

AROUND THE STATES

TEXAS

The Republican Roundup

WILLIAM MURCHISON

The state of Texas, birthplace of Lyndon Johnson and Sam Rayburn, political linchpin of the Sunbelt, is becoming a two party state. This turn of events was dramatized by President Reagan's gigantic margin of victory over Walter Mondale there in 1984, by a massive turnover of local elective offices to the Republicans, and by conversions to the GOP by conservative Democrats Phil Gramm and now Kent Hance.

Hance's switch to the Republican Party was celebrated by party officials because it confirms—and accelerates—a trend of non-liberal Democrats leaving the party. Hance, who lost the Democratic nomination for the Senate to left-liberal Lloyd Doggett, is persuaded that there is no more room for conservative Democrats like himself in the party, a realization that is coming to scores of Texas Democrats who share Hance's views on issues. The Texas Democratic Party, which once accommodated both liberals and conservatives, now runs the risk of losing many of its members, and certainly the conservative label, to the GOP.

Until recently, the Democratic Party had a lock on politics in Texas. For the first six decades of the century, no Republican won statewide office in Texas. There was no Republican in the Texas legislature from 1931-61. When at last, in 1961, John Tower was elected to the U.S. Senate, just one other Texas Republican sat in Congress—Representative Bruce Alger of Dallas. In 1978, Texans elected the first Republican governor since Reconstruction: Bill Clements, a Dallas oil well magnate. Throughout the 1970s, Republican state legislators and judges were few and far between.

The elections of 1982 made things even worse for the GOP. Bill Clements was defeated for reelection by Mark White, a liberal opportunist, and a whole slate of qualified Republicans seeking statewide office were clobbered. The recession that year, attributed to President Reagan's policies, no doubt played a part in this.

Today, for numerous reasons, Texas Republicans rub their hands together with satisfaction:

- Texas Republicans boast one U.S. senator; 10 of 27 congressmen; 58 of 181 legislators; a multitude of local officials; and almost complete political control of the Dallas County courthouse.

- Ronald Reagan garnered 3.1 million Texas votes against 1.9 million for Walter Mondale: a 64-36 percent split. (By contrast, four years earlier, Reagan beat Jimmy Carter in Texas 2.5 million votes to 1.8 million. In 1976, Mr. Carter won the state by 129,000 votes over President Ford.)

- Of 254 Texas counties, the Republican ticket carried 238—including Planco County, birthplace and home of the late Lyndon B. Johnson.

- President Reagan's support across the state was astonishingly even. The six urban counties gave him 57-67 percent of their votes; the 19 middle-sized and the 229 rural counties 65 percent each.

- The mandate for Congressman Phil Gramm, in his quest for retiring Republican Senator John Tower's seat, was similarly broad and deep. In the urban counties, Congressman Gramm polled 57 percent of the vote, in the middle-sized ones 60 percent, in the rural counties, 59 percent.

- Texas Republican pollster Lance Tarrance forecast, incredibly enough, that 36 percent of registered voters would go straight Republican, while only 23 percent would grasp the Democratic lever. He was right.

A little caution is in order. To say that Texas is becoming a two-party state is plainly not the same as saying it has become one already. The 1984 elections notwithstanding, most Texas officeholders, including nearly all the top ones, remain Democrats.

On the other hand, the Texas landslide of 1984 didn't just happen. It helped, of course, that by then the state's economy was once more on the boom. Unemployment at election time was 5.4 percent, down several points from 1982. It also helped that a popular president and a vice president from Texas headed the Republican ticket. By contrast, the Democratic Party candidates were perceived as Northeastern liberals. But what probably counted most in Texas was a change of perception: in 1984 the Republican Party was viewed as the conservative party.

It could not have managed this by itself. The Democrats helped enormously. Between 1972 and 1984 they demonstrated an unerring ability to stake out positions not shared by the majority of Texas voters.

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The old Texas Democratic Party was as conservative as a pocket watch. It was dedicated to rugged individualism, local control, and traditional values. So while Texas registered Democrats might vote for Republican Presidential candidates, they almost always pulled the lever for local candidates from their own party. This remained true until the conservative Democrats in high places began to lose interest and standing in the party, and either left or converted to the Republican fold. This alerted rank-and-file Democrats in Texas, who in any case were not happy with the policies of the national Democratic Party: appeasement, redistribution of income, and hyper-solicitousness toward homosexuals and feminists.

In 1984, the opportunity for Texas Republicans was plain. All they had to do besides get out the vote was get out the conservative message. Which they did.

Phil Gramm was the conservative point man. No candidate could have been better equipped for the job. Balding, with more than a trace of Georgia drawl, and a self-deprecating sense of humor, he had the common touch. He also had the uncommon distinction among politicians of thoroughly understanding economics and public policy. (Before entering Congress, he was an economics professor at Texas A&M University.)

In 1983, Congressman Gramm had quit the Democratic Party rather than knuckle under to Tip O'Neill. On changing parties, Gramm resigned his seat in Congress, ran as a Republican in a special election, and won a thumping endorsement from a rural district that had never before sent a Republican to Congress. In 1984, Congressman Gramm waved around his new party label.

"I ran as a Republican," he said recently. "I said, 'I'm a Republican. Here are the reasons why — and you are one, too. And the time is here to admit it.'" Had he failed to convince, Texans only had to look at the record of his Democratic opponent, state Senator Lloyd Doggett, which was uniformly liberal.

It was the way of the old Democratic Party to anoint in the primaries a conservative—who then went on to defeat his Republican opponent in November. The Democrats had such a conservative at their disposal in 1981, Congressman Kent Hance of Lubbock. By 1,400 votes in the runoff primary, the Democrats spurned his suit.

Doggett, who represented chic and liberal Austin, spoke as senatorial candidate for all the important elements of today's Democratic Party—minorities, feminists, peace movements, labor leaders, homosexuals. The group for whom he failed chiefly to speak was the ordinary Texan: not particularly rich, not particularly poor, concerned for the revival of lost values like work and patriotism.

Congressman Gramm, in speech after speech, embraced the values of the working man, as exemplified by a printer in his congressional district, one Dickie Flatt. On the campaign trail, Dickie Flatt became almost as famous as Lloyd Doggett. Gramm portrayed the voters' choice as Texas values versus the philosophy of the new Democratic Party. His was a campaign of issues—the need for budget cuts, strong national defense, and traditional conservative areas that Republicans commonly conceded to Democrats. Some 50,000 volunteers worked the entire state on behalf of Reagan and Gramm together.

In Texas, as elsewhere, Democrats had pinned their hopes on an upsurge in voter registration. Republicans responded by signing up 1.2 million new voters—one million more than their original goal. The number of financial contributors to the party tripled to 70,000. Not even Hispanic voters, on whom the Democrats had set their sights, helped the Democratic ticket in the end. Texas Republicans have long regarded Hispanics—hard-working, church and family oriented—as a natural Republican voter. John Tower, for instance, was popular with Mexican-Americans. Ultimately, Reagan and Gramm carried a number of heavily Hispanic counties in South Texas.

Numerous Texans made up their minds to eschew the whole Democratic ticket. And so Republican straight-ticket voting made its debut on Texas. In Dallas County, led by an exceptionally able county chairman, Fred Meyer, Republicans swept all but one contested race, including judgeships. They fared nearly as well in Harris County (Houston).

The Future is Now

What of the future? "We've got a great opportunity," says Meyer. Once a defensive, introverted, even apologetic kind of party, Texas Republicans have become bold and assertive. Led by Phil Gramm and state party chairman George Strake, they have been on an evangelical kick, carrying the gospel to conservative Democrats, urging them to switch their party allegiance.

All this missionary work has not been without effect. Three Dallas Democratic judges converted at a highly publicized press conference. The spirit has likewise come upon various local officials, including the sheriff of Nueces County (Corpus Christi) and the district attorney of Williamson County. "I continue to be encouraged," says Gramm, "that the fastest-growing group in the state is called Former Democrats."

By far the greatest coup is Kent Hance himself. In early May, he called it quits as the Texas Democratic Party's only well-known conservative, saying that "my personal philosophies will no longer be in conflict with my party's." Ronald Reagan sent a telegram: "From one former Democrat to another, welcome to the team. We did not leave the Democratic Party over the years, it simply left us."

Mr. Strake says the Hance conversion "moves political realignment ahead by at least two election cycles." One reason is that Hance's example will probably inspire other conservative Democrats to convert. Another reason is the likelihood that Hance will run for governor against Governor White, who is regarded as vulnerable. "He reads the same tea leaves I do," says Meyer. "He couldn't wait to get down to Honduras. White will move absolutely as far right as he can get." In the Republican Party, Hance's likeliest competition is highly regarded Congressman Tom Loeffler of Hunt, in west Texas.

The Republican Party's quest for converts makes tactical as well as public relations sense. Right now, there isn't a big enough field of well-known, well-respected Republican candidates. This makes harder the job of capturing medium-visibility offices like lieutenant governor, attorney general, and agriculture commissioner, not to mention seats in the legislature.

With noted ex-Democrats running on the GOP ticket, things might be different. Small wonder evangelism gets so much priority from Republican leaders like Gramm and Meyer. Small wonder, too, that Texas Democratic leaders are morose. They fear their power is ebbing away. 📞

CALIFORNIA

A Senator Named After A Curve?

TOM HAZLETT

Art Laffer has "risen to the top of my profession," as a university economist, "been fabulously successful—beyond my wildest imagination—as a businessman," his A.B. Laffer and Associates pulling down some \$2.7 million in annual billings, and, as is commonly understood, he sits at the right hand of President Reagan for policy matters economic (hence, the \$2.7 million in annual billings). So what do you give the policy expert who has everything? A United States Senate seat, of course.

Mr. Laffer is likely to run for Alan Cranston's Senate seat in California in 1986. If elected, Laffer will certainly rank as the U.S. Senate's most "curvaceous" member, as the Laffer Curve has gained folklore status in a matter of a very few semesters. According to legend, the curve was first posited on a Washington, D.C. cocktail napkin to Wall Street Journal writer Jude Wanniski and an unnamed staffer in the Ford White House in 1974. The graph shows a simple relationship: tax receipts as a function of tax rates. As rates rise, so do government revenues—up to some point. After a high (and unspecified) tax rate, people will work and invest so much less, that government's take—while a bigger *share* of GNP—shrinks in absolute terms. The practical upshot is that we may have reached the point, by the late 1970s, where government could actually increase its income by cutting tax rates. This powerful argument served as the intellectual motivation for the dramatic 25 percent cut in personal income taxes during Ronald Reagan's first term.

In a field crowded with Republicans anxious to make the final heat against, presumably, Alan Cranston (the incumbent senator may face the formidable San Francisco mayor, Diane Feinstein, in a tough primary), Art Laffer sticks out like a pointy-headed intellectual—which he's not (most intellectuals wouldn't have the faintest idea of what to do with a cocktail napkin, for instance). L.A. police chief turned state senator Ed Davis is currently the smart money choice for the nod, against congresspeople Bobbi Fiedler, Dan Lungren, and William Dannemeyer, state senators William Campbell and Ken Maddy. (No one has dared to yet declare, due to fear of "equal time"—or loss of franking). There is also some rumbling about the



intentions of Peter Ueberroth or Charlton Heston descending from Mt. Olympus or Mt. Sinai respectively, to slay the entire field in a bold stroke. But for now it's a dog fight.

An economist in the Senate? It has been done, true. Texas rookie Phil Gramm quit the Texas A&M economics department, joining the Club of 100 last fall, following by some years the well-known symbol-cruncher Paul Douglas of Illinois, the only U.S. Senator in history to have a production function named after him (the vaunted Cobb-Dougllass model: you remember it, surely . . . c'mon—it's the one where the exponents sum to unity, indicating linear homogeneity? Oh, that production function. Right.) But why would a 44-year old guy, plump and happy with six kids, a new 25-year-old wife, a Southern California estate boasting exotic wildlife (with, yes four, macaw birds) and more strains of cacti than the Gobi Desert would want to mix it up with the low-lives of politics?

It's not an academic seminar out there, Art. "I know that, but I think people would rather have someone who knows the process from the outside and has been successful on his own," he grins. Besides, Laffer's image as a policy expert out of official ranks gives him a little added credibility, he believes. "I'm saying the very same things today I said and wrote 10, 15 years ago. When a person's been running for office since they were 22, you don't really know what they believe."

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