The Republican Party of Texas
- The Great Divide, Cost Paid, & Power Restored -

The Republican Party of Texas had an interesting start. It was post-Civil War, March 7, 1867, and the Congressional Reconstruction Act was having an immediate impact on Texas politics. There was a great push to ensure newly freed black people would be included in the political landscape moving forward.¹ The secession of Texas (February 1861) from the Union and their desire to reunite meant concessions had to be made. So, Texas Republicans wasted no time embracing these new congressional demands and purposely pursued the development of a biracial party. On July 4, 1867, a Republican Convention was held in Houston, Texas. Present were 150 Black Men and 20 Anglos.² Together, these brave men birthed the Republican Party of Texas (RPT)!

Diversity. The start of the RPT was indeed unique, especially with its large number of black members (who were new to voting and to being included in politics). The new party was also diverse beyond race as it was made up of 1) Antebellum and wartime Texas Unionists 2) Recent immigrants from the North (also called carpetbaggers) and 3) Newly enfranchised Blacks. The makeup would prove to be formidable for Texas politics which had experienced Southern Democrat dominance up to this point. The famous Sam Houston left his mark on the Republican Party of Texas as well!³ Being the former first and third President of the Republic of Texas before it became a state in 1845, Houston had significant influence remaining among Texans. Republicans would assume immediate political
power in Texas; however, such power would not go on unchallenged by Democrat counterparts.

**Labeling.** Democrats needed a way to survive and the tactic of labeling these new Republican opponents was one of the chosen methods. White Southerners who partnered with northern Republicans during Reconstruction were often labeled with the cynical name of scalawag given to them by White Southern Democrats opposing Reconstruction. The labeling also affected any political candidate from the Northern States who came South after the Civil War to profit from Reconstruction. In general, those who migrated to Texas for such purposes were called carpetbaggers. They were viewed as unscrupulous opportunists, and that name was quickly applied to those in politics.

The Republican strategy to diversify, nevertheless, proved a great move, as they were able to secure many county and state offices. They were also able to gain solid control over voter registrations, place loyalists in positions to help with local Republican party development, and form chapters of the Union League, which was very influential in steering the new black vote.4 The Union League, originating from the North, connected blacks with Republicans and reminded them that it was indeed the Republican Party who helped them win their freedom. Republicans wisely used external groups to gain an advantage over Democrats and maintain the favor of Black voters. This would not remain unchallenged as Democrats would become creative in contending with such groups.

**Racial Tension.** The honeymoon period would not last forever for Republicans in Texas. It was, in fact, very short-lived. Almost from the onset, division among Republicans was present. Much of the division was based on platform issues and disagreements about which way the newly formed RPT should proceed. Other divisions had racial undertones (which would later cultivate into part of the early demise of power with the RPT). One example of the latter made
headlines. During the Texas Constitutional Convention (1868-1869), two delegates were at odds – Dr. Smith (Anglo) and G.T. Ruby (Black), both from Galveston County. It was reported that Dr. Smith referred to Ruby’s birth and proclaimed other derogatory remarks of a personal nature with an overtone of racial predisposition. The Daily Austin Republican highlighted the disdain and noted, “These personal attacks will do no good to the Republican party in this state.”

This would be an early incident with race at the foundation, unfortunately, it would not be the last.

Division, nonetheless, as mentioned, went beyond race, and moved to principals, positions, platforms, and more. Although just formed in 1867, Texas Republicans saw its split almost immediately. Even with the division, a job still needed to be done and Texas had a goal to be readmitted into the Union, so resolutions of some sort had to take place.

The requirement and need to have a Constitutional Convention to regain admittance into the Union was at hand. This meeting would take place; however, Texas Republican politicians were immediately at odds, which would prove costly in just a few short years.

The purpose of the Convention was to write a constitution (and ratify the Thirteenth and Fourteenth amendments), however, it was clear that the delegates wanted to address more issues. Thus, the birthing of great debates and a greater divide!

**Division.** There were two factions that emerged in the Republican Party almost immediately. On one side there were the Conservative Republicans and the other, the Radical Republicans. They would differ on their idea of what were priorities in Texas and how to move forward in this post-Civil War era. They were
at odds as to the actions to be taken due to results from the post-war concerning the right of secession, slavery, the war debt, the status of the freedman, etc.\textsuperscript{7}

The Conservative Republicans were led by prewar congressman Andrew J. Hamilton and the Radical Republicans were led by both Edmund J. Davis and Morgan C. Hamilton (brother of Andrew J. Hamilton). So, there was some sibling rivalry at hand as well. Republicans would choose sides based on what they perceived as important and the route forward for Texans.

The Conservatives were focused on economic stability as they favored actions favorable to private corporations and desired to push railroad or manufacturing interest. Radicals did not view such things as priorities, though they too were concerned about the economy. At greater odds to the Radicals, nevertheless, was the Conservative’s position to recognize state and local government actions taken between 1861-1868 not in support of the war. The Radicals wanted to declare all the acts of the state government after secession null and void. Additionally, they desired to divide the state of Texas into two. Ultimately, the two factions were at odds enough that an irreparable rift would emerge and only get worse over time.\textsuperscript{8}

Unfortunately, there was enough problem between the Republican factions that an almost immediate uproar ensued at the Texas Constitutional Convention in 1868! Furthering the discord, the Radicals failed to get their issues included on the platform and tension would explode. During the convention, there was even a vote to divide the State of Texas.

**The Divided State of Texas.** On March 1, 1845, a congressional joint resolution that admitted Texas to the Union stated that Texas could be divided into as many as five states. Although many proposals were presented to divide Texas into two, three, four, or five states, none materialized.\textsuperscript{9} Amazingly, the tension was high enough and an agreement was so hard to reach during the 1868-89 Texas Constitutional Convention, that the proposition to divide Texas was not only discussed but a vote was cast at the convention. Of course, the measure did not pass, and Texas remained one state. However, the idea was that Texas would be divided at the Colorado River.
Everything west of the Colorado River would be called “West Texas” and all that to the east would likely have remained ‘Texas’.

It was also believed that E.J. Davis, who was President of the Convention, was circulating a pamphlet entitled “Constitution of the State of West Texas”! Again, though it was voted on, the measure would fail, and Texas would remain one state, undivided (at least from a mapping perspective). There may have been some truth to this story as Davis’s regime would emerge in 1871 with the proposal to divide Texas into four: western, northern, eastern, and southern. However, both Congress and the Texas legislature failed to take any action and Texas remained one.

The two groups, nevertheless, were successful in getting the platform adopted. However, during the convention in August 1868, E.J. Davis and others decided, they’d seen and had enough, so they withdrew from the convention! The Radicals would go on to hold separate conventions from the Conservatives. The Radicals would actually have two conventions (Galveston – May 1869 | Houston – 1869). During this time, they elected G.T. Ruby as permanent chairman for both conventions.

Separate Choices for State Offices. At this point, the RPT is less than one year removed from its inception and already they are divided and nominating separate slates of candidates for state offices. Although the Conservatives did not hold another convention, they did submit their separate slate of candidates for state offices through their State Executive Committee.

At this point, though the Radicals took a loss at the convention, they were still strong enough throughout the state with voting strength, to dominate at the polls. Unfortunately, however, the division among Republicans in Texas had now solidly materialized and would become costly. Just as quickly as Republicans rose to power, they would see a decline, and at the heart of it – division!
Democrat Endorsements. During the 1869 Election, A.J. Hamilton appeared to get a bit desperate as he moved to obtain endorsements from leading Democrat Party politicians. This would quickly become problematic for Hamilton and the Conservatives as many would abort that camp and shift over to the Radicals. Hamilton’s efforts fell short. To regroup and rebrand themselves, Conservative Republicans would now call themselves ‘Liberal Republicans’.

Fortunately, at this time, Democrats were still not strong enough to take full advantage of the division among the ranks of the Republicans, and Radical candidates would still win most of their offices. The seeds, however, had been planted and the division had tainted the RPT enough that it would not recover and would pay an almost immediate cost. Although they still had power through the Radicals, it would not last long.

Party Strength. The strength of the RPT was evident and was directly yoked to the great support from the black voters. During the 1869 Election, the Republican Party’s electoral strength was easily seen, with its greatest support coming from counties with large Black Populations. Democrats recognized both the division among Republicans and the power of the black voting bloc, and they went after both!

Democrats Move to Seize Power. Although Republicans in Texas started off extremely strong in 1867 dominating Texas politics, such domination would be short-lived. With Conservative (Liberal) and Radical Republicans at odds with one another, Democrats took advantage and moved in to secure the black vote.

They began trying to entice the black voters with many Free Barbecues to build relations. In addition, they helped black people to establish what was called at the time “Negro Democratic Clubs”. One of these clubs was in Marshall, Texas at Central Academy. The Black Democrats established resolutions targeting Radical
Republicans and expressed contempt for any man, black or white, who supported Radicals. They pledged to boycott and refuse to buy from any who sided with, supported, or belonged to the Radicals.

Democrats reasoned that such clubs would compete with the Union League which had for years helped steer the black vote towards Republicans. Unfortunately, for Republicans, the tide was turning. They were slowly turning away from black voter support and Democrats were turning towards it. Democrats would ultimately find success in both securing a great portion of the black vote and soon thereafter political power in Texas.

**Republicans Unravel.** Desperate for a turnaround and securing the political power position in Texas again, Republicans, entertained the idea of abandoning the bi-racial and agrarian base on which they were birthed. They would shift to build a party based upon whites who supported the national party’s economic and foreign policy initiatives and more. This idea did not manifest immediately, but the seeds were planted and would soon grow.

**Lily-Whites.** Led by Andrew J. Houston (son of Sam Houston), Texas Republicans decided to change directions. Houston, the president of the state League of Republican Clubs, would take action to promote segregated local clubs and a movement that would come to be known as the *Lily-White Movement*.17 This movement was coined by the second Chairman of the Republican Party of Texas, a black man named Norris Wright Cuney.18 He coined the term at an 1888 Republican convention in Fort Worth, Texas. The movement, nonetheless, led by white conservatives, aimed to oust blacks from positions of leadership within the RPT (even inciting riots to divide the party).19

After the death of Cuney, Dr. John Grant, of the *Lily-Whites*, would take over as national committeeman from Texas and by 1898, the Lily-whites would take over the state convention.20 This would be the beginning of the end for Republican power for over 120 years to come as Democrats would continually conduct a power grab for the black vote and take full advantage of the divided Republican Party of Texas!
Republicans Loss of Political Power. The first few years proved great for the newly formed Republican Party of Texas as they securely held power throughout Texas. However, within six short years, that power would be lost as it quickly dissipated. By 1872 Democrats captured the Texas Legislature and by 1873, they had the Governor’s office. Democrat Richard Coke would win the Governor’s office, thus starting over a century of Democrat domination. So, for roughly 120 years (1873-1995) Democrats would dominate the Texas Legislature and the Governor’s office. Within a few short years, the main success Texas Republicans would see moving forward existed mainly in areas with large Black Populations.21

With the shifting of the Republican party away from the black voters, a great shift took place. Statewide, Republicans would struggle, securing only 20-30% of the vote.22 A perfect storm was brewing, and Republicans in Texas were about to catch the brunt of it. The Great Depression happened in the 1930s and with Democrat President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s – ‘New Deal’, which was helping blacks struggling financially. This effort prompted more blacks to vote Democrat. Additionally, the Civil Rights legislation of 1964 was signed by Democrat President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the perception that Democrats were for black voters gained more momentum. The black vote was now all but gone for Republicans in Texas (barring a small percent). This, coupled with other factors, would prove costly for Republicans in Texas.

**Long-Lasting Effects.** It would take over 120 years for Texas Republicans to truly recover from decisions made in the late 1800s and the early to mid-1900s. Some of the effects were as follows:

- From 1867 to 2020 (153 years) Texas has had 41 Governors. Only 14% of the Governors have been Republicans and 86% Democrats (35 Dem | 6 Rep).
- ✓ 3 of the 6 Republicans came in the past 25 years. Before 1995 - 7% were Republicans
- ✓ Last Democrat Governor of Texas was Ann Richards in 1995.23
✓ It was also 25 years ago in the 74th Legislature (’95) Democrats last held a majority in the TX House & Senate.
✓ Since the 78th Legislature (’03) Republicans have held a majority in the TX House & Senate, adding Republican Governors from 1995-Present.

Considering a time perspective, it’s not that far removed when Democrats held power throughout the state of Texas. Today, Texas appears to be solidly Republican (Red). However, Democrats experienced the same for over 120 years. Texas Republicans must remember their history and know what factors caused the initial shifts from power – to the later changes which brought it back.

Positive Shift for Texas Republicans. Democrats enjoyed over a century of domination in Texas. This continued into the ‘70s and the early ‘80s. However, a shift would take place towards the end of that time with those who were relocating and moving into Texas. Many Republican-leaning people started to populate the suburban (major) cities and a shift towards Republican principles and power began to take place. It was a natural phenomenon, coupled with the timing of many incumbent Democrats choosing not to seek re-election. Add the right people in place politically, with an intended purpose to win seats for Republicans, and the perfect formula for success emerged. Texas was well on its way to becoming Republican after over 120 years of Democrat domination.
Political shifts began to take place for Republicans in Texas. Just as the perfect storm hit to strip Republicans in Texas of power, somewhat the opposite was taking place to restore it (although with different components). Texas Republican history took a great shift when U.S. Senator Phil Gramm, a Texas Democrat, decided to switch parties and become a Republican. He was a man with power and influence. Thus, many conservative Democrats, witnessing their party moving further left, decided to follow suit.\textsuperscript{27} Texas, therefore, had many middle-class and working-class Democrats leaving their party and joining the ranks of the Republicans.

In addition, one key figure was Karl Rove who had a strategy to push Texas towards the right. Texas has dozens of statewide offices and Rove wanted not only those offices at the top but at every level of the political ladder. Targeting the Governor’s office, State Senate and House, Texas Supreme Court, etc. were paramount in ensuring Texas became securely Republican.\textsuperscript{28} Today, every statewide elected officeholder is Republican.\textsuperscript{29}

Timing coupled with strategic effort and attention to details paid off and Texas saw the shift back to being a Republican State. Rove and others were sure to consider other mitigating factors that could shift constituents towards Republican votes. Things such as race, values, religion, etc. Rove knew that such issues could drive a wedge between conservative Democrats, shifting them to the Republican party.\textsuperscript{30}

Again, it was a matter of timing, conservative population increases, strategy, issues, etc. which caused Texas to shift back to being Republican. A perfect alignment of necessary components came together, and the right people, in the right places politically, took full advantage of them and pushed Texas politics to the right.

Today, Texas is indeed Republican Strong, but as shown, this is fairly recent and not the extended history of Texas politics. Therefore, understanding Texas’s political history and the mistakes made, are paramount so that they will not be repeated, and the Republican Party of Texas will be stronger because of it!
Author’s Reflection

Lessons. Although there are many valuable lessons that Texas Republicans can learn from its history, these are but a few:

✓ Diversity. Never devalue, nor abandon the quest for diversity, or lose sight of who and what contributed to your greatness.

✓ Labeling. Labeling is a long-used tool of the Democrat party and will not go away. They are skilled at the art and Republicans must skillfully counter it. Republicans, nonetheless, must be careful not to get entangled in this game, instead anticipate it, and control the war of perception.

✓ Race. Race is an unavoidable aspect of politics. It is the quintessential Elephant in the Room which must not be avoided, but properly addressed and considered. Republicans must not tiptoe around the topic but face it head-on and properly address it.

✓ Division. Republican infighting is inevitable; however, points of agreement must be made, or the structure of the party becomes weakened. Further, character attacks among Republicans are seeds that grow into divisive discourse over time and eventually long-term party problems. Republicans
must not be blinded and set on destroying one another that the party is destroyed in the process. All such division that is not properly addressed and resolved is fair game for Democrats to take advantage of.

✓ **Democrats.** Although bi-partisan efforts can often benefit those we serve, Republicans must not lose sight of platform principles and planks. Also, seeking endorsements (or approval) of Democrats can often cause a rift at the Republican bases and eventually cause shifts of the same (not always in a positive way). Republicans must be careful with how and why relationships with Democrats are forged and be aware of all possible ramifications that may emerge.

✓ **Lasting Effects.** Bad decisions made today can have negative, lasting impacts, and effects on future generations for countless years to come. Republicans must consider not only short-term benefits but also, long-term effects.

✓ **Learn.** Republicans must intentionally learn from the past (history) so as not to repeat its errors while capitalizing on their successes!

There is so much more to be learned from the rich history of Texas Republican politics. It is therefore paramount, that the lessons of the past be sought, and thus ensure a more prosperous and sounder future for generations to come. This is but a small glimpse of the past in *Texas Republican* politics, yet there is so much more to be seen and learned. Thank you for taking the time to travel along this journey through history. Remember, *History Matters!*
Endnotes

4 Ibid, para. 3.
7 Ibid.
12 Ibid, p. 29.
13 Moneyhon, Carl H. Republican Party. Texas State Historical Association.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
17 Moneyhon, Carl H. Republican Party. Texas State Historical Association.
19 Ibid.
20 Moneyhon, Carl H. Republican Party. Texas State Historical Association.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
27 Ibid. Thomas Edsall.
28 Ibid.
29 Hughes, Ruth. Statewide Elected Officials. Texas Secretary of State.