South's Unique Political Tradition Undergoing Rapid, Telling Erosion

By JOHN R. BEHRMAN

Houston's politics were born and raised in the Jacksonian and southern political tradition as were most of its citizens. These traditions are reflected in the curious and quite unique Democratic primary ballot.

The influence of the Jacksonians is to be seen in the fact that vast numbers of major and minor offices of all types on the local and state level are subject to the biennial primary.

THE BANKRUPTCY of these practices under the impact of modern society can be seen in the fact that 40% of the offices were uncontested on the Democratic ballot and 50% of the offices were ignored on the Republican ballot.

The final tabulations of the votes indicated that many citizens, rushing to get out of the booth and dismayed by the bewildering array of candidates and offices, simply ignore many of the more trivial offices.

However, these and other traditions are undergoing rapid and telling erosion. Nomination in the Democratic primary, for instance, is no longer tantamount to election in November. Many of the Democratic nominees will face very substantial GOP opposition in November on the state and local level.

With the growth of the two-party state the Texas Democratic Party is bound to narrow somewhat its all-encompassing embrace as the right wing drifts into the ranks of the Republicans.

THE ONLY obvious trend in the results—and an admittedly superficial one—is Houston's preference for cheap government. Liberal-conservative or pro- or anti-Kennedy administration lines simply don't fit the profile of votes.

Houstonians favored Don Yarbrough, a pro-administration liberal who said he would fight to abolish the sales tax. They favored unendorsed Woodrow Bean who declared, "the income tax is immoral."

These same voters gave a thumping majority to anti-administration conservative Bob Casey who promised withholding tax deductions for home improvements and supported administration-backed plans for abolishing the poll tax in a "straw vote" referendum.

The results of the GOP primary indicate that insurgent conservatives will be stepping from one fight into another, for the Republican primary was the scene of the week's closest and fiercest battles in two races.

Jim Bertron, the old-guard county party chairman won his race by a 29-vote margin over Walter Mengden. Tower-endorsed kellis Dibrell eked out a slim margin over Bill Hayes in Harris county only to lose in the statewide tally.

Both of these battles were symptoms of an intraparty struggle between party stalwarts and the John Birch Society which backed Mengden and Hayes.

Bertron and some of his sup-

porters feel that loyalty to the John Birch Society is in conflict with the ideals of the Republican Party. This conflict, which will break to the surface in the May 25 county convention and which provided the backdrop to those two races, threatened to tear the Texas GOP asunder.