

1

Goodwyn and the Democratic Coalition of Texas

MAX KROCHMAL

In 1962 Larry Goodwyn bulldozed the Lone Star political scene like a Texas tornado, sudden, deafening, and leveling everything in his path. He was not unknown to the state's Democratic Party activists: he'd been a volunteer and sometime staffer in the barnstorming campaigns of Ralph W. Yarborough in the 1950s. Larry had grown up in the "liberal movement"—the largely white fight to make the Texas body loyal to the party of Franklin D. Roosevelt. Years of work as a journalist around the legislature and as a foot soldier in the party's perennial convention battles earned him a reputation as a straight shooter and committed activist. But in 1962 Goodwyn landed a high-profile gig as the head PR man for Don Yarborough (no relation), the first gubernatorial candidate to embrace the burgeoning civil rights movement.

Larry's new post propelled him to the center of several tumultuous transformations, all of which swirled around Don's campaign. He looked on as conservative white Dixiecrats began their defection to the Republican Party, as African American and Mexican American activists demanded faster change with increasingly militant tactics, as organized labor struggled to expand its base, and as white liberals charted a new course in the age of civil rights.

Over the next three years, Goodwyn would navigate this minefield to emerge as a leading voice in Texas politics, and indeed in the civic life of the entire South. Always learning from experience, he would develop new alliances among white liberals, Black and Brown civil rights activists, and the white-led labor movement. He would inhabit the eye of the storm as these groups came together to form a multiracial coalition, living through the exhilarating promise and ultimate tragedy of trying to come together

across the color line. Larry's activism would eventually lead him to become a pathbreaking historian of social movements. But before he became Goodwyn the scholar, his work as an organizer and journalist in Texas in the 1960s taught him lessons that still resonate for community organizers in 2020 and beyond.¹

"New Shapes in Texas Politics"

In 1961 president H. S. Hank Brown of the Texas AFL-CIO convened the first meetings of the simply named Democratic Coalition, a smattering of African American activists with ties to the NAACP, Mexican American leaders of the Political Association of Spanish-Speaking Organizations (PASO), labor leaders, and "independent" white liberals from the Democrats of Texas (DOT), a left-wing party caucus that had collapsed the year before. After much acrimonious debate, the diverse group agreed to work together on a poll tax drive, the annual winter ritual of registering their constituents, people who today would be called "unlikely voters." As Don Yarborough's campaign picked up steam, with Larry Goodwyn as his spokesman, the Coalition hired two temporary staffers, one African American and one Mexican American, who canvassed the state's barrios, ghettos, and rural crossroads. They trained local activists who, in turn, registered thousands of Black and Brown Texans who had never before connected to the "liberal movement." Change was in the air.

Yet the Coalition's members could not agree on a gubernatorial candidate. Despite Don's and Larry's pleas, many African American leaders instead supported John Connally, an ally of Lyndon B. Johnson, former secretary of the navy in the Kennedy administration and the first establishment politician to actively court the Black vote. Mexican Americans in PASO split when a pragmatist faction secured the group's endorsement for the incumbent, Governor Price Daniel, a previously rabid segregationist. White liberals and labor leaders backed the liberal integrationist Yarborough, as did PASO's dissidents and some African American groups. Don beat the odds and advanced to the Democratic primary runoff (a hallmark of the one-party Solid South), and Goodwyn rushed to bring as many Black and Brown voters as possible into the candidate's fold. The Coalition, which had fractured after the joint registration drive, was reborn on the ground in the final month of the campaign. In the end the insurgent failed, but by only 26,000 votes out of more than 1.1 million cast, 51 to 49 percent.²

While many liberals despaired, Larry crunched the numbers. The heart-breaking campaign had given him reason for hope. African Americans, Mexican Americans, urbanites, and Republicans had all voted in record numbers, creating a viable two-party state, and inexorably shifted the political terrain. Many whites had abandoned the “Party of the Fathers” for the GOP, which meant that the conservative Democrats were losing their base. The Coalition’s establishment opponents won only because they made special appeals to African American and Mexican American voters, but those groups could also be organized for the cause. The state appeared likely to follow the example of San Antonio over the previous six years: there Black, Brown, and white liberals, labor leaders, and small farmers organized the Bexar County Democratic Coalition and proved that they could wield a majority if they stuck together.

“For liberals as for the G.O.P.,” Goodwyn wrote in the *Texas Observer*, “1963 can be a year of consolidation or—if they are diverted—a year in which that consolidation is postponed.” Conservatives would attempt to maintain their “coalition of big business interests with minority voters,” he wrote, so liberal candidates “must be more liberal, more explicitly integrationist,” and more committed to the statewide Democratic Coalition. These were the “New Shapes in Texas Politics,” he added. White activists must take unequivocal stands and catch up to the Black freedom struggle. Yet “this is easier said than done,” Goodwyn noted, “because the pace of change, in racial attitudes and in racial expectations, is far swifter than most liberal politicians realize.”³

Never content to write in a vacuum, Larry hit the road to sell his theory. He prepared thirteen hand-drawn graphs that demonstrated the trends of the changing electorate, analyzing the previous decade of contests to demonstrate the defection of conservatives to the GOP and the rise of the Black and Brown votes since 1960. He took his case to labor leader Hank Brown and to white liberals around the state. He did not believe that there was any natural affinity for white liberals among Black and Brown activists, nor much love in either group for the other. But the numbers meant that liberal Democrats needed to woo nonwhite voters first and foremost, and that meant fighting for civil rights. “If we’re gonna get those votes, we’re gonna earn them,” Larry told his white audiences. “These are our folks.” But, he added, “They ain’t votin’ for us because we ain’t doin’ right by them.”⁴

Goodwyn also shared his analysis with his friend Arthur DeWitty, an African American journalist and leader of the NAACP in Austin. DeWitty

was convinced and agreed to join the roadshow. They shared Larry's graphs and call to action with Black political activists in Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, and rural East Texas as well as with Mexican American audiences in San Antonio and across South Texas. Brown joined them in pitching it to labor's Committee on Political Education, urging local leaders to recognize that "civil rights" fell within their own self-interest. Finally, Larry took his case to East Coast foundations: the Rockefellers in New York, several groups in Washington, DC, and the Voter Education Project in Atlanta.

As they traveled, Goodwyn and DeWitty hatched plans for a biracial "Team Program" centered on voter registration and mobilization, an ambitious field campaign in which pairs of Black and white organizers would develop Black political organizations throughout the state and then connect them with the extant white liberal groups in their counties. Yet the proposal to create the Team Program, like Don Yarborough's campaign, turned out to be an exercise in social learning. Despite DeWitty's intimate involvement, Goodwyn's first drafts were steeped in latent white supremacist assumptions and straitjacketed by a binary analysis of the state's racial problems.

The Coalition's activists of color pushed back hard against the initial proposal, making their voices heard in countless meetings as well as, critically, on the streets. Mexican Americans in the South Texas agricultural hamlet of Crystal City had just come together with Coalition leaders from nearby San Antonio to overthrow the Anglo planter oligarchy that had dominated rural South Texas for the previous century (Larry hand-delivered donations from Coalition partners and was the first Anglo reporter on the scene). African Americans across the state were on the march to desegregate the holdout businesses, to demand jobs at ghetto grocery stores, and to win ordinances that would guarantee their civil rights. White liberals like Goodwyn were forced to come to grips with the growing power of their Black and Brown counterparts—and to treat them as full rather than junior partners.⁵

"A Four-Group Coalition"

In late April 1963 the leaders of the Democratic Coalition gathered to restructure their organization. Since its inception in 1961, the body had convened haphazard meetings of activists of all races, but in the end each partner was free to go its own way. Now Black and Brown activists convinced their white counterparts, including Larry, that the multiracial alliance must

be more deliberately democratic. To move forward, it must guarantee equal representation and leadership roles for its Black and Brown participants.

The traditional lack of structure was no longer viable. Although they refrained from creating a constitution and by-laws, Coalition leaders recognized the need to appoint cochairs and develop a formal power-sharing arrangement. The old informal agenda committee of about ten members gave way to an official “policy committee” of sixteen leaders, intentionally organized to include four members from each “leg” of the Coalition: Mexican Americans, African Americans, organized labor, and “independent” white liberals. The new policy committee translated the years of experimentation in coalition building into a more intimate partnership in which each group had an equal voice.⁶ Although many of the activists were holdovers from earlier collaborative efforts, this newest incarnation of the Coalition constituted a significant departure from the past. It formally recognized—for the first time—the independence and agency of its nonwhite participants. The new structure allowed for dialogue to take place in the open and on equal terms. And it allowed them to raise money and hire a sole full-time staffer, one Larry Goodwyn.⁷

The Coalition’s first statement of principles set out an expansive vision of civil rights, declaring the issue the group’s highest priority. Although it may seem obvious today, such a pronouncement carried great symbolic weight. As the liberal *Texas Observer*’s Ronnie Dugger noted, “For many years Texas liberals treaded softly . . . on civil rights, evolving integrated practices in their meetings, but generally emphasizing advanced policy positions in other areas.” In contrast, the Coalition’s new leadership structure prioritized racial equality, marking a radical departure for Texas liberalism, one that made it possible to envision a truly multiracial movement.⁸

The Coalition also revised its plan of action. Following months of social learning, Goodwyn penned a revised Team Program proposal that reflected both the growing power of the Black and Brown legs of the Coalition and the white liberals’ growing acceptance of nonwhite leadership. Instead of hiring a predominately white staff to attract African Americans and Mexican Americans into established white groups, as early drafts had dictated, most of the staff would now be Black and Brown organizers. The sole white coordinator remaining in the new plan would be asked “to prod existing local [white] liberal organizations into incorporating the Negro and Latin-American organizations in the local Democratic Coalition, *with the minority group leaders in policy-making positions in the Coalition’s leadership.*” The local alliances needed to follow the example of the reformed

statewide body, which soon elected four cochairs, one from each leg of the Coalition, and a steering committee of one hundred, twenty-five per group.

In this reimagining of the Team Program, the fundamental problem to be solved was the historic failure among white liberal groups to substantively include African Americans and Mexican Americans as leaders and equal partners. Goodwyn gave his white comrades the benefit of the doubt even as he called them to action: “Most white liberals in Texas now realize—for reasons of internal Texas politics—the need for a rapid revamping of the old power relationships among reform-minded persons in all races,” Goodwyn began. Yet white liberals needed to move beyond acceptance toward active inclusion. “Habit, left to itself, dies hard,” he wrote. “At this stage of the development of Texas liberalism, segregation, as an idea, is dead, but the *political habits* of segregation tend to pop up from time to time in such matters as the internal structure of the local liberal political organization.” Newly egalitarian leadership structures represented the key to moving forward together. Larry then offered a series of warnings: “Unless white liberal Texans, at the local level, abandon the old practice of meeting alone, adopting their own program, and then going out to ‘sell’ the finished product to their political allies among minority groups—unless this folk custom ends, any success attained by a mass voter registration drive will be illusory and the political ‘coalition’ that is projected will be a soap bubble.” The Team Program was about more than votes, Goodwyn concluded. Rather, it “is an attempt to forge a political weapon against segregation—to complement legal and mass action weapons,” he wrote. It was a campaign for freedom, and only a robust, democratic multiracial partnership could make it work. Otherwise, Larry concluded, “the political assault on segregation will be blunted.”⁹

The Coalition’s multipronged war on Jim Crow and Juan Crow would soon capture the attention of the state and, indeed, the nation. Its radical experiment in multiracial democracy would take many twists and turns in the coming years, and Larry Goodwyn would have a hand in many of them. One upsurge occurred on August 28, 1963, the same day as the March on Washington, when some one-thousand demonstrators paraded from all-Black East Austin to the state capitol demanding “Freedom Now.” The Democratic Coalition was visible throughout the protest: veteran Black and Brown activists pledged fealty to the multiracial alliance, praising the unprecedented unity among the four groups in their speeches. Larry and white labor leaders joined them in blasting Governor Connally and his conservative Black and Brown allies, promising still more demonstrations.