Development of Political Parties in Texas

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A HISTORY OF TEXAS POLITICAL PARTIES

Historians and political scientists usually trace the origin of American political parties to the debate between the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists over the ratification of the new United States Constitution written at Philadelphia in 1787. For a short period in the nation’s early history (1788-1800), there was only one party -- the Federalists. However, for most of the nation’s history, the United States has had two major parties - the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. Furthermore, until recent years (1968-the present) when neither party has been as dominant as in the past, either the Democratic Party or the Republican Party has tended to dominate American politics for long periods of time (Democrats, 1800-1860, 1932-1968; Republicans, 1860-1932). Third parties have never had much success at the national level in terms of electing their own candidates. Nevertheless, on a few occasions, they seem to have played a “spoiler” role in determining which of the two major parties was victorious in a presidential election.

The development of political parties in Texas since it secured its independence from Mexico has been a different story from that in the nation as a whole. For one thing, political parties were slower to develop in Texas than they were in the United States. In fact, during the time that Texas was an independent nation called the Republic of Texas, there really were no political parties. In addition, for about one quarter of a century after Texas in 1845 became a state within the United States, there was in reality only one political party, the Democratic Party. In fact, except for a very short time after the American Civil War when the Republican Party was in control of the state’s government (1867-1874), the Democrats enjoyed almost uncontested control of the state for the rest of the nineteenth century. Continuing into the twentieth century, the Democrats maintained their overwhelming domination of the state’s politics for approximately the first sixty years of the century with only limited competition from the Republican Party and occasionally from third parties such as the Populists. In the 1960s, the Republicans became somewhat more competitive, but the Democrats retained their hold on most governmental positions in the state until the mid-1990s when the Republican Party for the first time since Reconstruction assumed control of most state offices. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the Republican Party has become just as dominant in Texas politics at the state level as the Democratic Party was for a very long time. The history of Texas political parties can be summarized in five eras into which the state’s political history can be divided.
THE FIRST ERA: PERSONALITIES – NOT PARTIES  
(1836-1845)

In Gone To Texas: A History of the Lone Star State, Randolph Campbell writes: “Texas had no political parties in 1836. ... the Democratic and Whig Parties, which were relatively new in the United States at the time, did not develop immediately in the new Republic. Instead, the elections hinged on personal popularity.” Similarly, in The History of Texas, Robert Calvert, Arnoldo De Leon, and Gregg Cantrell write: “During this period in Texas history, formal political parties did not exist, but factions, mainly pro- or anti-Houston and his policies, had already formed.” In the Republic’s first election for President in 1836, there were initially only two candidates: Henry Smith, the governor under the provisional government established by the 1835 Consultation; and Stephen F. Austin, who had just returned from an unsuccessful mission seeking diplomatic recognition of the Republic of Texas by the United States. Shortly before the election, a third candidate, Sam Houston, entered the race. Henry Smith then withdrew as a candidate. When the votes were counted, Houston was easily elected. He received 5,119 votes, Smith 743, and Austin 587. Mirabeau B. Lamar, a bitter opponent of Sam Houston, was easily elected Vice President. Once elected, Houston appointed both of the men he had defeated to positions in his cabinet: Austin as Secretary of State and Smith as Secretary of the Treasury.

Since the Republic’s Constitution limited the term of the first President to two years and made him ineligible to succeed himself, Houston had to leave office in 1838. Vice President Lamar declared himself a candidate to succeed Houston and indicated that if elected his chief goal would be to oppose policies which Houston had adopted. Trying to find a candidate to oppose Lamar, Houston and his supporters finally settled on Robert Wilson, a little known member of the Texas Senate. Lamar won easily with 6,995 votes to Wilson’s 252. David Burnet, another of Houston’s enemies, was elected Vice President. As Randolph Campbell notes, “Texas’s voters thus turned the government over to men who hated Sam Houston and promised to stabilize and strengthen the Republic by reversing his policies.”

Having completed a three year term, President Lamar was ineligible in 1841 to succeed himself. Houston announced his candidacy for a return to the presidency and launched a campaign in which he strongly attacked policies followed by Lamar’s administration. The anti-Houston forces turned to Vice President Burnet as their candidate. After a very personal and dirty campaign in which both sides made ugly charges against one another, Houston easily prevailed with 7,508 votes to Burnet’s 2,574 and quickly made clear his intention to reverse Lamar’s policies. At the end of his second term as President in 1844, Houston was again unable to succeed himself, and once more pro- and anti-Houston factions appeared. Houston and his friends gave their support to Secretary of State Anson Jones. The anti-Houston forces gave their support to Vice President Edward Burleson. After another heated, nasty campaign, Anson Jones, “a Houston Man,” was elected the last President of the Republic.
THE SECOND ERA: DEMOCRATS IN CHARGE
(1845-1867)

After Texas’ annexation as a state within the United States in 1845, the Democratic Party quickly established its dominance of the state’s politics. Stefan Haag, Gary Keith, and Rex Peebles in Texas Politics and Government write: “Democratic dominance was established early as most early settlers in Texas arrived from the South, carrying their political allegiance to the Democratic Party with them.” Randolph Campbell in Gone To Texas writes: “Instead, the key to Texas then – and in many respects ever since – lay in its development as an essentially southern state, a part of the South.” Campbell adds: “Leadership by slaveholders meant that politics during the early statehood years operated within what should be called a southern consensus. No one could criticize slavery or slave-based agriculture and expect to receive support at the polls; indeed, to be accused of holding anti-slavery views was a political death sentence. … The southern consensus in Texas played a key role in creating the state’s tradition of one-party politics that appeared immediately after annexation.”

James Pinckney Henderson, a Democrat and former Attorney General and Secretary of State for the Republic of Texas under Sam Houston, was elected the state’s first Governor in 1845. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, the Whig Party provided some competition for the Democrats but had little success. After Henderson’s one term as Governor, Democrats continued to control the governorship as well as other state offices almost without opposition except for a short time in the 1850s when the Know-Nothing Party provided the Democrats with some competition. The Know-Nothings even nominated a candidate for governor in 1855, but the Democratic candidate won handily, and the Know-Nothings soon faded away. Randolph Campbell notes that “as the Know-Nothings declined, Texas became more of a one-party state than ever, although Democrats still had pro- and anti-Houston factions.”

The Democrats’ dominance was threatened in the late 1850s and early 1860s not by another political party but by disagreement among Democrats over whether Texas should secede from the United States. In 1857, the conflict became clear when the Democrats nominated Hardin Runnels, whom Randolph Campbell describes as “a Calhoun-style ultra-southerner,” as their candidate for Governor. Sam Houston, an opponent of secession running as an Independent, opposed Runnels. Runnels defeated Houston, but two years later, the two men ran against each other again, and this time Houston was victorious. The Texas Legislature, however, remained under the control of Democratic secessionists. Furthermore, at the party’s national convention in 1860, the division among Democrats became crystal clear when the Texas delegation, led by Runnels and others, withdrew and later met with other pro-southern delegates at a convention in Richmond, Virginia, where they nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky for President. After the Republican Abraham Lincoln was elected President in 1860, delegates at a convention in Austin in 1861, over Houston’s opposition, voted overwhelmingly in favor of Texas’ secession, a decision later ratified by the voters of Texas. After the Confederate States lost the Civil War, this era of Democratic Party dominance in Texas ended in 1867 when the military commander of the district with control over Texas removed Texas Governor James W. Throckmorton from office and appointed former Governor Elisha M. Pease, a Republican and Unionist who was one of the chief organizers of the Republican Party in Texas in 1867.
THE THIRD ERA: A REPUBLICAN INTERMISSION
(1867-1874)

The military leaders with command over Texas after the Civil War proceeded to secure Republican control of the state by among other things removing former Confederates (Democrats) from office and from the voter rolls. In 1868, an election for delegates to a constitutional convention to write a new constitution for Texas resulted in an overwhelming victory for the Republican Party. Seventy-eight of the ninety members elected were Republicans. However, these Republicans were divided into two groups. The “Moderates” were led by Andrew Jackson Hamilton, a former Democrat who had opposed Texas’ secession and had served as a provisional Governor of Texas from June, 1865, to August, 1866. The “Radicals” were led by Edmund Jackson Davis, a native of Florida who came to Texas before the Civil War, opposed secession, and served as a Brigadier General for the Union during the war. This division among Republicans continued in the 1869 election called to ratify the new constitution and to choose officers for the new Texas government created by the constitution. A. J. Hamilton and E. J. Davis were the two candidates for Governor. U. S. President Ulysses Grant and General Joseph Jones Reynolds, the commander of the Fifth Military District with control over Texas, decided to support the “Radical” Davis. When this news reached Elisha Pease, the interim Republican Governor of Texas who supported Hamilton, he resigned. The new constitution which significantly increased the Governor’s power was adopted by an overwhelming vote, but the contest for Governor could not have been much closer. The “Radical” Davis won with 39,838 votes to 39,055 for Hamilton. General Reynolds then appointed E. J. Davis to begin serving as Texas Governor on January 8, 1870. The “Radical” Republicans also won a majority in both houses of the Texas Legislature and three of four Texas seats in the U. S. House of Representatives. In 1870 the Texas Legislature selected two “Radical” Republicans to represent Texas in the U. S. Senate. Republicans were thus clearly in control of the state, but, as Randolph Campbell notes, “a glance at election results in 1868 and 1869 showed that the new party’s reign would be very short-lived unless it found a way to appeal successfully to more white Texans.”

The division among Texas Republicans continued during E. J. Davis’ term as Governor. “Moderate” Republicans such as A. J. Hamilton joined Democrats in criticizing policies followed by the Davis administration. In congressional elections held in 1871, Texas Democrats won all four Texas seats in the U. S. House. In 1872 elections in Texas, in the first presidential election in Texas since 1860, Horace Greeley, with the support of Democrats and some Republicans, won the state over the incumbent Republican President Ulysses Grant. Democrats again won all of Texas’ seats in the U. S. House of Representatives, and perhaps even more important, Democrats seized control of both houses of the Texas Legislature. In 1873, E. J. Davis sought reelection to a second term as Governor. His Democratic opponent was Richard Coke, a lawyer and Confederate veteran from Waco. Tyranny and corruption were the major themes of the Democratic campaign against E. J. Davis. “The result,” writes Carl Moneyhon in Texas After The Civil War: The Struggle of Reconstruction, “was a Republican catastrophe. Coke received 85,549 votes to Davis’s 42,663. Democratic candidates swept into all of the state offices and secured total control of the state legislature. … The election had eliminated the last remaining element of Republican government.” This short era of Republican dominance of Texas politics had come to a screeching halt.
THE FOURTH ERA: DEMOCRATS IN CONTROL
(1874-1994)

Every Texas Governor for over a century was a Democrat from 1874 when Democrat Richard Coke began his term as Governor until 1979 when Republican William Clements began his term. This was but one indicator of the political reality of what became by far the longest era in Texas’ political history: Democratic Party dominance. Another sign of Democratic dominance was that in the first century (1876-1976) of presidential elections in this era, the Republican Party only managed to win Texas’ electoral votes four times (1928, 1952, 1956, and 1972). For Republicans, the devastating legacy of E. J. Davis’ term as Governor and the aftermath of the Civil War soon became clear. Conservative Democrats, many of them secessionist former Confederates, governed Texas without much competition from Republicans whose support was mainly limited to areas of the state with large numbers of African Americans and those areas which had opposed slavery and/or Texas’ secession. From the late 1870s to the early 1880s, the Democrats’ most serious opposition came from the Greenback Party. By the mid-1880s and 1890s, the principle opposition for the dominant conservative Democrats came from the Populist Party. In 1894, the Populists managed to elect several members of the Texas Legislature, and in 1896, the Populist candidate for Governor received forty-four percent of the votes cast in an election where there was no Republican candidate.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, divisions among the dominant Democrats appeared and soon became the real battlefield of Texas politics. In part, the division revolved around support for, and opposition to, controversial Democrats such as James E. (“Pa”) and Miriam (“Ma”) Ferguson, W. Lee (“Pappy”) O’Daniel, and Earle Mayfield. The division also involved race, segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, prohibition, and the power of the national government v the power of the states. This division among Texas Democrats sometimes led to opportunities for Republicans to rebound. For example, in 1924, the Republicans nominated the Dean of the University of Texas Law School as their candidate for Governor against Miriam Ferguson, and although he was defeated, he received more votes than any Republican had received for Governor since Reconstruction. In the 1940s and 1950s, growing dissatisfaction among Conservative Texas Democrats with policies of the New Deal and Democratic Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman led to an increasing divide between Conservative and Liberal Democrats. In 1952, Allan Shivers, the Conservative Democratic Governor of Texas, endorsed, and successfully led the effort to win Texas’ electoral votes for, Dwight Eisenhower, the Republican candidate for President. In 1957, Ralph Yarborough, a leader of the Liberal Democrats of Texas, was elected to the U. S. Senate over the opposition of Conservative Democrats. The split between Conservative and Liberal Democrats played an important role in the 1961 election of Republican John Tower to the U. S. Senate from Texas, the first Republican to win a statewide race since Reconstruction. The same split also led to Senator Ralph Yarborough’s defeat in the 1970 Democratic primary by Conservative Democrat Lloyd Bentsen. The split also had something to do with the surprise election in 1978 of William Clements as the first Republican Governor of Texas since 1874. As Texas proceeded into the 1980s and 1990s, there was growing evidence that this long era of Democratic dominance was coming to an end: the last Democratic Governor, Ann Richards, was elected in 1990; the last Democratic victory in a presidential election in Texas was 1976; and Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison’s 1993 election to the U. S. Senate meant that Texas now had two Republican U. S. Senators for the first time since the 1870s.
Texas has not had a Democratic Governor since Republican George W. Bush defeated Democrat Ann Richards running for a second term in 1994. In fact, 1994 was the last time that any Democrat was elected to any statewide office in Texas. Since 1998, all executive and judicial offices elected statewide have been filled by Republicans. As noted previously, the Democrats have not been victorious in a presidential election in Texas since 1976, and both of Texas’ U. S. Senators have been Republicans since 1993. The Republicans won a majority in the Texas Senate in 1996, and they have continued to hold their majority in that body ever since. In 2012, 19 of 31 Texas Senators are Republicans. In 2002, the Republicans completed their newly achieved dominance of Texas politics when they won a majority in the Texas House of Representatives, and thus, in 2003, they were able to elect the first Republican Speaker of the House in more than 130 years. In 2012, 101 of the 150 members of the Texas House are Republicans (a super-majority). What these facts clearly indicate is that the Republican Party is today just as politically dominant in Texas as the Democratic Party was for over a century.

This Republican rebirth in Texas politics has been traced to several factors. For one thing, as the national Democratic Party became increasingly more liberal on social and economic issues, the Democrats in Texas became more divided. In fact, part of the rise of the Republican Party in Texas can be attributed to the defection of many conservative Texas Democrats to the Republican Party, including several well-known former Democrats such as Phil Gramm, Kent Hance, and Rick Perry. Another factor in the Republican surge has been the tremendous growth of Republican strength in the suburbs of Dallas and Houston to which many Republicans from other states have moved in recent years in search of well-paying jobs, a lack of unions, and low taxes. The party has also been strengthened by the support of many evangelical Christians concerned over issues such as abortion and prayer in the public schools.

What the future may hold for Republican dominance of the state’s politics is unknown. Some observers detect a possible split occurring among Texas Republicans similar to that which developed among Texas Democrats in the past. For example, what will be the repercussions for the future of the Republican Party in Texas after Ted Cruz with Tea Party support in 2012 defeated David Dewhurst, the Lt. Governor and candidate of the Republican establishment in Texas, in the race for the Republican nomination for the U. S. Senate? Perhaps more important for the future of the Republican Party in Texas, the state has experienced a dramatic increase in the proportion of its population who are racial or ethnic minorities. Texas is today a majority minority state and will be even more so in the near future. Republicans in modern times have historically done very poorly among African Americans and Latinos, and should they begin voting in larger numbers, this could spell bad news for the Republican dominance of Texas politics. For the time being, Texas Republicans will continue to enjoy their dominant position in the state’s politics with their anticipated victory in another presidential election, the election of another Republican to the U. S. Senate to replace a departing Republican, a continuation of Republican majorities in both houses of the Texas Legislature, and their continued hold on a majority of the state’s seats in the U. S. House of Representatives.
RESOURCES WHICH HAVE BEEN VERY HELPFUL IN THE PREPARATION OF THIS REVIEW OF THE HISTORY OF TEXAS POLITICAL PARTIES:

1. Calvert, Robert; De Leon, Arnoldo; and Cantrell, Gregg. *The History of Texas.*