

CHAPTER 14

TURNING AROUND THE DYSFUNCTIONAL TEXAS LIBERTARIAN PARTY

I moved to Austin, Texas in 2000 after becoming a joint owner of a small business there, and I soon got involved with the Travis County Libertarian Party. This is a story about what happened a few years after that. It's going to sound like I'm bragging a lot—I'm just warning you.

On October 30, 2003, I emailed all 59 county chairs and state committee members listed on the Libertarian Party of Texas website. I explained that the Libertarian Party of Texas had not qualified to put candidates on the ballot in 2004, so we would have to conduct a big petition drive. We needed to collect 45,540 “valid” petition signatures to re-qualify (in reality we'd have to collect a lot more), so I was asking people to step up as local volunteer coordinators and tell me how many signatures they thought their county could collect.

Much to my surprise, AOL froze my email account! What was going on? Was this some kind of conspiracy against Libertarians?

I had to phone AOL tech support to get the account re-activated. It turned out, they had frozen my account because nearly half of

those emails had bounced.

Not to be defeated, I picked up the phone and started calling the county chairs at the phone numbers on the website. I discovered that many of the numbers were either disconnected, gave fax tones, or rang continuously without any answering system.

I began to fully realize the mess our state party organization had become. For the first time in eighteen years we faced a petition drive for ballot access, and our state and county organizations were in shambles. The state database manager had resigned, and our website was filled with outdated contact information.

A few months later, the state treasurer ceased activities. The state secretary hadn't published minutes for months. All of the officers had been fighting with each other, but then they stopped and basically went AWOL. While many of those individuals had been fine county activists, the group dynamics at the state level proved dysfunctional.

Fortunately, the Travis County chair, Pat Dixon, stepped into the void and agreed to head up a state ballot access committee to take charge of the petition drive. I agreed to serve as the statewide volunteer coordinator. Before then, I had only been a Travis County volunteer.

For six months I worked nearly full-time as an unpaid volunteer for the petition drive. I traveled the state training other petitioners, and I paid my own travel and hotel expenses without getting reimbursed. (I had recently sold the business in Austin, so I had the time and money to do this.) I thought that if I failed to step up at this crucial time when I was available and capable, how could I ever fault others for failing to step up?

Thanks to my efforts, and the efforts of some other very dedicated folks, the Texas LP turned in over 80,000 signatures in May 2004. Far more than 45,540 of those were valid, so we qualified for the ballot.

With momentum from the petition drive, Pat Dixon sought and won the state chairmanship of the Texas LP at the June 2004 state convention. I was hired to fill the newly created position of executive director—a position that came with a small paycheck. Before then, the party had been run completely by volunteers.

Shortly after taking my position as executive director, I proceeded to work with our new secretary to update our website contacts. On July 1, 2004, I phoned the 800 number listed on our website and left a voicemail to see what would happen. The outgoing message at the 800 number mentioned a candidate for governor from 2002, as well as another contact phone number. I dialed it—it was disconnected!

When I logged into the voicemail system for the 800 number, I found there were six months' worth of unchecked messages, and there had probably been more that got automatically deleted. Perhaps it had been *two years* since the voicemail had been checked. Here is a sample of transcripts of those voicemails:

“This is Michael at 210-###-####. Want to know if y'all have a twenty-eighth congressional district candidate. I would run as a Libertarian.”

“Ross, interested in helping LP with campaigning in El Paso.”

“Ken in Dallas. I called R. and the phone is disconnected. Chris's message center doesn't give anything to leave a message on. I'm in Arlington and want to get a hold of where the Gary Nolan campaign meeting will be. Maybe I'll get on the computer one day.”

“Albert Wood with Valley Morning Star. We're doing a series of stories . . .”

“Hi, my name is Melvin. I'm trying to find a petition to sign.”

“Hi, this is Wes Benedict, I was calling about the...the—

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uh...this phone number...the uh 800-422-1776. I'm curious who gets these messages. If you'd give me a call. Thanks a lot and I hope this voicemail works. Thanks, bye."

In August and September 2004, I was bombarded by requests for contact information for our candidates. Unfortunately, much of that contact information was missing or incorrect. The press was begging for phone numbers and photos of our candidates, but I only had the information for some of them.

This description obviously sounds demoralizing—but actually, I was encouraged. There was nowhere to go but up! Libertarians often complain about our lack of press coverage, but I was finding that the press was begging to cover us if we would only let them! Volunteers were contacting us begging to help if we would only give them something to do! We were making it extremely difficult for voters to find out about our candidates, yet many voters still voted Libertarian that year.

Libertarian activists, libertarian couch potatoes and even non-libertarian press analysts often debate why the Libertarian Party hasn't achieved more success. Many say our platform is too radical, or if we would just drop this or that controversial issue, we'd have massive growth.

I wasn't sure how much our platform had to do with our success or failure, but I was confident that unanswered phones, outdated websites, and bad contact information were hurting us.

The good news, I thought, was that a Texas turnaround would be straightforward, with potential for major improvement. All I had to do was focus on the basics like customer service and cleaning up our websites, and things would surely improve.

Making improvements was tough at first. At one point I sent a batch of fundraising letters, and then I found out that our treasurer was too busy with his personal life to retrieve the funds and deposit

them in the bank!

Eventually another volunteer stepped in to serve as treasurer, Geoffrey Neale. Among many other roles, Neale had previously served as national chair, but thankfully he was willing to serve where we critically needed him. He set up an accounting system and kept the funds moving to the bank account.

I wanted to hire an assistant director to help with database management, writing, and anything else I could delegate. I wanted to get fellow Travis County activist Arthur DiBianca, who had been a valuable volunteer on the ballot access campaign. I sent a note to our state committee saying, “Art has proven to be one of those super productive workers capable of producing up to ten times the output of the average citizen” (which was true). The committee approved. Finally, I felt we had a team that could make big things happen.

We set out with a goal to recruit a record number of candidates for 2006. The previous record had been 138 in Texas. We succeeded and got 168 Libertarians on the ballot in 2006. In fact, we broke lots of records in 2006 (and again in 2008), making Texas the best performing Libertarian state chapter by most measures. We did this against a trend of declining performance of the LP nationwide. We recruited a record 173 LP candidates in Texas for the November 2008 elections, which was 29% of the nationwide Libertarian total. Even though Texas has just 8% of the U.S. population, Texas LP candidates in 2008 received 28% of all the Libertarian votes for U.S. House and 44% of all the Libertarian votes for State Representative. Our list of Texas Libertarians elected to nonpartisan offices grew from two to eight. We increased the Texas LP donor base from under 300 in 2005 to over 900 in 2008. We wrote highly successful fundraising letters and emails. We raised \$244,000 for the 2007-2008 election cycle, which was more than the state parties of California, Florida and New York combined.

There was no magic bullet to what we did. We didn’t do anything

especially exciting or new. We just focused on the basics and copied the strategies and techniques used by earlier successful Libertarian Party efforts. Much of the work boiled down to taking care of lots of details.

While I enjoyed working as executive director in Texas, I was paid very little. I gave several months' notice that I would leave at the end of 2008 to get a "real job" and rebuild my personal bank accounts.

A part of me hoped the Texas LP would come crashing down after I left, just to make it clear to everyone that I was responsible for the success. However, there were hundreds and hundreds of volunteers and donors that supported our efforts, and I don't think they did it just to make me look good. So, I helped recruit and train my replacement, Robert Butler. His fundraising beat my records, and his candidate recruitment was quite strong.

Okay, so why have I told you all this? Because I know that other Libertarians have had a similar experience of thinking their local or state organization is a total wreck. I want to make the point that a dysfunctional and declining Libertarian state party can be turned around pretty quickly, and it can come roaring back to break records. Currently, many Libertarian state party organizations are weak. In 2012, only sixteen states had ten or more candidates. I'd like to see every state field a hundred Libertarian candidates.

Unfortunately, party committees can sometimes act as obstacles. In Chapter 22, I'll suggest how to get around internal barriers to success by forming political action committees.