Readers' Forum

Beginning with this issue, Houston History magazine is launching a new feature, Readers' Forum. We encourage our readers to write to us with your thoughts on our articles, opinions about events discussed in these pages, and brief reminiscences about historical events. We begin this feature remembering the late Thomas D. Anderson. Mr. Anderson, a Houston attorney, was a longtime reader and supporter of *Houston History/Houston Review* and often wrote to express his thoughts about articles in the magazine and ideas for future topics. Shortly before he died in July 2007, he sent this account of how "four young Houstonians" acted upon their disaffection with the Democratic Party to support Dwight Eisenhower for president in the 1952 elections.

Harris County, Texas, in the 1952 Election of Dwight Eisenhower

By: Thomas D. Anderson

As the Republicans opened their 1952 Presidential Convention in Chicago, the first order of business was to determine the qualifications and eligibility of each state's delegation to be recognized and seated on the floor, traditionally a duty of the Credentials Committee. Texas was one of several states to send two delegations to Chicago, one pledged to support Robert Taft, a prominent and capable senator from Ohio, the other pledged to Dwight Eisenhower, the famous war hero. The rival delegations were loud and insistent in demanding recognition, and the Credentials Committee was uncertain how to resolve the hotly contested claims on behalf of the two candidates, claims that had to be resolved before the convention could begin.

Early balloting in the Committee failed to settle the Taft-Eisenhower dispute until Joe Ingraham, a delegate from Texas and chairman of the Harris County Republican Party, was called to testify. He stated that, while he personally favored Taft, the Eisenhower forces in Texas had prevailed at every convention level—precinct, county, and state—and had clearly won the right to represent Texas.

The Committee agreed and then rapidly recognized Eisenhower delegates from the remaining states. Without doubt, the disarming testimony of Joe Ingraham was the catalyst that led to Dwight Eisenhower's nomination in July 1952 and his election as President in November.

This development had its roots in 1950, when many disaffected Democrats, mainly in the South, felt abandoned by their party and yearned to "turn those dreadful people out of the White House." Grassroots organizations, sponsored by political novices who normally were Democrats, switched to the Republican Party in order to elect a Republican President. Most felt that "Taft can't win" and devoted themselves first to persuading Dwight Eisenhower, then in command of NATO, to resign from the Army and to seek the nomination by the Republican Party.

In mid-1950, four young Houstonians,[1] three lawyers and a businessman, all Democrats, decided to quit talking and to start acting. Jesse H. Jones gave them free use of downtown office space in an unfinished portion of the Gulf Building at Travis and Rusk, an office manager was employed, used furniture was loaned or given, flags and bunting were installed, and eager people were attracted, first by the handful, then by the scores, then by the hundreds. "Town meetings" at the Rice Hotel and elsewhere attracted hundreds of Democrats and swing voters. The movement was well underway by the end of 1950 in Harris County, as were counterpart movements in many counties in Texas and elsewhere.[2]

The Harris County Republican Party was a small, tightly-knit organization interested mainly in patronage accompanying Republican rule in Washington. It perfunctorily nominated candidates for statewide office, with no expectation of victory in November. Nearly all Harris County republicans favored Taft, including their chairman Joe Ingraham and the Republican National Committeeman, Jack Porter, a genial oil man from Houston; but both welcomed the influx of the neo-Republicans, recognizing a new hope of re-vitalizing the party and of regaining the White House.

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Not every precinct had a Republican chairman, but of those who had been selected, many favored Eisenhower and joined hands to help give traction to a county-wide pro-Eisenhower movement. Coordination required frequent meetings, and the key people met regularly around a large table at the Houston Club, then located in the old Commerce Building on Main Street. The meetings of this steering committee had no chairman until John R. Brown assumed the chair and thereafter conducted the meetings, which continued into the 1952 election and was a viable campaign organization by the time Eisenhower agreed to be a candidate. A fledgling national organization became full-grown and offered professional advice and instruction to those working at the precinct level, then governed by the convention system. A booklet called "How to Run a Precinct Meeting" became a useful tool to those active at the precinct level.[3]

The Taft forces had not been idle. They too were preparing for precinct meetings, scheduled for May 1952, and it became evident that the principal strife in that year would be an intra-party context between the Taft and Eisenhower camps. This brought forth an unparalleled effort to "get out the vote." The early months of 1952 were devoted to ringing doorbells, holding personal conversations with everyone who would listen, and offering transportation where needed.

Precinct meetings previously had attracted only handfuls of voters, especially among Republicans. The Harris County Republican precinct convention of May 1952, however, produced numbers so overwhelming that in Precinct 135, for example, the Eisenhower supporters and the Taft supporters had to be herded through separate gates in order to be counted accurately by tellers. The Eisenhower devotees outnumbered those for Taft, and delegates to the county convention were selected from Eisenhower supporters. Undeterred, Taft's people held rump conventions in Precinct 135 and elsewhere, positioning themselves to send rival representatives to the county convention.

As already seen, the Credentials Committee approved first the Eisenhower team from Texas then similar delegations from other states. This action, more than the action on the floor, produced a clear victory of the Eisenhower forces over those preferring Taft, setting the stage for the landslide defeat of Adlai Stevenson in November—by no means a certainty.

The Taft forces, for the most part, agreed to support Eisenhower in the general election, and both factions consented to look to Joe Ingraham and Jack Porter for leadership. The campaign structure became more elaborate, establishing campaign mangers for zones, precincts and even neighborhoods. Remembering that precinct voting places had always been staffed by Democrats, poll watchers were detailed to observe the balloting and to call a telephone bank in the old Melrose Building to report violations. Federal marshals were ordered to straighten out the offenders, mainly Democratic precinct chairmen who called themselves "precinct judges," to turn away or disqualify Republican voters. As in May, the streets had been worked and the turnout was enormous, rivaling the percentages recorded at the intra-party contest of the previous May.

Meantime, support for Eisenhower had grown among those Democrats who were unwilling to abandon their party but also unwilling to support Stevenson. The Democratic governor, Allan Shivers, publicly announced his support of Eisenhower, and Dillon Anderson, a prominent and influential Houston lawyer who had known Eisenhower in World War II, rallied support in Harris County within the shrinking Democratic Party, and these "crossover" voters assured a landslide victory for Eisenhower, who lost only two states. Anderson subsequently became security advisor to Eisenhower, serving through his first term. Another influential Houstonian, Dudley C. Sharp, was installed as Secretary of the Air Force in the same period.

When the excitement of the Republican victor in a Democratic state subsided, it was noted that no Republican had occupied a significant state office since Reconstruction days, and none would do so until the election of Bill Clements in 1978. Encouraged, the neo-Republicans began nominating well-qualified candidates for state offices and campaigning with far more assurance than in previous years. As a result, most Democratic state and county officials, especially judges, were gradually replaced by Republicans, and the century-long stranglehold on Texas by the Democratic Party drew to a close.

The final chapter is yet to be written. The Democratic Party remains strong and may be expected to nominate forceful candidates in future elections; but the state is unlikely again to witness the high turnout of voters that attended the intra-party precinct conventions of 1952. ✯

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