

## PUBLIC OPINION AND THE 1990 DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY IN TEXAS

By Kent L. Tedin

The 1990 Democratic primary election for Governor of Texas received more than the usual amount of national publicity. Even by Texas standards the conduct of the candidates reached an all time low. The major candidates were Mark White the former governor (1982-1986), Ann Richards the current state treasurer and Jim Mattox the current attorney general. All three were visible, establishment, mainstream Democrats.

The general election was held on March 13 and the runoff on April 10. In the general election attorney general Mattox implied treasurer Richards (a recovering alcoholic) had also abused controlled substances. Richards refused to confirm or deny the charges. Richards in turn charged that former governor White while in office had lined his pockets financially at the taxpayers' expense. White vigorously denied the charge. In the first round Richards received 40% of the vote, Mattox 37% and White 19%. On the Republican side Midland businessman Clayton Williams easily bested three Republican opponents with 65% of the vote to capture the nomination without a runoff.

In the Democratic runoff the negative campaigning escalated sharply. The odd candidate out, former governor White, held a news conference where he bitterly accused Richards of lying about his finances while he was governor. He asserted he would never vote for Richards in any election, and compared her tactics to those of the infamous Nazi Heinrich Himmler. Mattox meanwhile escalated his charges that Richards had used illegal drugs in the recent past. One pointed Mattox TV commercial asked of Richards: "Did she use marijuana, or something worse like cocaine, not as a college kid but as a 47-year-old elected official sworn to uphold the law?" However, just before the balloting at least two Texas residents claimed they had seen Jim Mattox smoking marijuana in the 1970s. Mattox denied the charge. In the runoff Richards won handily taking 57% of the vote to Mattox's 43%.

### What Happened in the Runoff?

The first key to understanding the Richards win was the urban-rural split in the voting. In a poll of 791 registered voters conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston for The Houston Chronicle and The Dallas Morning News about a week before the balloting, Richards led in the major metropolitan areas by a margin of 52% to 31%, while Mattox led in the rural areas by 43% to 37%. Mattox had done well in the first round of voting because rural turnout was very high — about 45% — while

urban turnout averaged only about 12%. In the runoff, turnout dropped from 1.6 million in the general to 1.2 million statewide. But turnout fell dramatically in the rural areas, only marginally in the urban areas. The reason is that in rural areas county elections for sheriff, county judge and the like are still settled the old fashion way — in the Democratic primary. With most of those contests settled in the first round of voting, the incentives to vote in the runoff dropped substantially. Turnout was already low in the urban areas so there was little room for any significant decline.

Richards also benefited from a greater commitment on the part of her supporters. In the pre-election poll 62% of those favoring Richards were "strong supporters" contrasted to only 38% for Mattox. A similar pattern can be seen for party identification. Fifty percent of the strong Democrats favored Richards while only 34% favored Mattox.

Other opinion data showed a strong relationship between ideology and vote choice with the more liberal respondents favoring Richards. It was not that Richards was the more liberal candidate; both candidates had impeccable liberal credentials. Rather Mattox received the conservative rural vote by default. The rural vote was against Richards rather than for Mattox.

Richards won the white vote by about 10%, the black vote by about 15%, but the survey shows Mattox taking the Hispanic vote by 8%. Post election analysis also indicates that Mattox did best in Hispanic precincts. Despite the fact that Mattox has been throughout his career a strong champion of women's rights, there was still a 14 point gender gap favoring Richards in the pre-election survey (as shown in Table 2).

### What's Likely to Happen in the Fall?

The negativism that characterized the Democratic primary is certain to have fallout in November. For example, 26% of those voting for Mattox said they would vote for Republican Clayton Williams in the fall rather than Ann Richards. In addition, Richards evaluation on a 0 to 10 scale among those indicating they would vote in the Democratic primary was only 5.5.

Table 2 shows just how deep the hole is in which Ann Richards finds herself at the start of the general election campaign. Persons whom we polled just before the runoff who said they would vote in that Democratic primary were as a whole not much more favorable in their assessment of Richards than of the nominee of the Republican party, Clayton Williams. Democrat men actually were more favorable toward Williams than to Richards.

Still, Richards should not be counted out. She should do well among minority voters and she has in her favor those issues relating to gender. William's position on abortion is that it should be allowed only in cases of rape, incest, or to save the life of the woman. Texans oppose banning abortion. Williams also made a major gaffe when sitting around a campfire in rural west Texas. He compared rape to bad weather, observing, "If it's inevitable, just relax and enjoy it." He later apologized, but the issue continues to dog him. If we collapse the 0 to 10 rating thermometer into negative, neutral and positive categories, we can see the strong gender related reactions to the November contestants.

*Keep in mind the data are for those who reported they planned to vote in the Democratic runoff and so do not represent the statewide electorate.*

If Richards can put together a coalition of blacks, Hispanics and women, she has a chance for victory in November, despite the likely negative fallout from the primary. [Editor's Note: No post-runoff trial heats between Williams and Richards were available at press time. A pre-runoff survey by Mason-Dixon Opinion Research for the San Antonio Express News, KPRC, et al, April 2-4, 1990, gave Williams a lead over Richards of 50%-38%.]

Table 1\*

VOTE CHOICE IN THE APRIL 1990 DEMOCRATIC GUBERNATORIAL RUNOFF IN TEXAS  
BY IDEOLOGY AND SEX  
(in percent)

	Richards	Mattox	Not Sure
Liberals	61	30	9
Moderates	46	33	21
Conservatives	33	48	18
Men	36	45	20
Women	51	33	16
ALL	45	38	17

Table 2\*

HOW DEMOCRATIC PRIMARY VOTERS RATED ANN RICHARDS  
AND CLAYTON WILLIAMS (Republican nominee)  
(in percent)

	Richards			Williams		
	Positive	Neutral	Negative	Positive	Neutral	Negative
All respondents	49	18	33	37	25	38
Men	43	14	44	45	22	33
Women	54	19	27	31	28	41

\*Data for both tables are from a survey conducted by the Center for Public Policy at the University of Houston for The Houston Chronicle and The Dallas Morning News, from April 3-5, 1990.

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