

Political Terrain Shifts in Texas as Independents Gain Ground

Americans may have been momentarily confused, but not all that surprised, when they learned that the Democratic Party of Texas holds a primary *and* caucuses to select a presidential nominee; in most states there's one or the other, but it made a sort of sense that in our second largest there would be both. The results of the March 4 "two-step" were more noteworthy: Hillary Clinton won the primary, 51% to Barack Obama's 47%, but he won the caucuses, 56% to her 44%, and walked away with more pledged delegates, 99 to Clinton's 94. Exit polls indicated that among independent voters Clinton was outpolled by Obama, who was endorsed by Independent Texans (IT) and its iconoclastic founder, Linda Curtis.

"Barack Obama has gained more recognition for independent voters than any single political leader since Ross Perot, despite being a Democrat!" she says. "What will happen, in terms of real change, after the election depends on what we – independents – do, no matter who wins. I think Obama is the only one who has some understanding of that fact, which might be a no-brainer to us but is apparently missed by all those brilliant pundits we watch on Sunday mornings."

"Obama has a lot of voters who are hard to characterize," says Paul Burka, senior executive editor of the widely read *Texas Monthly*. "People have characterized them as independents. A lot of them are cynical about politics and see in Obama a chance to change whatever it is they don't like about politics. They're with Obama but they can very easily be disillusioned. I think Hillary would do very badly in Texas. People who like Obama would not support her, and I think she would be a strong motivator of Republicans."

Harvey Kronberg, publisher and editor of *The Quorum Report*, a nonpartisan newsletter focusing on Texas politics and government, agrees with Burka that the traditionally Republican Lone Star State is unlikely



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Linda Curtis
Independent Texans

Photo: Linda Curtis of Independent Texans.

to be in play this November. Still, he says, it is “not as strongly presumptively Republican as it was even four years ago” and predicts “the closest race in 20 years... The Republican majority in Texas has been constituted [in part] by ‘independents.’ The indications are that they are far more up for grabs than they ever have been before.” Kronberg calls the Obama campaign’s recent launching of a voter registration drive in Texas “audacious,” a signal to the Republicans that the probable Democratic nominee is “not writing Texas off.”

Two years ago 300,000 Texans signed petitions to put two independent candidates for governor on the ballot; Carole Strayhorn and singer/songwriter/novelist/humorist Kinky Friedman, who was also once a columnist at *Texas Monthly*, received a combined total of 1.3 million votes in the 2006 general election. “That’s not that long ago,” says Linda Curtis, who was a key player in the Strayhorn campaign and had worked doggedly to get Strayhorn and Friedman to join forces. “Those voters are still out there, and they’re still independent,” Curtis continues. “We’re calling them. By 2009 we hope to be positioned to draft a major independent to run for governor.”

The collective political wisdom in Texas suggests that Strayhorn will not enter another gubernatorial fray. Friedman, who described himself as a “bad loser” after the 2006 election, has said that he plans to run as a Democrat; *Texas Monthly*’s Burka believes that his former colleague is “a lot less appealing” ever since he abandoned his “iconoclast” persona during the 2006 campaign for that of a conventional candidate, complete with position papers. “You’re seeing some realignment in Texas,” Burka adds. “Not so much toward the Democrats but away from the Republicans – people who regard themselves as independents.” These Texans, he says, “have a distaste for ideology. Much of the concern about Iraq is not simply about whether the war is moral or not, but the reason for going to war was not based on policy objectives but ideological bias.”

“Independents’ power is growing,” Curtis says. “Consultants are looking at numbers and issues, and they’re figuring out that they need to talk with us. Obama figured it out in 19 open primary states. They see the power of independents, because Obama made it real. People who are running for office are coming to us.”

Among them is Joe Jaworski. A former city councilman in Galveston, his tenure brought to a close by term limits, the well-funded Jaworski is running for the Texas state senate from District 11. Projecting himself as an independent Democrat, he is seeking IT’s endorsement.

“He’s started pursuing us,” Curtis reports. “He knows that he can’t win in that district without independents. I told him that what indies want, besides recognition, and reforms like Initiative and Referendum, is serious opposition to the Trans-Texas Corridor.”

The 4000 mile-long, 1200 foot-wide toll road is the Texas section of the proposed mega-highway – a crucial piece of the NAFTA master plan – that would start at Mexican ports (where Chinese goods whose ultimate destination is in North America are already being trans-shipped) and make its way north, devouring small farms, manufacturing jobs and local tax dollars as it goes.

“It will hurt everyone in Texas who drives or eats,” Curtis says bluntly. Independent Texans is calling for a congressional investigation into the political corruption, wedded to multinational profiteering, that has given birth to the Corridor. “This is our where-the-rubber-meets-the-road issue,” she explains. “It’s why we need political reform.”

Earlier this year Curtis attended a series of hearings on the Corridor that were held throughout East Texas. “That’s where ‘bubbas’ – rural, mostly white, conservative working class Texans – were getting the shaft from Governor Perry and the Texas Department of Transportation with their schemes to seize East Texans’ land and heritage,” the fiery IT founder charges. The wildly unpopular Republican governor, a major booster of the Corridor, won a second term in 2006 with 39% of the vote; without term limits to rein him in, he has recently announced that he will run for reelection in 2009. Harvey Kronberg believes that Rick Perry’s support for the TTC is one reason that independents “no longer feel at home in the Republican Party.” Meanwhile, says Curtis, “some Democratic leaders are getting smart, like the Republicans used to be – they’re coming to see that if they want to win elections they have to partner in some way with the independents. The Democratic Party is another matter. I suspect they’re where they’ve always been at, which is ‘independents don’t exist.’”

In 2006, independents succeeded in joining the Corridor issue to what Curtis calls the “independent revolt”: approximately 612,000 “bubbas” in east and central Texas voted for Strayhorn or Friedman, both of whom had strenuously opposed the monster road. “These Texans were, and still are, desperate for someone who will fight for them and their way of life,” she argues. “Many pleasantly surprised us as Obama-positive. We call ourselves ‘Bubbas for Obama!’ Our job now is to keep building bridges – non-tolled, of course! – between them and black voters.” NEO