
February 29, 2008

2008 Campaign

Texas on Pace for Record Voter Turnout

By [RALPH BLUMENTHAL](#)

SPRING, Tex. — Anita Dawkins has never voted early. But there she was Wednesday, a 48-year old homemaker, or “domestic engineer,” as Ms. Dawkins called herself, lining up outside the [Barbara Bush](#) Branch Library in this fast-growing northern Houston suburb “to beat the crowds” and cast her primary ballot for Senator [Barack Obama](#).

“I’m very excited; we need all the help we can get in the state of [Texas](#),” said Ms. Dawkins, who also hopes to attend a [Democratic Party](#) caucus.

Texans have never seen anything like this stampede to the polls for the March 4 face-off that could prove crucial to the presidential hopes of Mr. Obama’s Democratic opponent, Senator [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#), and provide perhaps the final boost to the all-but-anointed Republican nominee, Senator [John McCain](#).

Through Wednesday, in the state’s 15 most populous counties, 805,000 people have voted, compared with 169,000 for the same period in 2004, according to the Texas secretary of state, Phil Wilson. Of those, 601,000 have been Democrats.

If the same level of enthusiasm holds true through Tuesday, Mr. Wilson projected, 3.3 million people will eventually vote in the primary, easily surpassing the record of more than 2.7

million in 1988 when Vice President (and native son) George Bush was in the race, along with Gov. [Michael S. Dukakis](#) of Massachusetts.

Early voting began Feb. 19 and ends Friday.

The library here in Spring has proved the second-busiest location in Harris County, with nearly 9,500 voters through Wednesday; only a polling center in Houston drew more.

Ymitri Mathison, 45, a professor of English at Prairie View A & M University, said she had come to cast her vote for Mrs. Clinton, countering family members, including her mother, who favored Mr. Obama.

"He's just talk," Ms. Mathison said of the Illinois senator. "No experience. It'd be like hiring George Bush."

Ken Turner, 40, a drummer and an education student at Tomball College, also came to back Mrs. Clinton, although he said, "I'd like to see a double ticket."

Alana Hall, 38, a health care consultant, said that she had voted for Mr. Obama as "a man who stands for change" and that her fiancé, a Republican, was voting for him, too.

Eugene Ping, 75, a retired engineer now selling sporting goods at Wal-Mart, said he had favored [Mitt Romney](#) but had given his vote to Mr. McCain. "Obama's got to bomb out," Mr. Ping said. "People swoon about his rhetoric, but he has no real agenda."

Past a thicket of candidate signs in the parking lot, Constable Ron Hickman, a Republican incumbent running for his third four-year term as a Harris County law enforcement official, appealed for votes and, too often, he said ruefully, explained the rules.

"They don't understand why you can't vote for someone on one ticket and then one on the other," Mr. Hickman said.

Two of his supporters, in fact, had come to do just that. Jimmie Williams, 70, a retired oil company worker and an avid Republican, said, "I wanted to vote against Hillary so Obama would win so McCain would go against Obama and have an easier time."

His buddy, J. B. Cain, 65, a retired computer programmer and also a Republican who said he had never voted early before, came with the same idea, although interjecting, "Lord help us if he couldn't beat either one."

Mr. Hickman explained that if they voted in the Democratic primary, they could not also vote for him as constable in the Republican primary because voters are handed either a Republican ballot or a Democratic one. Both men then dropped their plan to vote for Mr. Obama.

The high turnout has prompted speculation that other Republicans were also trying to cast a strategic Democratic vote. "We've heard those anecdotes," said Mr. Wilson, the secretary of state, adding, "We wouldn't know why until later when we can go back into voting histories."

"All we know," he said, "is that a lot of people are voting."

Experts are trying to figure out what that surge may portend.

In the state as a whole, early primary voters account for about 40 percent of the eventual vote total, said Kelly Fero, a leading Democratic strategist who is not working for either candidate. But in heavily Hispanic South Texas, where Mrs. Clinton is favored, the proportion is reversed, Mr. Fero said. If the Democratic momentum is moving in Mr. Obama's direction, as polls

suggest, the votes Mrs. Clinton has been able to bag early will prove particularly important, he said.

Lydia Caramillo, vice president of the Southwest Voter Registration Education Project in San Antonio, said the Latino vote was split, with older voters clearly siding with Mrs. Clinton, younger voters gravitating to Mr. Obama and those ages 30 to 45 "trying to decide which way to go."

"This is an election none of us understand," Ms. Caramillo said.

Max Beauregard, a professional demographer at Houston Community College and a Democratic strategist also not working for either candidate, said the Hispanic vote in Houston might not prove as potent as some had suggested.

In the two most recent statewide elections in Harris County, where Hispanics make up more a third of the population, Mr. Beauregard said, the percentage of Hispanic voters dropped to 10 percent in 2006 from 12 percent in 2002.

The Texas women's vote is also considered crucial. Older white women are Mrs. Clinton's mainstay, nationwide results to date have shown. But, said Richard Murray, a professor of political science at the [University of Houston](#), "women are younger in Texas than in Ohio and Pennsylvania."

And studies show that Texas women rank at the low end of voter participation, said Elizabeth Crum, a spokeswoman for the Institute for Women's Policy Research in Washington. In the Congressional elections of 1998 and the presidential election of 2000, Ms. Crum said, less than 42 percent of registered Texas women voted, ranking them 49th out of 50 nationwide.

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