

Ann Richards



AP Photo/David Breslauer

As governor of Texas, Ann Richards reflected both new and old Texas, embracing the transformation of the state while remaining rooted in its traditions. She challenged the historical male dominance of state offices as Texas's "good ole boys" loosened their generations-old grip on state governance. Although she changed the way things were done, Richards proved equally fluent in the language and symbols of traditional Texas.

Richards moved up quickly in the ranks of state politics. After teaching junior high school social studies while raising her family, she entered government in 1976, winning a seat on the Travis County Commissioners Court. Richards fit easily into the small-town image revered in Texas, often proclaiming proudly that her father came from a town called Bugtussle and her mother from one called Hogjaw. In 1982, she won election as state treasurer and became the first woman elected to statewide office in Texas in fifty years.

She campaigned for the governor's office in 1990, calling for a "new" Texas that would offer opportunities to more residents. In the end, she won a hard-fought battle, besting West Texas rancher Clayton Williams. While in office, Richards worked aggressively to bring more women and minorities into state government. She made clear that women could find a place in Texas politics, advising them in patently Texas style, "Let me tell you, sisters, seeing dried egg on a plate in the morning is a lot dirtier than anything I've had to deal with in politics."ⁱⁱ She appointed the first black regent to the University of Texas Board of Regents and brought more black, Hispanic, and female officers into the ranks of the legendary Texas Rangers.

Richards proved to be just as colorful as her predecessors. She once quipped, "Let me tell you that I am the only child of a very rough-talking father. So don't be embarrassed about your language. I've either heard it or I can top it."ⁱⁱⁱ Like many of the men who came before her, Richards also had flaws, including a battle with alcoholism that ended in rehab and a strained marriage that ended in divorce.

She demonstrated repeatedly that women could be tough on crime, dramatically increasing the size of the Texas prison system and limiting the number of prisoners granted parole. She also championed education and environmental causes. Richards looked to modernize the way in which departments were administered and led the state in insurance reform and ethics reform.

While her tongue was sharp, her language was folksy. Richards' style won her a national following when she delivered the keynote address at the 1988 Democratic National Convention. Complaining about George H. W. Bush, the Republican Party's presidential candidate, Richards suggested the Democrats would expose his shortcomings, or, as she put it, "We're going to tell how the cow ate the cabbage."

Richards championed political activism, saying, "Sometimes it's serendipitous. Good things happen accidentally. But they're not going to happen unless well-meaning people give of their time and their lives to do that."ⁱⁱⁱ One of her legacies is the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, a school focused on giving girls the education and confidence necessary to serve as leaders in their communities. Richards preached feminism, informing the audience at the 1988 Democratic National Convention that "if you give us the chance, we can perform. After all, Ginger Rogers did everything that Fred Astaire did. She just did it backwards and in high heels."

Beaten by George W. Bush in her bid for reelection, Richards remained in the spotlight, making frequent media appearances and working as a political consultant. Asked what she would have done if she had known she would serve only one term, Richards remarked, "Oh, I probably would have raised more hell."^{iv}

Richards died of esophageal cancer on September 13, 2006. Governor Rick Perry's eulogy summed up her already legendary status. "Ann Richards," he said, "was the epitome of Texas politics: a figure larger than life who had a gift for captivating the public with her great wit."^v Richards embodied change in a state that has held fast to tradition. She embraced the traditions of the state more than many of the good ole boys, all the while challenging the state's limited role for women and minorities.

- i. Mimi Swartz, "Ann Richards: How Perfection Led to Failure," *Texas Monthly*, October 1990, 60.
- ii. Ann Richards with Peter Knobler, *Straight from the Heart: My Life in Politics and Other Places* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 165.
- iii. "Political People and Their Moves," *Texas Weekly*, www.texastribune.org/texas-weekly/vol-23/no-12/people/ (accessed August 30, 2014).
- iv. "Former Texas Governor Ann Richards Dies," *USA Today*, September 14, 2006, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2006-09-13-richards-obit.x.htm> (accessed August 30, 2014).
- v. "Political People and Their Moves."