

DEMOCRATIC REPORTER

A Newsletter for Bay Area New Democrats

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BAND President Looks at the State of Harris County Democrats

We just started February, and it has been a busy year so far. The sting of the November elections is lingering, but we are shaking it off and working to learn what went wrong, and what we as Democrats need to do differently next time.

Multiple candidates have already announced their intention to run for state chair of the Texas Democratic Party. Delegates to the 2012 State Convention in Houston will cast their votes in that election. Boyd Richie has been the chair for almost five years.

Harris County Democratic Party (HCDP) has initiated several activities. In early January, approximately 250 people attended a workshop led by HCDP called "A Blueprint for a Blue Harris County." Several BAND and BAAD Women members attended, including, but not limited to: Bob Tomlinson, Ila Montalvo Roel, John Cobarruvias, Sherrie Matula, Sherry and Mark Weesner, Doug Peterson, Albert Gonzales, and Lee and Christy Hernandez.

The program started with a panel discussing the outcome of the 2010 elections in Harris County.



Joe Parra, pictured the Holiday Dinner in December, will be one of two guest speakers at the February BAND meeting.

Panel members were Dr. Bob Stein, Dr. Keir Murray, Charles Kuffner and HCDP chair Gerry Birnberg. Extreme summaries from each panelist follow.

Dr. Stein said proportionately low Hispanic voter turnout is a myth; overall Harris County turnout was 61 percent in 2008, while Hispanic surname turnout was 56.5 percent; that's a statistically insignificant difference. Dr. Stein's main concerns were

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Catch Up on SDEC at Meeting

Loretta Davis and Joe Parra, our State Democratic Executive Committee (SDEC) members representing Senate District 11, will be the guest speakers at the February BAND meeting.

The Texas Democratic Party (TDP) recently held the first SDEC meeting of the year, and our SDEC members will give us an expanded presentation how the TDP viewed the election and what they say their goals are for the year.

The meeting takes place at 7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 9 at the Harris County Courthouse Bay Area Annex at 16630 Buccaneer. BAND president C.J. Farley will also announce the nominating committee for the April officer elections.

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BAND president C.J. Farley joined 250 other Democrats for a county Democratic Party planning workshop in January.

the polls, but they debated what this actually meant for Democratic candidates. One panelist thought increased registration would be a marked advantage for Democrats; another thought that it is a worthy goal, but it should be nonpartisan-focused, as there was little if any advantage. The data is very unclear.

The 250 attendees broke into small groups to discuss topics ranging from messaging, Hispanic turnout, the roles of clubs, grassroots organizing and key groups. An idea that came out of multiple sessions was the need to get on board with messaging. This is far more complicated than it sounds, and work has started now. It entails the creation of a local marketing effort for the Democratic Party. The goal of upcoming meetings in the next few weeks will be to come up with and distribute talking points to the various organizations around the county so that we can start with a more unified position in dealing with the public. Stan Merriman is leading this effort. There will be some additional work in this area, and BAND may be asked to provide some help in the next four to eight weeks. If interested, let us know!

Phillip McNutt facilitated a discussion on the role of clubs. From what I observed around the table, BAND is well ahead of the curve in some regards, but there are some things we can learn and do better. It is important that we as an organization continue to engage in these conversations, and do so without predisposition so that we can improve without blindly throwing away the things that work for us. Some of the main ideas centered on a more routine engagement of the community by sponsoring events in local retirement communities, taking nonpartisan issues and making them club priorities in our communities, and having occasional regional meetings

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moving the Hispanic community into the electorate and turning mobile HISD residents into voters.

Dr. Keir Murray's conclusion was not to read too much into the 2010 election. In 2006, 600,000 people voted in the county, and in 2010, 800,000 people voted. The 2010 totals included about 90,000 more straight Democratic voters than in 2006. However, in 2010 the national tide swept Democrats out of office. There were many areas like ours without a meaningful Congressional race. The Democrats were swamped by the midterm turnout of Republicans and Independents leaning Republican. Dr. Murray's advice was to keep doing the same thing we have been, but start earlier and engage on issues first.

Charles Kuffner, known as "Kuff," started his discussion with two words: "Don't panic." He largely agreed with the prior panelists and pointed out that all the census data is indicating good growth in Harris County, but it is in the western part of the county. This will skew redistricting efforts and will have an impact all over the county.

Gerry Birnberg, HCDP Chair, repeated the election numbers presented by Dr. Murray and added that there were 657,000 voters in 2002, more than in 2006. The 2010 turnout of 800,000 voters in the county exceeded predictions in the 660,000 to 690,000 range. Work needs to be done to identify the incremental 110,000 to 140,000 voters who actually made it to the polls.

The panel also discussed the merits of voter registration. All agreed that it is important that eligible citizens be registered and have access to

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made up of multiple clubs.

In 2011, we need to focus on our infrastructure, which means pouring some resources (mainly time with some money) into the backbone of our club. That means helping our membership be more successful, growing our membership and sharpening the tools the club uses to operate. We are developing budgets for the next two years (and they will not have a deficit), and we are gearing up for the

New Environmental Group Forming in Galveston and Bay Area

The Houston Sierra Club is coming to the Bay Area.

There is no need to drive to the center of Houston, because now Sierra Club meetings will be available in the Galveston Bay Area close to home.

To find out more, please come to the first meeting of the Galveston Bay Area Link (of the Houston Sierra Club) on Wednesday, Feb. 16 at the Bay Area Community Center in Clear Lake Park at 5002 NASA Parkway, across the street from the lake. Look for the building with the blue roof.

Social time begins at 6:30 p.m. with refreshments, followed by the program at 7 p.m. Future meetings are expected to be on the third Wednesday of the month, a week after the BAND monthly meeting.

Topics at the first meeting include information about the organization as well as the Texas Bottle Bill. The guest speakers are Scott Jones of the Galveston Bay Foundation and Patsy Gillham of Plastic Pollution Texas.

Organizers of the new Sierra Club subchapter are Gracie Martinez, a BAND member; Linda King, a BAND and BAAD Women member; Stennie Meadours, former president of the Houston Audubon Society and former board member of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality; and Doug Peterson, former BAND president and a Houston Sierra Club executive board member.

To RSVP or learn more information, send an e-mail to lindaawking@att.net, gracemartinez7@earthlink.net or stenmead@aol.com.

April board elections.

As we look to the 2011 city elections and newly created districts, we need to maintain a good working relationship with the Harris County Democratic Party. There is some uncertainty around the management of HCDP as well as how redistricting will impact our local geographic area. From a club standpoint, I urge everyone to spend the first \$20 they can on renewing their BAND membership (\$30 for families), but after that, if you have \$10 a month you can spare, become a sustaining member of HCDP.

Looking back at electoral successes over the last five years, it is clear that, locally, we have contributed to countywide victories. A key group of us had an impact in the special election in which Houston City Council member Melissa Noriega first won office. In 2008, 25 of 35 countywide Democratic candidates won races they might not have won without our efforts.

We must engage our local community in ongoing conversation on issues that are important to all of us, and work to dispel the myths that are perpetrated by the hard-core conservatives. We can and should actively work to elect Democrats to office, but in some specific races, we will have to be happy with just improving the outcome. We have to move forward with making our local community and world better, even in the absence of local candidates that can win local offices.

C.J. Farley, BAND president

More Combined Meetings Planned

Bay Area New Democrats and Bay Area of Association of Democratic (BAAD) Women have agreed to combine future meetings four times a year.

Combining the meetings encourages cooperation between the clubs and dual memberships, and it increases the likelihood of a bigger audience for interesting speakers who driven a long way for the meeting.

The first combined meeting was in January at the BAAD Women's usual meeting place. (Please see story, page 7.) The location of future meetings is yet to be decided, but the clubs plan for joint meetings in the first month of each quarter.

Let's Fix the Republican State Budget Deficit

The Republican Party has controlled the government of Texas for more than 16 years. That party dominates the legislature, the executive branch, and the Texas Supreme Court. Everything that happens in state government today is, as a practical matter, the responsibility of the Republican Party.

The policies these radical Republicans have implemented are driven by a combination of ideology and greed. Simply put, the Republican Party in the State of Texas has worked to transfer much of the hard-earned wealth created by the work of Texans to the hands of a privileged few and multinational corporations. At every opportunity the costs of running the state of Texas have shifted away from the wealthy and the well connected and left with a struggling middle class. At the same time, that ruling party has created a regulatory climate that favors multinational corporations at the expense of citizen protections and budget cuts that diminish our children's future

The results are sadly clear. In Texas our energy prices are among the highest in the nation and yet our electrical grid is so underfunded and poorly managed that a simple winter storm can cause a crisis and rolling blackouts across the state. In Texas Republican policies give us insurance rates that are among the highest in the nation and still allow insurance companies to reduce and deny coverage. The Texas public school system, once the shining promise of our state government, has been allowed

to decline to the point where it is among the worst in the nation. At the same time Republican policies are pricing public college tuition beyond the reach of more and more of our middle class. Republican programs have Texas exporting jobs and importing pollution and nuclear waste.

Now 16 years of radical Republican dominance has brought us to another crisis: a \$27 billion state budget deficit. This is not surprising. Wherever they have been practiced, Republican fiscal policies have increased deficits.

Sadly, regardless of the fact that Republicans are responsible for the mess in Austin, the adults, as they always do, will have to clean it up. To dig out of this \$27 billion hole, we must use all of the tools available. No single solution will work. We will need a combination of revenue increases, targeted spending cuts, and a portion of the Rainy Day Fund.

Revenue increases must not shift more of the burden of government to the middle class and certainly not to the poor. We will need to be guided by the Biblical admonition, "For to whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required." Those who have benefited the most from the opportunities afforded by this great state must contribute their share of the cost of the civilization that has served them so well. We should also insure that regulatory costs, needed to protect the public, are paid by the industries being regulated.

Spending cuts must not further mortgage our future to pay for the mistakes of the past. Programs serving our children's education and health needs must be preserved. Again, we can look to the Bible for wisdom: "Whatever you failed to do for one of my brothers or sisters, no matter how unimportant [they seemed], you failed to do for me."

Texas is a great state and we will not make ourselves better by making the lives of the vulnerable unbearable. Third, before we put the retirement plans of our longtime public servants at risk, we must consider the retirement plans for the elected officials responsible for our current crisis. After all, these

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Linda Tomlinson, Vicky Sargent and Florence Coen visited at the Holiday Party in December.

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elected officials were never supposed to be career politicians.

There are some areas where we can and must make cuts. First, we should look at our contracting practices. Many government functions have been outsourced to well-connected private contractors for ideological reasons, without evaluation of the cost of this choice. We must also improve our contracting practices to ensure that we increase the number of companies bidding for state projects and that contracts are awarded to the lowest qualified bidder, not the one with the best connected consultant or the one who contributed to the right campaign. Finally, we should consider our criminal justice sentencing practices for non-violent offenders, as other states have, to see if we can safely reduce the

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populations in our expensive and overcrowded prison system.

This brings us to the rainy day fund. As in our household budgets, the state's rainy day fund is intended to cushion the impact of short-term events. We know some portion of our budget crisis results from the Recession. Those impacts are real but not permanent. The Recession will fade over time. This is exactly the kind of rainy day for which the fund exists. If the Republicans who hold power are not willing to use the rainy day fund to soothe the pain of this crisis, one needs to ask for what, or perhaps for whom, they are saving it.

Lobbyists in Austin represent the wealthy and the powerful corporate interests well. The wealthy and powerful do not need the support of our elected officials as well. It is time we tell our representatives that we expect them to serve the needs of ordinary Texans. We must tell them that we are tired of their failed trickle-down economic theories that only leave us wishing we could afford a better raincoat.

Rusty Cates

Falling Journalistic Standards Help Create Mob Mentality

While watching a recent high school production of *The Music Man*, I was struck by how much the main character, Professor Harold Hill, reminded me of some television and radio personalities.

In the musical, a swindling traveling salesman figures out how to manipulate the townspeople at each stop. He learns in River City that the town has just received its first pool table, and he whips the crowd into a frenzy over it so that he can convince them they need to provide wholesome alternatives for their kids. He wants to sell them band instruments and uniforms and then plans to leave them with no musical skills as soon as the products arrive. The manipulation is not unlike what has been happening in what passes for journalism these days.

The January assassination attempt on Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords brought the lack of civility in

politics once again to the forefront. Some Democrats, however, believe deteriorating journalistic standards in the conservative media are at the heart of the civility issue.

Television and radio personalities masking as journalists stir up incivility. Fox News, or as many like to call it, Faux News, stokes the fires and promotes a mob mentality. Conservative talk show hosts don't bother to check their facts, and they tell blatant lies.

Journalism students are supposed to learn two guiding principles when reporting the news: accuracy and fairness. To be accurate, a journalist must consult reliable sources and, if the source is not absolutely reliable, check for corroboration somewhere else. That somewhere else would not be the Internet, which often is essentially as reliable as gossip. "Check

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conservative media, continued from page 5 and recheck,” *Tonight* show host Jay Leno likes to joke when poking fun at the tabloids.

In the 1970s, when *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein uncovered President Richard Nixon’s involvement with the Watergate scandal, their editors sent them repeatedly to find confirmation of the hints given to them by their secret source, called “Deep Throat.” The newspapers would never have published items they could not reasonably verify. If it is not the truth, it should never appear in published form!

Last November, conservative media circulated reports that President Obama’s overseas trip to several Asian countries would cost the taxpayers \$200 million a day. That whipped plenty of listeners into a frenzy, until CNN’s Anderson Cooper decided to check out the story. He learned that the rumor began with an unnamed Indian provincial official who really had no access to the correct figures or any connection to the Obama administration. In fact, Obama’s trip was no more extravagant than past Presidents’ trips overseas.

The second principle, fairness, requires journalists to tell both sides of the story. Previously, print publications and broadcast media sought balance by granting equal space, or equal time, to opposing viewpoints.

With the advent of cable television, programs have dispensed with the fairness requirement. Now cable television stations exist for the purpose of presenting only one viewpoint, and Fox News has become the propaganda wing of the Republican Party. MSNBC has attempted to respond by presenting mostly the progressive point of view.

Conservative media skirt the fairness issue by broadcasting primarily editorial programming. After all, an editorial by definition presents a viewpoint. The danger is that viewers watch the editorial shows without distinguishing them from the news, and the opinions of Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck become facts in their eyes.

It is natural for human beings to have opinions, but a professional news reporter squelches his or her own viewpoint as much as possible. Even reporters

who try to maintain balance find that their personal beliefs enter into the way they tell a story. That is why voters should consult multiple sources.

Our country’s founders supported the Constitution’s First Amendment freedom of speech and freedom of the press because they believed in the concept of a marketplace of ideas. When voters “shop around” the marketplace by reading or watching more than one source for news, they are more likely to arrive at the truth.

Unfortunately, many conservatives believe that all other “mainstream media” are biased, so they hear the so-called news from Fox only. Conservative media has so divided the country that we can no longer have a civil discussion, because the two sides aren’t even starting with the same set of “facts.” In broadcast news’ heyday, if we heard it from Walter Cronkite or on the *Huntley/Brinkley Report*, we knew it was so, and civil discussions proceeded from there.

For some time before an obviously unstable man shot Arizona Rep. Giffords in January, she had expressed her fear that violence would occur. Giffords’ vote for the health care insurance reform bill that passed in 2010 had resulted in a broken glass door at her office as well as written threats.

Why would people feel so threatened by the health care law that they would threaten violence against Congress members? Perhaps it was because they believed the rumor spread by the Professor Harold Hills of the conservative media that elderly relatives in the hospital would face “death panels” who would decide their fates, or that the new law would prevent them from choosing their own doctors.

When the shooting occurred, the conservative talk show hosts were quick to point out that the shooter had no record of involvement with Republican or Tea Party activists, and no evidence pointed to his having been inspired by the “crosshairs” posted online by Sarah Palin over a map of targeted Congressional districts. Whether that is true remains to be seen. Still, conservative media set the tone and manipulated the crowd, just like the swindling traveling salesman in the musical.

Vicki M. Cherewaty

Local Political Scientist Bob Stein Talks Strategy

Bob Stein presented a wide-ranging discussion at the combined meeting of BAND and BAAD Women in January.

Topics ranged from the 2010 election to local and national politics, and the Hispanic vote.

Stein, a Rice University political scientist who appears frequently on local television and radio programs, said that the November 2010 elections were like many midterm elections from the past that became “nationalized.” Voters cast ballots against the incumbent President’s party for local offices even where the national policy was unrelated to local matters.

Stein’s media work includes polling for KUHF radio and KHOU-TV (Channel 11). He had predicted 61 percent straight ticket voting, but the actual figure exceeded his prediction by six percent. Usually, voters in northern states are more likely to vote a straight ticket, but this time around, Harris County had the longest ballot in the country. Both parties strongly encouraged straight ticket voting here, and the Republicans turned out more of their voters.

Stein theorized why Republicans were so motivated to vote. He said people who thought their own self-interest might be affected were more likely to show up at the polls.

He used the health care reform law as an example. Four of the most talked about benefits of the new health care law were: 1) portability of medical insurance policies when workers leave a job; 2) the guarantee that the insured will not be dropped from their policies; 3) availability of coverage by the parents for children up to age 26; and 4) no cap on what an insurance policy must pay. All these benefits have been implemented, but many of them went to Republicans who already had insurance.

Stein agreed with the long-held notion that people vote their pocketbooks. Plus, he said, voters had no confidence that the Recession would end soon. “That’s just a recipe for disaster,” Stein said.

What happened to the 2008 voters? Some blame Hispanic voters for not turning out, Stein said, but in reality, the turnout for registered Hispanic voters



Political scientist Bob Stein said Democrats should be focusing on mobilization and citizenship to increase Hispanic voting in upcoming elections.

was about the same percentage as for all voters.

Only one-third of Hispanics are registered to vote, but that doesn’t mean it is because they are undocumented, Stein said. The barriers to citizenship are much tougher now, and others just don’t want to be citizens. Stein said he knows three foreign-born Rice engineering professors who have no interest in citizenship.

“We’re focusing on the wrong thing,” said Stein. He thinks the focus for the Hispanic vote should be on mobilization and citizenship. He believes the best single predictor of Hispanic turnout is a well-financed, good Hispanic candidate, especially if that candidate has run and held office before.

Unfortunately, it’s hard to get Hispanic candidates to run in the first place; they are “risk-averse.” It’s a vicious cycle, said Stein. “If you don’t run, you don’t win,” he said. The remedy is to get Democratic officeholders who will run for higher office.

The majority of the state is now Hispanic, African-American or Asian. The Spring Branch school district, on the west side of town, is overwhelmingly Hispanic, yet what Stein calls the “selectorate,” the group that actually votes, is 74 percent Anglo. Many

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are empty nesters with kids no longer in school. Usually, older voters are more likely to show up at school bond elections and vote against the bond, because they have no children who will be affected.

Districts like Spring Branch are starting to buck that trend, Stein said. Residents have figured out that property values are influenced by the quality of schools in the neighborhoods. Also, land use rules keep bars and other unsavory businesses away from schools, and away from residences as a result. With the Recession, more empty nesters are interested in education. Stein predicted local school districts will pass tax increases.

Moving on to Congress, Stein admonished the crowd to pay attention to what Republican Party leadership is doing with the legislative rules. One rule he likes is that a bill must now be posted for 10 days before legislators can vote on it.

Republican Rep. Paul Ryan has been given absolute control of the budget, including a line item veto of sorts. Stein said Ryan wants to cut NASA and health care. "My view of politics is 'what have you done for me today?'" said Stein. He thinks Rep. Pete Olson, the Congressman for District 22, could be hurt politically by what his cohorts do if he "can't bring home the bacon."

Stein predicted an interesting upcoming U.S. Senate race in Texas. Should the Republicans nominate a more extremist candidate, like Ron Paul or Debbie Medina, Stein thought a credible Democratic nominee might stand a chance, especially if the Democrats could nominate a strong Hispanic candidate.

Stein touched on Houston city politics as well, where he said there is not much available to cut in the budget. He expects the drainage fee to become a campaign issue in elections this year if City Council passes an ordinance to implement the fee.

Three African-American City Council members did not support the drainage proposition that barely passed in the November elections. Stein believes that the people who most needed drainage improvements voted against the dedicated fee, probably because they feared the fee would

be unaffordable. The fee could be more than the advertised \$5 a month if fewer property owners, such as churches, are not required to contribute.

Stein said he was in favor of spreading the use of Election Day Centers such as those used recently in Lubbock. The centers operate similarly to early voting in Harris County, where voters can cast their ballots at any polling place within the county instead of going only to their precinct.

The centers should be at easily accessible locations off freeways. "It's what Walmart does," said Stein. They are more inconvenient for older voters who don't have access to transportation, but far more convenient to workers who have a hard time making it back to their home precincts because they work odd shifts or drive long distances to work.

Many see this solution as an inexpensive way to improve voter turnout. Conventional wisdom says improved turnout, especially for workers, benefits Democrats.



Longtime BAND members Louisa and Terry Hodges are moving from the Clear Lake area to the west side of town to be near their daughter, son-in-law and new grandson. We will miss them, but we will surely see them at future Democratic events!