

Domingo Garcia fires US House campaign chief after failed bid for Texas Coalition of Black Democrats' support

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After a tension-filled meeting last week where he lost a Democratic group's endorsement because his supporters were disqualified from voting, congressional candidate Domingo Garcia fired the group's local chairman from his campaign.

Operatives for Garcia and other campaigns had distributed cash-stuffed envelopes to supporters at Wednesday's meeting of the Coalition of Black Democrats so they could join and vote on a slate of candidates in the May 29 primaries. But the group's board, led by Randall Bryant, voted to allow votes only by those who had been members of the group for at least 30 days, in accordance with the state-level group's guidelines.

Two days later, Bryant, who had a contract to do grass-roots work for Garcia, was told in an email that his services were no longer needed.

Anna Casey, Garcia's campaign manager, said the firing was unrelated.

"Randall was brought in early to help out," she said. "We have professionals now doing that job, so there was no longer a role for him."

Bryant, the grandson of veteran Dallas political consultant Kathy Nealy, said he was blindsided by the termination.

"I have not spoken with Domingo Garcia or anyone from his staff since my termination, and I wish him the best of luck with his campaign," he said.

Last week, the raucous meeting of the Dallas Coalition of Black Democrats exposed the seedier side of local politics.

Representatives from various campaigns used "street money" to pay membership dues for their supporters. In some cases, the envelopes contained extra cash, according to several people who got them.

The use of street money, which some campaigns employ to pay for support in urban neighborhoods, community groups and even churches, is a staple in cities with hard-knuckled politics.

The attention to the group was unusual. Its membership is small, but older area residents often remember the group's stronger days, a potential advantage for a candidate in the crowded race for the new 33rd Congressional District seat.

On Tuesday, after a report on the meeting in *The Dallas Morning News*, the chairman of the Texas Coalition of Black Democrats, Daniel Clayton, released a letter denouncing the presence of street money, saying it worked against the interests of the longtime Democratic organization.

Clayton also criticized the Dallas chapter for incorrectly voting at an earlier meeting to allow people to pay membership dues and instantly vote. It was later determined that such a change would violate the state group's constitution and put the local chapter's affiliation in jeopardy.

Garcia aides contend that Bryant encouraged them and others to flood the meeting with potential new members and their dues. They also say the coalition's state rules say they can't endorse candidates.

Clayton says local chapters can endorse, though he conceded language in the group's constitution is sometimes confusing.

He said the state group would review the incident and praised the local group's board for upholding the state rules "in the face of crushing political pressure."

"The notion that today, certain campaigns and/or individuals believe those interests can be placed on the auction block by using what is commonly referred to as 'street money' to influence organizational outcomes is deeply troubling," Clayton wrote. "There is no place for the interjection of 'street money' in politics, period."

Bryant defended the local board and said the original decision to allow new members to vote was made because he wanted more than just a small group of board members making critical endorsements for the primaries. He said he found out just before the meeting that the board had erred.

"Given the hostile environment before us, we not only carried out our endorsement process that was held up by explicit language and derogatory terms by those not satisfied with the process, but we defended and followed the state constitution," he said.

Bryant said 49 new members were given the option of getting a refund, and 21 did so.

Clayton, who works for state Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, is running for the District 1 seat on the Dallas County Commissioners Court. West has endorsed Garcia for Congress.

In response to Clayton's letter, three members of the board requested that he remove their names from his list of campaign endorsements.

"That's fine," Clayton said. "As soon as I get word, I'll make the appropriate changes."

Eleven candidates are running in the Democratic primary in the 33rd District, which includes parts of Tarrant and Dallas counties.

State Rep. Marc Veasey got the group's endorsement for the congressional race over Garcia and others.

While Bryant, the board's chairman, worked for Garcia, Lorraine Birabil, the board's secretary, works for Veasey's campaign.

Veasey and other members of the coalition's local slate say they did not bring street money to last week's meeting.