Conservatives' Heyday: Tower - Blakley Battle

By EUGENE KELN

In an election which was simultaneously a Democratic primary and a Republican popularity contest, Texas voters last week sent Goldwater Republican John Tower and Dallas Millionaire Bill Blakley into a late spring run-off for the Senate seat held for twelve years by Lyndon Johnson. More than a million voters cast almost 98 per cent of their votes for six major candidates and almost 50 per cent of the total for the two winners.

TOWER'S STRENGTH was concentrated in most of the state's metropolitan areas, West Texas the Valley and Panhandle, and along the Gulf Coast, as he won in 113 of 254 counties. In Harris County, Tower led second place Maury Maverick almost 3 to 1 while splitting the Dallas county vote with Dallas-based oilman Blakley who ran strongest in East Texas.

But with the free-for-all over, interest focuses on the head-on clash between Republican and Democrat, the outcome of which (in addition to the issues) is far from clear. While less than half the voters who cast ballots in last fall's general election showed up to vote in the Senate contest, the Republicans polled better than half the 600,000 vote cast of their state-wide candidates received in November, and the party is conceded a strong hold over 30-35 per cent of Texas.

Assuming most of the votes which the two winners received last week can be held in line, Blakley, who trailed Tower by better than 135,000, must pick up more than 65 per cent of the vote which went to the other 68 candidates on the ballot in order to win. But the interim Senator's problems are complicated by the prospect that many liberals may stay at home while Tower stands an even chance of picking up half the moderate vote.

In fact, the run-off picture seems to center on the decisions the liberal loyalists and their leaders will make for years while moderate and liberal candidates predominated the Democratic slate in state and national elections, loyalists maintained that all Democrats must vote the party ticket, whether they were themselves liberals or conservatives.

While some of the liberals may indeed remain loyal to the party, some will vote for Tower on the hope of building a two-party state on the claim that he is a "conscientious conservative," while still others will refuse to vote at all.

BLAKLEY'S HOPE for party unity thus depends on the endorsement of party leaders, Speaker Rayburn, a long-time personal friend, has already announced his support, while Johnson and Yarborough have "withheld judgment." While the support of Johnson and Yarborough may cost him in terms of conservative votes, Blakley needs their help in any attempt to unite the party.

Even if the Republican party is gaining state-wide strength, the local areas will continue with predictable regularity to send Democrats to state and national legislatures for many years, and many of these men will endorse Blakley. But it is possible that defections, abstentions, and a light vote may combine to place a one-time professor from Wichita Falls in the Senate seat vacated by a one-time school teacher who is now the Vice President.