antonio in scuffed shoes from the unpaved roads of her impoverished neighbourhood to attend a better high school, cleaning her dusty footwear every morning in the bathroom before class. Today education is the cornerstone of what she calls "common-folk priorities", which she argues Texan Republicans have forgotten about. "Why can't we provide quality education for Texans in rural and inner-city areas?" she asks. "I'm not talking about handouts, I'm not talking about freebies. I'm talking about opportunities."

But it's Valdez's trajectory after she attended university in Oklahoma that has arguably turned her into the sort of Texas-grade Democrat the party thinks might win over undecided moderates: namely a solid schooling in all things law-enforcement. Valdez has served as a jailer, an army captain and a federal agent for US Customs & Border Protection. In 2004 – and despite the area's solidly Republican history – Valdez pulled off the coup of being elected Dallas County's sheriff (her decision to co-operate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, during that time has come under fire from the more progressive wing of the party). She held the position from 2005 until 2017, when she resigned to join the primary race for governor, swapping her uniform for the Sunday best she wears today. In May she beat Democratic rival Andrew White, a more business-friendly centrist, in a runoff, becoming the first gay and Latina candidate to top the party's ticket in the state.

Valdez will be hoping that she can transpose her popular four-term tenure as sheriff onto the bigger stage, billing herself as a ready-made remedy for the "everyday Texan [who] continues to struggle, while a certain group continues to do just fine".

There is, however, one spanner in the works: 60-year-old Republican incumbent Greg Abbott, who is running for re-election. For one, his campaign war chest – standing at over $40m (€35m) – severely dwarfs Valdez's more meagre fund of just a few hundred thousand dollars and has translated into a double-digit lead over her. Her rival will have far more to spend on all-important advertising in the run-up to November but Valdez says that she's content to be a "struggling mobiliser". She tells the story of a woman who approached her confessing she had no money but a "great pair of feet", and who was prepared to walk, talk and door-knock on Valdez's behalf. It is this sort of grassroots support the candidate is hoping will carry her, despite the David-and-Goliath feel to the race. And while a Democrat hasn't won the governorship since Ann Richards in 1990, Valdez refutes the idea that Texas is solidly Republican. "Texas is not a red state," she says. "It's a non-voting state."

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Valdez argues that the real Texas is being obfuscated by low turnout. Indeed, it ranks 44th out of 50 states plus the District of Columbia in voter registration and came in near the bottom of the pile for voter turnout in the 2016 presidential election. To have any chance of winning, Valdez would need to awaken the so-called "sleeping giant" represented by the Latino vote in Texas, where Hispanics make up some 40 per cent of the population. Not that they will necessarily vote for her; Abbott, whose wife is Mexican-American, received 44 per cent of the Latino vote in his first election. Meanwhile, Jolt – a Texan Latino civic-engagement organisation – originally endorsed Andrew White over Valdez in the primary due to her record of working with ICE. In June, Jolt finally said it would back her over Abbott. "I've heard in the Latino population you have to get them angry for them to come out and vote," Valdez says. "Then let's get them angry."

And there's plenty to get angry about. She calls Abbott "a Trump puppet" who has wasted hundreds of millions of dollars that could have been spent on jobs and education by sending Department of Public Safety personnel down to the border and, since April, members of the state's National Guard. Perhaps the most divisive moment came in May at the state legislature in Austin. During a rancorous last day of the session, immigrant-rights activists filled the rotunda to protest at a bill that banned sanctuary cities in the state; one GOP lawmaker claimed to have called ICE on the demonstrators. Valdez says that if Texan Latinos could form a stronger voting bloc, legislators would be forced to listen.

Given her law-enforcement past, it's perhaps no surprise that Valdez believes in the constitutional right to bear arms enshrined in the second amendment. But she also recognises polls that show a majority of Texans would back more stringent checks on gun owners in a state that experienced a mass shooting at Santa Fe High School in May, in which 10 people died. She says that she can understand why someone in rural Texas may want a gun to protect their family from a rattlesnake but says she "doesn't believe in stupidity", adding that universal background checks need to be introduced and the loopholes closed. If that can't be achieved at a federal level then she says it needs to be done by the state. Texan Republicans would be unlikely to cede much ground over the issue but Valdez is prepared to strike a brief note of conciliation. "We [have to] come to the table and settle our differences," she says. "When you come to the table, you're never going to get everything you want but you're going to come out with something that makes sense for the majority."

Detractors say she doesn't have a firm enough grip on state issues and, when questioned about voter turnout, she refutes that 40 per cent of eligible Texan Latinos voted in 2016. In fact, the figure rose from 38.8 in 2012 to 40.5 that year, according to national census data. She claims, incorrectly, that the figure represents the percentage of the Texan Latino vote won by Trump, saying she believed the turnout figure to be about a sixth lower. (Her communications director, when asked for clarification, said she was talking about figures from when she was sheriff.) Then there was the revelation earlier this year of outstanding property taxes (now paid) and accusations that she changed her view on tax increases. "That only happened when they caught me off guard and I said, 'Maybe'," she says. "They turned that into a 'Yes'. Then 'Maybe' becomes a 'No'." She is officially against raising taxes and says that the only people railing against her now are Republicans who will "go for anything they have".

Whatever the outcome in November, there's little doubt that her nomination and everything she represents is a watershed moment in a year in which nine women are running for governorships across the US. Perhaps equally important, in mid-term elections where Democratic gains are dependent on battlegrounds like Texas, there's a hope that Valdez can galvanise the vote among the state's underrepresented with her calls for "decency and humanity". That might help other Democratic hopefuls such as young, telegenic Senate candidate Beto O'Rourke, who is facing an uphill battle against Ted Cruz.

Not that Valdez, who recently received the endorsement of Elizabeth Warren, is in it for any other reason than to win it. "Do you think I quit a nice-paying job to be unemployed now? Just because I'm going to advance somebody in the future?" she asks, vexed at the very thought. "I'm doing this to make a change for Texas right now."

Lupe Valdez CV	
1947 Born 11 October, San Antonio	**1983-1987** Federal agent at Department of Agriculture: investigating fraud in agriculture, banking, food stamps and white-collar crime
1973 Graduates from Southern Nazarene University in Bethany, Oklahoma, with a degree in business administration	**1985-2004** Serves in the US Army Reserves
	1987-2003 Federal agent, US Customs: investigating organised crime and spending time in Guatemala, Venezuela and Uruguay from the late 1990s
1976-1978 Caseworker, Jackson County Department of Corrections	**2000** Graduates from University of Texas at Arlington with an MA in criminology and criminal justice
1974-1985 Serves in the National Guard	
1978-1980 Correctional officer, Federal Bureau of Prisons in Seagoville, Texas	**2005-2017** Sheriff of Dallas County, Texas
1980-1983 Federal agent, General Services Administration	**2018** Wins Democratic primary in May ahead of Texan gubernatorial race