

'Street money' triggers blow-up at Texas Coalition of Black Democrats meeting



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Dozens of folks gathered at a bar last week in the Cedars neighborhood of Dallas in anticipation of a good old-fashioned political fight.

And they came ready to persuade, not just with oratory but with envelopes of cash, providing a window into the seedier side of street-level politics.

The meeting was of the freshly reorganized Dallas chapter of the Texas Coalition of Black Democrats, once one of the most influential political organizations in the city.

Over the years, most of the political elite in Dallas left the group or let memberships lapse. It wasn't until several young Democrats formed a new board late last year that the group started doing the business of politics in earnest.

Last week, members of the coalition were scheduled to vote on the board's recommendations for candidates to back in the May 29 primaries. The endorsement is useful for candidates to list the group on mailers, hoping to spur older voters who remember the coalition's glory days. And in close primary races for open seats — such as the new 33rd Congressional District, which stretches across Dallas and Tarrant counties — every edge is important.

Those in attendance anticipated a political tussle because at a previous meeting, the board allowed revision of a rule that required 30 days of membership before a member gains voting privileges. Some board members pushed for allowing a person to instantly vote after paying membership fees.

As news of the change spread, candidates who did not get the board's recommendation came to the meeting, hoping to change the outcome. Operatives for at least two of the candidates came with money intended to pay the membership dues of supporters so they could cast votes.

In some cases, the envelopes had the membership fee and a little extra, according to one person who received such a payment.

It's a typical use of "street money," loose cash given to operatives by political campaigns to take care of the often gritty business of lining up political support. The cash flows in neighborhoods,

sometimes churches and on the street. It's a cherished tradition in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Dallas and any place with political machinery.

As the start of the meeting approached, the Coalition of Black Democrats treasury rose by about \$1,500. That's a lot of \$30 memberships.

When the meeting didn't start on time, veteran Dallas street operative **Teddy Hawkins** told me that the longer it took to start the meeting, the more money the group would make. Hawkins is not a coalition member and said he was there on behalf of County Commissioners Court candidate Bennie Brown, who is running against longtime incumbent **John Wiley Price** and others. Hawkins apparently came ready to buy an endorsement.

"I've got 15 of them," Hawkins said, patting envelopes filled with money in his pocket.

A worker for **Domingo Garcia**'s campaign also had envelopes to pass out. Garcia was trying to wrest an endorsement away from state Rep. **Marc Veasey**, D-Fort Worth, in the Congressional District 33 primary race.

He's trying to reach beyond his Hispanic base and appeal to black voters. He is endorsed by leaders such as state Sen. **Royce West** and Dallas County District Attorney **Craig Watkins**.

Veasey, who was at the meeting like Garcia, is trying to hold his turf in Tarrant County and make inroads to voters in Dallas. He said his campaign didn't come to the meeting with street money.

For those whose campaigns did, it was a bad investment.

When the meeting started, coalition chairman **Randall Bryant** said the rules of the state-level group prohibited a chapter from passing a guideline such as the membership change. Bryant, the grandson of veteran Dallas political consultant **Kathy Nealy**, stood firm with fellow board members as the audience erupted in anger.

After some debate, the group's full body rejected a motion to table the matter and approved the recommended slate of candidates.

The room exploded.

Peter Johnson, a Garcia campaign worker who once marched with **Martin Luther King Jr.**, compared the treatment to how people wearing white sheets treated him during the civil-rights movement.

Political consultant **Tanya Watkins**, wife of the district attorney, urged the board to table the matter, even after the vote was taken.

And **Anna Casey**, the campaign manager for Garcia, blasted the board and demanded to see the state rules.

“It was an unfair process,” Casey said, adding that Bryant invited her to round up supporters and friends to pay their membership so they can vote.

Casey said she paid only membership dues and had 50 people in the audience.

Bryant, who has done work for the Garcia campaign, chaired the meeting, but the votes were made by the board and those eligible to vote. Bryant said that in the end, he had to act to preserve the local group.

“They did a great job and upheld the rules of the organization,” said **Daniel Clayton**, president of the Texas Coalition of Black Democrats and a Commissioners Court candidate who got the local group’s endorsement.

Bryant was under fire. Casey’s objections became so pointed that Nealy, also a Garcia supporter, stretched out her arm toward Casey and told her to knock it off.

The board offered to refund money to those who didn’t want to join the group after all. Two-thirds of the dues collected were given back. Some people got their cash back and darted out of the door, perhaps not wanting to give the money back to campaign operatives.

Price, who was part of the slate, asked the crowd to give the young Democrats a break.

“This organization went silent,” he said. “We at least have to give them a chance to rebuild.”

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