

Texas Democrats in the 21st Century: Will They Go Quietly Into that Good Night? ...Or Be the Comeback Kids of the 2006 Elections?

By
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Context: How Did Democrats Become the Minority Party in Texas?

We all know the sad story of the decline of one of the nation's most heralded state parties, the Democrats of Texas. Ten years ago the governor, Lt. governor, speaker, attorney general, and a majority of state legislators were members of the party of Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson. Today, all statewide elected officials are Republicans, large GOP majorities dominate the state senate and house, and in Harris and Dallas Counties only one of more than 100 countywide elective posts is held by a Democrat.

The policy consequences of this tectonic shift have been even greater than the partisan change, as extreme conservatives, dominating low-turnout Republican primaries, have pulled the state farther and farther from its traditional centrist approach on issues like health care, funding education, abortion rights and civil justice. Instead, we see a radical agenda being pushed on Texas that has slashed funding for health care, eroded women's right of choice on reproductive issues, denied many Texans meaningful access to civil courts, and shoved half the state's electorate out of their congressional districts on orders from House Majority Leader Tom Delay.

It is easy to describe what happened and its consequences, but much more difficult to lay out a positive, realistic plan for reversing the situation Democrats face in the spring of 2004. But before discussing how to get out of this situation, one needs to understand how the party dug itself into this hole.

- (1) In my opinion, the roots of the problem go back a long way, to the late 1970s and 1980s, when Ronald Reagan and the national conservatives asserted their dominance within the GOP and melded a new political coalition of social conservatives with traditional Republicans more motivated by concerns about economic/national defense/foreign policy issues. This new national coalition was especially potent in Texas, as Reagan's sweeping victories in 1980 and 1984 demonstrated. The potential power of this new national alignment within Texas was not widely appreciated by most of us in the 1980s and early 1990s for several reasons. These included: Local Republicans seemed more interested in *national* than *state* issues and so did not seem a major threat within Texas; Democrats had a vastly deeper bench of incumbents and open-seat candidates running in mostly favorably drawn districts in those years; and the Republican gubernatorial candidates in four consecutive

elections, Bill Clements (1978, 1982, 1986) and Clayton Williams (1990) were not well suited to consolidating their party's presidential strength at the state level. But even while the state's elected Democrats were moving along with a business-as-usual attitude of every man and woman for herself or himself, the minority party (read Karl Rove) was steadily transforming itself into a formidable fighting machine. Republicans expanded their fund raising, built a network of lobbyists, consultants, and allied groups superior to anything the Democrats had, and honed messages on subjects like requiring parental notification for teen abortions that they had tested and knew would work with Texas voters. They were just waiting for the right opportunity.

- (2) That came in 1994 when the national Democrats were caught by a "perfect storm," producing the biggest Republican midterm election victory since 1948. National and Texas Democrats were blindsided in a contest where Republicans were highly motivated by visceral dislike for President Clinton and his recent tax increases, "don't ask, don't tell" policy on gays in the military, etc., Meanwhile, Independent voters and even Democrats were discouraged by the failure of a Democrat-controlled Congress to even bring to a vote the President's major health reform plan, and a White House that seemed shaky and uncertain. The GOP gained 55 net seats in the U.S. House and 11 in the Senate, taking control of the Congress for the first time since 1954. The results were even more profound in Texas where relatively popular Gov. Richards lost by more than 200,000 votes to George W. Bush, and Republicans took every other statewide office save Lt. Governor and Attorney General where strong Democratic incumbents held off weak challengers. The 1994 election was a classic "critical election," to use a term coined by the late Texas-born political scientist, V.O. Key, Jr., where a single contest demarks a profound shift that persists through subsequent elections. After watching Texas Democrats lose the next four general elections (1996, 1998, 2000, 2002) by comparable numbers, we now know 1994 sounded the death-knell of the old Texas Democracy with its independent candidacies, factionalism, and often fierce intra-party conflicts.
- (3) Republicans would have been formidable opponents for Democrats in all these elections since 1994, but the state party, candidates, consultants, and allied interest groups did not help matters by continuing to run (or try to run) campaigns like they were still in the 1980s. That did not work, and it will not work in the future.
- (4) Since the 1980s, I would argue that Texas Democrats have been beaten time and again by the Republicans in the areas of ideas and vision, development of a coherent, positive campaign message to take to voters, fielding quality candidates for a range of offices, and utilizing effective campaign techniques to maximize support. (Note my list does not include money. As the Tony Sanchez campaign aptly demonstrated, you can outspend a vulnerable Republican by three-to-one and still lose). When you fail in all the above areas, you lose unless the other guys really screw things up. Which, incidentally, may be happening now, a point we'll come back to later.

- (5) Republicans have not used their political success to govern wisely or well in Texas, but they have masterfully milked every drop of power within reach to further enhance their partisan advantage, with the 2001 and 2003 redistricting plans being the most relevant examples. The utter failure of the Democrats to stop this brazen power play, which had almost no support from voters other than strong GOP partisans, testifies to the difficulty the old majority party has in adjusting to its new circumstances. Note the example below.

Thinking Inside the Box
<p>More than a hundred years ago, the Irish nationalist, Charles Stewart Parnell, demonstrated how a small, but determined minority could use parliamentary rules to achieve goals. In that vein, if 51 House Texas House Democrats could band together late in the 2003 regular session to block, at least temporarily, Tom Delay's congressional plan, why did they not borrow from Parnell and use their same leverage as a group of 51 (or 11 in the Senate) by refusing to pass <i>any constitutional amendments</i> unless they were fairly treated on a range of issues such as redistricting in the 2003 session? New Speaker Craddick wanted many things from the regular session, including a constitutional amendment to shore up his beloved tort reform bill. A unified Democratic legislative bloc that would pass no constitutional amendments until the end of the session in 2003 could have forced the Speaker to make hard choices among his favorites, and quite possibly, aided by the proponents of the numerous amendments being pushed (19 were placed before the voters in September 2003) could have carried the day against Tom Delay's redistricting plan.</p>

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- (6) Besides using power aggressively for narrow partisan goals, the Texas Republicans have also masterfully spun the media on numerous points so they often serve as an echo chamber for the GOP's agenda. Most recent case in point: Mainstream media in the nation and state repeat over and over again that the GOP congressional plan will swing the state's 16D/16R partisan alignment to a 10D/22R advantage. This assertion is highly questionable and is rarely if ever backed by analyses of particular races. Three Democrats seeking reelection (Sandlin, Edwards, Stenholm) have been winning for years in districts that have a high Republican statewide average vote, but the press ignores the important reason why they have been winning, namely, in rural and small town Texas the congressional vote is still a *personal vote*, rather than a *party vote* as the statewide average implies. By accepting uncritically the GOP redistricting line, Democrats like Edwards, Sandlin, and Stenholm find the playing field tilted against them in raising the funds needed to run competitive races in 2004. One also notes the absence in media coverage of the Texas redistricting of the fact that aggressive partisan redistricting plans often result in a "backlash" among voters unhappy about being moved from one district to another (See California in 1982,

Georgia in 2002) which produce quite different results than the computer-assisted map-drawers anticipated.

OK, So Things Are Bad, What Should Democrats Do? Some General Ideas on What to Stop Doing and What to Start Doing.

Insanity is sometimes defined as doing the same thing over and over, failing again and again, but still expecting to get a different and better result if one tries just one more time. Accepting that perspective, maybe the first thing Texas Democrats have to do is stop doing things that have not worked. Let's review a few of these failed ideas and think about how the party can better position itself in the *near and long-term*.

- (1) Demography is destiny. With the state's Anglo population peaking in 3-4 years while black growth continues and the Hispanic population surges, all Democrats have to do is put up candidates that represent the "new" Texas and victory will be ours again. Wrong! As the 2002 "Dream Team" ticket demonstrated, that strategy might work if we held the election in the first grades of Texas where about 70% of the kids are Latinos or Black, but in the polling booths of the state Anglos still account for 70% of all the ballots cast and they will remain the *voting majority* in Texas for another 15-20 years. Given that fact, any Democratic plan that does not direct a compelling message to Texans of all races and ethnic groups is simply stupid. Tom Delay's fondest dream is that Democrats will narrow their vision to representing minority districts conveniently "packed" by the 2001 and 2003 redistricting plans, which would leave the Republican Party a clear field to dominate statewide elections until 2020, *even if minority voters continued to vote Democratic by the margins witnessed in 2002*. Whether it is Tony Sanchez in Texas or Cruz Bustemante in California, the great majority of Anglo voters will reject candidates for statewide office they perceive, fairly or unfairly, as representing primarily minority communities. On the other hand, I believe Anglo candidates that try to polarize the majority against minorities will also be vulnerable in future statewide elections. The Democratic Party, and its candidates, thus need to be inclusive of all Texans, while at the same time sensitive to the different histories, barriers, and problems that have denied equal opportunity to all Texans. If Democrats can stay away from dumb actions like the highly publicized Sanchez-Morales Spanish language debate of 2002, the party can likely count on the dumber Republicans to misplay their cards on issues like Hopwood case and Prairie View A&M student voting flap.
- (2) Once we get more attractive national Democrats, especially running for president, the state party will come back strong. Hello? Bill Clinton was a much more sellable candidate for Texans in 1992 and 1996 than Michael Dukakis was in 1988, but the Arkansan, who knew the state well, wrote it off in both elections and won the presidency by electoral college landslides. Gore followed the same strategy in 2000, and would have pulled it off save for some very bad luck in Florida. Kerry may be persuaded to mount a meaningful guerilla war campaign in Texas to cut Bush's margin here dramatically (more on this later), but for the foreseeable future, Texas Democrats are on their own. Additionally, with our

important state offices up in off-years, Texas Democratic candidates for these posts will never be swept into office by a presidential landslide, even if that rare event reoccurs (and remember it's been 40 years since a Democratic presidential candidate got more than 55 percent of the two-party vote in Texas).

- (3) Once voters understand how radical the Republican agenda is, they'll run to the Democrats. Maybe, but unless the Democrats have compelling candidates and relevant messages, that will not happen short of major scandal or severe economic distress. The Republican Party may be a party of bad ideas, but it clearly has ideas. If the Democrats cannot develop and distill a coherent message on issues like school finance, health care, and tort reform, Republicans will continue to dominate the marketplace of ideas, giving them a huge edge. One of the major reasons for GOP success in the last decade is they have shrunk the electorate (with more than a little help from the Democrats). The Republican base of Anglo, moderate to conservative Texans represents about 30% of the adult citizen population of Texas, but casts almost 50% of the votes in low-turnout general elections like 1998, 2000, and 2002. Unless Democrats can motivate the millions of Texans who are already registered but have not bothered going to the polls, this skewing of the electorate toward Republicans and conservatives will continue. And we should again note that Texas Republicans have aggressively used their political power to entrench themselves in gerrymandered districts, embed themselves with the Austin lobby, and have the Bush administration in Washington providing critical assistance when needed (note the political appointees in the Voting Rights Division of the Department of Justice overriding the career lawyers who recommended objecting to Tom Delay's 2003 congressional map). The governing party can also call on associated interest groups and think-tanks nationally and locally for ideas, funding, and other resources. Adding this up, getting these guys out won't be easy.
- (4) The Democratic Party can rely on individual campaigns and the Texas coordinated campaigns to get back in the game. This is, in my view, too little and too late. One can never be certain who will run, but in this climate getting quality Democrats to pursue state office is going to be a tough sell. And when such candidates do run, they must necessarily focus on specific short-term strategies and tactics that maximize their own chances of winning in the months before the November election when campaign funds are available.. A broader *party* focus is needed, in my opinion, that is less tied to electoral cycles and specific candidates. For example, potential candidates for 2006 need good, continuous data from 2004 and 2005 in assessing whether to run or not run. It is not in the interest of any such potential candidate to fund that kind of prior data-gathering, even though it would be of great use in deciding whether to run and *how* to run in 2006.
- (5) Can't this be done through the Texas Democratic Party? Not likely. State party organizations are heavily regulated entities that are legally required to be representative bodies. Given the very diverse constituencies that usually support Democrats (in contrast to the more homogeneous Republican Party), the

formal party structure must function as an *expressive organization* for a rather unwieldy coalition of political activists. That is entirely appropriate. Healthy official party organizations at the state and county level are clearly desirable, and deserve our support. However, these official party structures are not well-suited to take on the broader task on party building, or re-building, needed in Texas. The Texas Republicans rise to power made modest use of their formal state organizational structure. There is a lesson here for the Democrats.

- (6) The “tried and true” techniques of registering voters, voter contact, and voter mobilization can still be utilized to win elections for Democrats. Not! In a state with extraordinary population change, new patterns of employment, media use, and expanding internet access, the old ways don’t work well anymore. For example, in Harris County, which has the largest African-American population in the state, tradition Democratic campaigns focused on GOTV in traditional communities like Third and Fifth Ward. In 2004, although there are many more blacks in the county, the inner city wards have smaller and smaller numbers of registered voters. Many African Americans have moved into outlying areas, some heavily black, others not, but a much more sophisticated program to ID black (and hence likely Democratic voters) is needed that was the case in the 1980s. New approaches are particularly needed that blend current election data (like the 2003 city election in Houston), with new demographic data (the census data is already four years old, but school enrollment data by race/ethnicity is updated annually). As the electorate gets more and more diverse (in the Houston mayoral election, the Asian American vote rose from about 8,500 in 2001 to 14,000 in 2003), better techniques of developing and delivering messages become more critical. Of especial importance is using the internet as the 2003-04 Dean campaign (and to a lesser degree the Clark campaign) was able to do across the nation and in Texas.
- (7) Why not wait a few years until the state Demographics are more favorable? Highly risky, in my view, for two reasons. One, a lot of damage has been done in the last three years by a governing party dominated by a small minority of right-wing primary voters. A few more years of this and Texas may be in such a deep hole that reversing course may be extremely difficult no matter who wins statewide office. Two, there is accumulating evidence that now is the time to act. For example, a March 9th 2004 exit poll, sponsored by national media, found Texas Democrats, as in the nation, are angry and eager to take on President George Bush and the national Republican Party. Coupled with recent policy actions supported by the state GOP (radical redistricting and tort reform, threatened dismantling of equity funding for public schools, etc.) there is great energy building up against the governing party in Texas, but unless it is tapped into in the coming months, it will likely fade over the summer and die after the November 2nd presidential vote.
- (8) Circling back to a point above, won’t the Kerry campaign help get things rolling here when they realize Bush is much more vulnerable in 2004 than 2000? I certainly hope so. There are excellent reasons why the national campaign should make a much greater effort in Texas than was done in 1992, 1996, or

2000. Let's cite three. First, it would be relatively easy to dramatically cut George W. Bush's inflated popular vote margin of 2000 in Texas (3.80 million to just 2.43 million for Gore) because his job approval rating, according to the latest Texas Poll, had fallen to 48%, compared to his job rating (as governor) of over 60% in 2000. Slicing Bush's Texas margin by 800,000 votes, which I believe is entirely possible, would make it much more likely that even if President Bush squeaks by again in the electoral college and wins a second term, he would be a two-time loser of the popular vote. Denied a popular mandate, it would be considerably more difficult to stack the Supreme Court with right wing appointees in 2005 and 2006. A second reason why it makes a lot of sense for national Democrats to put Texas into play is we have 5 endangered Democratic House members running for re-election this fall. Absent help from the presidential campaign, getting the Democratic vote out in these districts will be all the more difficult. Three, Texas is a great stage for Kerry to use to attack the President on a wide range of issues. No one expects the Kerry campaign to spend much of their post-convention \$75 million in hard cash in the state, but it makes a lot of sense to play hard here before the convention, and afterwards, as much as possible, given financial constraints. However, unless there is good evidence on the ground that Texas Democrats are geared up for the fight here in 2004, the chances of the national party doing anything here are greatly diminished. In my opinion, if Texas Democrats are going to start a comeback in 2004, it has to be from the ground up within the state, although it would sure be nice to be on the national party's radar this time around.

- (9) So let's finally cut to the chase. What can be done in Texas in 2004 and 2005 to take advantage of the window of opportunity that is clearly opening. My friend Arnie Vedlitz, Bob Bullock Professor of Public Policy at Texas A&M got the ball rolling in this regard late last year, and he has had some discussions with former Senator Caperton and others about how to get the Democrats back in the game. We have since had encouraging meetings with former Lt. governors Bill Hobby and Ben Barnes, and are continuing to discuss what might be done with a range of other folks unhappy about the political situation in Texas. My take differs somewhat from Professor Vedlitz's, but I think the following ideas are worth considering.

Some Specific Ideas for a Democratic Comeback

Democrats got into their weak position because of a number of factors, and they need a lot of things to get out. Better ideas, better messages, better prepared candidates, more sophisticated use of information and voter contact techniques, etc.. Arnie Vedlitz has proposed something akin to the Democratic Leadership Council here in Texas – perhaps called the Texas Leadership Forum. It would bring together business, political, civic, and academic leaders in a progressive coalition committed to a set of core principles. These would include restoring the Texas Democratic Party as a competitive force in statewide politics on a platform emphasizing real and fair family values for all Texans.

In addition to this leadership group, I think an allied think tank is needed, partly modeled on John Podesta's new Center for American Progress, but with, of course, a specific Texas focus. If Texas Democrats are going to do more than react to bad Republican policies, future candidates need to be better armed than is the case today. The central focus of this organization would be to gather and provide in a user-friendly form, the *political intelligence* needed by Democratic campaigns and candidates to enhance their competitiveness in general elections. Texas is a large, diverse, and rapidly changing state. We are experiencing huge economic changes (moving to a post-industrial society in a global economy), demographic shifts (a stable and aging Anglo population along with a growing African American population, fast growing new Asian minorities, and most importantly, explosive growth of Latinos driven equally by natural increase and immigration), coupled with new information technologies that are fundamentally altering the social and political landscape (fewer people watching television, expanding internet access, etc.). Here are some things I think this Texas research center should focus on:

First, regular statewide polling, using the best techniques available including careful stratification to ensure different regions and racial/ethnic populations are accurately surveyed. An on-going quarterly poll of at least 1,000 registered voters would provide a continuing source of longitudinal data that would help future candidates, office holders, and political consultants understand the ever-shifting patterns of public opinion in our state.

Second, improved demographic analyses and assessments of their political impact across the state and especially in fast-changing districts and counties. The 2000 census is already more than four years old. By November of 2004 we will have lost one million state residents by death and out-migration that were counted by the last census. And we will have more than 2.5 million new Texas residents, mostly minorities, than are changing neighborhoods and political districts across Texas. By a combination of standard projection techniques and new current data such as public school enrollment data that is collected every year, by race and ethnicity, this center could give office holders and candidates badly needed basic data need to determine where political resources such as voter registration efforts, candidate recruitment, etc. should be focused. We will not get new census data until the spring of 2011. Texas Democrats must have access to reliable, on-going basic data to answer questions such as when will the Dallas and Harris County courthouses swing back Democratic.

This effort should produce a much more accurate measure of actual competitiveness in legislative, county and congressional districts across the state. *This model should be tested in the 2004 general election.* In my opinion, The Texas Legislative Council Index is not only dated but, more importantly, badly biased against Democratic candidates. This needs to be documented before the 2006 elections if the Democratic party is going to recruit strong candidates in truly competitive districts. I did a small project in 2002 in Sylvia Garcia's successfully race for Harris County Commissioner that accurately predicted her 52% to 48% victory on a precinct-by-precinct basis. I will do the same in other local races this year. Democratic candidates across the state need similar information.

Fourth, this center should build and maintain a top-notch website for contacting activists, opinion leaders, party officials and interested others with the information the center pulls together.

Fifth, this new center should avoid duplicative efforts. Specifically, the Center for Public Policy Priorities is filling a vital role in helping Texans understand complicated public policy issues like public school finance. The CPPP, in a short period of time, has added great value to the policy-making process in Austin. A new progressive center is not needed that would compete with their excellent work. The center I am proposing would have a quite different focus, and would – if successful – supplement the work of the CPPP, just as it would for the regular state and local Democratic party organizations.

Sixth, while the center's underlying objective is the restoration of a competitive Democratic Party from the courthouses to the capitol, it should carefully avoid being associated with any candidate or faction within the party. The goal should be to provide objective information, not to promote any particular person, intra-party group, or narrow issue(s). The value of the center will absolutely depend on its credibility, which can only be gained by consistently producing good work that stands up over time.

In that regard, we need to attract respected researchers, academic and non-academic, to work with the center on both a pro bono and compensated basis. Personally, as a well-paid tenured professor, I will not accept a salary or compensation from this organization, other than reimbursement for direct out-of-pocket expenses. I am prepared to make a substantial personal commitment to this project in the areas of polling and demographic analysis over a number of years. (I am stepping down as Director of the UH Center for Public Policy, but will remain as a fulltime class room teacher in the political science department at the University of Houston.)

My preference, in light to the above, is that any such center that is established should be funded by a wide range of individuals and groups who support the restoration of a competitive two party system in Texas.

Postscript: Looking Back and Ahead

More than a half century ago, V.O.Key, Jr., arguably the greatest American political scientist of the 20th century and a native of West Texas to boot, opened his classic book, Southern Politics in State and Nation, with the observation that "...certain predispositions color the book. One of them is a belief in the democratic process as it is professed in the United States." Fundamental to that process, he continued, is the prevailing notion "that the public weal is best served by the existence of two major political parties that compete on more or less even terms for control of the state." (my emphasis). Texas and the other southern states, Key observed 55 years ago, had failed that test with its one-party system. That lack of political competitiveness contributed mightily to his conclusion that "The South may not be the nation's number one problem, as some northerners assert, but politics in the South's number one problem."

Key's nearly 700 page book carefully documented, state by state, the very high price most residents of the the old Confederacy paid, but especially it's black minority, to maintain the Democratic Party's dominance of elections in the region. Among the more perverse and destructive effects the old Southern one-party system was the great power in placed in the hands of a relatively small minority – the whites who lived in majority blacks areas – who correctly saw that keeping African Americans in virtual peonage required a political process that did not offer voters a real choice in the elections that counted – general elections where candidates sponsored by one party squared off against those put up by another.

Before Key's death in 1963 the South had begun moving away from its traditional one-party politics. And with the rise of a meaningful Republican challenge to the governing Democrats in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, many of the benefits the author had predicted would come with a genuinely competitive party system, did materialize in Texas and other states.

Today, a very different one-party dominance seems to be taking root in Texas and other Southern states. Now, of course, it is the Republican Party that threatens to overwhelm a much diminished Democratic competitor. If such comes to pass, I think the wisdom of Key's original analysis will again become evident. For example, if there is no meaningful competition for votes in general elections, the effective election in Texas shifts to the March Republican primary. The main problem with this is that, as was the case with the earlier Democratic one-party system, it empowers a small and unrepresentative minority – white conservative ideologues who dominate the low-turnout GOP primaries as opposed to black belt whites in Key's day – who become the gatekeepers to power.

If Key was right, and I believe he was, it is important for political scientists and others in and out of academia who share this belief to work for the revival of a meaningful two party system in Texas. This is not, for me, about helping the Democrats per se. Both the organized Democratic Party (if there ever was one), as well as individual Democratic candidates, have, in my opinion, contributed to the mess we are in. The bottom line question must always be the late Bob Bullock's: "Is it good for Texas?" My answer is that a competitive two-party system in Texas, where voters get meaningful choices in November, is not only good for Texas, it is essential for our state's progress in the 21st century. And that obviously requires the recovery of the Democratic party both locally and statewide. I hope to contribute, with Professor Vedlitz and others of similar spirit, to that end.

