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Kronberg: Some not-so-self evident takeaways from the 2026 election in Texas

The repudiation is not yet realignment but there is no path to the White House for Republicans without Texas. Democrats have to deliver, but they also have to be pragmatic populists.

What follows are a dozen takeaways from the last working journalist who actually covered the Ann Richards election in 1990.

---First, last night, we obviously saw a repudiation of **Donald Trump,** but it is as of yet unclear whether it is a realignment. Democrats ran on a very generalized program of fixing what was wrong. We will see if they can execute.

---What we are now witnessing is the end of the right-wing takeover of the populist movement and the emergence of the left-wing takeover of the american populism. Unlike the right-wing populism that was dominated by a cruel, narcissistic adolescent the left-wing populism has a soft, gentle, humanist face. But it is populist nonetheless.

Populism is typically a political episode, and it remains to be seen whether the coalition that swept the country last night can be made durable. However, the $500 million that was spent to keep Texas red in this election will be a fraction of what will be spent in 2028 because, frankly, there is simply no pathway to the White House for Republicans without Texas.

--Obviously, President Trump bears the majority of the responsibility for the earthquake that shook the United States yesterday, but here in Texas, **Dan Patrick** also shares huge responsibility. Had he not put his thumb on the scale for the impeachment and allowed the Senate to do what it wanted to do (which was convict **Ken Paxton**), **John Cornyn** or **Wesley Hunt** would have been the nominee, and the cesspool that was the Attorney General would have been off the stage.

Of course, for those who have been watching this for a while, it is particularly sweet that **Tim Dunn's** $3 million “campaign contribution” to Dan Patrick six weeks before the impeachment trial began _underscores the perception of corruption. Corruption was the number two or three issue among most polling of Texas voters. President Trump reeks of corruption, and Ken Paxton's primary defense was essentially that if Donald Trump can get away with it, so can I.

--The most underappreciated thing about this slate of Democratic candidates is that most of them have served in the legislature for at least 8 years and they have served in the minority. They have no illusions about how the process works. None have taken the culture war chum that has routinely derailed Democrats in the past. For instance, do not expect Governor-elect **Hinojosa** to go to war over abortion, but you will expect to find her go to war over women's health! The criminalization of women's health in Texas has driven OB-GYNs out of the state and put the female population at risk.

They have new Democratic statewide have no illusions about how the game operates. The populist coalition that elected them was comprised of the return of the Latino vote in combination with overwhelming support by women, and an explosion of the young vote. That is a fragile coalition going forward. They have two years to create something durable. Hopefully, they will not make the same mistakes that **Ann Richards** made back in 1990.

--Most people think Texas was a one-party Democratic state, but that was incorrect. Texas was a two-party state, conservative Democrats versus liberal Democrats. The state had been historically governed by conservative Democrats. Ann Richards was the first unapologetic liberal to sit in the governor's office. However, her staff put her behind sandbags, as popular as she was, Richards was inaccessible to members of the legislature as well as to the lobby. Stakeholders were routinely ignored in the appointment process, particularly the business community.

The result, even longtime Democrats sought refuge in the **George Bush** candidacy. Hinojosa understands that to build something durable, she is going to have to come to terms with the business community, the religious community, and a whole variety of communities and have them invested in her success.

The depth of experience of Talarico, Hinojosa, Eckhart, and Johnson is invaluable. They understand the legislature. They understand the stakes, and presumably they understand the fragility of the coalition that elected them. They have to deliver, but they also have to be pragmatic populists. That is a very narrow path to watch and walk.

----***Democratic Party*** Chair **Kendall Scudder** began his term of office controversially moving Democratic Party headquarters out of town and watching his staff resign. But he deserves major kudos for his successful effort to find candidates for the entire slate, so that they were able to take advantage of the tsunami. With the exception of a few House and Senate seats, Democrats won every race, all the way down to the Court of Appeals and the ***State Board of Education***

---Conversely, ***the Republican Party of Texas*** remains a wholly owned subsidiary of white Christian nationalist **Tim Dunn**. Virtually the entire Republican effort to retain a House majority fell to Dunn's campaign apparatus. Dunn's entire history up until now was primarying responsible Republicans in order to replace them with knee-jerk ideologues. He was so successful that the current Republican Party in the legislature is so far out of the mainstream that even their reduced numbers will probably double down. Dunn is clearly a cancer on the process, and until Republicans declare independence, his version of Christian

nationalism, as manifested explicitly by **Dan Patrick**, will continue to erode Republican legitimacy.

---Speaking of Dan Patrick yet again, the mendacity of his concession statement is painful. It is mostly culture war and right-wing sliver successes. Nothing about the future of Texas such as water, electricity, roads. His property tax nostrums have saddled the state with impossible budget commitments while undercutting local control and public education.

The most galling part of his screed was his bragging that he had ended abortion in Texas. Unstated in that press release was the fact that the Republican leadership has concealed what was a statutorily mandated report on maternal mortality for years. He bragged about how many abortions have been preventedWhile ignoring how many women have died or whose health has been put in jeopardy because of this nonsense.

Like Trump, Patrick was trying to write his legacy. Like Trump, his legacy is largely irrelevant. Frankly, for political insiders, his destruction of the culture of the Senate is the one unforgivable sin. Everybody in the process understood that there was only one person that mattered, only one person that would give permission to allow a bill to even be considered, much less pass, and that was Dan Patrick.

While he neutered the Republican caucus, he strengthened the Democrats, who sharpened their debating skills, not knowing it would be in preparation for this moment.

-- Unfortunately, Lieutenant Governor-elect **Vikky Goodwin** has no real experience or understanding of the Senate and is likely to see power wrested away from her by Senate rules with the remaining Republican majority. Perhaps the smartest thing she can do is to find a moderate Republican with Senate experience for her chief of staff.

The ways of the Senate are dramatically different than the House, and it is a matter of subtle nuance to lead the Senate. If she has any hope of being relevant, that is the path she will have to follow.

In 1995, Republicans took over the Senate and were prepared to remove Lieutenant Governor **Bob Bullock** from any leadership role. What saved Bullock was intervention by **George W. Bush**, who told the Republican senators that Bullock would continue to hold the gavel and continue to preside. Ironically, that proved to be the smartest thing George W. Bush ever did because Bullock, in combination with then Speaker Pete Laney, paved the way to his legislative successes, which then paved the way to the White House.

--- is truly irritating to watch national and even local media compare 2026 experience with the near success that **Beto O'Rourke** had in 2018. Two things. Trump's approval in 2018 was -6. Trump's approval in 2026 was -25. In addition, Beto ran a sloppy campaign that virtually ignored South Texas and was all about him. Talarico and Hinojosa ran extraordinarily disciplined campaigns, and it was especially amazing watching Hinojosa live off of earned media and, with less than $20 million, put a three-term incumbent on the defensive.

--Finally, Talarico's success R in some ways similar to the path chosen by New York Mayor **Mamdani.** Whatever you think of Mamdani's politics, he is a cheerful warrior and always smiling. In an age of unconstrained anger, Talarico's serene, centered personality was always manifested by a cheerful smile. Even when attacking Ken Paxton, he did it with humor and good nature.

His whole demeanor and the fact that he spent the summer running ads introducing himself made **Elon Musk's** sewage attack extraordinarily unbelievable.

--And of course, we can't conclude without a mention of the presiding oligarch of Texas, Elon Musk. Democrats are celebratory now that they had the trillionaire waste his money, , that was a unique experience. Like Tim Dunn or ***Las Vegas Sands***, the pit, the money is endless, and there will not be a House or Senate member that wants to have that money spent against them in the next cycle, or the next cycle, or the next cycle..

Talarico was uniquely positioned to be able to fight it off, but do not presume the mogul is defeated. He will be a continuing presence, and one with which the Democrats should find a way to make peace.

Democrats should rightly celebrate Central Texas' third-largest employer being soundly gobsmacked, but they should not believe that it is any more than this single episode. Musk is an enduring presence that will have to be dealt with and, in some way, neutralized. That is a clear Democratic challenge.

By Harvey Kronberg

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