



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on April 25, 2023

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## How LBJ Stole a Texas Senate Seat in 1948

In late March, audio recordings from a 1977 interview detailing how the late President Lyndon Johnson won the 1948 Senate contest in Texas were posted to the archival website of the LBJ Presidential Library and Museum on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. The tapes renewed interest in the sordid episode that saved Johnson's political career — and threw some light on how American elections have been, and can be, stolen.



AP Images

In 1977, James Mangan, a reporter for the Associated Press, conducted a series of interviews that touched on the allegations of the 1948 steal. After Mangan died in 2015, family members found the cassette tapes of the interviews at his home in San Antonio. In 2022, they decided they were of such historical value that they needed to be donated to the LBJ Library in Austin.

Here we will take a detailed look at the events leading up to Johnson's surprise "victory" in the 1948 Democratic primaries.

### Amazing Comeback

Like many southern states at the time, Texas was dominated by the Democratic Party, but the party consisted of a more "progressive" wing and a more "conservative" wing. Johnson's Democratic opponent was the former governor of Texas, Coke Stevenson, a more conservative Democrat. As Texas historian J. Evetts Haley wrote in his 1964 book *A Texan Looks at Lyndon: A Study in Illegitimate Power*, Stevenson had never supported a tax bill and was "anathema to the ultra-liberal New Deal elements and the pseudo-intellectuals." He opposed public debt and excessive government spending. In the first primary, Stevenson had led Johnson by 71,460 votes, but as he had fallen short of a majority of the vote, Texas election law required a runoff primary.

This second election provided Johnson with the opportunity to make an amazing comeback, with the help of South Texas political boss George Parr. As Haley put it, "Big money was thrown into south Texas." In Bexar County (San Antonio), Johnson was able to transform a 12,000-vote Stevenson lead into a 2,000-vote lead for himself.

In the runoff campaign, Johnson set about distorting Stevenson's record as governor, charging, for example, that he had issued a record number of pardons. What Johnson had done was combine the true number of pardons with days in which convicts were allowed to attend funerals or visit sick family members as though those were also "pardons." This deception was aided by the fact that Johnson controlled much of the media in a 63-county area around Austin, where he owned a radio station that he had purchased in his wife's name in 1943.

In Duval County, the vote was 4,662 for Johnson to only 40 votes for Stevenson. Despite these amazing figures, when the polls closed, Johnson was still behind by 854 votes statewide. Then, several Houston precincts posted "revisions," which cut the Stevenson lead by more than half. More revisions in Parr's



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territory reduced Stevenson's tenuous lead to only 157 votes.

Then, on Friday — almost a week after the election — an “amended” return of a box in Precinct 13 in Jim Wells County gave Johnson 200 more votes. In 1977, Jim Wells County Deputy Sheriff Luis Salas, who supervised the election, admitted that he had lied under oath in 1948, and said, “Johnson did not win that election. It was stolen for him.”

## Precinct 13

How this was done was detailed by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Robert Caro in his bestselling biography of Johnson, *Means of Ascent*. Salas recalled that he arrived at the Precinct 13 polling place in Alice, Texas, on election day, expecting possible “trouble” from poll watchers, but they were surprisingly compliant. He directed them to sit in two chairs on the far side of a schoolroom, “too far away to see the ballots.” (This was similar to what was done in some voting locations in the disputed 2020 election.) Salas unfolded the paper ballots and began to call out a name for three clerks. One poll watcher, Jimmy Holmgreen, suspected that votes were being counted for Johnson that were really Stevenson votes. Salas admitted in 1977 that that was the case: “If they were not for [Johnson], I made them for [Johnson].”

Caro wrote, “But when Holmgreen jumped up and approached the table, Salas ordered him to stay away from the desk where the votes were being counted.” Salas told Holmgreen, “You sit over there. Sit down and don’t interfere with my clerks.” When Salas and his clerks resumed calling out the votes, they were all for Johnson. On election day, Johnson had in excess of 90 percent of the votes, with a margin of 765-60.

But it was not enough, as Johnson still trailed statewide. Then, on Sunday morning, Duval County announced there were more votes yet to be counted, votes that had just been “discovered.” This was unusual, as Duval ordinarily reported completely on Election Night. The previously “uncounted” votes went for Johnson 425-2. By the end of Monday, Duval County had an incredible voter turnout of 99.6 percent.

Stevenson still carried a narrow lead of 119 votes, meaning Johnson would have to “find” some more votes elsewhere — and soon, because Texas election law required that all ballots had to be reported within 72 hours after the polls closed, and that all ballot boxes, tally sheets, and poll sheets had to be turned over to election officials. It was on Friday that Jim Wells County “found” uncounted votes from Precinct 13 — three days after Texas law dictated they had to be counted.

The 200 extra votes from Jim Wells County were recorded by adding a loop to the “7” of 765 to turn it into a “9,” making it 965.

**All the details:** Late Associated Press reporter James Mangan did a series of interviews in 1977 with a Texas election official who detailed how the election fraud of 1948, which put Johnson in the Senate, was effected. In 2022, Mangan’s family donated the tapes from those interviews to the LBJ Presidential Library in Austin.



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Stevenson sent some men to investigate the matter, but they were stopped by deputies carrying submachine guns. Despite state law that said every citizen had a right to look at the tally sheet, they were turned away. Finally, Stevenson took Frank Hamer — the legendary Texas Ranger who had ambushed and killed bank robbers and murderers Bonnie and Clyde — with him to the Valley to personally investigate.

The last 201 (or 202, as there are conflicting stories) names on the poll list (Johnson had 200 of these extra votes, while Stevenson picked up just one) were in alphabetical order, beginning with the A's. After going through all 26 letters of the alphabet, a few more were added, again starting with the A's and a few B's.

While Stevenson's people were not allowed to copy down the additional names, his lawyers memorized nine of them, and asked these individuals if they had voted for Johnson. They all said they had not, as they had not voted for anyone. One of them, Hector Cerda, swore in an affidavit that he was not even in Alice on Election Day. Three more whose names appeared on the poll book also did not vote, as they had been dead for several years. Of course, Salas admitted in 1977 that none of the additional 201 individuals had really voted — their names were simply added.

Faced with charges of ballot-stuffing, Johnson counter-attacked, accusing Stevenson, Hamer, and others of being involved in a "conspiracy for the purpose of causing the votes in Precinct No. 13 in Jim Wells County to be thrown out." He convinced an Austin judge, Roy Archer, to issue an injunction, despite Jim Wells County being out of his jurisdiction.

Finally, the issue was set to be resolved by the members of the Executive Committee of the Texas Democratic Party, who would recommend to the state convention which of the two men would be the Democratic nominee for U.S. Senator. President Harry Truman got into the act, encouraging the committee to unite the party by picking Johnson, who was considered a Truman ally.

When the Executive Committee voted, it was a tie, 28-28, but then Johnson's campaign manager — future Governor John Connally — went and found a committee member hiding in a restroom, and badgered him to come out and vote for Johnson. When he did, Johnson was recommended to the state convention, 29-28. Concerned that the Democratic Party needed to unite for the presidential election, in which Truman was trailing in the polls, the convention easily accepted the recommendation of the Executive Committee.



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## On to the White House

So Lyndon B. Johnson had successfully stolen a U.S. Senate seat by ballot-stuffing in Alice, Texas, launching him on a path that would eventually put him the White House when President Kennedy was shot to death in Dallas.

In 1952, Coke Stevenson was contacted by Sam Smithwick, another deputy sheriff at the time of the steal in Jim Wells County, who was now serving time in the Texas state prison in Huntsville. He wrote to Stevenson saying he was willing to testify about how they had stolen the election for Johnson. Stevenson went to meet Smithwick in the penitentiary, and stopped on the way to call and notify prison officials of his arrival time. They told him not to bother coming.

Smithwick was dead.

The *Valley Morning Star* reported, “A prison guard found Smithwick at midnight. The husky but aging man — he was 64 — had twisted a towel, tied it around his neck, and anchored it to the top bunk of the double-decker beds in his cell.” In 1956, Governor Allen Shivers accused Johnson of having a hand in Smithwick’s death.

Democrats dismissed allegations of vote fraud in the 1948 Senate race in Texas for almost three decades, until the release of the Mangan interviews in 1977. For that matter, Democrats also dismissed allegations of vote fraud in the 1960 presidential election, in which John F. Kennedy and Johnson defeated Richard Nixon. That election was marred by voting irregularities in multiple cities, particularly in Chicago, where Kennedy had votes on voting machines even before the polls were opened.

Yet, any concerns about potential vote fraud in recent years — which always seems to favor the Democrats — are ridiculed as “conspiracy theories.”

Mark Lawrence, the director of the LBJ Library, said of the tapes he received from Mangan, “The kind of irregularities we can see were at work in the 1948 Senate race in Texas were, I think it’s fair to say, pretty widespread across American history and all regions of the country to one extent or another but certainly in the South and along the Mexican borderlands, as recently as the 1940s.”

Lawrence implied that vote fraud is something that happened years ago, but just doesn’t happen today. But, as was the case in the Johnson steal of 1948, election laws and even state constitutions were sometimes ignored in 2020. Poll watchers in 2020, just as in 1948, were sometimes not allowed to sit close enough to those counting the votes to catch any fraudulent counting, if there was any. As happened in 1948, “extra votes” mysteriously appeared — votes that always benefitted Joe Biden, not Donald Trump.

In the United States, we pride ourselves in settling our political differences at the ballot box. But if we cannot trust the election process to produce an accurate result of actual votes, this way of settling our differences peacefully is placed in jeopardy. We cannot say that people are more honest today than they were when Lyndon Johnson stole a U.S. Senate seat in 1948. Human nature has not changed. We must have strict laws — that are enforced — to enable us to trust the outcome of elections.



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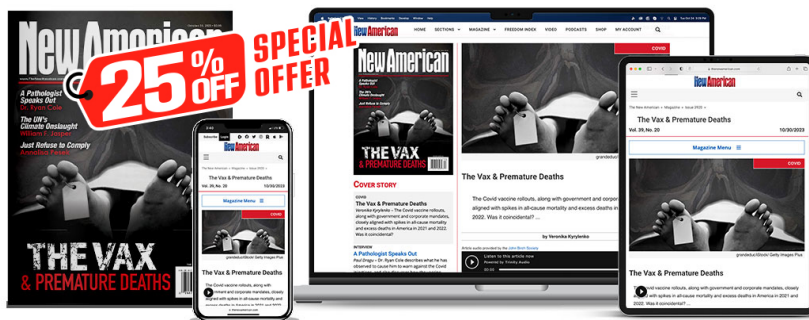
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