

# Harris County Democrats boosted by Obama win

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HOUSTON — A federal investigation, racist e-mails and controversy over deaths at the Harris County Jail finally cost Sheriff Tommy Thomas his job after 14 years as voters replaced him with the county's first Latino sheriff amid other Democratic gains.

Democrat Adrian Garcia scored a decisive victory Tuesday over the GOP incumbent, whose department has come under fire for more than 140 inmate deaths in the county jail system, which spurred a federal investigation, and for sheriff department e-mails containing racial and ethnic slurs.

Garcia, a Houston City Council member and retired police officer, also got a boost from endorsements by a coalition of three sheriff's deputies unions.

In addition to the inmate deaths, the county recently paid a \$1.7 million settlement in a lawsuit that claimed deputies unlawfully arrested a pair of brothers who lived next to the site of a drug raid and videotaped it.

"We hoped this would be the outcome," said Richard Newby, president of the Harris County Sheriff's Deputies Organization, a 1,700-member union. "We believe it's going to bring more unity and that things are going to be more transparent and open."

Newby attributed Garcia's win to the deputies' backing and the bad publicity surrounding Thomas over the last year.

Garcia's win was part of a near sweep of countywide offices by Democrats in Harris County, where challengers got a boost from Barack Obama's victory, lingering questions over Thomas's office and changing demographics.

But Republican County Judge Ed Emmett was re-elected after gaining credit for getting the state's most populous county through its worst storm in 25 years, September's Hurricane Ike. And Republican Pat Lykos was elected Harris County district attorney, the first woman to hold the job after scandal pushed former chief prosecutor Chuck Rosenthal out of office.

Harris County Democrats claimed 24 of the county's 27 judicial seats and three of six administrative races — creating bipartisan leadership and marking an abrupt change for a county where Republicans had held all countywide offices since 1995.

The biggest factor in the gains by Democrats may have been Obama's candidacy, said Renee Cross, associate director of the University of Houston Center for Public Policy

"We in Texas and Harris County don't turn out to vote like this. The early voter turnout helped the downballot races incredibly," Cross said. "Because there was so much media attention on how many more people were coming out to vote, people more likely voted straight ticket, maybe pressured by time. The Democrats benefited from that."

Cross also credited the Democrats' victory to the changing demographics of the county.

According to U.S. Census estimates, Harris County has about 3.9 million residents. Hispanic and black populations increased to 1.5 million and 764,000, respectively, and the white population dropped to 1.4 million.

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