

OTHER VIEWS

By Joaquin Castro
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS



Paul Rusesabagina is a hero in every sense of the word. As then-manager of the Hôtel des Mille Collines, Rusesabagina

saved more than 1,000 lives during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Ten years later, audiences across the world learned about his heroism through Don Cheadle's Academy Award-nominated performance in the film "Hotel Rwanda."

In the years following the release of "Hotel Rwanda," Rusesabagina received the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President George W. Bush and continued to use his elevated platform to speak out against the oppressive government of Rwandan President Paul Kagame. Today, because of his political activism, this 67-year-old cancer survivor with cardiovascular problems is fighting for his life in a Rwandan prison.

Rusesabagina is a political prisoner.

In 2020, the government of Rwanda kidnapped Rusesabagina from Dubai and brought him back to Rwanda, where he was tortured and charged with terrorism. For international observers, the result of the trial was all but certain. In the State Department's 2020 report on Rwanda's Human Rights Practices, analysts noted that "outcomes in high-profile genocide, security, and politically sensitive cases (in Rwanda) appear predetermined." In Rusesabagina's case, the State Department noted that "the

Calling on U.S. to stand up for Rusesabagina's release



Getty Images file photo

Paul Rusesabagina last year was sentenced to 25 years in a trial condemned by the United States and the European Union. Now, it's time they denounce Rwanda and work to set him free.

reported lack of fair trial guarantees calls into question the fairness of the verdict," and the European Union noted that the trial was "marred by numerous violations of his fair trial rights." Despite these concerns, on Sept. 20, Rusesabagina was sentenced

to 25 years in prison.

So how does the United States factor into this?

After the Rwandan genocide, Rusesabagina applied for asylum in Belgium and later immigrated to San Antonio with his family. He is an American permanent

resident, and his children are U.S. citizens – and the United States will not stay silent when our residents are threatened.

I made this clear in a December 2020 letter to Kagame and a June 2021 letter to U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. The

extrajudicial transfer, detention and trial of Rusesabagina violated international law. He was held in solitary confinement, denied confidential access to counsel and not granted the presumption of innocence. Today, he is only allowed to speak to his family for a few minutes a week and Rwandan authorities have repeatedly denied him the medication he needs to treat a heart condition.

Congress must act swiftly to denounce the government of Rwanda for actions that have endangered Rusesabagina's life and violated his human rights. Earlier this month, I introduced a bipartisan resolution with U.S. Rep. Young Kim, R-Calif., that calls on the government of Rwanda to release Rusesabagina on humanitarian grounds and permit him to return safely to the United States. The resolution also urges the U.S. government to press for his release.

Soon, I hope to bring our resolution to a vote on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives. Countries around the world take the posture of the U.S. Congress seriously, and we must push our allies to condemn Rwanda's actions. I hope common sense will prevail upon Kagame to release Rusesabagina and return him to his family in San Antonio.

His family feels the weight of his absence, and that pain is immeasurable. For as long as Rusesabagina remains in a Rwandan prison, that pain is lasting. Rusesabagina prides himself on giving a voice to the voiceless. Now we must speak up for him.

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Texas has a primary problem

By David Martin Davies
FOR THE EXPRESS-NEWS



There's a vast gulf between the public policies that most Texans say they support and the policies embraced and enacted by state elected leaders. Why? If we live in a representative democracy, why don't we see stronger representation?

We know from polling of the general population that most Texans support expanding Medicaid, addressing climate change and having access to legal abortion. But in the last year, the Texas Legislature didn't take up Medicaid expansion, it ignored climate change, and it effectively banned all abortions after six weeks of pregnancy.

This might appear to be democracy out of whack, but it's not. The state's most powerful officeholders are responding to the direction given by a coterie of voters who matter the most. These are the Republican primary voters. Republican primary voters have a titanium grip on how we pick our state leaders, and they have an outside sway on the state's policies.

For candidates to get on the general election ballot, they first must win their party's nomination. The two major parties hold a primary election, which is now underway. Primary election day is March 1. The Democratic and Republican primary

victors will face each other on Nov. 8 in the general election.

However, Texas has not elected any Democratic candidates to statewide office since 1994, when Bob Bullock, Dan Morales, John Sharp and Garry Mauro were re-elected as lieutenant governor, attorney general, comptroller and land commissioner, respectively.

For the past 25 years, the path to statewide office – be it the Governor's Mansion or the agriculture commissioner's barn – goes through the Republican primary. These candidates know they must win that primary and then don't need to worry too much about winning the general election. In my experience as a Texas political reporter, these GOP candidates don't grant many interviews after the primary, especially to reporters who ask tough questions.

The candidates know that the majority of Texas general election voters are brand-loyal Republicans. They show up on Election Day to keep the state red.

A caveat: Just because Democrats haven't won a statewide race in a quarter of a century doesn't mean their losing streak will continue. However, the "hot hand fallacy" does give the incumbent party a tremendous advantage with fundraising, free media time and name recognition.

Given this political history, over the past 25 years, the candidates favored by Republican primary voters have, without

exception, won their offices in the general election. And that means Republican primary voters are the most influential voters in Texas. They are indeed the primary voters of Texas – as in the dictionary sense of the word "primary": something that stands first in rank, importance, or value.

Those who opt to vote in the Democratic primary, or Republicans who skip the primary and vote only in the general election, can be seen as the secondary voters of Texas.

The last Texas gubernatorial midterm election, in 2018, tells the story. Of 28.6 million Texans, only 8.4 million people voted in the general election that year, but that was actually higher than normal because the top race – the U.S. Senate contest between Republican Ted Cruz and Democrat Beto O'Rourke – attracted unusual media attention.

The candidates in the general election were those elected in the March primaries, during which the voter turnout is much lower. In the Republican primary, 1.5 million votes were cast; in the Democratic primary, there were 1 million votes. As no Democrats won any of the general statewide races, it was the majority of voters in the GOP primary – not the general election – who picked the governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general and statewide candidates down the ballot. That boils down to about 1 million people – 3.5 percent of Texans – deciding who governs a state of 28 mil-



Staff file photo

For more than two decades, the Republican primary has been the election in which statewide leaders are chosen.

lion. This small sample size doesn't mirror the diversity of the state. Who are these 1 million primary voters? They are the most loyal Republican party members, who tend to be white, older, rural and extremely conservative.

The candidates who win these statewide offices know who these voters are and what they want. That's why we have seen this push further and further to the conservative right with powerful culture wars. We live in a Texas where incumbents are more concerned about GOP primary voters than they are the general election voters.

Our system is supposed to be self-correcting, with general election voters rejecting candidates from either party that have shifted too far to the extreme. But this correction is dependent on voters who restore the balance in the general election. And that is why a strong voter turnout is necessary for a well-functioning democracy that serves the needs of all Texans.

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Shoplifting is, and isn't, forcing the closure of drugstores

By Megan McArdle
WASHINGTON POST WRITERS GROUP



The closing of a drugstore used to be a matter of local interest, if that. It was an occasion for passing neighbors to reminisce about weirdly

organized shelves or complain about the distance of the next-nearest pharmacy, before bustling onward with their day. Now, however, drugstore closings have become an "issue," and the internet is periodically swept by debate over the reason various big-city drugstores are closing, most recently over a Rite Aid on New York's Upper East Side.

As you might guess, the "issue" is not really the "issue"; America has not grown more interested in the vagaries of the retail business. Rather, drugstore closings are a proxy battle in a bigger war over criminal justice. The right likes to

share viral videos of brazen shoplifters and blames store closures on feckless progressive cities that have stopped prosecuting these scofflaws. The left says the real culprit is corporate consolidation.

You would probably like me to resolve this question, but alas, this is probably impossible. What I can do is lay out the evidence for both propositions – and the reasons to be skeptical of the strong claims for either side.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that the only people who actually know why these stores are closing – the executives at major drugstore chains – aren't necessarily going to tell the public the whole truth.

When conservatives hear that Walgreens is closing five San Francisco stores, blaming shoplifting, they should keep in mind that the company announced a major wave of store closures two years ago for reasons unrelated to theft – and that major retailers are currently pressing California

to crack down on shoplifting, which gives Walgreens incentive to emphasize theft over other explanations. But progressives should exercise the same caution when retailers say shoplifting has nothing to do with closures: Retailers don't like to offend local governments, which control everything from building permits to sales tax rates, so they might emphasize other issues.

Which brings us to the second point: Many events have lots of causes. The internet has cut into drugstore sales, and it might be that a number of urban drugstores could survive falling sales or rising shoplifting, but not both.

And while it would be nice if we could resolve the question by examining shoplifting statistics, shoplifting often goes unreported, because most retail insurance doesn't cover it. Both retailers and individuals are probably not disposed to bother filing a report in jurisdictions where the district attorney is unlikely to prosecute.

And the pandemic had all sorts of odd effects on crime, making it harder to know whether there is a problem and, if so, how big it is.

All that said, shoplifting does seem to be on the rise, and lax prosecution has probably made that problem worse in some areas, though other factors are also contributing, such as the opioid epidemic and the ability to resell goods on the Internet. It would be surprising if reluctance to aggressively prosecute shoplifters had no effect on the number of shoplifters. It would also be surprising if the tent encampments now common in several major urban areas didn't increase shoplifting. And while the effect on store closures might be marginal, it would be quite surprising if an increase in shoplifting didn't affect at least some decisions about store closures, because that "shrinkage" flows straight through to the profit-and-loss statement. Both casual observation and empirical data indicate

that neighborhoods with higher crime tend to have less retail, presumably because it makes businesses less profitable and scares customers away.

Finally, it's worth noting that even when retail stays, crime is bad for the store and the customer. Stores that risk robbery or shoplifting take defensive measures: putting bulletproof glass around registers or locking up items so you have to find a clerk every time you want to buy razors. Those actions can depress the profitability of the store, or force managers to raise prices, both of which leave the business vulnerable to closure. And when businesses close, they can make the neighborhood more vulnerable to crime.

So, for all the energy that has been poured into debating this question, we don't need to answer it to know that shoplifting is bad – or that authorities should do what they can to keep it at reasonable levels.