

## A.J. 'Dell' Girard

September 13, 2013 | Victoria Advocate, The (TX)

Section: Obituaries | 237 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

### A.J. "DELL" GIRARD

PORT O'CONNOR - A.J. "Dell" Girard 94 of Port O'Connor passed away September 12, 2013. He was born March 5, 1919 in Berlin, New Hampshire to the late Joseph and Ernestine Glaude Girard.

Mr. Girard was a barber for 69 years and a Catholic. He proudly served his country in the United States Army during WWII.

Dell is survived by his daughters, Betty Dell Girard Causey and husband Jimmy C. and Mary Elizabeth Girard Hawes and husband Michael E; grandchildren: Tamary Talarico and husband Mark, Holly Prather and husband Darrell, Penny Clark and husband Rocky, Sgt. Dana Girard, Meredith Steves and husband David, Hugh Hawes and wife Lindsay; great-grandchildren, James Talarico, Madeleine Talarico, Clayland Prather, Joey Prather, Julia Prather, Jake Clark, Nicholas Clark, Delaney Steves, Mirielle Steves, Mitchell Steves, Addison Hawes, Eden Hawes and baby Hawes on the way.

In addition to his parents he was preceded in death by his wife, Ray Elizabeth Mars (Stapp) Girard; son, Rene Joseph Girard; brothers, Henry, Bob, Roger and Rene; sisters, Sadie, Lena and Clara.

A Rosary will be recited at 7 pm on Sunday at the St. Joseph Catholic Church in Port O'Connor. Funeral Mass will be held at 2 pm on Monday at the St. Joseph Catholic Church. Burial will follow at the Port O'Connor Cemetery with flag folding presentation by the Calhoun County Veterans Joint Honor Guard.

Richardson Colonial Funeral Home is in charge of the arrangements, 361-552-2988.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

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## State Rep. Larry Gonzales not running for re-election

August 30, 2017 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 226 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, is not running for re-election.

"It has been an honor and a privilege to serve HD52 and this great state," Gonzales wrote Wednesday night on Facebook. "We certainly gave it our all."

Gonzales announced his decision not to run again at a meeting Tuesday night of the Williamson County GOP Executive Committee, according to attendees.

First elected in 2010, Gonzales has served on the Sunset Advisory Commission since 2014 and currently chairs the panel, which is responsible for periodic reviews of state agencies. He is also the chairman of a House Appropriations subcommittee.

Gonzales won election in 2010 by unseating a Democratic incumbent, Diana Maldonado. Before that, he had been a familiar face in Austin, working in the offices of state lawmakers, the lieutenant governor and the attorney general.

Gonzales is one of the few remaining Hispanic Republicans in the lower chamber. There were six as recently as a year ago, but three lost in the 2016 elections. The other two are state Reps. Jason Villalba of Dallas and J.M. Lozano of Kingsville.

At least two Republicans have already lined up to run for Gonzales' seat in House District 52: Texas GOP chaplain Jeremy Story and Round Rock resident Christopher Ward.

Another person, James Talarico, has filed paperwork indicating he is interested in running. He is expected to make an announcement early next week.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2017, August 30). State Rep. Larry Gonzales not running for re-election. *Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/166A0B1AD0E03890>.

## Democrat James Talarico launches bid for House seat

September 7, 2017 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove; American-Statesman Staff | Section: METR | 218 Words

Page: B3

[OpenURL Link](#)

James Talarico, a 28-year-old Round Rock Democrat, said Wednesday that he is seeking the Texas House District 52 seat held by Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock.

"After this past legislative session, we need new leaders willing to fix our broken school finance system, which I see as the No. 1 priority from the state Legislature, and frankly, I admire Larry Gonzales and Speaker (Joe) Straus for trying to find a solution to this problem," Talarico said.

Talarico is executive director of Reasoning Mind, an education nonprofit that provides software to schools in and around San Antonio and Austin, to help low-income students with math and science. He is a former public school teacher in San Antonio. Talarico earned a bachelor's degree in government from the University of Texas and a master's degree in education policy from Harvard University.

The first candidate to announce, back in July, was Republican Jeremy Story of Round Rock, the 42-year-old head of Campus Renewal. He was challenging Gonzales as not conservative enough. Another Republican, Christopher Ward of Round Rock, also said he is running.

Talarico has the endorsement of Democratic Williamson County Commissioner Terry Cook, Round Rock City Council Member Tammy Young, Austin City Council Member Jimmy Flannigan, and a multitude of local Democratic Party leaders.

Contact Jonathan Tilove at 512-445-3572.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Tilove, J. (2017, September 7). Democrat James Talarico launches bid for House seat. *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, p. B3.

Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/166C67BF48DF1288>.

## Workman raises most in House race - Workman out-raises opponents in western Travis County primary - Goodwin leads cash race among Democrats seeking that seat.

January 18, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Johnathan Silver; American-Statesman Staff | Section: METR | 400 Words

Page: B1

[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, eclipsed his primary challengers in campaign finance reports posted this week, raising almost \$129,000 in the second half of 2017, spending slightly more than \$78,000 and having about \$135,000 in cash on hand.

Challenger Jay Wiley raised nearly \$77,000, spent \$17,364 and had \$73,746 on hand. Fellow GOP challenger Patty Vredevelt's report was not available Wednesday afternoon.

In the Democratic primary for that Texas House district, which includes a western portion of Austin, Lago Vista, Lakeway and Bee Cave, Vikki Goodwin raised nearly \$30,000, spent \$14,434 and had \$76,870 on hand for the reporting period. Sheri Soltes raised \$11,064, spent nearly \$3,000 and had \$8,112 on hand. Will Simpson raised \$9,383, spent \$11,482 and had \$9,583 on hand. Elaina Fowler raised \$8,416, spent \$1,281 and had \$1,412 on hand. Candace Aylor's report was not available Wednesday afternoon.

In House District 45, which encompasses Blanco and Hays counties, five Republicans and three Democrats are running for the seat being vacated by state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs, who is running for Congress.

Republican Amber Pearce raised much more money than the other candidates in either primary with \$126,555 in contributions, \$27,701 in expenditures and \$114,454 on hand.

District 45 Republican candidates Ken Strange raised \$16,135, spent \$1,618 and had \$20,821 on hand; Naomi Narvaiz raised \$7,687, spent \$6,540 and had \$6,198 on hand; Austin Talley raised \$2,575, spent \$2,501 and had \$649 on hand. Amy Akers raised no money and had no cash on hand for the reporting period.

In the District 45 Democratic primary, Rebecca Bell-Metereau raised \$824, spent \$5,245 and had no cash on hand for the reporting period. Campaign finance reports from Democrats Erin Zwiener and Les Carnes were not available on the Ethics Commission website Wednesday afternoon.

In the race to replace retiring state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, Cynthia Flores stood out in the Republican field with more than \$42,000 in contributions, \$26,425 in expenditures and \$16,572 on hand. Jeremy Story raised \$11,700, spent \$7,700 and had \$4,000 on hand. Christopher L. Ward's report was not available Wednesday. District 52 includes Hutto, most of Round Rock and parts of Georgetown.

James Talarico is running unopposed in the District 52 Democratic primary. He raised \$75,296, spent \$22,124 and had \$71,412 on hand.

Contact Johnathan Silver at 512-445-3631.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Silver, J. (2018, January 18). Workman raises most in House race Workman out-raises opponents in western Travis County primary - Goodwin leads cash race among Democrats seeking that seat.. *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, p. B1. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16983E6CC1B28648>.



## Cynthia Flores is leading in Williamson County GOP Texas House race

March 7, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)  
Author: Julie Chang; Austin American-Statesman | Section: U.S. Politics | 303 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

March 07--Social services case manager Cynthia Flores, who had the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, is leading in the Republican primary in state House District 52 in Williamson County, according to early voting results.

Flores has 63 percent of the votes so far, besting Chris Ward, a clinical auditor, who has 18 percent of the votes and religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, who has 20 percent of the votes.

The district -- currently held by Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales, who didn't run for re-election -- encompasses most of Round Rock, some of Georgetown and extends east to Hutto and Taylor. Flores also received Gonzales' endorsement.

Flores campaigned on opposing elective abortions and strengthening the border to reduce human trafficking. She said if she's elected to the Legislature, she would support increasing the state's share of public school funding to decrease the property tax burden from local homeowners.

Ward said he also wants to fix school financing to help curb property tax increases. To bring costs down for schools, he wants to consider consolidating services and positions at small school districts, ensure that school districts are granting construction projects to lowest bidders when possible and eliminate the recapture system under which school districts with high property wealth give some of their revenue back to the state to be redistributed to property-poor school districts.

Although Flores wouldn't comment on the leadership of Texas House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, Ward said he thought that Straus wasn't conservative enough.

Flores must garner more than 50 percent of the votes to avoid a runoff election May 22. Whoever wins the Republican primary will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November general election.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Chang, J. (2018, March 7). Cynthia Flores is leading in Williamson County GOP Texas House race. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16A7DC8234742190>.

### 3 Republicans vie to replace state Rep. Gonzales - Property taxes, school financing among issues stressed by candidates.

February 28, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)  
Author: American-Statesman Staff | Section: METR | 822 Words  
Page: B1  
[OpenURL Link](#)

By Julie Chang

If money raised and endorsements are decisive factors in a political race, Cynthia Flores, a Round Rock social services case manager, would easily win the March 6 Republican primary for Texas House District 52.

The district - currently held by Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales, who isn't running for re-election - encompasses most of Round Rock, some of Georgetown and extends east to Hutto and Taylor.

Flores had raised \$92,000 by Jan. 25 and had the endorsements of Gov. Greg Abbott, Gonzales and Texas Alliance for Life, among others.

Careful with how she addresses certain issues that have divided the GOP, Flores wouldn't comment to the American-Statesman on the performance of outgoing Texas House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio, whom the Texas State Republican Executive Committee has censured for obstructing the party's conservative agenda. Straus and his lieutenants blocked bills last year restricting bathroom use by transgender people.

"I'm not going to get into what I thought about him," Flores said of Straus. "I don't think that does any good. I think we need to look forward."

She instead said she is ardently against elective abortions and wants to further boost border security to prevent human trafficking. Flores said she supports requiring voters to approve property tax increases of 4 percent or more - currently, elections are triggered at 8 percent - and bring down property taxes in part through addressing the inefficient way school districts are funded. She said she supports increasing the state's share of public school funding so that local property taxpayers aren't shouldering most of the burden.

Chris Ward, a clinical trial auditor who is second in fundraising with \$17,000 in contributions, said he's not a fan of Straus or Gonzales. Straus isn't conservative enough, and Gonzales didn't do enough to address high property taxes, he said.

Ward said he also wants to fix school financing to help curb property tax increases. To bring costs down for schools, he wants to consider consolidating services and positions at small school districts, ensure that school districts are granting construction projects to lowest bidders when possible and eliminate the recapture system under which school districts with high property wealth give some of their revenue back to the state to be redistributed to property-poor school districts.

The Round Rock school district will send back \$8.3 million in recapture money in 2018, according to an estimate from the Texas Education Agency.

"I'm not going to be type of person to say that all things can't be on the table," Ward said of his approach to fixing school finance.

Ward said if he's elected, he will donate the \$14,400 salary he would make over his two-year term as state representative to nonprofits in the district, including those that help victims of domestic violence.

The third Republican candidate, religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, has raised \$12,000. He did not respond to requests for an interview.

The Republican primary winner will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November election. Talarico has raised \$75,000. Early voting for the primaries ends Friday.

Contact Julie Chang

at 512-912-2565.

Twitter: @juliechang1

(Box)

\* Cynthia Flores, 52, is a case manager for the Round Rock Area Serving Center, which provides such social services as a food pantry and financial assistance for utilities and rent for low-income residents. She has a bachelor's degree in rehabilitation studies from the University of North Texas.

Civic participation: Flores is a community representative on the Allen Baca Senior Center Advisory Board and was appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott to the board of directors for the Brazos River Authority. She is a member of the Professional Women of Williamson County organization, Catholic Business Networking and Williamson County Non-Profit Networking group.

\* Jeremy Story is the president of Campus Renewal, a nonprofit that organizes campus ministries. He has a government degree from the University of Texas, according to his website.

Civic participation: Story serves on the board of directors for the National Day of Prayer and is the state chaplain for the Republican Party of Texas, according to his website.

\* Chris Ward, 42, audits clinical trials to ensure patient safety and proper data reporting. He has a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences from the University of South Florida and a master's degree in critical incident management from Saint Leo University.

Civic participation: Ward said he's been involved in charities including the American Cancer Society, Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, Halo House, Austin Angels, Veteran Collective, Boot Campaign and 22Kill. As a member of the motorcycle community, he has also supported Texas Baptist Children's Home, Helping Hand Home and Clubs for Kids.

\* James Talarico is the only Democrat running in Texas House District 52. He is executive director for Reasoning Mind, a nonprofit that provides math learning material for children. He has a bachelor's degree in government from the University of Texas and a master's degree in education policy from Harvard University, according to his website.

Civic participation: Talarico did not respond to a request for comment from the American-Statesman.

(Box)

About the candidates

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Staff, A. (2018, February 28). 3 Republicans vie to replace state Rep. Gonzales - Property taxes, school financing among issues stressed by candidates.. *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, p. B1. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16A5C25567EB3D00>.



## HD 46 primary headed for run-off without 12-term Rep. Dawanna Dukes

March 7, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)

Author: Ryan Autullo and Julie Chang; Austin American-Statesman Section: State and regional | 859 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

March 07--With a congested field lining up to unseat embattled State Rep. Dawanna Dukes, the House District 46 Democratic Primary has wittled from six candidates to a two-person runoff.

And Dukes, the 12-term lawmaker who has represented the district since 1994, won't be one of those two people.

Undone by an invisible campaign, miniscule fundraising efforts, and questions about her attendance at the past two Legislative sessions, Dukes ran a distant third in a six-person race, landing just 10 percent of the vote after all ballots were tallied Tuesday.

Advancing to the May 22 runoff were immigration lawyer Jose "Chito" Vela III and former Austin city council member Sheryl Cole. Neither reached the majority vote needed to avoid a runoff, as Vela secured 39 percent of the vote and Cole 38 percent. They were separated by 209 votes.

"I think I've got the momentum," Vela said. "I think my campaign has the spirit, the energy and the strength. I'm confident we'll win in May."

On the campaign trail, Cole pulled in endorsements from party heavyweights and amassed \$187,231 in campaign funds since last year. Vela brought in much less, \$46,631, but boasted it came from small donations from district residents.

"In the months ahead I'll continue to be a strong advocate against the voices of hate and division, and I'll fight for the justice and opportunity our community deserves," Cole said.

All along, Dukes showed little initiative to ward off her challengers. She blamed the paltry \$12,250 she raised on banks shunning her over a criminal corruption case that went away when prosecutors dropped charges in October.

None of the three other candidates -- Ana Cortez, Warren Baker and Casey L. McKinney -- got significant votes.

The Democratic winner will oppose Republican Gabriel Nila in November. Nila, a public school teacher who wants to de-criminalize marijuana, fell to Dukes in the 2016 general election. Nnamdi Orakwue is running as an independent.

House District 46 covers parts of East Austin and Pflugerville, and most of Manor.

### Texas House District 47

State Rep. Paul Workman on Tuesday secured the Republican nomination in state House District 47 which encompasses western Travis County, according to the Associated Press.

Workman, who was elected to the state legislature in 2011, had 60 percent of the results so far, ahead of business owner Jay Wiley who had 31 percent of the votes and Patty Vredevelt, a retired nurse, who had 9 percent of the votes.

Although she led for most of the night, real estate broker Vikki Goodwin did not secure enough votes to fend off a runoff on May 22 in the Democratic primary.

Goodwin, who received 34 percent of the votes, will face Elaina Fowler, who runs an employee retiree group and

won 29 percent of the votes, according to the AP.

Nonprofit owner Sheri Soltes received 24 percent of the votes, nurse Candace Aylor received 7 percent and company executive Will Simpson received 6 percent.

#### Texas House District 52

With 61 percent of the votes, social services case manager Cynthia Flores, who had the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, won the Republican nomination in the district that encompasses most of Williamson County.

She bested Chris Ward, a clinical auditor, who had 17 percent of the votes and religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, who had 22 percent of the votes.

Flores will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November general election.

#### Texas House District 45

Wimberley school board member Ken Strange on Tuesday won the Republican primary in House District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties.

Strange captured 55 percent of the votes. Business owner Amber Pearce was second with 24 percent of the votes, followed by citizen activist Naomi Narvaiz (9 percent), Austin Talley (7 percent) and Amy Akers (5 percent).

Texas State University professor Rebecca Bell-Metereau's lead in the Democratic primary most of the night wasn't enough to avoid a runoff on May 22.

Bell-Metereau, who won 45 percent of the votes, will face Erin Zwiener, who received 31 percent of the votes even though a complaint was filed to have her removed from the ballot.

Les Carnes, a criminal analyst for Travis County constable Precinct 3, had 24 percent of votes.

#### Senate District 25

With 74 percent of the Republican votes, Sen. Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels, an emergency room doctor, defeated Shannon McClendon, a gay lawyer who was motivated to run by the unsuccessful attempts to crack down on transgender-friendly bathrooms last legislative session.

In November, Campbell will face Democratic primary winner Steven Kling, a retired Army Reserve captain who works in information technology. Kling narrowly defeated Jack Guerra, a property investor and former city planner, with 51 percent of the votes.

#### Senate District 5

An orthopedic surgeon seeking a second term, Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, defeated Harold Ramm, a longtime superintendent for several Texas school districts with 75 percent of the votes.

Among Democrats, auditor Meg Walsh, who received 71 percent of votes trounced two challengers -- management consultant Brian Cronin (17 percent) and Glenn "Grumpy" Williams, a former lawyer for Child Protective Services (12 percent) -- and will face Schwertner in the November general election.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Autullo and Julie Chang, R. (2018, March 7). HD 46 primary headed for run-off without 12-term Rep. Dawnna Dukes *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current:



## There are three Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature. Only one is coming back.

March 7, 2018 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Alexa Ura | Section: News | 1038 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

And then there was one.

After Tuesday's primary elections, the only Hispanic Republican incumbent who will return to the Texas Legislature in January is state Rep. J.M. Lozano of Kingsville. That's after three Hispanic GOP lawmakers served during the 2017 legislative session.

On Tuesday, Dallas Republican state Rep. Jason Villalba lost his re-election bid to Lisa Luby Ryan, a primary opponent who flanked him on the right. His departure from the Legislature follows Round Rock Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales' previous decision to not seek re-election.

Though it's possible Republicans could make up for one of those losses in November, the prospect that Lozano might be the only Hispanic Republican in the GOP-dominated Legislature offers a grim outlook for those who want the party to increase its standing among Hispanics in a state that is becoming less and less white.

"It's not frustration. It's serious concern," said Artemio "Temo" Muniz, Texas chairman of the Federation of Hispanic Republicans.

Hispanic Republicans have long been underrepresented in the Legislature, but the GOP had made some diversity gains in the last decade. During the 2009 legislative session, there were no Hispanic Republican legislators. Just ahead of the 2016 election cycle, that count had climbed to six.

But the 2016 elections ultimately dealt setbacks to the GOP's modest legislative diversity when half of the Hispanic Republicans in the Legislature — three out of six — lost their re-election bids. They lost their seats even though Republican Gov. Greg Abbott had worked on their behalf.

Texas Republicans' dearth of diversity among their legislative ranks stands in stark contrast to the Democrats. During the last legislative cycle, 41 of the 66 Democrats in the Legislature were Hispanic, while 17 were black. Only six were white and two were Asian.

Meanwhile, there were only five people of color — the three Hispanics, one Asian representative and one black representative — among the 115 Republicans elected to the state House and Senate.

Party leaders, including Abbott, have long rejected the notion that the Texas GOP struggles with diversity.

"We continue our efforts to reach out to the diverse communities here in the state of Texas," Abbott said after the 2016 election, "and that's something that I championed during my campaign last time and will again this next time."

When the count of Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature was cut in half in one fell swoop in 2016, Abbott pointed to the re-elections of Lozano, Villalba and Gonzales as evidence that "the diversity continues in the Republican Party."

Asked about the prospect that only one Hispanic Republican would return to the Legislature, an Abbott spokesman on Wednesday pointed to the governor's support of Hispanic GOP hopefuls, noting that Abbott was planning to work with local Hispanic officials who have switched parties this cycle and are seeking office across the state.

Of note, Lozano, the only Hispanic Republican who is returning to the Legislature, is a former Democrat who switched parties in 2012 after his district near the Coastal Bend was redrawn to be less favorable to Democrats.

This year, Republicans looking to boost their diversity will set their hopes on two legislative races that are far from certain wins.

In Williamson County-based House District 52, social services case manager Cynthia Flores handily won the Republican nomination on Tuesday, setting her up to face Democrat James Talarico in the general election. She's picked up endorsements from Gonzales, the outgoing Hispanic Republican who currently represents the district, and Abbott.

Flores on Wednesday recognized her election could help boost diversity among the GOP's ranks and described the prospect of serving as the only Hispanic Republican woman in the Legislature as a honor.

"It's all about making sure that we have the right people at the right time who are willing to serve and are true to themselves," Flores said. But she acknowledged it was too soon to claim that distinction.

The district, which President Donald Trump won by 1.4 points, is a big target for Democrats in November. The area was represented by a Democrat before Gonzales won it in the 2010 Republican wave.

Some Republicans are also eyeing San Antonio-based House District 117, which switched party hands briefly in 2014 as part of a Republican wave but switched back to Democratic control in 2016. Though the Democratic margin of victory wasn't wide in 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton won it by almost 11 points.

Though the outcomes of those races are uncertain, it's clear that the Republican Party needs to work harder to elect Hispanics who aren't left to ride Republican waves into office, Muniz added.

In managing the 2014 campaign of former state Rep. Gilbert Peña — who flipped a Pasadena-based district that was held by a Democrat by 152 votes — Muniz said their strategy depended on their ability to ride the "Greg Abbott wave."

Peña, who didn't have much legislative experience, lost his seat in 2016 when the Democrat who formerly held it won it back with a 20-point margin of victory.

This year, the Texas GOP is dealing with the ramifications of the party's shift away from Bush-era politics to Trump's, said Victoria De Francesco Soto, a political science lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin.

"There was growth of Hispanic Republicans prompted by Bush's pragmatic politics. It was a pillar of his politics," De Francesco Soto said, referencing former President George W. Bush, who also served as governor of Texas. "Those ideas have been purged from the Republican Party and Hispanics are not getting the same deference or respect they had when the Bush politics was the major force in Texas."

In a state where Hispanic voters tend to vote Democratic, those politics — and the related lack of Hispanic representation among Republican elected officials — could complicate the party's efforts to turn out even conservative Hispanics, she added.

"There is dwindling space for Latino Republicans at the table in elected office," De Francesco Soto said. "And that is going to trickle down to the electorate as well."

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## State House, Senate races in Central Texas

March 8, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)  
Author: American-Statesman Staff | Section: Main | 438 Words  
Page: A7  
[OpenURL Link](#)

### Texas House Dist. 47

State Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, secured his party's nomination with 59.5 percent of the GOP vote in state House District 47, which encompasses western Travis County. Business owner Jay Wiley had 31.2 percent of the vote, and Patty Vredevelt, a retired nurse, had 9.3 percent. Real estate broker Vikki Goodwin, who took 33.6 percent of vote in the District 47 Democratic primary, will face Elaina Fowler, who runs an employee retiree group and won 29.2 percent of vote, in a May 22 runoff. Nonprofit owner Sheri Soltes got 23.7 percent of the Democratic vote; nurse Candace Aylor, 7 percent; and company exec Will Simpson, 6 percent.

### Texas House Dist. 52

With 60.8 percent of vote, social services case manager Cynthia Flores, who had the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, won the Republican nomination in state House District 52, which encompasses portions of Williamson County. She bested Chris Ward, a clinical auditor, who had 16.8 percent of vote, and religious nonprofit president Jeremy Story, who had 22.4 percent of vote. Flores will face Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, in the November general election. He ran unopposed Tuesday.

### Texas House Dist. 45

Wimberley school board member Ken Strange won the GOP primary in House District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties. Strange took 54.7 percent of vote, and business owner Amber Pearce got 24.4 percent, followed by citizen activist Naomi Narvaiz (9.2 percent), Austin Talley (6.8 percent) and Amy Akers (4.9 percent). Texas State University professor Rebecca Bell-Metereau, who won 45.4 percent of the vote in the District 45 Democratic primary, will face Erin Zwiener, who got 30.7 percent of the vote, in a runoff. Les Carnes, a criminal analyst for Travis County constable Precinct 3, had 23.9 percent of the vote.

### Senate District 25

With 73.7 percent of the Republican vote, state Sen. Donna Campbell, R-New Braunfels, an emergency room doctor, defeated Shannon McClendon, a gay lawyer motivated to run by the unsuccessful attempts to crack down on transgender-friendly bathrooms last year. In November, Campbell will face Democratic primary winner Steven Kling, a retired Army Reserve captain who works in information technology. Kling narrowly defeated Jack Guerra, a property investor and former city planner, with a 1-point margin.

### Senate District 5

An orthopedic surgeon seeking a second term, state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, beat Harold Ramm, a longtime superintendent for several Texas school districts, with 75.1 percent of the vote. Among Democrats, auditor Meg Walsh, who got 71.1 percent of the vote, trounced two challengers - management consultant Brian Cronin (16.9 percent) and Glenn "Grumpy" Williams, a former Child Protective Services lawyer (11.9 percent) - and will face Schwertner in November.

Julie Chang,

American-Statesman staff

- **Citation (apa Style)**

Staff, A. (2018, March 8). State House, Senate races in Central Texas. *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, p. A7. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16A864BC18BAA0A0>.

## State Rep. Larry Gonzales is leaving office effective Thursday

June 6, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)  
Author: Julie Chang; Austin American-Statesman | Section: U.S. Politics | 342 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

June 06--State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, said he is resigning Thursday to focus his attention on rebuilding his graphic design business.

Gonzales, whose district encompasses most of Round Rock, all of Hutto and Taylor, and parts of Georgetown, was first elected in 2010. Gonzales announced in August that he would not be running for re-election.

"Forty-eight years old, self-employed and two kids in high school -- it's very difficult for guys like me to make a living and to serve as a legislator. I'm honored to do it but it's no doubt that it's taken a little toll on my family and it's time to get that back in order," Gonzales told the American-Statesman.

Gov. Greg Abbott must call a special election to fill Gonzales' seat. That election could occur Nov. 6, the day of the general election.

Democrat James Talarico, head of an education nonprofit, and Republican Cynthia Flores, a social services case manager, will face off in the general election.

Gonzales, who is chairman of a House Appropriations subcommittee, is one of only three Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature. The other two are Reps. Jason Villalba of Dallas, who lost the Republican primary in his district in March, and J.M. Lozano of Kingsville.

Gonzales played a critical role in last summer's special session, successfully guiding the one must-pass piece of legislation -- extending for two years operations of the Texas Medical Board and four other agencies -- a task that was left undone at the end of the regular session, requiring Abbott to call the special session.

Gonzales said his biggest achievements in the Legislature include extending insurance coverage of physical and occupational therapies for children with autism as well as requiring physical education classes to be more accommodating for children with autism.

"This isn't something that wins you re-election, but I'm telling you, it's the stuff that truly changes lives. Unless you're in that world, you have no idea what we accomplished," Gonzales said.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Chang, J. (2018, June 6). State Rep. Larry Gonzales is leaving office effective Thursday. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16C62B80C479B0E0>.

## James Talarico Launches Campaign in Round Rock, Texas

June 15, 2018 | Austin Villager, The (TX)

Author: Tsoke (Chuch) Adjavon | Villager Columnist Section: News | 227 Words

Page: 4

[OpenURL Link](#)

On June 9, 2018, James Talarico, candidate for Texas House District 52 held a campaign opening in Round Rock. Moreover, Mr. Talarico is the Democratic Party nominee who will face Cynthia Flores, the Republican nominee. Since Larry Gonzales who was the former representative of Texas House 52 resigned, then this race is considered as an “open seat.” In addition, Texas House District 52 is considered to be a “swing district”, due to the fact it can go either way.

Since it is considered as a “swing district” Democrats strongly believe that they can win this seat. Furthermore, it is considered as a swing district due to its “demographic shift.” Over the years, more liberal Austinites have been moving into Williamson County due to the issue of affordability. In addition, Williamson County has seen a drastic increase of immigrants due to its high-tech industries. In the past years, people from South Asia (India); the African continent; and the Middle East has called Williamson home.

Finally, Texas House District 52 covers the Eastern half of Williamson County. It includes areas such as: Round Rock, Georgetown, Sun City, Hutto, Taylor and numerous other surrounding municipalities. Moreover, it is population growth in the various cities has caused it to become a swing district. According to Diaspora Vote, a democrat who can reach out and galvanize the various immigrant population can win this district.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

(Chuch) Adjavon, T. (2018, June 15). James Talarico Launches Campaign in Round Rock, Texas. *Austin Villager, The (TX)*, p. 4. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16C967DBB82D4190>.

## Former Round Rock state Rep. Larry Gonzales takes lobbyist job

June 20, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)  
Author: Mike Parker; Austin American-Statesman | Section: State and regional | 371 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

June 20--While Larry Gonzales has resigned from his Texas House seat, his new position will likely often lead him back to the state Capitol.

Lobbying and political advocacy firm Husch Blackwell Strategies announced this week that Gonzales is joining its Texas team as a senior consultant, where he'll work on behalf of clients to help steer state legislation. In a media release, the firm noted Gonzales' experience as both an elected state representative and his earlier role on staff at the lieutenant governor and attorney general's offices.

READ: Gonzales resigns from Texas House seat

"Larry brings to our team a deep understanding of the public policy issues our clients care about and his strategic counsel will be a tremendous asset to our firm," Andy Blunt, chairman of the board and chief operating officer for Husch Blackwell Strategies, said in the release.

Among Husch Blackwell Strategies' clients are Dell Technologies, Audobon, General Motors and MillerCoors, according to its website. Past endeavors have been advocating on behalf of individuals persecuted by their own governments abroad, legislative intervention for national mortgage and financial market institution and developing legislative support for online gaming issues.

Gonzales, a Republican who had represented the District 52 House seat since 2010, announced in September he would not seek a fifth term in the House. While he said nothing particularly led him not to run, he is focused on spending more time with his wife and children.

Three Republicans -- Cynthia Flores, Jeremy Story and Chris Ward -- vied for seat in the March primary. Flores, a case manager at the Round Rock Area Serving Center, won that race and will face Democrat James Talarico in November.

READ MORE: Flores easily secures GOP nomination in March primary

With Gonzales resignation, the state House will hold a special election to fulfill the remainder of his term through November. That election could occur Nov. 6, the same day of the general election.

Gonzales is president and owner of Lazarus Graphics, a communications and public relations firm. He earned a master of arts degree from the Texas State University School of Public Administration and has a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Parker, M. (2018, June 20). Former Round Rock state Rep. Larry Gonzales takes lobbyist job. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16CA5A05B046CF78>.

## Gov. Abbott sets Nov. 6 special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales

June 29, 2018 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Emma Platoff | Section: Texas | 196 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

The special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, will take place on Nov. 6, the same day voters were already set to head to the polls to select his 2019 replacement, Gov. Greg Abbott announced Friday.

Gonzales, who served in the Texas House since 2011 and worked in the Capitol for years before that as a staffer, had already said he wouldn't seek another term, but he announced June 6 that he'd retire early, saying "it's time to get on with the next phase of my life." That set up a special election to fill the remainder of his two-year term.

Candidates have until Aug. 23 to file to run for the seat, the governor's announcement said. Two candidates, Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico, have already announced they're running to serve the central Texas district for the full term. Flores has Gonzales' support.

Earlier this month, Abbott set a special election date of July 31 to replace former state Sen. Carlos Uresti, a San Antonio Democrat sentenced this month to 12 years in prison. And in April, he set a Nov. 6 special election to complete the term of former state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Platoff, E. (2018, June 29). Gov. Abbott sets Nov. 6 special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales *Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current:

<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16CE4398096BBA58>.

## Republican set to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips after drawing no special election opponents

August 23, 2018 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: Texas | 250 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Republican Reggie Smith will replace former state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, in state House District 62. [Facebook campaign page](#)

Republican Reggie Smith is effectively the next state representative from House District 62 after no one else filed Thursday for the special election to fill the seat.

As long as Smith gets one vote in the Nov. 6 special election, he will get to finish the term of ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, who did not run for re-election and resigned in April. Smith, a Sherman attorney, is also his party's nominee for the full term representing HD-62, which begins in January. That race will also be decided on the same day in November, and it features two other candidates: Democrat Valerie Hefner and Libertarian David Schaab.

Six o'clock Thursday evening was the filing deadline for the Nov. 6 special elections in both HD-62 and House District 52, where former state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, also chose not to seek another term and then stepped down early. Two candidates filed for the HD-52 special election, and they are both also on the Nov. 6 ballot for the full term: Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico.

Early voting starts Oct. 22 for the both the special and regularly scheduled elections on Nov. 6.

Read related Tribune coverageGov. Abbott sets Nov. 6 special election to replace former state Rep. Larry GonzalesGov. Greg Abbott calls Nov. 6 special election for Larry Phillips' state House seatRep. Larry Phillips to step down from the Texas House on Monday

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2018, August 23). Republican set to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips after drawing no special election opponents. *Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16E0141BAA3E83A0>.

## Meet six Longhorns running for public office in the upcoming November midterms

September 14, 2018 | Daily Texan, The: University of Texas at Austin (TX)

Author: Chad Lyle | Section: State | 676 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

For Texans, early voting for the midterm elections begins in less than six weeks, and several former Longhorns are on the ballot across the state.

Six UT alumni currently running for office spoke with The Daily Texan about what inspired them to get involved in public service.

### Governor Greg Abbott, Class of 1981

Abbott is currently campaigning for a second term as the 48th Governor of Texas. After graduating from UT, Abbott received a law degree from Vanderbilt University Law School and went on to serve three terms as Texas Attorney General before successfully seeking the governor's office in 2014.

"When I originally ran for governor in 2014, I ran because I believed in the promise of Texas' future," Abbott, a Republican, said in a statement to The Daily Texan. "Since then, we have taken Texas to even greater heights. Business is booming, our communities are safer and high school graduation rates are at all-time highs. But I know that there's more to do to keep Texas exceptional."

### Rep. Lloyd Doggett, Class of 1967 / Class of 1970 (J.D.)

Congressman Lloyd Doggett has been a member of the U.S. House of Representatives for 23 years, and is currently running for a 13th term. Doggett was previously a state senator and a Texas Supreme Court justice.

"My involvement at UT as a Business School representative, member of the UT debate team, and later as Student Body President and on the Texas Law Review, played a significant role in my decision to get involved," Doggett, a Democrat, said in a statement to The Daily Texan. "Consumer and environmental protection and opening up our government for greater public participation were key interests that I advanced to get elected as Texas state senator."

### Chip Roy, Class of 2003 (J.D.)

Chip Roy is the Republican nominee to represent District 21 in the U.S. House. He served as chief of staff to Republican Senator Ted Cruz and a special adviser to former Governor Rick Perry before jumping into the political arena himself.

"I'm running for Congress because it's time for the American people to reclaim our God-given right to live free from government interference," Roy said in a statement to The Daily Texan. "It's time for genuine, proven leadership to fight for our children against a tide of government regulation, spending, and coercion that threatens their future."

### Julie Oliver, Class of 1998 (J.D.)

Julie Oliver is the Democratic nominee to represent District 25 in the U.S. House. Since graduating from UT School of Law, Oliver has worked as a lawyer and accountant in healthcare finance, and was appointed in 2017 to the board of Central Health by the Austin City Council.

"Right now we have elected representatives who answer the call of corporations, special interests, lobbyists, and PACs — not the people they are elected to serve and represent," Oliver said in a statement to The Daily Texan.

Sri Preston Kulkarni, Class of 2002

Sri Preston Kulkarni is the Democratic nominee to represent District 22 in the U.S. House. After graduating, Kulkarni spent 14 years in the Foreign Service, the primary group of diplomats in the State Department working to promote U.S. foreign policy goals.

"I resigned from the Foreign Service to come back home and stand up for the things that I believe in," Kulkarni said. "I think there's a direct connection to my time at UT and the values that I learned, both with other students and through what UT allowed me to do, which propelled me into the Foreign Service but also drew me back to Texas."

James Talarico, Class of 2011

James Talarico is a Democratic candidate for state representative in District 52 of the Texas House. At UT, Talarico served as the president of the University Democrats and executive director of Student Government. He received his M.A. from Harvard and became a school teacher before deciding to run for office.

"At UT I worked with some amazing student leaders to lobby our legislature to invest in higher education and make college affordable," Talarico said via Facebook messenger. "That experience inspired me to fight for educational equity as a middle school teacher and now as a candidate for office."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Lyle, C. (2018, September 14). Meet six Longhorns running for public office in the upcoming November midterms *Daily Texan, The: University of Texas at Austin (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16E6EF15A4428438>.

## Analysis: For state Sen. Charles Schwertner, bad news and a trickle-down effect

September 27, 2018 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: Texas | 808 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Charles Schwertner, Senator and Chair of the Senate Committee on Health and Human Services, listens to DFPS Commissioner John Specia speak at a hearing at the Texas Capitol on April 20, 2016. Shelby Tauber/The Texas Tribune

Editor's note: If you'd like an email notice whenever we publish Ross Ramsey's column, [click here](#).

\*Correction appended

An allegation of sexual misconduct against state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, might not ruin his re-election, but it could foul things for other Republicans on the ballot — particularly in Williamson County.

According to the Austin American-Statesman, Schwertner was accused, in a complaint filed with the University of Texas at Austin, of propositioning a UT graduate student and texting her a picture of his genitals. On Wednesday, his lawyers said he sent no such messages: "Sen. Schwertner did not send any inappropriate texts as alleged. Period."

If that's proved correct, and quickly, the political ramifications should disappear as quickly as they arose. But time is short this late in the election season; Schwertner not only has to dispel the accusation and the political chatter — he has to do it right away.

The news report yanked attention to a state Senate race that wasn't on anyone's list of hotly competitive elections, and it heightened apprehensions among Republicans who might be affected if this dampens enthusiasm among the senator's voters, particularly in Williamson County.

That's the most populous of the nine counties in Schwertner's sprawling Central and East Texas district, which reaches from Williamson east to Walker County and north to Limestone and Freestone counties. The majority of the voters in his last election in 2014 were in Williamson (59 percent) and Brazos (18 percent) counties.

It's an overwhelmingly Republican Senate district. Republican Greg Abbott beat Democrat Wendy Davis by 30 percentage points in the 2014 race for governor. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton by 20 percentage points two years later. In his last election, Schwertner got 65 percent of the vote with both a Democrat and a Libertarian in the race. He won in all nine counties; the low spot was a 60.5 percent win in Robertson County.

It's his to lose. Or it was before the scandal whistle blew. The incumbent has two opponents this time — Democrat Meg Walsh and Libertarian Amy Lyons — ready to jump if the frontrunner falls.

It would take a very, very long fall to beat a Republican in the state's 5th Senate District.

But misfortune in a race like his could fall harder in contests where Republicans don't have the lead Schwertner's got. Williamson County is critical to U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Georgetown, who's in a high-profile dogfight with former helicopter pilot M.J. Hegar, a Democrat. Carter can't afford to lose rattled conservative voters, and a Schwertner stumble could put him in a vise, with U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz and U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke in a close race for U.S. Senate above and the state Senate race below.

The Texas House seats currently held by Reps. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Hill, and Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, could be affected in the same way. Dale faces Democrat John Bucy and Libertarian Zack Parks in a district that leans

Republican — but without much of a safety net. Gonzales isn't running for re-election, and that district is also a close one. Trump beat Clinton in Gonzales' district and Clinton beat Trump in Dale's, but the presidential candidates were separated by less than 3 percentage points in each race. Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico are on the ballot there.

Unlike the nine-county state Senate district or, for that matter, the two-county congressional district Carter is defending, those House districts were in play before the allegations surfaced.

Like any politician this close to an election when allegations of bad behavior arise, Schwertner is fighting on two fronts. He's hired lawyers to deal with the legal issues, and UT is doing an investigation to see what texts actually were sent, who sent and received them, and so on — to figure out whether anything criminal or improper took place. And he's got a political issue or, if you prefer, a public one: If it's confirmed that nothing inappropriate took place, how will the voters view all of this?

Their support and turnout will affect the senator — and with him, his fellow Republicans on the local ballots.

Correction: An earlier version of this column said Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in Tony Dale's HD-136; in fact, Clinton narrowly beat Trump.

Disclosure: The University of Texas at Austin has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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Analysis: Some voters want candidates who watch what they say. Some don't.

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## It's bad news, trickle-down effect for state Sen. Charles Schwertner

October 8, 2018 | Victoria Advocate, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: Opinion | 651 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

An allegation of sexual misconduct against state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, might not ruin his re-election, but it could foul things for other Republicans on the ballot – particularly in Williamson County.

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## Abbott holds huge fundraising lead over Valdez headed into homestretch

October 10, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove | Section: News | 783 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

There may or may not be a blue wave come November, but, with the notable exception of U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke, D-El Paso — who is outpacing every U.S. Senate candidate in the country in raising money in his bid to defeat U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas — fundraising by the rest of the Texas Democratic Party's statewide ticket is more of a trickle.

According to campaign finance statements for the period between July 1 and Sept. 27, which were due midnight Tuesday with the Texas Ethics Commission, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's re-election campaign has a nearly 90-to-1 cash advantage over Democratic challenger Lupe Valdez heading into the homestretch of the 2018 campaign.

Valdez's campaign reported raising \$680,000, and spent \$604,000, leaving her campaign with \$303,000 in the bank. Texans for Greg Abbott raised \$5.7 million dollars in the same period, spent \$7.3 million, and had \$26.8 million in cash on hand.

That's actually a less onerous gap for Valdez, the former Dallas County sheriff, than the 1,000-to-1 cash advantage Abbott held over her late-starting campaign at the beginning of the year.

Abbott, however, still flush with cash, is determined to turn out Republican voters in numbers that could give him a crushing victory and ensure, barring a truly historic tsunami, comfortable wins for all the down-ballot Republicans on the statewide ticket — who haven't suffered a loss since 1994 — in a state in which about 60 percent of all voters punch a straight ticket vote. (The Cruz-O'Rourke race and congressional contests appear above the governor's race atop ballots.)

Judging by his latest fundraising numbers, Republican Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller seems content to draft on Abbott's operation. In the third quarter, Miller collected an astonishingly meager \$24,570, leaving his campaign with less than \$53,000 in the bank. Democratic rival Kim Olson raised more than \$130,000 and finished the quarter with nearly \$162,000 in cash on hand.

But Miller spokesman Todd Smith said one has to look at fundraising "in the totality" and that Miller's campaign is confident it has all the money it needs to win in November. Miller does maintain a fierce social media presence, thanks to his delight in politically incorrect, and sometimes factually inaccurate, pro-Trump memes, and has a nose for free media, garnering headlines this week for backing the Sons of Confederate Veterans desire for a Confederate-themed specialty Texas license plate.

"The numbers tell an important story about how Texans are ready for a change," Olson campaign manager Kolby Monnig said in an emailed statement. And Olson's haul, while greater than Miller's, was less than James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for Texas House District 52, raised in a single competitive Williamson County race.

Justin Nelson, the Democratic nominee for Texas attorney general, did the best of the down-ballot Democratic candidates, raising \$1.1 million and leaving him with \$1.7 million for his campaign against Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, who raised \$488,000, spent \$3.2 million and had \$4.3 million in the bank.

"This report shows that we have the resources to inform voters across Texas, allowing them to best decide who to hire as a lawyer for all Texans," Nelson said in a statement. "I believe nobody is above the law, including Ken Paxton — the first statewide official in Texas history to run for re-election while indicted."

That's the message Nelson has been trying to hammer home about Paxton, but it's one that he would need a lot

more money than he has raised so far to reach a critical mass of voters in a state the size of Texas.

In the race for lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, the Republican incumbent, raised \$1.6 million, spent \$7.5 million and had \$8.2 million in cash on hand. Democratic challenger Mike Collier raised \$396,000, spent \$263,000, and had \$233,00 in the bank.

Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush raised \$181,400, spent \$272,000, and had \$827,000 in the bank.

Bush's Democratic opponent, energy and natural resources attorney Miguel Suazo, raised \$26,000, over the same period, spent \$128,000 and had \$12,000 in his campaign coffers.

Comptroller Glenn Hegar raised \$112,000, spent \$62,000 and had \$5 million to spend or save. Democrat Joi Chevalier raised \$27,000, spent \$16,000 and had \$19,000 in cash on hand.

Republican Railroad Commissioner Christi Craddick raised \$364,000, spent \$300,000 and had \$1.6 million in the bank, while her Democratic rival, Roman McAllen, raised \$14,000, spent \$12,000 and had a little more than \$5,000 in his campaign account.

Meanwhile, despite her lagging fundraising, Valdez still had her game face on in a fundraising solicitation Wednesday: "If you're ready to build a Texas that's open to everyone and that works for everyone, make a contribution to my campaign today of \$10 or whatever you are able towards our Oct 27 fundraising goal."

Staff writers Asher Price and Johnathan Silver contributed to this story.

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## There may or may not be a blue wave come November, but, with

October 11, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman (TX)

Author: Jonathan Tilove jtilove@statesman.com | Section: TX News | 783 Words

Page: A8

[OpenURL Link](#)

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Abbott, however, still flush with cash, is determined to turn out Republican voters in numbers that could give him a crushing victory and ensure, barring a truly historic tsunami, comfortable wins for all the down-ballot Republicans on the statewide ticket — who haven't suffered a loss since 1994 — in a state in which about 60 percent of all voters punch a straight ticket vote. (The Cruz-O'Rourke race and congressional contests appear above the governor's race atop ballots.)

Judging by his latest fundraising numbers, Republican Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller seems content to draft on Abbott's operation. In the third quarter, Miller collected an astonishingly meager \$24,570, leaving his campaign with less than \$53,000 in the bank. Democratic rival Kim Olson raised more than \$130,000 and finished the quarter with nearly \$162,000 in cash on hand.

But Miller spokesman Todd Smith said one has to look at fundraising "in the totality" and that Miller's campaign is confident it has all the money it needs to win in November. Miller does maintain a fierce social media presence, thanks to his delight in politically incorrect, and sometimes factually inaccurate, pro-Trump memes, and has a nose for free media, garnering headlines this week for backing the Sons of Confederate Veterans desire for a Confederate-themed specialty Texas license plate.

"The numbers tell an important story about how Texans are ready for a change," Olson campaign manager Kolby Monnig said in an emailed statement. And Olson's haul, while greater than Miller's, was less than James Talarico, the Democratic nominee for Texas House District 52, raised in a single competitive Williamson County race.

Justin Nelson, the Democratic nominee for Texas attorney general, did the best of the down-ballot Democratic candidates, raising \$1.1 million and leaving him with \$1.7 million for his campaign against Republican Attorney General Ken Paxton, who raised \$488,000, spent \$3.2 million and had \$4.3 million in the bank.

"This report shows that we have the resources to inform voters across Texas, allowing them to best decide who to hire as a lawyer for all Texans," Nelson said in a statement. "I believe nobody is above the law, including Ken Paxton — the first statewide official in Texas history to run for re-election while indicted."

That's the message Nelson has been trying to hammer home about Paxton, but it's one that he would need a lot more money than he has raised so far to reach a critical mass of voters in a state the size of Texas.

In the race for lieutenant governor, Dan Patrick, the Republican incumbent, raised \$1.6 million, spent \$7.5 million and had \$8.2 million in cash on hand. Democratic challenger Mike Collier raised \$396,000, spent \$263,000, and had \$233,00 in the bank.

Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush raised \$181,400, spent \$272,000, and had \$827,000 in the bank.

Bush's Democratic opponent, energy and natural resources attorney Miguel Suazo, raised \$26,000, over the same period, spent \$128,000 and had \$12,000 in his campaign coffers.

Comptroller Glenn Hegar raised \$112,000, spent \$62,000 and had \$5 million to spend or save. Democrat Joi Chevalier raised \$27,000, spent \$16,000 and had \$19,000 in cash on hand.

Republican Railroad Commissioner Christi Craddick raised \$364,000, spent \$300,000 and had \$1.6 million in the bank, while her Democratic rival, Roman McAllen, raised \$14,000, spent \$12,000 and had a little more than \$5,000 in his campaign account.

Meanwhile, despite her lagging fundraising, Valdez still had her game face on in a fundraising solicitation Wednesday: "If you're ready to build a Texas that's open to everyone and that works for everyone, make a contribution to my campaign today of \$10 or whatever you are able towards our Oct 27 fundraising goal."

Staff writers Asher Price and Johnathan Silver contributed to this story.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Tilove, J. (2018, October 11). There may or may not be a blue wave come November, but, with *Austin American-Statesman (TX)*, p. A8. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F04417A8FF0690>.

## Texas Democrats board bus for 5-day tour

October 17, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Asher Price | Section: News | 569 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Hoping to energize Democratic voters ahead of the coming election, Texas Democratic candidates launched a statewide bus tour Wednesday in Northwest Austin.

"This allows us to get out and talk to voters," said Mike Collier, Democratic candidate for lieutenant governor. "We like each other as a slate, we all have a similar world view. Politics should be joyful, and that's what this is."

At a kick-off event at the Williamson County Democratic Party headquarters, Collier was joined by statewide candidates Lupe Valdez, running for governor; Joi Chevalier, running for comptroller; Miguel Suazo, running for land commissioner; Roman McAllen, running for railroad commissioner; and Kathy Cheng, Texas Supreme Court candidate for Place 6. Local candidates also were present: James Talarico, running for Texas House District 52, John Bucy, running for Texas House District 136, and MJ Hegar, running in the 31st Congressional District.

RELATED: O'Rourke and Cruz relied more on Texas contributors than out-of-staters

Unity and working across party lines were the main themes. Talarico, a former middle school teacher, said he was "proud to be standing here" with "selfless, committed servant-leaders."

"A lot of people are trying to tear us apart at a time when ... most of us agree on where we want to go," said Hegar, who is running against U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Round Rock, in a district that encompasses most of Williamson and Bell counties.

Candidates, their aides and supporters took pictures of themselves outside the bus, which was wrapped in blue.

"On the road for a fair shot for all," says the bumper of the vehicle.

"Health care, strong schools, and an economy that works for everyone," is the motto on the side of the bus, in English on one side and Spanish on the other.

After Wednesday's scheduled stops at College Station and Katy, the bus is due in the Metroplex on Thursday before heading back through Central Texas on Friday on its way to San Antonio. Saturday morning starts with a block-walk in Laredo, lunch in Alice, and afternoon get-togethers in Brownsville and Edinburg. Sunday, the final day of the "Fair Shot for All Bus Tour," begins in Kingsville, before heading northeast through the Corpus Christi area and Victoria and ending, at 5 p.m. in San Marcos, with a last rally on the eve of early voting at San Marcos Plaza Park.

The bus, which the driver said was the same one that Hillary Clinton had used for her 2016 presidential bid, might act like a rolling fundraising machine.

RELATED: Democrats see chance to oust up to 3 GOP Texas senators

Manny Garcia, Texas Democratic Party deputy executive director, said that among other activities on the bus, he thought candidates would be "dialing for dollars and preparing for their next campaign stop and the one after that."

Complete with televisions, Wi-Fi, a kitchen, an office and a full bathroom, the bus has room for up to 20 people – leaving campaign aides and family members to follow in a caravan of "chase cars" stuffed full of yard signs and campaign literature.

Texas Democratic Party officials declined to say how much the bus cost, but the website of Nashville, Tenn.-based Premiere Transportation, which rented the vehicle, says daily rates range from \$1,800 to \$2,800.

The bus tour comes as polls suggest Texas Democratic candidates are unlikely to win statewide races.

"Everyone tells me it's an uphill battle," Valdez said. "What other kind of battle is there? A piece-of-cake battle?"

Early voting begins Monday. Election Day is Nov. 6.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Price, A. (2018, October 17). Texas Democrats board bus for 5-day tour. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F27CF2E56359A0>.

## Flores, Talarico vie for Texas House seat in Williamson County

November 2, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Julie Chang | Section: News | 529 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

In predominantly Republican Williamson County, James Talarico knows he needs to stand out to win as a Democrat. So he livestreamed on Facebook his walk across the length of the district, about 25 miles, in a day.

At 29, he'd be the youngest member of the Legislature. "We haven't been shy about telling folks that. I think having new blood and having fresh perspective is what people want," said Talarico, who faces Republican Cynthia Flores, 53, a social services manager, in House District 52.

The winner will serve a full two-year term as well two months left in former Rep. Larry Gonzales' term. Gonzales, a Round Rock Republican, left office in June and now works for a lobbying firm.

The last time Williamson County voters elected a Democrat — Diana Maldonado — to the Texas House was in 2008, when District 52 included parts of Austin and Democratic turnout was high.

The district now encompasses much of Round Rock, Taylor and Hutto. President Donald Trump received 1,000 more votes than Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton in the district in 2016.

Talarico, who previously led an education nonprofit, raised \$400,000 between Jan. 1 and Oct. 27, according to most recent campaign finance reports. Flores, who received Gov. Greg Abbott's endorsement during the March primary, has raised \$328,000 more than Talarico. Flores also has received \$250,000 from Texans for Lawsuit Reform, which supports tort reform.

Flores' husband is Rene Flores, a member of the Round Rock City Council.

Flores declined a phone interview with the American-Statesman for this story but opted to submit answers to questions via email.

If elected, she said she would support increasing the state's share of educational funding, which is currently estimated to be 38 percent. Local property taxpayers are on the hook for most of the rest.

"Shifting the burden of funding schools from property taxpayers to the state will largely rely on increased sales tax revenue," Flores said. She did not specify how

She said she would work to increase funding for skills training programs and high school career and technology courses.

Flores said she would work to decrease human smuggling, "punishing those who engage in sex trafficking of women and minors."

If elected, Talarico said he would support a constitutional amendment that would force the state to pay 50 percent of the total cost of public school funding. He also wants to eliminate loopholes in the tax code that would force commercial property owners to pay more. He also said the Legislature needs to update the recapture system, which relies on outdated funding formulas to determine how much property-wealthy school districts send to the state to support property-poor school districts.

Talarico, who taught in the San Antonio school district for two years, said he doesn't support using state money, like vouchers, to help families pay for private school tuition.

"My opponent has proposed using public money to support private schools, which is something I fundamentally disagree with. I respect my opponent and like her personally, but still disagree pretty deeply on the direction we should take for our local schools," Talarico said.

Flores has said she supports spending state money for private tuition in cases of students with disabilities and special needs.

Election Day is Tuesday.

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Chang, J. (2018, November 2). Flores, Talarico vie for Texas House seat in Williamson County. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/16F7D3BA6F6F5750>.

## Texas House battleground playing out in suburbs

November 3, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Johnathan Silver | Section: News | 1085 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

If Texas Democrats make gains this election, they most likely will come in down-ballot races, where a dozen GOP-held state House seats are seen as vulnerable. Those districts are concentrated in the booming suburbs of Austin and Dallas, where population growth and demographic changes have altered the electoral landscape.

Austin's suburbs are home to thousands of new arrivals, both from outside the area and from Austin, in search of more affordable housing and, in some cases, better schools. Many of the new suburbanites vote more like Austinites than longtime residents of places like Buda and Cedar Park, according to Texas political scientists.

The shift was evident two years ago, when Hillary Clinton edged President Donald Trump in 10 Texas House districts won by Republicans, including one suburban Austin district. Seven were in the Dallas area, and two in Houston.

This year, amid high turnout during early voting and with Democrats motivated by Trump and a popular Democratic candidate at the top of the ticket — U.S. Senate candidate Beto O'Rourke — party leaders are optimistic they can make a significant dent in the Republicans' majority in the Texas House, which stood at 40 seats in the last legislative session.

Rice University political science professor Mark Jones, who studies Texas politics, identified a dozen battleground House districts, all held now or most recently by a Republican. Of those, he considers six toss-ups. In the other six, he gives the GOP candidates a slight edge.

Republicans hold a significant money advantage in those contests, however, according an American-Statesman analysis of campaign finance data. In all but one of the 12 races, Republican candidates on average raised twice as much money as their Democratic rivals this year.

Still, Texas Democratic leaders are eying as many as 25 GOP seats they say Democrats can win — districts either won by Clinton or where Trump won by 10 points or less. That would give the party a majority in the House, an unlikely outcome on Tuesday night.

Jones predicts Democrats will pick up three to 10 GOP seats.

The more the better for Democrats' chances of influencing who becomes the next Texas House speaker, Jones said.

"It could strengthen the Democrats," he said, adding, "the more Democrats there are, the more credible the threat (moderate Republicans) defect" to support a less conservative speaker.

In the Austin area, four districts are on Jones' list:

- District 45 (leans Republican), where state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs, isn't running for re-election.
- District 47 (toss-up), where state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, is seeking a fifth term.
- District 52 (toss-up), without representation since June, when state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down.
- District 136 (toss-up), where state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, is seeking a fourth term.

## Hays County

Republican Ken Strange, a Wimberley school board member and director of Wimberley EMS, said his campaign's internal analysis of early voters show he's leading in District 45, though he didn't provide a margin.

The district is dominated by Hays County, one of the fastest-growing counties in the country and home to the 39,000-student Texas State University, where early voting was expanded after high interest and a threat of a lawsuit.

Early voting turnout in the county topped 46 percent.

Trump defeated Clinton in Hays County by less than a percentage point — 600 votes — but in rural Blanco County, the other half of the two-county district, Trump won by 3,000 votes. In the March primary, 13,000 Republicans and 11,000 Democrats voted in the district.

Erin Zwiener, Strange's Democratic opponent, said she has been targeting the fast-growing areas of the district, including the Interstate 35 corridor, where she said there are 20,000 more registered voters than two years ago.

"We're one of the most educated districts in Texas. We're young both because of the college and young families in Buda, Kyle and San Marcos. We have a high Hispanic population and a growing African-American population. All the ingredients are here" for a Democrat to win, Zwiener, an author and educator, said Friday.

## Travis County

Across Travis County, 368,000 ballots were cast in early voting, just slightly below the 2016 early voting total and far exceeding the 2014 total.

Vikki Goodwin, the Democratic candidate for District 47, the western portion of the county, predicted a close race. She said she's been targeting more conservative areas, including Lake Travis, Lakeway and Lago Vista.

Workman, who has made a name for himself by fighting Austin ordinances he considers too restrictive, is the only Travis County Republican in the Texas House.

The district was nearly evenly split between Trump and Clinton. And during the March primary, Democratic voters in the district outnumbered Republican voters, 16,018 to 15,317.

## Williamson County

Early voting totals in Williamson County slightly exceeded the total in 2016, and turnout there was second-highest among the state's 30 largest counties.

"We know that the Beto movement has definitely motivated the Democrats to come out," said Cynthia Flores, the Republican running in House District 52, which encompasses much of Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. "But we have an incredible team in Williamson County, and Gov. Greg Abbott has really supported our county and has been very well received. I feel very positive."

Abbott's campaign has given Flores, a social services manager, \$67,000 for political advertising.

Her Democratic opponent, James Talarico, who previously led an education nonprofit, said his campaign's analysis shows Democrats turning out who typically stay home for midterm elections.

"I think it's a dead heat," Talarico said. "If we elect good, decent people to office this year it will be because there's a coalition between Democratic voters, independent voters and Republicans who are willing to stand up to their

party."

In House District 146, encompassing Cedar Park and Leander, Dale is facing Democrat John Bucy, a small-business owner, for a second time.

When he first ran against Dale in 2014, Bucy lost by 13 percentage points. Bucy became chairman of the Williamson County Democrats in 2016 and focused on building the party's structure. The effort paid off with nine Democrats elected to city and county offices, he said.

In 2016, Dale won re-election by 10 points, but Clinton defeated Trump in the district. Bucy said Clinton's performance and recent victories for the local party show that a Democrat can win the district.

For his part, Dale said he's seeing enthusiasm among Republican voters. He said on the Texas Insider podcast Oct. 27: "What you hear from the left is they want to say the demographics are changing in Williamson County. And that's just code to say, 'Hey, Republicans, don't show up and vote,' because they want to win."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

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## Democratic super PAC injects \$2.2 million into Texas House races in closing days

November 3, 2018 | Eagle, The (Bryan-College Station, TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: Texas | 864 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

View of the Texas House floor during the budget debate on House Bill 1 on May 29, 2015. Bob Daemmrigh

\*Clarification appended

A Democratic super PAC focused on state legislative races has injected \$2.2 million into a slew of Texas House contests in their closing days.

The group, Forward Majority, is using the money to help 32 Democratic candidates, many of them challengers in GOP-held districts who have not been able to match the financial backing of the incumbents. A large majority of the funds are going toward digital ads targeting the Republicans as beholden to big donors and corporate interests, with a couple of spots tailored to specific lawmakers.

"We are staging this late intervention because we believe there is a unique window of opportunity for first time candidates to take down several entrenched Republican incumbents on Tuesday," said Ben Wexler-Waite, a spokesman for Forward Majority.

Democrats currently control 55 seats in the 150-member House, meaning they would need to pick up 21 seats on Tuesday to capture the majority. Very few are predicting the House could flip, but Forward Majority's investment nonetheless reflects Democratic optimism about significantly expanding their ranks in the lower chamber come Tuesday.

Forward Majority was launched last year by alumni of Barack Obama's campaigns with the goal of retaking state legislatures across the country before the next round of redistricting in 2021. Texas is one of six states the group is targeting this cycle as part of a nearly \$9 million push.

In Texas, Forward Majority began seriously spending in its targeted races just a couple weeks ago. Its latest filing with the Texas Ethics Commission, which covered Sept. 28 through Oct. 27, shows the group spent \$1.1 million. The rest of the \$2.2 million has come since then, Wexler-Waite said.

Forward Majority is not the only seven-figure force for Democrats in Texas House races this cycle. The House Democratic Campaign Committee has raised \$1.1 million this cycle, fueled by six-figure donations from the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, the group led by former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. The HDCC is currently waging an \$800,000 digital ad campaign in the most competitive seats.

The races that Forward Majority is targeting include:

HD-14: State Rep. John Raney, R-College Station, is being challenged by Democrat Josh Wilkinson. HD-23: Republican Mayes Middleton and Democrat Amanda Jamrok are running for the seat being vacated by defeated state Rep. Wayne Faircloth, R-Galveston. HD-26: State Rep. Rick Miller, R-Sugar Land, faces Democratic challenger L. Sarah DeMerchant. HD-28: State Rep. John Zerwas, R-Richmond, faces a Democratic challenge from Meghan Scoggins. HD-45: Republican Ken Strange and Democrat Erin Zwiener are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs. HD-47: Democrat Vikki Goodwin is running against state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin. HD-52: Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico are competing to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock. HD-54: Republican Brad Buckley and Democrat Kathy Richerson are running for the seat being left open by defeated state Rep. Scott Cospers, R-Killeen. HD-64: Democrat Andrew Morris running to unseat state Rep. Lynn Stucky, R-Denton. HD-65: State Rep. Ron Simmons, R-Carrollton, is being challenged by Democrat

Michelle Beckley.HD-66: Democrat Sharon Hirsch is challenging state Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano.HD-67: State Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, faces a challenge from Democrat Sarah Depew.HD-85: Democrat Jennifer Cantu is challenging state Rep. Phil Stephenson, R-Wharton.HD-92: State Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, is being opposed by Democrat Steve Riddell.HD-93: Democrat Nancy Bean is running to unseat state Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth.HD-94: Democrat Finnigan Jones is challenging state Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington.HD-96: State Rep. Bill Zedler, R-Arlington, faces a Democratic challenge from Ryan Ray.HD-97: Democrat Beth Llewellyn McLaughlin is running against state Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth.HD-121: Republican Steve Allison and Democrat Celina Montoya are running for the seat being left open by retiring House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San AntonioHD-126: Republican Sam Harless and Democrat Natali Hurtado are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Kevin Roberts, R-Houston.HD-129: State Rep. Dennis Paul, R-Houston, is being opposed by Democrat Alexander Karjeker.HD-132: Democrat Gina Calanni is running against state Rep. Mike Schofield, R-Katy.HD-133: Democrat Martin Schexnayder is challenging state Rep. Jim Murphy, R-Houston.HD-135: State Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston, is being challenged by Democrat Jon Rosenthal.HD-105: Democrat Terry Meza is challenging state Rep. Rodney Anderson, R-Grand Prairie.HD-108: State Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas, is being challenged by Democrat Joanna Cattnach.HD-112: Democrat Brandy Chambers is running to unseat state Rep. Angie Chen Button, R-Richardson.HD-113: Democrat Rhetta Bowers and Republican Jonathan Boos are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Cindy Burkett, R-Sunnyvale.HD-134: Democrat Allison Sawyer is challenging state Rep. Sarah Davis, R-West University Place.HD-136: Democrat John Bucy is running to unseat state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park.HD-138: State Rep. Dwayne Bohac, R-Houston, is being opposed by Democrat Adam Milasincic.

Disclosure: Paul Workman has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

Clarification: Forward Majority initially provided an incorrect figure regarding the number of candidates the group is helping. It is helping 32 candidates.

Read related Tribune coverageWhile Beto O'Rourke rakes in cash, big donors ignore the Democratic statewide ticketHere are 34 races to watch in the Texas midterms

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

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## GOP loses four Texas House seats in Austin suburbs

November 6, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Julie Chang | Section: News | 394 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Democrats on Tuesday picked up four GOP-held Texas House seats in the Austin suburbs, helping to fuel their party's gains in the Legislature.

Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, lost to Democrat challenger, John Bucy III, in House District 136, and Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, fell to Democrat Vikki Goodwin in House District 47.

Democrat Erin Zwiener beat Republican Ken Strange in the race for outgoing Rep. Jason Isaac's District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties. And in House District 52, where Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down, Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Cynthia Flores.

Democrats picked up 12 House seats and made most of their gains in the outskirts of Texas' urban centers, with Republican representatives also falling in the suburbs of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth. Two Republican state senators in suburban North Texas districts — Konni Burton of Colleyville and Don Huffines of Dallas — also lost to Democratic challengers.

Still, any gains are unlikely to affect the balance of power in the Capitol, where Republicans held 95 of 150 House seats in the last legislative session and now hold 21 of 31 in the Senate.

Other notable Central Texas seats, however, stayed in the hands of the current occupant's party.

Democrat Sheryl Cole, a former Austin City Council member, coasted to victory over Republican Gabriel Nila in House District 46 and will replace longtime Rep. Dawnna Dukes, who fell to Cole in the primary.

Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, defeated Democrat Meg Walsh in Senate District 5, which was considered a safe GOP seat until it was revealed recently that Schwertner is being investigated by the University of Texas for alleged sexual misconduct, which he denies.

Democratic gains could affect the agenda for next year's legislative session. In the House, members will choose a new speaker when they convene in January; a larger Democratic caucus could help the party influence the race.

In the Senate, Democrats fell one seat short of threatening the GOP super-majority, which allows Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, to override Democratic attempts to slow down his agenda through procedural hurdles. Given Tuesday's results, Democrats would have had enough votes in next year's session to force Patrick to negotiate with them had they not lost the September special election for disgraced former Sen. Carlos Uresti's seat, which Republican Pete Flores won in an upset.

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Chang, J. (2018, November 6). GOP loses four Texas House seats in Austin suburbs. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F911C84EAF3B48>.

## **GOP loses 12 seats in Texas House, 2 in the Senate**

November 7, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)

Author: Julie Chang | Section: News | 782 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Democrats on Tuesday picked up four GOP-held Texas House seats in the Austin suburbs, helping to fuel their party's gains in the Legislature.

State Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park, lost to Democratic challenger, John Bucy III, in House District 136, and Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, fell to Democrat Vikki Goodwin in House District 47.

Democrat Erin Zwiener beat Republican Ken Strange in the race for outgoing Rep. Jason Isaac's seat in District 45, which encompasses Hays and Blanco counties. And in House District 52, where Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, stepped down, Democrat James Talarico defeated Republican Cynthia Flores.

Population growth and demographic changes in Williamson and Hays counties, driven in part by Austin residents moving to suburbs, combined with dissatisfaction with President Donald Trump and enthusiasm for Democratic U.S. candidate Beto O'Rourke helped carry down-ballot Central Texas Democrats to victory.

"The (voter) excitement and the energy and candidates that ran — all of that was conceived out of the Trump victory in 2016, but then after that, you have the Beto phenomenon, and you also had four very different but talented candidates in Talarico, Bucy, Goodwin and Zwiener," said Mark Littlefield, a political consultant who helped with the Talarico, Goodwin and Bucy campaigns.

In total, Democrats flipped a dozen Texas House seats and two Texas Senate seats, but Republicans will still hold a comfortable majority in both chambers.

"The message we put out there appealed to a lot of people who aren't happy with incumbents in general and find that some new people in office would be helpful," Goodwin, who won by almost 5 percentage points, told the American-Statesman.

Zwiener attributed her victory in part to an increase in the number of registered voters and high turnout among people living in the Interstate 35 corridor, where she focused her campaign.

"We knocked on almost 30,000 doors. I personally knocked on over 7,000 of those, and to me that's what made all the difference," said Zwiener, a children's book author. "Folks need to meet a candidate and look them in the eye. They need to know there are real, live human beings on the other end of that ballot."

Zwiener lost in Blanco County but garnered enough votes in Hays to win by slightly more than 3 percentage points.

### Teacher support

In Williamson County, Talarico, who also won by just more than 3 points, said independent and split-ticket voters made the difference in his race.

He said the fact he was a public school teacher for two years also helped. Talarico had said he'd vote against plans to spend public money for private school tuition, while Flores had expressed support for voucher-like options for students with special needs.

"I cannot tell you the number of teachers and retired teachers who told me they were lifelong Republicans but they were voting for me on the issue of public education," Talarico said. "The future of our education system is on the

line in the next legislative session, and that's much bigger and more important than partisan affiliation."

At 29, Talarico will be among the youngest members of the Legislature. He will join the House in the coming weeks after he won a separate race Tuesday night to serve out the rest of Gonzales' term.

In all four Central Texas races, Republicans raised twice as much as Democrats on average this year, and Republicans also received the endorsements of Gov. Greg Abbott.

#### Suburban shift

The 12 GOP House districts won by Democrats have at least one thing in common: They're located on the outskirts of Texas' biggest cities, with Republican representatives also falling in the suburbs of Houston, Dallas and Fort Worth. The two Republican state senators who lost — Konni Burton of Colleyville and Don Huffines of Dallas — also represent districts that include suburbs.

The shift reflects a national trend. Republicans struggled in suburban areas their party once dominated.

It was also an election marked by women winning in races across the country. Nine of the Democrats who prevailed in the 14 Texas House and Senate GOP seats are women.

Democratic gains could affect the agenda for next year's legislative session. In the House, members will choose a new speaker when they convene in January; a larger Democratic caucus could help the party influence the race.

In the Senate, Democrats fell one seat short of threatening the GOP supermajority, which allows Republican Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, to override Democratic attempts to slow down his agenda through procedural hurdles. Given Tuesday's results, Democrats would have had enough votes in next year's session to force Patrick to negotiate with them had they not lost the September special election for disgraced former Sen. Carlos Uresti's seat, which Republican Pete Flores won in an upset.

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## Editorial board: Democracy, diversity biggest winners in Texas midterms

November 7, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles (TX)  
Author: American-Statesman Editorial Board | Section: Opinion | 740 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The highly-contested U.S. Senate race between incumbent Ted Cruz and Democratic challenger Beto O'Rourke rightly earned voters' white-hot fascination. That the El Paso congressman came within striking distance of pulling off one of the biggest upsets in recent memory in one of the most deeply entrenched red states will be deconstructed over and over as Texans contemplate the future of state politics.

As relieved or as joyful as Cruz supporters are now, however, they were not the biggest winners in Texas' midterm elections. That victory belonged to the people and to Texas' diversity. That victory belonged to voter participation and to democracy.

If demographics are destiny, Texas politics began to look just a little more like its future Tuesday. Actually, it began to look a little more like its present.

Women, minorities, Latinos, African Americans, Muslims, young people, first-time voters, gays, lesbians – all played pivotal roles in an election season that will be remembered for awakening Texas from its voter participation slumber. And while it's true that Republicans held on to all the top statewide offices – Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick handily won re-election and the GOP still controls the statehouse – Democrats also won important races, propelled by women and minority candidates and voters.

Led by female candidates, Democrats flipped 12 House seats formerly held by Republicans, the biggest shift in that chamber since 2010. Among that slate of women, Democrat Vikki Goodwin defeated Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin, in District 47. Workman's seat was among a dozen concentrated in Dallas and Austin suburbs and considered in play because population growth and demographic change had transformed the electoral landscape. In addition, the election of Democrat Erin Zwiener in the House 45 seat in Hays and Blanco counties, and House victories for Dallas-area Democrats Jessica González and Julie Johnson, will increase the number of Texas LGBTQ lawmakers from two to five.

Nationwide, more than a hundred women – a record – were elected to Congress in a night of numerous firsts for women and minorities. Former El Paso County Judge Veronica Escobar and state Sen. Sylvia Garcia of Houston became the first Latinas from Texas elected to Congress.

"Women ran, women donated, women volunteered, women organized, women won. Now, watch them govern. I can hardly wait," Wendy Davis, the former Texas senator, tweeted. Davis was referring to the national picture, but the sentiment was the same in Texas, where women played influential roles running and mobilizing in races across the state.

Latinos, a historically untapped voting group, also played important roles. How much is still to be determined as analysts crunch votes, but groups working to mobilize Latino voting statewide reported a surge in Latino turnout, especially among young first-time voters. Organizers working to one day turn Texas blue hope to capitalize on young U.S.-born Hispanics, who are driving growth among the Latino population overall.

Latinos make up 39 percent of Texas' population. About 41 percent of eligible Latino voters in Texas are ages 18 to 33, according to the Pew Research Center.

Texas does everything big, everyone likes to say. But voter turnout has been more like a big embarrassment — turnout in the state had been abysmal, ranking dead last in the 2014 midterm elections.

This time, however, and with O'Rourke holding voters' fascination and drawing first-timers into the fold, Texas set early voting records. More people cast early ballots in the state's largest counties than in the entire state in the 2014 midterm overall.

With new voters and fresh faces in government more representative of who we are as a state, Texans must now call on those coming to office in Austin in January to work together to do the people's work. As we have said before, it is our government.

Among the House Republicans who lost their jobs Tuesday, Ron Simmons of Carrollton carried the bathroom bill during the 2017 legislative session. We hope this signals to legislators that they should focus on issues voters care about, like school finance and property tax reform, public education and healthcare — not social wedge issues.

We are encouraged by the words of James Talarico, who became the first Democrat elected in Williamson County's House District 52 since 2008.

"This is not a win for the Democratic Party, it's a win for the people of House District 52," Talarico said, adding that he would work to overcome partisan divides.

"So we can put people over politics," he said.

And in the process do the people's work.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

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## Democrat Talarico beats Flores in Williamson County's HD 52

November 7, 2018 | Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)  
Author: Julie Chang; Austin American-Statesman | Section: U.S. Politics | 268 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Nov. 07--Democrat James Talarico, the former executive director of an education nonprofit, beat Republican Cynthia Flores, a Round Rock social services manager, in the state House race for District 52 Tuesday night.

The last time a Democrat was elected in the district was in 2008.

Talarico, 29, garnered 52 percent of vote, while Flores, 53, received 48 percent.

Texas House District 52 covers most of Round Rock, Hutto and Taylor. Larry Gonzales, a Republican, previously represented the district before he left the Legislature earlier this year. He now works for a lobbying firm.

Talarico also narrowly beat Flores in a separate race Tuesday night to serve the rest of Gonzales' term, which ends at the end of the year.

Talarico, who taught in the San Antonio school district for two years before joining the nonprofit, said he would combat any legislation that supports using state money, like vouchers, to help families pay for private school tuition. Flores has expressed support for spending state money for private tuition in cases of students with disabilities and special needs.

He also said he would support a constitutional amendment that would force the state to pay 50 percent of the cost of public school funding and eliminate tax loopholes so that commercial property owners pay their fair share of taxes.

Flores, who is the wife of Round Rock City Council member Rene Flores, raised \$353,000 more than Talarico this year.

Gov. Greg Abbott endorsed Flores during the primary and his campaign gave her \$67,000 for political advertising.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Chang, J. (2018, November 7). Democrat Talarico beats Flores in Williamson County's HD 52. *Austin American-Statesman: Web Edition Articles [TCA] (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F8BC0B62696708>.

## State Rep. Larry Gonzales not running for re-election - "It has been an honor and a privilege to serve HD52 and this great state," Gonzales wrote Wednesday night on Facebook.

August 30, 2017 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: Texas House Of Representatives | 291 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, is not running for re-election.

"It has been an honor and a privilege to serve HD52 and this great state," Gonzales wrote Wednesday night on Facebook. "We certainly gave it our all."

Gonzales announced his decision not to run again at a meeting Tuesday night of the Williamson County GOP Executive Committee, according to attendees.

First elected in 2010, Gonzales has served on the Sunset Advisory Commission since 2014 and currently chairs the panel, which is responsible for periodic reviews of state agencies. He is also the chairman of a House Appropriations subcommittee.

Gonzales won election in 2010 by unseating a Democratic incumbent, Diana Maldonado. Before that, he had been a familiar face in Austin, working in the offices of state lawmakers, the lieutenant governor and the attorney general.

Gonzales is one of the few remaining Hispanic Republicans in the lower chamber. There were six as recently as a year ago, but three lost in the 2016 elections. The other two are state Reps. Jason Villalba of Dallas and J.M. Lozano of Kingsville.

At least two Republicans have already lined up to run for Gonzales' seat in House District 52: Texas GOP chaplain Jeremy Story and Round Rock resident Christopher Ward.

Another person, James Talarico, has filed paperwork indicating he is interested in running. He is expected to make an announcement early next week.

Read related Tribune coverage:

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The Rubio Texas team included current and former state representatives James Frank, Larry Gonzales, Jason Isaac, Linda Harper-Brown, Martha Wong, Peggy Hamric and Myra Crownover. [Full story]

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2017, August 30). State Rep. Larry Gonzales not running for re-election - "It has been an honor and a privilege to serve HD52 and this great state," Gonzales wrote Wednesday night on Facebook.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/166A032908CAB798>.

## **There are three Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature. Only one is coming back. - State Rep. J.M Lozano, R-Kingsville, is the only incumbent Hispanic Republican left on the ballot for 2018.**

March 7, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Alexa Ura | Section: Texas Legislature | 1118 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

And then there was one.

After Tuesday's primary elections, the only Hispanic Republican incumbent who will return to the Texas Legislature in January is state Rep. J.M. Lozano of Kingsville. That's after three Hispanic GOP lawmakers served during the 2017 legislative session.

On Tuesday, Dallas Republican state Rep. Jason Villalba lost his re-election bid to Lisa Luby Ryan, a primary opponent who flanked him on the right. His departure from the Legislature follows Round Rock Republican state Rep. Larry Gonzales' previous decision to not seek re-election.

Though it's possible Republicans could make up for one of those losses in November, the prospect that Lozano might be the only Hispanic Republican in the GOP-dominated Legislature offers a grim outlook for those who want the party to increase its standing among Hispanics in a state that is becoming less and less white.

"It's not frustration. It's serious concern," said Artemio "Temo" Muniz, Texas chairman of the Federation of Hispanic Republicans.

Hispanic Republicans have long been underrepresented in the Legislature, but the GOP had made some diversity gains in the last decade. During the 2009 legislative session, there were no Hispanic Republican legislators. Just ahead of the 2016 election cycle, that count had climbed to six.

But the 2016 elections ultimately dealt setbacks to the GOP's modest legislative diversity when half of the Hispanic Republicans in the Legislature — three out of six — lost their re-election bids. They lost their seats even though Republican Gov. Greg Abbott had worked on their behalf.

Texas Republicans' dearth of diversity among their legislative ranks stands in stark contrast to the Democrats. During the last legislative cycle, 41 of the 66 Democrats in the Legislature were Hispanic, while 17 were black. Only six were white and two were Asian.

Meanwhile, there were only five people of color — the three Hispanics, one Asian representative and one black representative — among the 115 Republicans elected to the state House and Senate.

Party leaders, including Abbott, have long rejected the notion that the Texas GOP struggles with diversity.

"We continue our efforts to reach out to the diverse communities here in the state of Texas," Abbott said after the 2016 election, "and that's something that I championed during my campaign last time and will again this next time."

When the count of Hispanic Republicans in the Texas Legislature was cut in half in one fell swoop in 2016, Abbott pointed to the re-elections of Lozano, Villalba and Gonzales as evidence that "the diversity continues in the Republican Party."

Asked about the prospect that only one Hispanic Republican would return to the Legislature, an Abbott spokesman on Wednesday pointed to the governor's support of Hispanic GOP hopefuls, noting that Abbott was planning to work

with local Hispanic officials who have switched parties this cycle and are seeking office across the state.

Of note, Lozano, the only Hispanic Republican who is returning to the Legislature, is a former Democrat who switched parties in 2012 after his district near the Coastal Bend was redrawn to be less favorable to Democrats.

This year, Republicans looking to boost their diversity will set their hopes on two legislative races that are far from certain wins.

In Williamson County-based House District 52, social services case manager Cynthia Flores handily won the Republican nomination on Tuesday, setting her up to face Democrat James Talarico in the general election. She's picked up endorsements from Gonzales, the outgoing Hispanic Republican who currently represents the district, and Abbott.

Flores on Wednesday recognized her election could help boost diversity among the GOP's ranks and described the prospect of serving as the only Hispanic Republican woman in the Legislature as a honor.

"It's all about making sure that we have the right people at the right time who are willing to serve and are true to themselves," Flores said. But she acknowledged it was too soon to claim that distinction.

The district, which President Donald Trump won by 1.4 points, is a big target for Democrats in November. The area was represented by a Democrat before Gonzales won it in the 2010 Republican wave.

Some Republicans are also eyeing San Antonio-based House District 117, which switched party hands briefly in 2014 as part of a Republican wave but switched back to Democratic control in 2016. Though the Democratic margin of victory wasn't wide in 2016, Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton won it by almost 11 points.

Though the outcomes of those races are uncertain, it's clear that the Republican Party needs to work harder to elect Hispanics who aren't left to ride Republican waves into office, Muniz added.

In managing the 2014 campaign of former state Rep. Gilbert Peña — who flipped a Pasadena-based district that was held by a Democrat by 152 votes — Muniz said their strategy depended on their ability to ride the "Greg Abbott wave."

Peña, who didn't have much legislative experience, lost his seat in 2016 when the Democrat who formerly held it won it back with a 20-point margin of victory.

This year, the Texas GOP is dealing with the ramifications of the party's shift away from Bush-era politics to Trump's, said Victoria De Francesco Soto, a political science lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin.

"There was growth of Hispanic Republicans prompted by Bush's pragmatic politics. It was a pillar of his politics," De Francesco Soto said, referencing former President George W. Bush, who also served as governor of Texas. "Those ideas have been purged from the Republican Party and Hispanics are not getting the same deference or respect they had when the Bush politics was the major force in Texas."

In a state where Hispanic voters tend to vote Democratic, those politics — and the related lack of Hispanic representation among Republican elected officials — could complicate the party's efforts to turn out even conservative Hispanics, she added.

"There is dwindling space for Latino Republicans at the table in elected office," De Francesco Soto said. "And that is going to trickle down to the electorate as well."

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## Rep. Larry Gonzales resigns from Texas House - State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, resigned this week; he had already decided against serving another term.

June 6, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: Larry Gonzales | 425 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, is resigning early, saying "it's time to get on with the next phase of my life."

Gonzales, a member since 2011 and a Capitol staffer before that, had already decided this would be his last term and didn't file for re-election this year. His resignation, effective on Thursday, sets up a special election for the remainder of his term.

That might take place on the same day as the November general elections. There's a precedent: State Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, quit earlier this year and was appointed to a judicial position; the special election for what's left of his term will take place in November.

During his term in the House, Gonzales chaired the Sunset Advisory Commission and served on several House committees, notably the budget-writing Appropriations Committee.

"I first walked into the Texas State Capitol in 1991, a young, eager intern ready to learn as much as I could and help make Texas the beacon of what good state government should be," Gonzales said in a statement. "Twenty-seven years later ... I'm happy with everything we have accomplished."

Still, he said, "it's time to move on."

"My little family needs me," he said. "I've missed a lot."

Gonzales' departure leaves just two Hispanic Republicans in the 150-member Texas House: J.M. Lozano, R-Kingsville, who is seeking another term, and Jason Villalba, R-Dallas, who was defeated in the Republican primary and is serving out his term.

Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico will be on the ballot for a full term in House District 52 in November; candidates can file for the stub term as soon as Gov. Greg Abbott calls a special election and sets a date. Flores has Gonzales' support.

In a statement Wednesday, Talarico praised Gonzales as "a fierce advocate for commonsense legislation" and said he'd "work every day to live up to his example."

"In divisive times, Rep. Gonzales resisted the tides of partisanship and fought for real solutions to the problems facing our community," Talarico said. "There are few politicians left like him who put people over politics."

Emma Platoff contributed to this report.

Read related Tribune coverage:

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Gov. Greg Abbott calls Nov. 6 special election for Larry Phillips' state House seat

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In Austin swing district, five Democrats are vying to unseat Republican Paul Workman

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Ramsey, R. (2018, June 6). Rep. Larry Gonzales resigns from Texas House - State Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, resigned this week; he had already decided against serving another term.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16C639E0398B3768>.

## Gov. Abbott sets Nov. 6 special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales - The special election for the remainder of his term in the central Texas district will take place on Nov. 6, the next uniform election date.

June 29, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Emma Platoff | Section: 2018 Elections | 268 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, will take place on Nov. 6, the same day voters were already set to head to the polls to select his 2019 replacement, Gov. Greg Abbott announced Friday.

Gonzales, who served in the Texas House since 2011 and worked in the Capitol for years before that as a staffer, had already said he wouldn't seek another term, but he announced June 6 that he'd retire early, saying "it's time to get on with the next phase of my life." That set up a special election to fill the remainder of his two-year term.

Candidates have until Aug. 23 to file to run for the seat, the governor's announcement said. Two candidates, Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico, have already announced they're running to serve the central Texas district for the full term. Flores has Gonzales' support.

Earlier this month, Abbott set a special election date of July 31 to replace former state Sen. Carlos Uresti, a San Antonio Democrat sentenced this month to 12 years in prison. And in April, he set a Nov. 6 special election to complete the term of former state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman.

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Platoff, E. (2018, June 29). Gov. Abbott sets Nov. 6 special election to replace former state Rep. Larry Gonzales - The special election for the remainder of his term in the central Texas district will take place on Nov. 6, the next uniform election date.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16CDCB8CE9332E20>.

## Republican set to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips after drawing no special election opponents - Republican Reggie Smith is poised to replace former state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, after Smith drew no opponents Thursday in the special election for the seat.

August 23, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: 2018 Elections | 215 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Republican Reggie Smith is effectively the next state representative from House District 62 after no one else filed Thursday for the special election to fill the seat.

As long as Smith gets one vote in the Nov. 6 special election, he will get to finish the term of ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, who did not run for re-election and resigned in April. Smith, a Sherman attorney, is also his party's nominee for the full term representing HD-62, which begins in January. That race will also be decided on the same day in November, and it features two other candidates: Democrat Valerie Hefner and Libertarian David Schaab.

Six o'clock Thursday evening was the filing deadline for the Nov. 6 special elections in both HD-62 and House District 52, where former state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, also chose not to seek another term and then stepped down early. Two candidates filed for the HD-52 special election, and they are both also on the Nov. 6 ballot for the full term: Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico.

Early voting starts Oct. 22 for the both the special and regularly scheduled elections on Nov. 6.

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Svitek, P. (2018, August 23). Republican set to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Phillips after drawing no special election opponents - Republican Reggie Smith is poised to replace former state Rep. Larry Phillips, R-Sherman, after Smith drew no opponents Thursday in the special election for the seat.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16DFF1966BE5EE28>.

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August 23, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 254 Words

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Click here to check out the ballot for the Nov. 6 general election. Early voting begins on Oct. 22 and ends on Nov. 2. Sign up for The Brief for the latest 2018 Texas election news.

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**Analysis: For state Sen. Charles Schwertner, bad news and a trickle-down effect - The timing of sexual misconduct allegations against Texas state Sen. Charles Schwertner could affect more than his election chances in November; it could affect the chances of other Republican candidates whose districts overlap his.**

September 27, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: News | 774 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

An allegation of sexual misconduct against state Sen. Charles Schwertner, R-Georgetown, might not ruin his re-election, but it could foul things for other Republicans on the ballot — particularly in Williamson County.

According to the Austin American-Statesman, Schwertner was accused, in a complaint filed with the University of Texas at Austin, of propositioning a UT graduate student and texting her a picture of his genitals. On Wednesday, his lawyers said he sent no such messages: "Sen. Schwertner did not send any inappropriate texts as alleged. Period."

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If that's proved correct, and quickly, the political ramifications should disappear as quickly as they arose. But time is short this late in the election season; Schwertner not only has to dispel the accusation and the political chatter — he has to do it right away.

The news report yanked attention to a state Senate race that wasn't on anyone's list of hotly competitive elections, and it heightened apprehensions among Republicans who might be affected if this dampens enthusiasm among the senator's voters, particularly in Williamson County.

That's the most populous of the nine counties in Schwertner's sprawling Central and East Texas district, which reaches from Williamson east to Walker County and north to Limestone and Freestone counties. The majority of the voters in his last election in 2014 were in Williamson (59 percent) and Brazos (18 percent) counties.

It's an overwhelmingly Republican Senate district. Republican Greg Abbott beat Democrat Wendy Davis by 30 percentage points in the 2014 race for governor. Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton by 20 percentage points two years later. In his last election, Schwertner got 65 percent of the vote with both a Democrat and a Libertarian in the race. He won in all nine counties; the low spot was a 60.5 percent win in Robertson County.

It's his to lose. Or it was before the scandal whistle blew. The incumbent has two opponents this time — Democrat Meg Walsh and Libertarian Amy Lyons — ready to jump if the frontrunner falls.

It would take a very, very long fall to beat a Republican in the state's 5th Senate District.

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But misfortune in a race like his could fall harder in contests where Republicans don't have the lead Schwertner's got. Williamson County is critical to U.S. Rep. John Carter, R-Georgetown, who's in a high-profile dogfight with former helicopter pilot M.J. Hegar, a Democrat. Carter can't afford to lose rattled conservative voters, and a Schwertner stumble could put him in a vise, with U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz and U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke in a close race for U.S. Senate above and the state Senate race below.

The Texas House seats currently held by Reps. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Hill, and Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock, could be affected in the same way. Dale faces Democrat John Bucy and Libertarian Zack Parks in a district that leans Republican — but without much of a safety net. Gonzales isn't running for re-election, and that district is also a

close one. Trump beat Clinton in Gonzales' district and Clinton beat Trump in Dale's, but the presidential candidates were separated by less than 3 percentage points in each race. Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico are on the ballot there.

Unlike the nine-county state Senate district or, for that matter, the two-county congressional district Carter is defending, those House districts were in play before the allegations surfaced.

Like any politician this close to an election when allegations of bad behavior arise, Schwertner is fighting on two fronts. He's hired lawyers to deal with the legal issues, and UT is doing an investigation to see what texts actually were sent, who sent and received them, and so on — to figure out whether anything criminal or improper took place. And he's got a political issue or, if you prefer, a public one: If it's confirmed that nothing inappropriate took place, how will the voters view all of this?

Their support and turnout will affect the senator — and with him, his fellow Republicans on the local ballots.

Correction: An earlier version of this column said Donald Trump beat Hillary Clinton in Tony Dale's HD-136; in fact, Clinton narrowly beat Trump.

Disclosure: The University of Texas at Austin has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## Texas Republicans mostly outraising opponents in key state races - The Democrats running against Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller and Attorney General Ken Paxton outraised the incumbents in the most recent fundraising period.

October 10, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek, Alex Samuels and Cassandra Pollock | Section: News | 890 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Check out the ballot for the Nov. 6 general election. Early voting ends on Nov. 2. Here's what you need to know about voting and here is our issues guide for young Texans. Get The Brief for the latest 2018 Texas election news.

### More in this series

Republicans largely outraised their Democratic challengers this summer in the most closely watched races for statewide offices and the Texas Legislature, according to the latest fundraising reports filed with the Texas Ethics Commission.

But a handful of exceptions — including the challengers to Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller and Attorney General Ken Paxton — highlight some bright spots for Democrats in certain races.

Tuesday was the deadline for state-level candidates to report their campaign finances for the period covering July 1 through Sept. 27. Here are a few highlights:

### Statewide races

Miller's opponent, Kim Olson, took in \$131,000 to his \$25,000 — a paltry sum for a statewide officeholder that came from only 13 donations. Paxton's rival, Justin Nelson, hauled in \$1.1 million to \$488,000 for the attorney general.

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Olson ended the period with more cash on hand than Miller had, \$162,000 to \$53,000. Paxton retained an advantage in that category over Nelson, leaving \$4.3 million in the bank to Nelson's \$1.7 million. Paxton nonetheless saw his balance go down significantly after unloading over \$3 million for TV advertising.

Meanwhile, at the top of the ticket, Gov. Greg Abbott continued to dominate Democratic opponent Lupe Valdez in the money race. His bank account stood at \$26.8 million after raising \$5.7 million, while Valdez's balance came in at \$303,000 after taking in \$680,000.

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick was also far ahead of his Democratic foe, Mike Collier, raising \$1.6 million to Collier's \$396,000 and maintaining a far larger war chest.

### Texas Senate races

In what is widely regarded as the most competitive Texas Senate district in the state, state Sen. Konni Burton, R-Colleyville, posted a much larger haul than her opponent, Democrat Beverly Powell, \$1.1 million to \$440,000. Yet most of Burton's haul came via six-figure assistance from three sources: Texans for Lawsuit Reform PAC, the political arm of the tort reform group; Empower Texans PAC, the hard-line conservative group; and Texans for Fiscal Responsibility PAC, a new entity affiliated with Empower Texans.

Burton also reported a cash-on-hand advantage — \$489,000 compared to Powell's \$447,000.

Powell pounced on Burton's funding sources in a statement Wednesday, touting that the Democrat "substantially

outraised Konni Burton in Tarrant County by over a 4-to-1 margin and reported nearly 5 times the number of Tarrant County donations."

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Two other Republican state senators whose seats are viewed as in play this cycle — Don Huffines of Dallas and Joan Huffman of Houston — also outraised their Democratic challengers but not nearly by as large a margin as Burton.

Huffines, who represents a district where Hillary Clinton beat Donald Trump in 2016, raised \$412,000 and reported having \$491,000 cash on hand. (His largest contribution was a \$100,000 donation from Texans for Fiscal Responsibility PAC). Nathan Johnson, his opponent, raised \$248,000 and has \$317,000 cash on hand.

Huffman, on the other hand, has a smaller cash advantage over her opponent, Rita Lucido. The incumbent reported raising \$248,000 compared to Lucido's \$185,000. And a large chunk of Huffman's haul came from Texans for Lawsuit Reform PAC, which donated \$100,000 — roughly one-third of all the money she raised this past quarter.

Texas House races

A majority of House Republicans locked in competitive re-election battles outraised their Democratic challengers.

In North Texas, state Rep. Matt Rinaldi, R-Irving, raked in \$278,000 to Democrat Julie Johnson's \$188,000 — a vast improvement for the incumbent after he was outraised by an almost 3-to-1 margin earlier this year. Most of Rinaldi's haul came from Empower Texans while Johnson had big-dollar in-kind contributions from Annie's List and Texans for Insurance Reform. Rinaldi ended the period by maintaining his cash advantage with \$287,000 to Johnson's \$251,000.

Other GOP incumbents in Dallas County — an area Democrats are heavily targeting this cycle — also came out on top in the latest money haul, including state Reps. Linda Koop of Dallas, Angie Chen Button of Richardson and Rodney Anderson of Grand Prairie.

Democrats, meanwhile, posted higher fundraising numbers in a few state House races, including state Rep. Victoria Neave's re-election bid. The Dallas Democrat raked in \$165,000 to Republican Deanna Maria Metzger's \$112,000. Neave got a \$30,000 boost from the House Democratic Campaign Committee, while Metzger was aided by support from Empower Texans and Abbott's campaign. Neave ended the period with \$115,000 to Metzger's \$40,000.

Democrats also reported fundraising advantages in races for two open seat currently held by Republicans. In House District 114, Democrat John Turner outraised Lisa Luby Ryan, who defeated state Rep. Jason Villalba of Dallas in this year's Republican primary. And in Central Texas, Democrat James Talarico outraised Republican Cynthia Flores, both of whom are vying to replace retiring state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock in House District 52.

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Disclosure: Texans for Lawsuit Reform has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2018, October 10). Texas Republicans mostly outraising opponents in key state races - The Democrats running against Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller and Attorney General Ken Paxton outraised the incumbents in the most recent fundraising period.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16EFC07234FAD9D8>.

## **In Texas' tightest state House races, right-leaning groups are giving Republicans an edge - GOP candidates have a financial advantage thanks to deep-pocketed groups like Empower Texans and Texans for Lawsuit Reform.**

October 12, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Cassandra Pollock | Section: News | 1069 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Check out the ballot for the Nov. 6 general election. Early voting ends on Nov. 2. Here's what you need to know about voting and here is our issues guide for young Texans. Get The Brief for the latest 2018 Texas election news.

More in this series

Texas Democrats are running competitive candidates in a number of state House races currently held by Republicans.

But a handful of deep-pocketed sources are helping Republicans outpace their opponents in many of those races, even in districts that Democrats view as likely pickups, according to a Texas Tribune review of campaign finance records in a dozen state House races widely considered the most competitive.

Groups like Empower Texans, the hard-line conservative group, and the powerful business group Texans for Lawsuit Reform are spending in a way that could provide a boost in the GOP's fight to retain some of the most vulnerable of its 95 seats in the 150-member lower chamber.

Two political action committees affiliated with Empower Texans that are mainly funded by Midland oilman Tim Dunn and West Texas fracking billionaires Farris and Jo Ann Wilks combined to dish out roughly \$1.2 million between July 1 through Sept. 27 in donations, advertising and consulting. That money helped bankroll campaigns for state Rep. Matt Rinaldi, R-Irving, and a few other GOP candidates locked in tight elections for state office.

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In Rinaldi's North Texas race, \$200,000 of the \$278,000 the incumbent received over the summer, campaign finance reports show, came from Empower Texans PAC and Texans for Fiscal Responsibility PAC, the other entity tied with the group. That boost helped Rinaldi handily outpace his Democratic opponent, Julie Johnson, who hauled \$188,000 — a figure that included big-dollar in-kind contributions from Annie's List and Texans for Insurance Reform.

Rinaldi has drawn the ire of Democrats for some of his hard-line conservative stances — and his district is nestled in Dallas County, which, thanks to changing demographics and Democratic enthusiasm, is home to a hotbed of competitive state House races this year.

Most of the money shelled out by GOP-aligned groups over the summer went toward playing defense. In a campaign season in which Democratic energy is high, there aren't many seats viewed as pick-up opportunities for Republicans. Mark Jones, a political scientist at Rice University, suggested that's partly because the GOP has nearly maxed out the number of seats the party can realistically hold with the current state House map.

"Republicans have already picked up almost all the low hanging fruit," Jones said.

Still, keeping as many seats as possible is especially important to Republicans this year, since the makeup of the lower chamber will impact the looming race for the next House speaker.

One Democrat who Republicans have heavily targeted this year is state Rep. Victoria Neave of Dallas, whose

Republican opponent Deanna Maria Metzger received \$60,000 in combined help from Empower Texans PAC and Texans for Fiscal Responsibility PAC, along with a nearly \$20,000 non-monetary political contribution from Gov. Greg Abbott's campaign — which was also generous with its resources over the summer.

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Neave flipped the district for the Democrats in 2016, but her re-election bid has been complicated by her 2017 arrest for driving while intoxicated. In October 2017, Neave pleaded no contest to the crime, paid a fine and went on probation for 12 months.

She is among the handful of Democrats running for the state House in the most competitive races who raised more than their Republican opponents in the most recent period. Out of the races the Tribune examined, two Democrats vying for open seats currently held by Republicans also reported fundraising advantages — John Turner, who's gunning for a Dallas-area seat being vacated by GOP state Rep. Jason Villalba of Dallas, and James Talarico, who's competing for a Central Texas seat to replace retiring state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock. Republicans were the top fundraisers — non-monetary contributions included — in the other nine races the Tribune reviewed.

Neave raked in \$172,000 over the period to Metzger's \$112,000, and ended the period with a huge cash advantage. Neave received around \$30,000 from the House Democratic Campaign Committee and over \$10,000 in non-monetary political contributions from Annie's List for survey research, among other things.

In the open race to replace outgoing state Rep. Cindy Burkett, R-Sunnyvale, Republican Jonathan Boos vastly outraised Democrat Rhetta Bowers, \$222,000 to \$75,000. Boos received \$90,000 from Empower Texans PAC and Texans for Fiscal Responsibility PAC, while Bowers received a \$12,500 non-monetary political contribution from Annie's List for survey research, plus \$5,500 in donations from the group. Boos also received \$25,000 from Texans for Lawsuit Reform PAC, plus almost \$40,000 in non-monetary political contributions from the group for grassroots canvassing, polling and more.

Texans for Lawsuit Reform PAC doled out roughly \$1.4 million on advertising, donations, polling and consulting for Republicans in various races between July 1 through Sept. 27, campaign finance reports show.

To be clear, Democrats also raked in sizable amounts of cash — and state Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, who heads the party's caucus in the House, said he wasn't bothered by the fact that a majority of his party's candidates locked in competitive races were outraised over the summer.

"Democratic candidates don't have to outspend their opponents," said Turner, who funneled almost \$90,000 of his own campaign cash to House candidates and affiliated groups between July 1 and Sept. 27. "They just need to have the resources to get their message out and turn out voters."

A big chunk of help that Democrats in these competitive races received over the period came from Annie's List, Lone Star Project, a progressive group, and the House Democratic Campaign Committee PAC, which recently received a \$250,000 lift from a national redistricting group headed by former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. Annie's List handed out around \$131,000 in advertising, donations, polling and consulting between July 1 through Sept. 27, Lone Star Project doled out roughly \$237,000 and the House Democratic Campaign Committee PAC spent about \$76,000.

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Early voting in Texas begins Oct. 22. And Election Day is Nov. 6.

Disclosure: Rice University, Texans for Lawsuit Reform and Annie's List have been financial supporters of the Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them [here](#).

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<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F068B31EC1B3F8>.

## Democratic super PAC injects \$2.2 million into Texas House races in closing days - The investment by Forward Majority reflects Democratic optimism about significantly expanding their ranks in the Texas House come Tuesday.

November 3, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 919 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Democratic challenger Beto O'Rourke in the race for U.S. Senate. View full 2018 Texas election results or subscribe to The Brief for the latest election news.

More in this series

A Democratic super PAC focused on state legislative races has injected \$2.2 million into a slew of Texas House contests in their closing days.

The group, Forward Majority, is using the money to help 32 Democratic candidates, many of them challengers in GOP-held districts who have not been able to match the financial backing of the incumbents. A large majority of the funds are going toward digital ads targeting the Republicans as beholden to big donors and corporate interests, with a couple of spots tailored to specific lawmakers.

"We are staging this late intervention because we believe there is a unique window of opportunity for first time candidates to take down several entrenched Republican incumbents on Tuesday," said Ben Wexler-Waite, a spokesman for Forward Majority.

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Democrats currently control 55 seats in the 150-member House, meaning they would need to pick up 21 seats on Tuesday to capture the majority. Very few are predicting the House could flip, but Forward Majority's investment nonetheless reflects Democratic optimism about significantly expanding their ranks in the lower chamber come Tuesday.

Forward Majority was launched last year by alumni of Barack Obama's campaigns with the goal of retaking state legislatures across the country before the next round of redistricting in 2021. Texas is one of six states the group is targeting this cycle as part of a nearly \$9 million push.

In Texas, Forward Majority began seriously spending in its targeted races just a couple weeks ago. Its latest filing with the Texas Ethics Commission, which covered Sept. 28 through Oct. 27, shows the group spent \$1.1 million. The rest of the \$2.2 million has come since then, Wexler-Waite said.

Forward Majority is not the only seven-figure force for Democrats in Texas House races this cycle. The House Democratic Campaign Committee has raised \$1.1 million this cycle, fueled by six-figure donations from the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, the group led by former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. The HDCC is currently waging an \$800,000 digital ad campaign in the most competitive seats.

The races that Forward Majority is targeting include:

\* HD-14: State Rep. John Raney, R-College Station, is being challenged by Democrat Josh Wilkinson.

\* HD-23: Republican Mayes Middleton and Democrat Amanda Jamrok are running for the seat being vacated by defeated state Rep. Wayne Faircloth, R-Galveston.

- \* HD-26: State Rep. Rick Miller, R-Sugar Land, faces Democratic challenger L. Sarah DeMerchant.
- \* HD-28: State Rep. John Zerwas, R-Richmond, faces a Democratic challenge from Meghan Scoggins.
- \* HD-45: Republican Ken Strange and Democrat Erin Zwiener are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs.
- \* HD-47: Democrat Vikki Goodwin is running against state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin.
- \* HD-52: Republican Cynthia Flores and Democrat James Talarico are competing to replace ex-state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock.
- \* HD-54: Republican Brad Buckley and Democrat Kathy Richerson are running for the seat being left open by defeated state Rep. Scott Cospers, R-Killeen.
- \* HD-64: Democrat Andrew Morris running to unseat state Rep. Lynn Stucky, R-Denton.
- \* HD-65: State Rep. Ron Simmons, R-Carrollton, is being challenged by Democrat Michelle Beckley.
- \* HD-66: Democrat Sharon Hirsch is challenging state Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano.
- \* HD-67: State Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, faces a challenge from Democrat Sarah Depew.
- \* HD-85: Democrat Jennifer Cantu is challenging state Rep. Phil Stephenson, R-Wharton.
- \* HD-92: State Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, is being opposed by Democrat Steve Riddell.
- \* HD-93: Democrat Nancy Bean is running to unseat state Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth.
- \* HD-94: Democrat Finnigan Jones is challenging state Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington.
- \* HD-96: State Rep. Bill Zedler, R-Arlington, faces a Democratic challenge from Ryan Ray.
- \* HD-97: Democrat Beth Llewellyn McLaughlin is running against state Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth.
- \* HD-121: Republican Steve Allison and Democrat Celina Montoya are running for the seat being left open by retiring House Speaker Joe Straus, R-San Antonio
- \* HD-126: Republican Sam Harless and Democrat Natali Hurtado are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Kevin Roberts, R-Houston.
- \* HD-129: State Rep. Dennis Paul, R-Houston, is being opposed by Democrat Alexander Karjeker.
- \* HD-132: Democrat Gina Calanni is running against state Rep. Mike Schofield, R-Katy.
- \* HD-133: Democrat Martin Schexnayder is challenging state Rep. Jim Murphy, R-Houston.
- \* HD-135: State Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston, is being challenged by Democrat Jon Rosenthal.
- \* HD-105: Democrat Terry Meza is challenging state Rep. Rodney Anderson, R-Grand Prairie.
- \* HD-108: State Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas, is being challenged by Democrat Joanna Cattanaach.
- \* HD-112: Democrat Brandy Chambers is running to unseat state Rep. Angie Chen Button, R-Richardson.

\* HD-113: Democrat Rhetta Bowers and Republican Jonathan Boos are vying to replace outgoing state Rep. Cindy Burkett, R-Sunnyvale.

\* HD-134: Democrat Allison Sawyer is challenging state Rep. Sarah Davis, R-West University Place.

\* HD-136: Democrat John Bucy is running to unseat state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park.

\* HD-138: State Rep. Dwayne Bohac, R-Houston, is being opposed by Democrat Adam Milasincic.

Disclosure: Paul Workman has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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Clarification: Forward Majority initially provided an incorrect figure regarding the number of candidates the group is helping. It is helping 32 candidates.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2018, November 3). Democratic super PAC injects \$2.2 million into Texas House races in closing days - The investment by Forward Majority reflects Democratic optimism about significantly expanding their ranks in the Texas House come Tuesday.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F7B1ED62E00E08>.

## Uncertainty hangs over Texas as voters head to the polls this Election Day - From the intense battle between Ted Cruz and Beto O'Rourke to hard-fought, well-funded races lower on the ballot, what happens on Election Day could reset — or reaffirm — the trajectory of Texas politics.

November 6, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Abby Livingston and Alex Samuels | Section: News | 1198 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Democratic challenger Beto O'Rourke in the race for U.S. Senate. [View full 2018 Texas election results](#) or [subscribe to The Brief](#) for the latest election news.

More in this series

It's been a long while since Texas entered an Election Day with so much uncertainty hanging over it.

From the blockbuster matchup at the top of the ballot between U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas and U.S. Rep. Beto O'Rourke, D-El Paso, to a bevy of potentially close races further down the ballot, predictions of what the results will look like after polls close Tuesday evening are all over the place.

The flood of early voting has scrambled all historical precedent, and what happens on Election Day could reset — or reaffirm — the trajectory of Texas politics.

"The enthusiasm is absolutely real," said Harris County Democratic Chairwoman Lillie Schechter. "Our statewide polling and now our turnout demonstrates that Democrats all over the state are not happy with the Republican leadership and are demanding changes."

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But Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican consultant with several clients on the ballot on Tuesday, suggested that some of that surge in early turnout was of a Republican bent. Either way, Republicans are taking nothing for granted.

"Everyone's on the same page in that they're taking every race up and down the ballot seriously," he said. "Everybody's sprinting through the finish line in a way that I haven't seen since I've been working elections here."

"I think there's a sense of mixed hope and consternation," he added. "The numbers we see coming back in internal polling, in public polling and county-by-county data is ... that people are fired up to vote. We're seeing it on the Democratic side and the Republican side."

At the center of Texas politics is the U.S. Senate race between Cruz and O'Rourke. Cruz has led in nearly all of the polling and has the structural advantage. But many political insiders wonder if O'Rourke, with the eye-popping \$70 million in donations he's attracted to his bid amid political rallies that have drawn crowds more akin to rock concerts, has so expanded the electorate that a path exists for a Democrat to win a U.S. Senate race for the first time since 1988.

Geographically, the race is on track to test the clout of the state's fast-growing urban centers. Should Cruz survive, much of that success will likely be rooted in more rural communities.

The most closely watched county of all is likely to be Tarrant County, the last large urban Republican stronghold in the state. If Tarrant flips for O'Rourke, it could be a new day in Texas politics.

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Aside from O'Rourke's muscular challenge for U.S. Senate, much of the remaining statewide ballot has been far quieter. Gov. Greg Abbott, for instance, has enjoyed double-digit leads against Democrat Lupe Valdez, the former Dallas County Sheriff, in some polls, and is putting much of his campaign infrastructure toward helping boost Cruz and others in tougher races. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has also run a mostly under-the-radar re-election campaign against Democrat Justin Nelson, but a burst of new ads and large last-minute donations to Paxton's campaign in the final days suggest Republicans aren't taking that race for granted amid such a volatile environment.

Down ballot, there are three congressional races that are the most closely watched, in Dallas, Houston and West Texas. In all three districts, more voters backed Hillary Clinton over Donald Trump in 2016, while also re-electing the GOP incumbents in the U.S. House. U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions is in a high-profile battle against attorney Colin Allred in North Dallas' 32nd District. In Houston, Republican U.S. Rep. John Culberson is deadlocked against Democratic attorney Lizzie Pannill Fletcher in the 7th Congressional District.

There is more confidence in the GOP world that U.S. Rep. Will Hurd is on the march to a third term, despite efforts by retired Air Force intelligence officer Gina Ortiz Jones to unseat him. Yet late last month, the National Republican Congressional Committee was back on TV in the district after canceling reservations there weeks earlier, a sign that national Republicans remained worried about the race.

Elsewhere, Democrats are expected to run up the score in the state's two largest counties — Harris and Dallas — and there could be serious down-ballot consequences as a result.

"We have always said that growing our electorate to grow our power is a long term project and every cycle that we add Democrats to the electorate is a successful election and a step in the right direction," Schechter said.

Sleeper races could emerge on the congressional front as well, given the robust fundraising of Democratic challengers across the state.

Beyond the statewide and congressional match-ups, three races in GOP-dominated state Senate seats have also generated interest, with some Republicans worried that Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick could lose his stronghold on the upper chamber should those seats flip. In Senate District 16, incumbent Don Huffines and Democrat Nathan Johnson are fighting to see who will represent a district in Dallas County that has been represented by a Republican for more than three decades.

What's working to Johnson's advantage is an obvious fanfare for O'Rourke and the fact that Senate District 16 overlaps with the 32nd Congressional District, where recent polls show Sessions trailing Allred by single digits. The district also supported Clinton over Trump by nearly 5 percentage points in 2016.

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A similar situation is unfolding in state Senate races in Tarrant County and the Houston-area, where Republican state Sens. Konni Burton and Joan Huffman, respectively, are vying for re-election. Burton, a Colleyville Republican facing a challenge from Democrat Beverly Powell, will have to navigate a historically competitive re-election bid. In 2014, she flipped the seat from Democrat Wendy Davis with a little more than 52 percent of the vote. Two years later, Trump beat Clinton in the district by only half a percentage point. In Huffman's district, Trump won by less than one percentage point.

Further down the ballot, there are several state House seats in play. Dallas County in particular has been a central battleground for several Democrats running aggressive campaigns against incumbent Republicans. If a "blue wave" does overwhelm the area, Democrats are hopeful more than a handful of seats will flip in their favor, including ones currently held by state Reps. Matt Rinaldi of Irving, Rodney Anderson of Grand Prairie, Angie Chen Button of Richardson and Linda Koop and Morgan Meyer, both of Dallas.

Two open state house seats in the Dallas-area could flip toward Democrats as well. The House District 114 race in Dallas County will determine who will succeed Republican state Rep. Jason Villalba of Dallas, a relatively moderate three-term legislator who lost his GOP primary earlier this year. Politicos are also keeping an eye on the neighboring House District 113, where Democrat Rhetta Bowers and Republican Jonathan Boos are vying for the seat vacated by state Rep. Cindy Burkett.

In Williamson County, too, several legislative seats are in play. Democrat James Talarico and Republican Cynthia Flores are duking it out to replace the retiring state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock. In a neighboring district, state Rep. Tony Dale is hoping to hold his seat against Democrat John Bucy.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Livingston and Alex Samuels, A. (2018, November 6). Uncertainty hangs over Texas as voters head to the polls this Election Day - From the intense battle between Ted Cruz and Beto O'Rourke to hard-fought, well-funded races lower on the ballot, what happens on Election Day could reset — or reaffirm — the trajectory of Texas politics.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F85F87FABD8578>.

## **Democratic women lead biggest shift in Texas House since 2010 midterms - Led by female candidates, Texas Democrats picked up 12 Texas House seats from Republicans, mostly in North Texas. But Republicans still have the edge in the lower chamber.**

November 6, 2018 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Cassandra Pollock, Carlos Anchondo and Allyson R Waller | Section: News | 556 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz defeated Democratic challenger Beto O'Rourke in the race for U.S. Senate. View full 2018 Texas election results or subscribe to The Brief for the latest election news.

More in this series

Led by a slate of female candidates, Democrats flipped 12 seats in the Texas House in Tuesday's midterm elections, marking the biggest shift in the lower chamber since the 2010 midterm elections.

In January, when the Texas Legislature convenes for the 86th legislative session, the Republicans' 95-55 advantage over the Democrats will shrink to 83-67, which could boost the role Democrats will play in electing the next Texas House Speaker — who will only need support from 76 House members to succeed the retiring Joe Straus, a San Antonio Republican.

Democrats made most of their House gains in North Texas, where shifting demographics, along with Democratic enthusiasm for the top of their party's ticket, placed GOP incumbents up and down the ballot on the defense. Democrats also flipped a number of GOP-held seats in Central Texas and in the Houston area.

Democratic women picked off five North Texas seats, highlighted by defeats of two high-profile GOP incumbents: Julie Johnson defeated Matt Rinaldi of Irving, a member of the hardline conservative Texas House Freedom Caucus, while Michelle Beckley beat Ron Simmons of Carrollton, who authored a version of the "bathroom bill" in 2017.

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Terry Meza also defeated Republican state Rep. Rodney Anderson of Grand Prairie, Ana-Maria Ramos ousted state Rep. Linda Koop of Dallas and Rhetta Bowers defeated Republican Jonathan Boos for a seat being vacated by state Rep. Cindy Burkett, R-Sunnyvale.

In a sixth Democratic pickup in North Texas, John Turner defeated Republican Lisa Luby Ryan for the seat currently held by outgoing state Rep. Jason Villalba, R-Dallas.

Two Dallas-area Republican incumbents won their re-election bids: State Reps. Angie Chen Button of Richardson and Morgan Meyer of Dallas. Republicans failed to knock off one of their main targets in North Texas as state Rep. Victoria Neave of Dallas won re-election.

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Democrats also picked up four seats in Central Texas: John Bucy III defeated state Rep. Tony Dale, R-Cedar Park; Erin Zwiener edged Republican Ken Strange for a seat being vacated by state Rep. Jason Isaac, R-Dripping Springs; James Talarico beat Republican Cynthia Flores to succeed former state Rep. Larry Gonzales, R-Round Rock; and Democrat Vikki Goodwin unseated state Rep. Paul Workman, R-Austin.

And they won two more in the Houston area, where Gina Calanni ousted state Rep. Mike Schofield, R-Katy, with a razor-thin 49-vote margin, and Jon Rosenthal narrowly defeated Republican state Rep. Gary Elkins of Houston.

Another Houston-area Republican, state Rep. Sarah Davis, R-West University Place, held off her Democratic opponent, Allison Lami Sawyer. Davis, a centrist, pro-abortion rights Republican, survived a heavy-handed attempt by Gov. Greg Abbott to unseat her in the March primaries.

Despite the GOP's losses on Tuesday, the 12-member, hardline conservative House Freedom Caucus could grow its membership by at least a few in 2019. At least three Republicans aligned with the more conservative faction of the party — Mayes Middleton, Jared Patterson and Steve Toth — won their races.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock, C. (2018, November 6). Democratic women lead biggest shift in Texas House since 2010 midterms - Led by female candidates, Texas Democrats picked up 12 Texas House seats from Republicans, mostly in North Texas. But Republicans still have the edge in the lower chamber.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/16F8AE374C830890>.

## James Talarico, youngest state representative in Texas Legislature, settles in for the 86th session - After besting Republican Cynthia Flores for his open Williamson County seat, the 29-year-old Democrat from Round Rock joined the Texas House on Tuesday amid plenty of jokes and words of wisdom.

January 8, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Alex Samuels | Section: News | 1267 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

### Texas Legislature 2019

The 86th Legislature runs from Jan. 8 to May 27. From the state budget to health care to education policy — and the politics behind it all — we focus on what Texans need to know about the biennial legislative session.

#### More in this series

State Rep. James Talarico joked that he started the first day of the legislative session by getting hazed.

After he parked his truck in his underground Capitol parking spot Tuesday, two men guarding the garage asked him if he was the youngest member of the Legislature. After confirming their suspicions, they teased that Talarico looked too young to be a state representative.

"One of them told me I look like an intern," the Round Rock Democrat said laughing.

The men wished him luck before he headed to his Capitol office, a small room filled with gifts from lobbyists, Tiff's Treats cookies, the lawmaker's parents and an eager campaign staff.

After besting Republican Cynthia Flores for his open Williamson County seat, Talarico became the youngest current member of the Legislature at 29. But the Democrat doesn't see his age as an impediment on his ability to lead. Rather, he's excited the Legislature has another millennial in the lower chamber to "help make sure that generation has a voice at the table."

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"It's an honor," he said, "but it also comes along with a lot of jokes, too."

Talarico said he's used to the wisecracks. It's the pomp and circumstance that comes with being an elected official that requires some acclimation. When he first saw the giant desk and chair in his office, his first thought was that the furniture took up too much space in a room meant to hold eight other staff members, including interns.

His solution? Get rid of it.

"I don't really work behind a desk anyway," Talarico said. "Plus, I'd rather work on a couch."

He and his staff replaced the Capitol desk and chair with a long conference table and couches to allow the state representative to work alongside staff and have a central place to speak with constituents.

"We're calling it 'the people's office,'" said Michelle Castillo, Talarico's chief of staff. "We want to ensure that anyone who comes into this office feels welcome."

A laundry list of people — from inside and outside of Talarico's district — had no problem stepping into the open space to make their acquaintances or snag a breakfast taco Tuesday morning. That included a Williamson County

Girl Scouts group, lobbyists from the Texas Public Policy Foundation and even former Democratic Texas Sen. Wendy Davis.

"Honestly, I had to let go of a bit of ego because I was excited about him having the big desk and the big chair and nameplate, but when he explained why he was doing it, I said, 'Yes, that's exactly how it should be,'" said Tamara Talarico, the state representative's mom, on her son's new office furniture. "Jimmy knows the district so well, and he wants people to come in and tell him what the real problems are and talk to them openly."

While Tamara Talarico credited her son with coming up with the idea of renovating his Capitol office, the freshmen admitted to receiving help and advice on policy and legislative issues from more seasoned lawmakers. Shortly after the election, newly elected Republican Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, who joined the lower chamber at 24, took the freshman aside to discuss how to navigate having a seat in the Legislature before turning 30. Talarico said Democratic House veterans like state Reps. Mary González, Joe Moody and Rafael Anchia also took the time to mentor him before he took his oath of office.

"I know the challenges that someone young faces," said Moody, who was first sworn into office at 28. "You have to convince people that you're prepared to and are ready to step into a leadership role. The advice I gave to him was that when you face structural opposition because of your youth, it forces you to work harder and smarter to elevate yourself in this building."

James Talarico said he knows he'll face barriers in the lower chamber — both because he's a member of the minority party and the Legislature's youngest member. But he's hopeful his House colleagues can look beyond his age and focus on the work ethic that helped him flip a Republican-held seat. Before James Talarico was elected in November, the Round Rock seat was held by Larry Gonzales who resigned from his post in June.

"We've been building the grassroots up there for five years and working hard," said state Rep. John Bucy, D-Cedar Park, a fellow freshmen lawmaker and Talarico's deskmate on the House floor.

State leaders this year have agreed to focus on bread-and-butter issues like property taxes and school finance. James Talarico feels confident speaking about the latter issue since he's a former middle school teacher. In the next five months, he hopes to have a role in the school finance debate Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Bonnen have promised will take center stage during the 86th Legislature.

"As a former teacher and non-profit leader," James Talarico said, "I believe I can provide some unique insight into that issue."

For his constituents, he's hoping to address issues related to Williamson County's infrastructure and protecting the district's cities from what he calls "overbearing policy proposals" that have come through the Legislature in past sessions.

"I knocked on 5,000 doors to win this seat — our campaign knocked on 100,000 doors total — and we heard directly from people about their hopes, fears and anxieties," James Talarico said. "We made promises that we would work our hearts out to make their lives better, and I feel the pressure to do that every single day."

Flanked by his mom and dad, James Talarico along with nearly 149 other state representatives, took their oaths of office Tuesday afternoon. Shortly thereafter, the freshman and his family rejoined his staff and supporters so he and Bucy could meet with their respective constituents.

For James Talarico, Tuesday was "surreal." And despite starting his morning by hearing playful remarks about his age, he insisted he was ready to put the jokes behind him and get to work.

"We had a campaign that lasted almost two years, so today is the day we start the real work," he said, the last of his visitors shuffling out of his office. "Now we try to convert the vision we talked about on the campaign trail into reality."

"Today is the day when the work begins and that's really exciting."

Disclosure: The Texas Public Policy Foundation has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Samuels, A. (2019, January 8). James Talarico, youngest state representative in Texas Legislature, settles in for the 86th session - After besting Republican Cynthia Flores for his open Williamson County seat, the 29-year-old Democrat from Round Rock joined the Texas House on Tuesday amid plenty of jokes and words of wisdom.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/170D7142C03F27F8>.

## **Julián Castro's 2020 announcement brightens spotlight on potential Texas showdown with Beto O'Rourke - Texas could have two Democrats running in the 2020 presidential race — and one of them, Julián Castro, got an early start Saturday as speculation continues to swirl around Beto O'Rourke's intentions.**

January 12, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1314 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

SAN ANTONIO — Lingering around after Julián Castro announced his presidential campaign here Saturday, Santa Garcia Rivera and her niece, Santa Garcia Reyes, said they were thrilled to see someone from the city's hardscrabble West Side reach for the highest office in the country. But they also expressed some ambivalence as they sized up a potential 2020 presidential field that could include another Texas Democrat: Beto O'Rourke.

"It's really tough," said Garcia Reyes, a 45-year-old education specialist for Early Head Start. "I think they have a lot of the same values."

Ultimately, Garcia Reyes said, "my loyalty is going to be to Julián... just seeing that he's never forgot about the people here in San Antonio." Her aunt, however, seemed less sure which Texan would end up earning her vote if they both run.

Such mixed feelings are not uncommon among Texas Democrats, who could end up with two of their own running in 2020. O'Rourke's closer-than-expected loss to U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz last year made him a national star, eclipsing Castro's longtime status — along with his brother — as Texas Democrats' best hope. Now, all eyes are on whether O'Rourke will ride the momentum to a 2020 bid of his own and officially test the loyalties of people like Garcia Rivera and her niece.

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As O'Rourke's 2020 buzz has intensified — with early polls showing him far outranking his fellow Texan — Castro has said there is enough room in the race for both of them. And both have said the other's plans will not affect theirs.

All this is unfolding as delegate-rich Texas is poised to have considerable influence in the 2020 nominating process with its early March primary — a high-stakes moment if the two Texans make can it there.

O'Rourke does not appear to be in a rush to make a 2020 decision and is not expected to make one until February at the earliest. In the meantime, every move he makes is drawing intense attention — from the videos he has tweeted out arguing against President Donald Trump's proposed border wall to his Instagram posts Thursday from the dentist's chair. Media mogul Oprah Winfrey announced Friday that she will interview O'Rourke on Feb. 5 in New York City, an event guaranteed to captivate the political world.

Castro and O'Rourke are not particularly close but have appeared friendly in public, and Castro and his brother, U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-San Antonio, joined O'Rourke on the campaign trail during the closing weeks of the U.S. Senate race. The brothers' political paths also intersected with O'Rourke's in the first few months of 2017, when Joaquin Castro mulled a U.S. Senate run at the same time O'Rourke did. Joaquin Castro ultimately passed on the Senate bid, announcing his decision about a month after O'Rourke launched his campaign.

Speaking before his brother Saturday, Joaquin Castro said there will be "a lot of great candidates" in the presidential race — many of them friends the brothers respect — "but I know we have the best candidate with the best ideas and the biggest heart." Joaquin Castro told reporters afterward he was not concerned about a potential O'Rourke candidacy.

"All of the candidates who are going to enter this race — there's something good about everybody, so [Julián]'s just gonna go and do the hard work of focusing on his vision and getting his message out to people," Joaquin Castro said, "and we understand it's a competition obviously and it's a race, but you really can't focus on what other people are doing."

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Asked what his message was for conflicted Texas Democrats, Joaquin Castro said, "I would ask them to follow their heart and their mind."

Some Texas Democrats are not waiting on O'Rourke's decision to give their unequivocal backing to Julián Castro. Among them is freshman state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who was the first introductory speaker Saturday. Talarico recalled his experience teaching middle school on San Antonio's West Side while Castro was the city's mayor, pushing an education-centric agenda. In an interview afterward, Talarico said it was seeing Castro's leadership "up close and personal in San Antonio" that led him to offer him his "full, complete endorsement for 2020."

"I'm a huge fan of Congressman O'Rourke, he campaigned with me, his campaign was hugely helpful in our race, he would make an incredible president, but just my history has been with Secretary Castro," Talarico said. "No matter who else runs, he's gonna be my candidate."

Talarico was joined in the lineup by a second state representative, Diego Bernal, a longtime friend of the Castros. And in another show of support among House Democrats, state Rep. Poncho Nevárez of Eagle Pass tweeted Friday that he was "all in" for Julián Castro.

Other Democrats are keeping their powder dry for now, reiterating how much of a net positive it is for Texas to have two Democrats in the 2020 mix.

"I grew up here and never in my lifetime has Texas been a battleground state," said Sri Preston Kulkarni, a former congressional candidate from the Houston suburbs who attended Castro's announcement. "Texas is a battleground state right now, and the energy, the excitement here — to see so many people coming out for a Texas Democrat running for president — that's huge."

Texas Democratic up-and-comers like Kulkarni face something of a conundrum when it comes to making a decision about who to support in 2020. Castro donated to their campaigns through his Opportunity First PAC and stumped for them. O'Rourke, meanwhile, gave them speaking time at his massively attended events and had an impact on their margins with his closer-than-expected loss at the top of the ticket.

Castro used his Opportunity First PAC to endorse over two dozen candidates last cycle in Texas, including the two biggest winners: Colin Allred, who unseated U.S. Rep. Pete Sessions, R-Dallas, and Lizzie Fletcher, who beat U.S. Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston. Castro was especially involved with Allred, who worked under Castro at HUD, backing him early on in what became a crowded primary.

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Allred has not shied away from Castro's 2020 maneuvering in recent weeks, issuing a supportive statement when he formed an exploratory committee a month ago, sending a fundraising email for the committee and talking him up during a recent Sunday show appearance.

"Well, I certainly like my former boss, Julián Castro, who is a friend of mine and a mentor of mine," Allred said Sunday on CBS' "Face the Nation," adding, "we have a lot of political talent in Texas."

For those trying to imagine what it would be like to have both Texas Democrats in the race, Castro's Saturday

announcement was instructive. He appeared to speak from a teleprompter, the lineup of introductory speakers was carefully curated to highlight his accomplishments and campaign surrogates were made available to the media afterward — all contrasts with the freewheeling, unvarnished style of O'Rourke's 2018 U.S. Senate run.

To political observers, Julián Castro's announcement speech invoked O'Rourke's 2018 bid in at least one way: Castro vowed not to take campaign contributions from PACs, a hallmark of O'Rourke's run. The promise, which Castro has been making for about a month now, was among the bigger applause lines as he spoke at the West Side's historic Plaza Guadalupe.

Texas Republicans, for their part, were happy to stoke divisions between Castro and O'Rourke on Saturday. On a conference call with reporters before Castro's announcement, Texas GOP Chairman James Dickey said the soon-to-be candidate was "absolutely" grappling with having his spotlight stolen by O'Rourke.

"As someone who made it obvious for a long time that he felt like he had a right to go for the presidency, he's got to be incredibly miffed at how quickly... the void of absence was filled during the last two years," Dickey said.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2019, January 12). Julián Castro's 2020 announcement brightens spotlight on potential Texas showdown with Beto O'Rourke - Texas could have two Democrats running in the 2020 presidential race — and one of them, Julián Castro, got an early start Saturday as speculation continues to swirl around Beto O'Rourke's intentions.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/170EC2B2370AC260>.

## Watch: A conversation with three new Democratic Texas state representatives - Meet the 86th: A conversation with new Texas state Reps. Rhetta Bowers, Jessica Gonzalez and James Talarico, moderated by Texas Tribune co-founder and CEO Evan Smith.

February 7, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Texas Tribune Staff | Section: News | 180 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

We sat down for a Thursday morning conversation with new Democratic state Reps. Rhetta Bowers, Jessica Gonzalez and James Talarico, moderated by Texas Tribune co-founder and CEO Evan Smith.

Bowers, D-Garland, was elected to represent House District 113 in November. Before her election, Bowers was an educator, a PTA member, and a volunteer at Garland ISD. She was appointed to the Rowlett Parks and Recreation Advisory Board and served from 2009-16. She is a former broadcast journalist.

Gonzalez, D-Dallas, was elected to represent House District 104 in November. She is a founding partner of the law firm Gandara & Gonzalez PLLC, which specializes in personal injury litigation. Gonzalez was previously selected as the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute Law Graduate Fellow in Washington, D.C., and served as a legislative assistant at the U.S. House of Representatives in 2011.

Talarico, D-Round Rock, was elected to represent House District 52 in November. He is a former public school teacher and is executive director for Central Texas for the nonprofit Reasoning Mind, which integrates data and technology into math classrooms. Talarico is the youngest member of the Texas Legislature.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Tribune Staff, T. (2019, February 7). Watch: A conversation with three new Democratic Texas state representatives - Meet the 86th: A conversation with new Texas state Reps. Rhetta Bowers, Jessica Gonzalez and James Talarico, moderated by Texas Tribune co-founder and CEO Evan Smith.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1716FF61795B5D68>.

**Analysis: Where control of the next Texas Legislature will be decided - One-fifth of the incumbents in the Texas House serve in districts where less than 10 percentage points separated average Democrats from average Republicans in statewide races. That's more than enough contested turf to put control within reach of either party.**

February 25, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: News | 783 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

## Texas Legislature 2019

The 86th Legislature runs from Jan. 8 to May 27. From the state budget to health care to education policy — and the politics behind it all — we focus on what Texans need to know about the biennial legislative session.

### More in this series

In 31 of the state's 150 Texas House districts, the top candidates for the Republicans and Democrats finished fewer than 10 percentage points apart in last year's general election.

Those results provide a rough guide to the political battlefield in Texas in 2020: 18 of those seats are now held by Republicans and 13 are held by Democrats. A tighter description of competitiveness — districts where the parties' top candidates finished fewer than 5 percentage points apart — narrows the list to 13 House districts, including seven now held by Republicans and six now held by Democrats.

Statewide, the average Republican candidate on the 2018 ballot outdid the average Democrat by 7.3 percentage points, according to an analysis of district-by-district election results compiled by the Texas Legislative Council.

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The partisan split in the House is narrow enough to give partisans on both sides plenty to scheme about. Republicans hold 83 seats. Democrats hold 65, with special election runoffs in Democratic districts next month to decide the remaining two spots.

That narrow list of potentially close districts includes Republican state Reps. Rick Miller of Sugar Land, Bill Zedler of Arlington, Matt Shaheen and Jeff Leach of Plano, Dwayne Bohac of Houston, Morgan Meyer of Dallas and Angie Chen Button of Richardson. The Democrats on the list are all freshmen: State Reps. Gina Calanni of Katy, Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, Jon Rosenthal of Houston, Vikki Goodwin of Austin, John Turner of Dallas and Erin Zwiener of Driftwood.

Ten Republicans are in districts where their party's statewide candidates won by more than 5 percentage points but fewer than 10, including Tony Tinderholt of Arlington, Ed Thompson of Pearland, Craig Goldman and Matt Krause of Fort Worth, John Zerwas of Richmond, Sam Harless of Spring, Jonathan Stickland of Bedford, Steve Allison of San Antonio, Lynn Stucky of Denton and Brad Buckley of Killeen.

Seven Democrats find themselves in the same situation: James Talarico of Round Rock, Rhetta Andrews Bowers of Garland, Abel Herrero of Robstown, Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City, Julie Johnson of Carrollton, John Bucy III of Austin and Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson.

One Democrat — Calanni — represents a district where Republicans, on average, won those statewide elections. Two Republicans are in districts where Democrats prevailed at the top — Bohac and Sarah Davis of Houston.

But no House Democrat has a district where Ted Cruz beat Beto O'Rourke. A number of Republicans, however,

represent districts where Cruz lost: Allison, Stucky, Miller, Leach, Shaheen, Bohac, Button, Meyer and Davis.

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Donald Trump defeated Hillary Clinton in six House districts where Democrats will be defending their seats: Zweiner, Calanni, Beckley, Rosenthal, Talarico and Goodwin. But Clinton won in these Republicans' districts: Bohac, Button, Meyer and Davis.

The mix in the Texas Senate doesn't appear to be in any kind of unusual trouble; only one of the seats that will be on the 2020 ballot — SD-19, where Republican Pete Flores scored a political upset last year and won in a district that typically favors Democrats. In the other 15 Senate districts on the 2020 ballot, the eight Republican and seven Democratic incumbents would be seeking re-election in districts dominated by their own parties.

It's a testament to the partisan strength of the Senate's redistricting maps. In Flores' case, Cruz lost by more than 14 percentage points. In 2016, Trump lost by more than 11 points. And the average statewide Democrat beat the average Republican there by more than 10 percentage points last year.

That seat will be a hot spot for both parties; the rest could see primary fights but are less likely to flip in the general election unless the candidates make big mistakes.

On paper, that's not enough to rock the Senate in 2020, either way. But with up to a fifth of the House seats in play, both parties have room for hope and terror. And with redistricting coming in the 2021 session, the partisans have something to fight over.

Disclosure: Sam Harless has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## The 2019 Texas House, from right to left

June 4, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Mark P. Jones | Section: Politics | 1053 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas Legislature's 2019 regular session is over, the votes on bills have been cast, and we have everything we need to rank Texas House members along the political spectrum from red to blue.

Political scientists have for decades used roll-call votes cast by members of the U.S. Congress to plot them on the Liberal-Conservative dimension along which most legislative politics now takes place. This ranking of the Texas House members does the same by drawing on the 1,166 non-lopsided roll-call votes taken during the 2019 regular session. As with previous rankings conducted in 2017 (post special session), 2017 (post regular session) 2015, 2013 and 2011, this one uses a Bayesian estimation procedure belonging to the family of methodological approaches that represent the political science discipline's gold standard for roll-call vote analysis.

### Methodology

In the figure below, Republicans are indicated by red dots and Democrats by blue ones. In this analysis, each representative is given a mean ideal point, referred to as the Lib-Con Score, along with the 95 percent credible interval (CI) for this point estimate. If two legislators' CIs overlap, their positions on the ideological spectrum might be statistically equivalent, even if their Lib-Con Scores are different. The vertical dashed black lines indicate the median location of the Democrats and Republicans. The representatives who are more conservative are located to the right of their party's line, while those who are more liberal than the median are located to the left of the line.

In addition, this table contains each representative's rank-ordered position, ranging from 1 (most liberal) to 149 (most conservative). House Speaker Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, who by custom doesn't ordinarily vote, is not included here.

### Republicans

The 82 members of the GOP House delegation reflect a wide range of positions along the liberal-conservative spectrum. The delegation stretches from Briscoe Cain of Deer Park, Tony Tinderholt of Arlington and Mayes Middleton of Wallisville at one end, to Sarah Davis of West University Place, J.D. Sheffield of Gatesville, and Dan Huberty of Houston at the other.

Davis is the only Republican whose CI overlaps with that of any Democrats, overlapping with eight Democrats and zero Republicans. Her centrist profile is a natural fit for her purple district (HD-134), where a majority of voters identify with Davis's fiscally conservative and socially moderate policy positions. Davis's ideological congruence with her constituents is the principal reason why in 2018 she defeated her Democratic opponent 53.2% to 46.8% while the same HD-134 voters who propelled Davis to victory voted overwhelmingly in the U.S. Senate race for Democrat Beto O'Rourke over their neighbor, Republican Ted Cruz (who lives in HD-134), 60.3% to 39.0%. While Davis won HD-134 by 6.4%, Cruz lost HD-134 by 21.3%.

### Democrats

The Democratic delegation is not as ideologically diverse as its GOP counterpart, but does nevertheless contain a broad range of ideological worldviews. Gina Hinojosa of Austin, Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson, and Jessica González of Dallas anchor the liberal end of the Democratic ideological continuum. The most centrist Democrat is Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City, followed by Richard Peña Raymond of Laredo and Tracy King of Batesville, reflecting the more conservative leanings of voters in far South Texas compared to voters in the major metro urban areas.

Within the Democratic delegation there are 28 women (42%) and 39 men (58%). As a result, were women and men equally distributed among the most centrist and most liberal quartiles of the party, we would expect to see approximately 42% of each quartile accounted for by women. As the figure reveals however, that is not the case. There are no women within the most centrist quartile of Democrats. In sharp contrast, 71% of the Democrats in the party's most liberal quartile are women.

#### The Democratic Dozen

In the 2018 election, Democrats won 12 House seats that had been held by Republicans during the 2017 legislative session. They won by margins ranging from 0.2% to 13.6%. Their margins of victory, followed by the margins between Democratic gubernatorial candidate Lupe Valdez and Republican Gov. Greg Abbott in the district, which range from -6.0% to 6.9%, are listed below:

- \* Erin Zwiener of Driftwood in HD-45 (3.2%; -1.6%)
- \* Vikki Goodwin of Austin in HD-47 (4.8%; -4.1%)
- \* James Talarico of Round Rock in HD-52 (3.5%; -1.4%)
- \* Michelle Beckley of Carrollton in HD-65 (2.3%; -4.5%)
- \* Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson in HD-102 (5.8%; 2.6%)
- \* Terry Meza of Irving in HD-105 (9.5%; 6.9%)
- \* Rhetta Bowers of Garland in HD-113 (7.0%; 0.5%)
- \* John Turner of Dallas in HD-114 (11.3%; -3.3%)
- \* Julie Johnson of Carrollton in HD-115 (13.6%; 1.9%).
- \* Gina Calanni of Katy in HD-132 (0.2%; -6.0%)
- \* Jon Rosenthal of Houston in HD-135 (3.2%; -3.9%)
- \* John Bucy III of Austin in HD-136 (9.6%; 2.8%)

From the day they arrived in Austin in January, many of these 12 legislators (especially those who won by the lowest margins and/or in whose districts statewide Republicans such as Abbott did well) have had targets on their backs, since these districts represent the Republican Party's best prospects for flipping Democratic-held seats in 2020. One response by these 12 legislators to this threat in their first (tabula rasa) session in the Texas Legislature could have been to adopt centrist voting records on the House floor, following the successful model of Republican Sarah Davis, who has continuously won in a purple district by having a purple record.

These dozen Democratic legislators, however, have categorically rejected that option, with all 12 located to the left of the Democratic delegation's median Lib-Con Score. A majority of these 12 Democrats have ideological positions that make them significantly more liberal than a substantial number of their 66 Democratic colleagues.

Far from displaying a centrist ideological profile, these potentially vulnerable Democrats behaved as unabashed liberals when casting votes during their first legislative session. Their liberal voting records should safeguard them against any serious Democratic primary challenge in March 2020, but do potentially put them at risk in the November 2020 general election — to the extent that district level forces, rather than those at the national or state level, drive voter behavior in their respective legislative districts.

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## **After House Republicans tackle big challenges in session, they face another one: saving themselves - Some Democrats are mobilizing in hopes of taking the nine House seats they need for a majority in 2020 as Republican House Speaker Dennis Bonnen tries to prevent intra-GOP challenges in the primaries.**

June 13, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 2398 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

When Hillary Clinton came to Houston last month for a local party fundraiser, she spoke forcefully about the opportunities that await Texas Democrats in 2020. Yet instead of promoting the U.S. Senate race — or even the half dozen congressional seats that national Democrats are targeting — she focused a little farther down the ballot.

"When I look at Texas, I see the future," the 2016 presidential nominee told Harris County Democrats. "I see a path to drive record turnout in 2020. And if we can do that, you can take back the state House. You can take back the House and maybe even the Senate."

While the Texas Senate appears safe for Republicans, Clinton's comments underscored the emphasis that some Democrats — both in Texas and outside it — are already putting on the fight for the majority in the state House, where their party is nine seats away from control of the chamber. Views vary on just how within reach the majority is for Democrats, but few disagree that 2020 will be a frenzied cycle for House races as Democrats work to protect — and potentially build on — their recent gains. Republicans, meanwhile, are pushing to take back seats and head off the worst-case scenario: a Democratic-led House heading into the 2021 redistricting process.

The early contours of the fight are taking shape in the wake of a legislative session that saw Republicans largely eschew divisive social issues for a bread-and-butter agenda after a humbling election cycle in which they lost a dozen seats in the lower chamber. There is also a new speaker, Angleton Republican Dennis Bonnen, who appears intent on keeping the GOP in power by minimizing the kind of internecine conflict that has previously bedeviled the party.

"Everything is focused on redistricting," state Sen. Kelly Hancock, R-North Richland Hills, said at a recent Tea Party meeting as he fielded questions about the demise of some controversial legislation this session. "There is nothing more important — not only to Texas, but literally the nation — than to make sure that we maintain the Texas House ... going into redistricting because if you look at the nation — we lose Texas, we lose the nation. And there's no other place to go."

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First things first

Before Republicans can fully focus on November, though, they must get through primary season, typically the most consequential part of the cycle in a traditionally red state. This primary stretch has been off to a more muted start than usual, with few credible challengers to incumbents emerging during or immediately after the session — or even speculation about them.

Of course, the unity among Bonnen, Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has set a much different tone coming out of this session versus the contentious 2017 sessions. In the aftermath of those sessions, Abbott took the remarkable step of backing primary challengers to GOP House members who had crossed him, which he has indicated he will not do this time.

Bonnen has taken particular interest in protecting GOP members from primary challenges that could prove counterproductive in preserving the majority. Early in his speakership, he counseled Abbott against getting involved

in primaries again and even visited with Tim Dunn, the Midland oilman whose largesse fuels the biggest-spending groups that help primary opponents.

Recently asked by reporters what he discussed with Dunn, Bonnen replied, "Not wasting money on primaries."

Still, hardline conservative activists have bitterly panned the session, pointing to the failure of priorities such as further restricting abortion and cracking down on voter fraud. Whether those complaints translate into viable primary challenges is an open question.

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It could depend on how Republican members use the coming weeks to characterize the session to constituents back home, according to one GOP consultant who regularly works with primary challengers.

"Republican lawmakers would do well to admit to their Republican constituents that this session fell short and that the media's acknowledgment that conservative issues were avoided is accurate," said the consultant, Luke Macias. "The more Republican lawmakers attempt to portray this session as a huge win for conservatives, the more they increase their likelihood of having a primary challenge to deal with."

Democrats mobilizing

As Republicans have sought to get their own in order for 2020, state and national Democrats have been drawing up preliminary battle plans to take the House. Their path runs through a group of 18 districts — 17 where Republicans won by single digits last year, as well as House District 32. That's where Rep. Todd Hunter, R-Corpus Christi, ran unopposed while U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, won by just 5 points.

Of course, Democrats have to simultaneously defend the 12 seats they picked up last year, some of which have already drawn serious GOP opposition.

The path is "tough but possible to flip the chamber," said Patrick Rodenbush, a spokesman for the National Democratic Redistricting Committee, the group chaired by former U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder. "We feel like there are enough potential targets out there that nine is doable, but it is gonna take a lot of work and resources."

The NDRC spent \$560,000 in Texas last cycle, and Rodenbush called Texas "one of our top priorities for 2020." It recently hired an Austin-based Democratic consultant, Genevieve Van Cleve, to oversee its advocacy and political efforts here as Texas state director.

Other national groups are zeroing in on Texas this cycle as a state House battleground. They include the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee and Forward Majority, a super PAC that injected \$2.2 million into Texas House races in the closing days of the 2018 election.

The state Democratic Party is expanding its campaign and candidate services as part of what will ultimately be a seven-figure effort in House races. Over the past weekend in Austin, the party held a training for 55 people to become campaign managers in state House races.

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How will Republicans respond?

While Bonnen and other top Republicans appear to be taking seriously the stakes of 2020, it remains to be seen whether there will be a centralized effort to defend the majority next year, either through Bonnen's campaign, an allied group or a new entity. Generally speaking, Bonnen's GOP predecessor behind the gavel, Joe Straus, relied on a top political adviser, Gordon Johnson, who worked with a regular group of consultants while helping guide Straus' campaign funds to a web of allied political action committees.

Bonnen entered the speakership without a consistent political consultant or cadre or campaign advisers — things he never needed while easily winning reelection back home cycle after cycle. That has set off some jockeying among Texas GOP operatives to get in on what will surely be a lucrative endeavor to help keep Republicans in the majority.

One thing Bonnen has made clear is that he does not want members campaigning against each other — or else there will be consequences. But even in that pronouncement, there are lingering questions, like what the policy means in practice and whether it is enough to rein in the usual troublemakers — like Rep. Jonathan Stickland, R-Bedford, who spent six figures out of his own campaign account last cycle to intervene in House contests beside his own, including primary challenges.

During a NE Tarrant Tea Party meeting Monday — appearing alongside Hancock and Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth — Stickland was defiant when asked about Bonnen's insistence that members stay out of their colleagues' races.

"I don't care what he says," Stickland said, drawing applause and laughter. He went on to criticize Bonnen's policy as "really poor judgment," "really short-sighted" and "one of the dumbest comments I've heard anyone say."

Of course, just because Bonnen has drawn a line in the sand for his members does not preclude GOP allies from filling the void. Abbott's political operation plans to go after Democratic freshmen, as do well-funded organizations such as the Associated Republicans of Texas.

"ART is focused on candidate recruitment earlier than ever this cycle," ART's president, Jamie McWright, said in a statement. "We are identifying qualified, knowledgeable candidates who are willing to tackle the state's biggest issues in order to win back the seats Republicans lost in 2018."

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Republicans are particularly focused on the seven seats they lost last cycle that Abbott carried.

Bonnen's pronouncement seems to have had an impact on some Democratic members, who have been more muted about the possibility of the House flipping than their allies outside the Capitol. During a Tribune event Monday in McAllen, Reps. Bobby Guerra and Oscar Longoria, both of Mission, responded unenthusiastically when asked if Democrats have a chance to take over the House.

"I don't know," Longoria said. "I guess the voters will decide, and at this point, you know, our speaker is Speaker Dennis Bonnen."

And in a statement for this story, Rep. César Blanco of El Paso, chairman of the House Democratic Campaign Committee, kept the focus on defending the gains that Democrats made last year, when the HDCC largely played offense.

"This session was clearly a change from last session," Blanco said, noting the different set of issues that were prioritized in Austin. "A priority for us is to make sure that our 67 incumbents are reelected because more Democrats in the House lead to better policy outcomes for Texas."

Will voters reward school finance and property tax overhauls?

Heading into the general election, Republicans are confident that the issues are on their side after they ended the session with long-elusive wins on school finance and property taxes. One of the most endangered GOP incumbents, Rep. Morgan Meyer of Dallas, said school finance and property taxes are "without question the top two issues" for his constituents.

"They're very pleased with what we've done," Meyer said, characterizing the initial feedback he has received since

returning from Austin. "They're telling me, 'We couldn't be happier that y'all focused on important issues to our district this session, and thank y'all for doing that.'"

Yet Democrats involved in state House races do not see those issues as entirely political winners. Republicans, they say, will have to answer for how they can guarantee long-term, sustainable funding for the landmark laws as well as why they sided against many local officials on the property tax measure, which limits how much revenue cities and counties can raise without voter approval.

"What Mr. Meyer supported is something that the district did not want to be supported, especially the city of Dallas," said Joanna Cattanaach, the Democrat who came within 220 votes of Meyer last year and is challenging him again. On the school finance law, Cattanaach asked, "What's going to happen in 2021? Because they did not write a check to fully fund the system. ... Who is really going to be there to be a public education advocate?"

One of the national groups is already building the case that House Republicans should not be rewarded on school finance. The State Legislative Accountability Project, the nonprofit arm of Forward Majority, has prepared a report arguing House Republicans "flip-flopped" on school funding after they "created the very problem they are now trying to solve." The report targets Bonnen and 10 vulnerable members, some of whom were in office in 2011 and backed the Legislature's more than \$5 billion cut to public schools.

Regarding more recent history, Democrats plan to pressure GOP lawmakers over the sales tax swap that the Big Three — Abbott, Patrick and Bonnen — unsuccessfully pushed this session to buy down property taxes. The proposal would have raised the sales tax by 1 percentage point, and various analyses found it would have hit poor Texans the hardest while benefiting the wealthy and businesses the most.

The state leaders have kept the sales tax swap on the table for future sessions and discussed it as recently as Wednesday, when Abbott said the idea could return if voters demand further property tax relief.

"Every single Republican needs to be asked: Do you support raising the sales tax?" said Manny Garcia, the state Democratic party's executive director, adding that Democrats would be "happy to have that conversation" in 2020. "This was a policy that was going to punish regular, everyday Texans."

To be sure, Republican challengers are also starting to sharpen their lines of attack against House Democrats, focusing on their failure to support the "born-alive" abortion bill and a constitutional amendment that would make a state income tax all but impossible. And the GOP candidates looking to take back the 12 seats that Democrats won last year received instant fodder last week when Rice University's Mark Jones released ideological rankings in the House that showed the dozen freshmen were in the more liberal half of the Democratic caucus.

Vulnerable Democrats are also gearing up to explain their no votes on the priority property tax legislation, Senate Bill 2, whose substance, they say, does not match the sweeping promises made by Republican leaders.

"This was supposed to be a property tax reform bill, and there was a lot of pressure to just vote yes because it's political expedient or it will look wrong and the other side will beat you up for that — and I welcome that," said state Rep. Jon Rosenthal, D-Houston. "What they have done is not going to lower property taxes any; it's not going to change the fundamental model any."

Disclosure: Todd Hunter has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2019, June 13). After House Republicans tackle big challenges in session, they face another one: saving themselves - Some Democrats are mobilizing in hopes of taking the nine House seats they need for a majority in 2020 as Republican House Speaker Dennis Bonnen tries to prevent intra-GOP challenges in the primaries.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank:

Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1742554FD6B98CF8>.

## The new hemp law reveals a bigger problem: Texas needs better cannabis laws

July 24, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Central Texas lawmakers | Section: Law and Order | 552 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Duly-elected law enforcement officials, both Democrats and Republicans, are telling us that they will no longer prosecute certain cannabis offenses because of the passage of House Bill 1325, which legalizes hemp in Texas. These law enforcement professionals say similarities between now-legal hemp and still-illegal cannabis will make it difficult, without costly lab testing, to prove the difference to the requisite legal certainty in court.

As the law enforcement officials chosen by our local communities to execute the laws in furtherance of their safety, they have thoroughly vetted this decision with our communities' needs and resources in mind. Additionally, we believe that their assessment further reflects the modernization of our state laws regarding drug-related offenses.

During the 86th legislative session, the Texas House overwhelmingly voted in favor of House Bill 63, which would have drastically lowered the penalties associated with cannabis. With both the House and Gov. Greg Abbott working towards the bill's passage, only Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick stood in opposition.

It is regrettable that he was successful in preventing the bill from even receiving a hearing in the Senate, and it is ultimately this failure that has placed our state in its current predicament regarding hemp. As such, our law enforcement officials are merely addressing the situation with the best available solution — one that mirrors what might have happened with the passage of HB 63. Now, it is incumbent on the Texas Legislature to fix the conundrum caused by the new hemp law in the next legislative session.

With a majority of Texas voters supporting the legalization and regulation of cannabis (according to a 2018 University of Texas/Texas Tribune Poll), the Legislature has more than sufficient reason to debate and vote on a new comprehensive cannabis policy.

Meanwhile, local law enforcement officials must exercise their professional judgment on drug-related offenses as they keep our communities safe. This includes determining how to effectively do their jobs within the constraints of their resources — constraints that have recently been exacerbated by the passage of Senate Bill 2, which requires voter approval for increases in the local property tax revenues used for public safety expenses.

The concerns we have heard regarding the new hemp law present increased urgency as well as another opportunity to finally bridge public sentiment with criminal justice efforts to reformulate and redraft the state's cannabis policy.

We take pride in our work as legislators. However, we know the legislative process is not infallible. Given the extreme time constraints on a Legislature that only meets for 140 days every two years for a state with the 10th largest economy in the world, this was not the first time — nor will it be the last — the Texas Legislature passes a law with unintended consequences.

Rather than stick our heads in the sand and pretend the fault lies with our local elected officials, our job now is to take responsibility and to take this as an opportunity to craft cannabis policy that is well informed, respectful of the will of Texans and embarked upon in partnership with our local communities.

The authors are central Texas lawmakers and Democratic state representatives: John Bucy, Sheryl Cole, Vikki Goodwin, Gina Hinojosa, Donna Howard, Celia Israel and Eddie Rodriguez of Austin, James Talarico of Round Rock, and Erin Zwiener of Driftwood.

- **Citation (apa Style)**

Texas lawmakers, C. (2019, July 24). The new hemp law reveals a bigger problem: Texas needs better cannabis laws *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current:  
<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/174E63CB9CBD6048>.

**Analysis: 2020's real Texas House prize fights are in the general election — not the GOP primaries - While the state's political class is entranced with allegations that Republican House leaders would like to see some of their GOP colleagues replaced, the real stakes are on what happens when the 2020 primaries are over — and which party is in control when it's time for redistricting in 2021.**

August 26, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: News | 748 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

For all of the Republican talk about which GOP legislators are true enough to the conservative flag to deserve reelection next year, the real 2020 elections battle will come after the party primaries are over — in a general election where voters decide which party controls the Texas House.

This summer's news about whether House leaders have a list of Republican members they wouldn't mind replacing could, if it persists, give voters some reason to look to the Democrats.

Texas Democrats want to knock off enough Republicans in the Texas House next year to win a majority in the 2021 Legislature, which will be drawing political districts for the next 10 years. The House has 83 Republicans and 67 Democrats, so it would take nine flips to put the Democrats in control.

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Last year's election results exposed opportunities and vulnerabilities for both parties.

Look at how statewide candidates fared in each of the House's 150 districts in the 2018 elections. Republicans won all of the statewide races by an average of 7.3 percentage points. But their district-by-district results show where the Republican brand is strong and weak. In 31 of those 150 districts, those statewide races were competitive, meaning the vote spread was under 10 percentage points: statewide Republicans won, on average, in 15 of them; Democrats in 16. In five of those districts, the statewide Republicans prevailed by 5 percentage points or less; in 8 of them, Democrats prevailed by 5 percentage points or less.

Four House members — Gina Calanni, D-Katy, and Republicans Dwayne Bohac of Houston, Angie Chen Button of Richardson and Morgan Meyer of Dallas — won in districts where their own party's candidates, on average, were losing the races at the top of the ballot. Another Republican — Sarah Davis of West University Place — is even further out on the plank; she represents a district that statewide Democrats carried by an average of 9.8 percentage points.

The broadest list of prospective flips — those 31 seats where top-of-ballot results in 2018 were closer than 10 percentage points — include 18 held by Republicans and 13 held by Democrats.

Another list useful for political plotters is candidate-specific: Who won a close race in 2018? A win is a win, of course, but a narrow win is an invitation to either a rematch or a new challenge. And several House members face that risk.

A total 46 candidates — 17 Republicans and 29 Democrats — were elected to the Texas House without opposition in 2018.

Another 77 members — 49 Republicans and 28 Democrats — were elected by margins bigger than 10 percent.

The remaining 27 members — 17 Republicans and 10 Democrats — won by fewer than 10 percentage points; 14 of those — eight Republicans and six Democrats — won by margins of less than 5 percentage points.

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And who in the Legislature barely made it past voters last time, winning by less than 3 percentage points? Two Democrats, both of them new to the Legislature: Calanni (also on the other high-risk list) and Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, both of whom beat Republican incumbents last year. Four more Democrats — Vikki Goodwin, Jon Rosenthal, James Talarico and Erin Zwiener — rode in on margins of less than 5 percentage points.

Six Republicans count as barelies, including Bohac, Button and Meyer from the other list, and Matt Shaheen and Jeff Leach of Plano, and Jonathan Stickland of Bedford, who this year announced he won't seek another term in the House. Republican Reps. Bill Zedler of Arlington and Rick Miller of Sugar Land each won by less than 5 percentage points.

Republicans outnumber Democrats in high-risk districts, either way you look at 2018's results. That election doesn't predict what will happen in 2020, any more than the 2016 results foreshadowed 2018. It does, however, give everyone — candidates, consultants, donors and voters — a map to some of the weak spots on each party's general election ticket.

Some incumbents in both parties will fall victim to challengers in the primaries; they always do. That's of interest to the party animals, and in particular, to party animals in the Texas House. But most of the outside interest is not in which Republicans fill the GOP seats in the House, but in which party has the majority there when Texas redraws its political districts starting in January 2021.

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Ramsey, R. (2019, August 26). Analysis: 2020's real Texas House prize fights are in the general election — not the GOP primaries - While the state's political class is entranced with allegations that Republican House leaders would like to see some of their GOP colleagues replaced, the real stakes are on what happens when the 2020 primaries are over — and which party is in control when it's time for redistricting in 2021.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1758ED9E9D5913A8>.

**Briscoe Cain says his "My AR is ready for you" tweet benefited him, Beto O'Rourke - "It was good for both of us," Cain said. "I trended [on Twitter]. I increased my name ID. It is what I believe. I don't regret it at all."**

September 28, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Section: News | 483 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Republican state Rep. Briscoe Cain doubled down Saturday on a controversial tweet that many saw as a death threat against Democratic presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke.

"I don't regret it. I just checked Twitter again, and I still can't use it," Cain said at The Texas Tribune Festival in Austin, where he was speaking on a panel about millennials' involvement in politics.

"It was good for both of us," Cain added. "I trended [on Twitter]. I increased my name ID. It is what I believe. I don't regret it at all."

The controversy began when O'Rourke, a former congressman from El Paso, called for a mandatory buyback program for assault weapons at a Houston presidential debate earlier this month — not long after mass shootings in Odessa and his hometown.

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"Hell yes, we're going to take your AR-15, your AK-47," O'Rourke said, answering a question about gun violence.

Cain then tweeted, "My AR is ready for you."

The comment, which prompted Twitter to temporarily suspend Cain's account, immediately garnered thousands of responses from people who criticized the politician's incendiary language. His comments followed an El Paso massacre in which a white gunman used an AK-47 to shoot and kill Hispanics in a Walmart.

Cain has said his tweet was just another version of the Texas motto "come and take it," born out of the Texas Revolution.

O'Rourke used the incident to fundraise for Cain's challenger, Josh Markle.

On Saturday's panel, state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said he considers Cain a friend but thought the tweet was a serious mistake. "When Twitter says you're out of bounds," Talarico said, "how far from the path have you strayed?"

Cain said he could see why some people would interpret his tweet as a threat but said he's actually the one who feels threatened.

"The threat was actually by the former congressman," he said, "that he's threatening to take my property."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Briscoe Cain says his "My AR is ready for you" tweet benefited him, Beto O'Rourke - "It was good for both of us," Cain said. "I trended [on Twitter]. I increased my name ID. It is what I believe. I don't regret it at all.". (2019, September 28). *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/17641BC6E0E48070>.

## **"This is all confidential": Key excerpts from secret recording of House Speaker Dennis Bonnen - In the hourlong conversation with Michael Quinn Sullivan, the leader of the Texas House is heard offering press credentials and asking for political support for challengers in the 2020 primaries.**

October 15, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Section: News | 2694 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

For months, House Speaker Dennis Bonnen has been hounded by an accusation that he plotted against fellow Republicans and sought political backing from hardline conservatives to defeat them.

Despite his initial denials, a secret recording between the speaker and Empower Texans CEO Michael Quinn Sullivan made public Tuesday seemed to back up claims against Bonnen with the back-and-forth depicting his ham-handed attempt at offering press credentials for Sullivan's group and asking for political support for challengers in the 2020 primaries.

Here are key excerpts from the hourlong conversation that occurred at the Texas Capitol in June, edited in some places for clarity.

The meeting between Bonnen, Sullivan and then-GOP Caucus Chair Dustin Burrows starts with a few pleasantries and a several minutes of exchanges about Sullivan's recent trip to France.

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Around the nine-minute mark, the conversation turns to the 2020 elections. Bonnen expresses he wants to avoid expensive primary races between Republicans, but he hints at a possible list of targets.

Bonnen: "Let's not spend millions of dollars fighting the primaries when we need to spend millions of dollars trying to win in November. And so honestly I just wanted to see if we can try and figure that out. And I mean this in a polite way: If you need some primaries to buy in, I will leave, and Dustin will tell you some that we would love it if you bought in, not that you need our permission.

But what I would love to be able to do, candidly, is kind of have, I don't want to say agreement but kind of understanding, look: You want to go pop some guys."

Bonnen generally mentions "the same 10 Republicans who don't want to help on anything" and stand in the way of what Sullivan and the speaker "want done." And he suggests that Sullivan's Empower Texans — a Tea Party-aligned political advocacy group that has a history of using its deep pockets to support far-right candidates in Republican primaries — should not challenge other Republicans whom Bonnen considers unproblematic.

(A month after the conversation, Bonnen formed his own political action committee focused on reelecting House GOP members.)

Hanging over the conversation is the reality that Democrats from both inside and outside of Texas have become intent on flipping the lower chamber and that Empower Texans' dollars may be better spent in the November general election.

Bonnen: "I just think we got to get through 2020 and guarantee that we hold this majority, which — all due respect to Trump, who I love by the way — he's killing us in urban, suburban districts."

Next month, the Democratic Party hopes to flip a Fort Bend County seat vacated by John Zerwas of Richmond — a

seat that, if Democrats are successful, would bring them within eight seats of the House majority.

Their optimism is due, in part, to President Donald Trump's 2016 Texas win — which was thinner than previous GOP wins in the state — and Republicans' heavy losses in the Texas suburbs in 2018, when two Republican state Senate seats flipped, 12 House Republicans lost their seats and two congressional districts turned blue.

But at the end of the this year's legislative session, Bonnen said he would take action against House incumbents from either party who campaign against colleagues. His request was criticized by a faction of hardline Republican conservative activists who said the speaker should focus on picking up seats for his party, especially ahead of an election that impacts how the 2021 redistricting cycle will shake out.

In the recording, Bonnen boasts he recruited someone someone to run against that "Talarico kid," referring to state Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat who in 2018 flipped a seat previously held by Republicans.

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### Disrespecting Democrats

From minute 12:20 to minute 13:28, Bonnen makes several disparaging comments about Democrats — specifically state Reps. Michelle Beckley of Carrollton and Jon Rosenthal of Houston.

Bonnen: "Can we kind of not waste our resources — yours or mine or anyone else's — fighting over members that aren't really a huge problem? I mean you might not find them to be your favorite, but they're not particularly a problem and even help us out. You kill off one or two or three that are never going to help you. And then let's also turn our guns completely. ... I can't stand [Richardson Democratic state Rep.] Ana-Maria Ramos. I mean Jon Rosenthal makes my skin crawl. He's a piece of shit. [Bonnen Chief of Staff] Gavin Massingill said it well — begging this is all confidential — after we meet with [Rosenthal] the first time, he leaves us ... and he said well his wife is going to be really pissed when she learns he's gay."

The men in the room laugh just before Bonnen affirms he agrees.

Rosenthal previously said he forgave Bonnen for what Bonnen said in the recording. In a new statement released Tuesday, Rosenthal said he's "focused on people."

"At the end of the day," he said, "if you're not making the lives of everyday people better — then you don't deserve to be in office," Rosenthal said.

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Bonnen: "We've got Michelle Beckley, who's vile. We've got people who beat our Republicans who are not even trying to act like moderate Democrats, OK. Which is good for us, because we ought to be able to take their heads off."

Bonnen later comes back around the 16-minute mark and adds, "Michelle Beckley is heinous."

During the tape, Bonnen never explicitly details what Beckley, Rosenthal or Ramos did to make his "skin crawl" or why he believes they're "heinous." Ramos has not publicly responded to Bonnen's remarks; Beckley, meanwhile, called for Bonnen's resignation as House speaker.

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### Talking about 2020

The conversation then turns to broader discussion on planning for 2020. Around the 22-minute mark, Burrows,

Bonnen and Sullivan engage in the following conversation:

Burrows: "I've talked to Rodney Anderson every other day to figure out what's going on in Dallas County just to make sure I know."

Bonnen: "And we have a great Hispanic female candidate against John Turner who I'm going to meet with soon. ... Actually, want to hear an interesting factoid? Joe Straus did meet her at an event and said, 'Why are you running against a good moderate Democrat? Why don't you run against [Dallas Republican state Rep.] Morgan Meyer?'"

Sullivan, laughing: "Recently?"

Bonnen: "Yeah, a week or two ago."

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Anderson, who chairs the Dallas County Republican Party, previously served in the Texas House. He narrowly lost reelection in 2018 to state Rep. Terry Meza. The candidate Bonnen is referring to who is challenging state Rep. John Turner, D-Dallas, is Luisa Del Rosa, whom Gov. Greg Abbott has already endorsed. A spokesman for Straus did not respond to a request for comment on the allegations.

Around the 25-minute mark, Burrows and Sullivan engage in a brief spat about whether the latter called the former a "moron" on Twitter.

Burrows to Sullivan: "Well, yeah, but you called me a moron on Twitter and you're attacking me."

Bonnen: "The problem is when you call people a 'moron' and this and that, they don't trust you to have the conversation."

Sullivan: "I don't think we called you a moron."

Burrows: "You said 'moronic.'"

Sullivan: "We may have said something was moronic. And I will ..."

Burrows: "'The moronic Dustin Burrows,' which refers to the person being a 'moron.' But that being said, fair is fair."

Then the conversation turns to the quid pro quo Sullivan has alleged, pointing to what he saw as Bonnen offering "to take an official government action in exchange if I would just go after his political foes."

The official government action in question is granting Texas Scorecard — a product of Sullivan's Empower Texans — coveted House media credentials in exchange for targeting 10 moderate Republican lawmakers in the March primaries.

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Bonnen, who has vehemently denied the allegations and said the recording served as "clear evidence" disproving any criminal wrongdoing, first referenced the credentials around the 13:49 minute mark.

Bonnen: "Let me tell you what I want to do. ... If we can make this work, I'll put your guys on the floor next session. And here's what I will do: I'll do what [Lt. Gov. Dan] Patrick did. I'll take [Scott] Braddock off."

Burrows again mentions Braddock, the editor of Quorum Report, during a later exchange around the 27-minute mark.

Burrows: "I want to be very clear. I'm also not the guy sitting over there with Scott Braddock telling him shit because I don't trust him or like him. I think he's sleazy. I don't do the same thing with any of the newspapers. I don't have a relationship with anybody, giving them information about what I'm doing, because I like to play my cards differently with that."

#### Targeting GOP incumbents

About halfway through the conversation, Bonnen more explicitly addresses the list of House Republicans he's hoping will face primary challengers in 2020.

He starts by warning that he'll have to step into some races where Empower Texans might help fund challengers to incumbent members of the House.

Bonnen: "If y'all fund a candidate who runs against Dustin Burrows, I'm gonna have to go make sure Dustin has his money. I just don't want to waste that money, and if we want to do that in 2020, fine. And I'm not being funny like, 'Let's do it.'"

But he indicates there are several individuals he doesn't plan to support and suggests Burrows has a list of members that could be targeted.

Bonnen: "I'm just saying, but we're in a unique election cycle where we don't need to burn that money up this time. And between you and I, he has some folks — because the speaker of the House shouldn't tell you some folks to go pop — but he has some folks if you want to go pop. ... They're going to have primaries. I may give them some pittance here or there."

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Despite acknowledging the constraints of his leadership position, Bonnen gets specific and notes he won't back up incumbent Republicans like state Rep. Phil Stephenson of Wharton, who Bonnen says is "not going to get \$150,000 out of me."

Sullivan argues that he doesn't like getting entangled in Republican primaries, and a back-and-forth ensues over what Bonnen describes as "opportunities" in the upcoming election.

Sullivan: "I think there's the sense that I actually like being involved in primaries, and I actually don't. ... There is this presumption that we feel some urge to spend the money —"

Bonnen: "Yeah, I appreciate that."

Sullivan: "But not a single person on my staff gets fed because we spend money on elections. No one does."

Bonnen: "I'm not saying you spend money on them."

Sullivan: "It's not a, it's not a mission-critical thing for us. It is a, it's an outgrowth of things that we care about. [Inaudible] ..."

Bonnen: "But with that said, I do think there's some opportunities here because there are a few people that I'm not going to go dump money to protect."

Bonnen and Sullivan then trade remarks on what the possible involvement of other political groups that typically back Republicans could mean in races where primary challengers may emerge. Sullivan brings up Republican state Rep. Travis Clardy of Nacogdoches, but the crosstalk between Bonnen and Sullivan makes it difficult to discern the exchange.

The conversation turns to the role Empower Texans plays in helping buck up primary challengers so they seem more viable, with Bonnen pointing to his own primary challenger from 2018, a pastor named Damon Rambo whom Empower Texans financially backed. Then, Bonnen makes a request that Sullivan's group stay out of his primary and most others but nods at a list of exceptions.

Bonnen: "So all I'm asking is that this time you don't fund him. And I've got a lady running this time, and I hope won't fund her."

Sullivan: "More than likely we would not."

Bonnen: "And I hope that you won't fund about 90% of any others that show up in a Republican primary this time. He'll show you the list of who we hope someone will show up and [challenge]."

Bonnen eventually steps out of the room, and Burrow takes the lead in the conversation, presenting a failed effort to ban "taxpayer-funded lobbying" this year as the "benchmark for next session." That legislation, which Empower Texans considered a priority and Bonnen supported, was voted down in the House.

But Bonnen and Burrows seemingly took a list of Republicans who voted against the measure, many of whom also vied to become speaker, as a start of potential targets.

Before moving forward, Sullivan asks if it's OK to "write down names," to which Burrows seems to indicate it is. Then, the Lubbock Republican gets into specifics.

Burrows: "We're going to spend the entire interim trying to expose what those dollars are being used on, try to get public support behind it, and we want to come back and take another pass at taxpayer-funded lobbying."

"I think the easiest way for me to say this is I've pulled the vote sheet from Republicans who voted against taxpayer-funded lobbying. And I'm going to go through the list of names and tell you who I think would flip their vote back on the good side. I don't think I have to worry about that. Steve Allison voted against it. Doc Anderson voted against it — Doc will come around. I'm good with Doc. ... [Trent] Ashby is 50-50, what do you think? ... Same with Ernest Bailes. Keith Bell voted against it, he's a freshman. I think Keith would probably come around. [Angie Chen] Button, she voted against it, but she's good, especially for her district. [Travis] Clardy's the ringleader of all opposition. [Long pause.] We would be thrilled to see Clardy, somebody else come back, in that district. ... [Drew] Darby voted against it. [Todd] Hunter voted against it. ... [Kyle] Kacal voted against it. [Stan] Lambert voted against it. Tan Parker voted against it. That makes no sense to me in his district at all. John Raney voted against it. [John] Smithee voted against it. Phil Stephenson voted against it. Those are pretty much the ones that I don't know how to turn back and vote for it the next time."

Burrows and Sullivan share a few exchanges, nailing down the list of 10 targets, before Sullivan quips, "Good targets."

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A lament on losing straight-ticket voting

The final portion of the recording features Burrows and Sullivan discussing the political implications of the loss of straight-ticket voting will present. Texas lawmakers in 2017 voted to eliminate a voter's ability to select every Republican or Democrat on a ballot by hitting just one button — an option two-thirds of Texans who voted in 2018 used.

But the law's implementation was delayed until 2020 after statewide elected officials won reelection.

Sullivan: "I think that we're going to regret eliminating straight-ticket voting. ... I think we are all going to live to regret it. I was ambivalent on it when it [passed]."

Burrows: "I trusted the governor's office and others who swore it was the best thing since sliced bread."

Sullivan: "The fact that they wanted it pushed to a year in which they weren't on the ballot is what sent up my first red flag, and I'm just going through the over and under votes historically, and particularly with what everyone thinks of the president and the presidential contest, a whole lot of people will be coming out, and I think trying to vote for — I think Trump is going to win Texas, and he's going to win at back-to-normal levels — but the people he pulls out are going to be people who really don't know — or care — what a state representative is."

Later, Sullivan concisely summarizes the possibility that voters won't get to the rest of a ticket and support Republican state representatives and judges.

Sullivan: "It's going to be real easy for that person — again, that person just coming out for Trump — to go, 'I'm done.' That's my fear."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

"This is all confidential": Key excerpts from secret recording of House Speaker Dennis Bonnen - In the hourlong conversation with Michael Quinn Sullivan, the leader of the Texas House is heard offering press credentials and asking for political support for challengers in the 2020 primaries.. (2019, October 15). *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1769B497F429E1C0>.

**Texas House Speaker Dennis Bonnen offered media access to Empower Texans, suggested it target certain Republicans, recording shows - Bonnen also spoke disparagingly about multiple Democrats, calling one House member "vile" and suggesting that another's "wife's gonna be really pissed when she learns he's gay."**

October 15, 2019 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Section: News | 1962 Words

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During a June conversation at the Texas Capitol, Republican House Speaker Dennis Bonnen urged hardline conservative activist Michael Quinn Sullivan to target members of their own party in the 2020 primaries and suggested he could get Sullivan's group media access to the House floor, according to a secret recording of the conversation released Tuesday.

Bonnen could also be heard speaking disparagingly about multiple Democrats, calling one House member "vile" and suggesting that another's "wife's gonna be really pissed when she learns he's gay."

The 64-minute recording of Sullivan's June meeting with Bonnen and another top House Republican, then-GOP caucus chair Dustin Burrows, was posted on Sullivan's website and the website of WBAP, a talk radio station in Dallas on which Sullivan appeared Tuesday morning. The recording largely aligned with Sullivan's initial description of that June 12 meeting — and with what certain Republicans who listened to the audio before it was public had described.

While its release prompted immediate outcry from Democrats and silence from Republicans, Bonnen said in a statement that the audio makes clear he did nothing criminally wrong in the conversation, adding that the "House can finally move on." The Texas Rangers are investigating the matter at the request of the House General Investigating Committee.

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Roughly nine minutes into the recording, after discussing Sullivan's recent trip to Europe, Bonnen tells Sullivan he's "trying to win in 2020 in November."

"Is there any way that for 2020 we sort of say ... let's not spend millions of dollars fighting in primaries when we need to spend millions of dollars trying to win in November," Bonnen says. "I wanted to see if we could try and figure that out. ... If you need some primaries to fight in — I will leave and Dustin will tell you some we'd love if you fought in. Not that you need our permission."

Roughly five minutes later, the speaker said, "Let me tell you what I can do for you. Real quick, you need to hear what I want to do for you."

"I don't need anything," Sullivan responded.

"Well, no you do," Bonnen said. "We can make this work. I'll put your guys on the floor next session."

"Or take them off," Sullivan suggested.

Amid laughs, Bonnen said, "Here's what I won't do. I'll do what [Lt. Gov. Dan] Patrick did — and I'll take Braddock off" the House floor, referring to Scott Braddock, a reporter for the Capitol insider publication Quorum Report.

Sullivan is the chief executive of Empower Texans, a group that's flooded with oil money and is a unique tangle of political lobbying firm, news outlet and deep-pocketed political action committee. The group is perhaps best known

for playing heavily in Republican primary elections, targeting Republicans it considers "squishy" and backing more hardline conservatives. In the 2018 election cycle, candidates and PACs reported receiving about \$4.7 million from the Empower Texans PAC.

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Empower Texans, a longtime critic of House leadership, has sought to gain media credentials to the floor of the lower chamber, where members of the press can roam to speak with staffers and legislators. After the group was denied access for the 2019 legislative session because of ties to a lobbying organization, it sued the House Administration Committee's chairman over it, arguing the rejection was "unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination."

Before Bonnen made his offer, he also disparaged a number of House Democrats. The speaker said state Rep. Jon Rosenthal, a Houston Democrat, "makes my skin crawl" and is "a piece of shit." Bonnen, after saying he's "begging this is all confidential," then recounted a meeting with the freshman, after which he asked his chief of staff, Gavin Massingill, what he thought about the new House member.

"Massingill said it best," Bonnen recalled. "Well, his wife's gonna be really pissed when she learns he's gay."

The room dissolved in laughter before Bonnen turned to discuss other members of the lower chamber's minority party.

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"We've got Michelle Beckley, who's vile," he said, referring to the freshman Democrat from Carrollton who unseated a Republican in 2018. He exhorted Sullivan to help target these Democrats in competitive districts.

Beckley said an interview Tuesday that "it is hurtful" to hear Bonnen call her names, and that though he had apologized, it did not feel sincere — especially because he had told her and other Democrats he would not target incumbents in 2020. He should resign as speaker, she said.

Ultimately, she said, the entire experience has made her more determined than ever to win reelection.

"All this tape is going to do is make me fight harder," Beckley said.

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Sullivan first disclosed in late July that the June meeting happened, saying that Bonnen offered his advocacy group, Empower Texans, media credentials on the House floor if the group targeted 10 Republican members of the Texas House. Bonnen and Burrows pushed back against those allegations, though the speaker later apologized for saying "terrible things" during the meeting and Burrows resigned as chair of the House GOP Caucus. Both Bonnen and Burrows said the point of that June meeting was to persuade Sullivan to stop trying to unseat certain Republicans in the primaries.

To the offering of media credentials, Bonnen told House members in an email after Sullivan's allegations surfaced in late July, that he "knew, at the end of the day, the House rules — not the Speaker — determine who gets media credentials."

About halfway through the conversation, Bonnen reiterated to Sullivan that Burrows would list members to potentially target in the 2020 primaries, saying he had "some folks if you want to go pop."

"He'll show you the list of who we hope someone will show up" to challenge, Bonnen said.

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Roughly 45 minutes into the conversation, after Bonnen apparently leaves the room, Burrows begins speaking, telling Sullivan that banning taxpayer-funded lobbying, a conservative priority that failed this year, will be the "benchmark for next session." Burrows promises that the House will "spend the entire interim trying to expose what those dollars are being spent on" and building public support for the cause before giving it another try in 2021.

Then Burrows references the failed vote in the House on banning taxpayer-funded lobbying and provides his analysis of which GOP members he thinks can be persuaded to reconsider their opposition next session. After ticking through a number of members who voted against it, Burrows says, "Those are pretty much the ones that I don't know how to turn back to vote for the next time."

"So you'd say Allison, Ashby, Bailes, Bell ... Clardy, Darby, Kacal, Lambert, Raney, Stephenson?" Sullivan asks.

When Sullivan mentions state Rep. Keith Bell, R-Forney, Burrows interjects: "Leave him alone — he's just a dumb freshman."

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Burrows otherwise sounds OK with the list and asks Sullivan to add one more member: state Rep. Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound.

In that exchange, Burrows did not explicitly endorse primary challenges against the 10 members but made clear in at least one case that he didn't want to see one of them return.

"Clardy's the ringleader of all opposition," Burrows tells Sullivan, referring to state Rep. Travis Clardy, R-Nacogdoches. "We would be thrilled to see Clardy, somebody else, come back in that district."

In addition to Parker, Bell and Clardy, the members mentioned are Steve Allison of San Antonio, Trent Ashby of Lufkin, Ernest Bailes of Shepherd, Drew Darby of San Angelo, Kyle Kacal of College Station, Stan Lambert of Abilene, John Raney of College Station and Phil Stephenson of Wharton. All are Republicans.

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Though Bonnen appeared to be absent while Burrows rattled off names, the speaker himself had seemed to allude to the same group early on in the conversation, explicitly mentioning the number 10.

"If I still have the same 10 moderate Republicans who don't want to help on anything, I'm still unable to do what you and I would want done," Bonnen told Sullivan about 11 minutes into the conversation.

On Tuesday, after Sullivan's recording was released, Bonnen said in a statement that he had repeatedly called for the audio to be made public "because it will be immediately clear that no laws were broken." He didn't dispute the recording's authenticity.

"This was nothing more than a political discussion — the problem is that I had it with that guy," Bonnen said in a statement. "My colleagues have always deserved the facts and context this recording provides, and with clear evidence now disproving allegations of criminal wrongdoing, the House can finally move on."

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Burrows in his own statement later Tuesday said he was happy the recording had been released and that he now planned to focus "on what is important: passing conservative legislation for future generations and the needs of West Texans."

The recording's release promises to reignite the political storm that surrounded Bonnen after Sullivan went public with his story. Until Tuesday, there had been a mixed bag of reviews on the allegations — though essentially every

Republican or Democrat who was asked about it called on Sullivan to release the recording. A number of Republicans who had listened to the audio prior to Tuesday backed Sullivan's version of the story. A few had even called on the speaker to resign, or issued statements that stopped just short of doing so.

Meanwhile, roughly a dozen of Bonnen's top lieutenants in the House had come out in support of him, saying in carefully worded tweets that the lower chamber could begin to heal after the speaker apologized for saying "terrible things."

Now, months after his first session as speaker was widely lauded by members, Bonnen's support could be tested. Later this week, both the House Democratic and House Republican caucuses are set to be in Austin for already-scheduled meetings. Sullivan's recording is all but certain to take center stage in conversations among members.

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By Tuesday afternoon, Republican members hadn't yet weighed in, while a number of Democrats either in leadership positions or mentioned in the recording issued statements condemning the speaker for his comments.

State Rep. Chris Turner, a Grand Prairie Democrat who serves as chair of the caucus, had perhaps the most notable statement, saying that, for him personally, the "revelations are incompatible with Mr. Bonnen serving another term as Speaker."

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who Bonnen discussed recruiting a GOP challenger against, said "the Speaker has lost his way" and that "Texas deserves leaders who will put people over politics."

Minutes after the tape came out, Sullivan called into Dallas radio host Chris Salcedo's show to discuss it. He reiterated his reasoning for secretly recording the meeting — he thought Bonnen might lie about it afterward — and he said he did not initially reveal he had the recording because he was perhaps embarrassed but also wanted to give Bonnen the "chance to make things right" on his own.

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Sullivan emphasized that he thought the most damning part of the tape was the alleged quid pro quo. Bonnen, Sullivan said, "offered to take an official government action in exchange if I would just go after his political foes."

Sullivan declined to make predictions about Bonnen's political fate but said he hopes the Republican caucus "understands they need to a better job of finding men and women of integrity" to serve in such a high-ranking position. Bonnen, Sullivan added, "needs to do some serious soul-searching."

Alexa Ura and Alex Samuels contributed reporting.

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**Analysis: In 2020's Texas legislative elections, competition is tricky business - Special interest groups and their lobbyists don't like to campaign against incumbent legislators, for fear they'll suffer if those incumbents return for another session. That "friendly incumbent" policy has spread to lawmakers themselves.**

February 3, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: News | 886 Words  
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Lobbyists and special interests around Texas government have generally followed the "friendly incumbent rule" — withholding political contributions to candidates challenging incumbent members of the House and Senate.

They might help an incumbent, or not, but they won't work against one. It's a matter of self-preservation.

That's because incumbents, on average, survive electoral challenges. And if you're a member of what passes for a royal court in Austin — the people who know the names of legislators' children and pets, their favorite restaurants, and how and why they vote the way they do — getting on the wrong side of a returning legislator is not very smart.

So, they duck.

Legislators themselves have usually followed the same rule inside their respective parties. Republicans don't eat Republicans. Democrats don't eat Democrats. Running against colleagues of the opposition party, however, has long been considered fair game.

But some members have become cautious. As the legislative session was ending last year, House Speaker Dennis Bonnen said publicly that he would frown on members of the House campaigning against other members, regardless of party. He quickly got in very hot water for not following his own advice, but other members have picked up the idea.

In an election year when either party has a plausible shot at winning the majority in the Texas House, there's some reluctance to add friction to the competition. That's why some of the member-driven political funds and efforts have opted to defend members targeted by the other party rather than to go after new seats.

Republicans can keep control of the House by not losing, so not losing is their first order of business. With Democrats scheming to flip at least nine seats currently held by Republicans, defense is the GOP's priority. That's one reason Republicans in particular are tamping down talk of chasing Democratic incumbents: They can hold their majority without it.

Democrats have shanked two attempts to take Republican seats in special elections. In 2018, Republican Pete Flores beat Democrat Pete Gallego in a Senate district that stretches west from San Antonio and takes in most of the state's border with Mexico. It's ordinarily Democratic territory, and the Democrats in the race collected almost 60% of the votes in the first round. But the Republican prevailed in the runoff.

A more recent result in House District 28 was predictable. But it was a comeuppance to Democrats who sold themselves on the idea that trends in Fort Bend County would give them an upset in a consistently Republican district. Gary Gates easily beat Democrat Eliz Markowitz by 16 percentage points.

Flores is on the ballot again in November, this time in a general election where Democrats think they'll fare better than in 2018's special election. Even if they were to beat the incumbent, the partisan balance in the Senate is likely to remain in Republican control.

And Gates might well prevail in his bid for a full term in the House, which would keep a Republican seat in

Republican hands. Under the current battle rules, he'll have help from Republican colleagues in the House if he needs it.

In addition to the seats they'll be defending, Republican strategists have their eyes on House districts lost to the Democrats in 2018 and now held by the likes of Erin Zwiener of Driftwood, Vikki Goodwin of Austin, James Talarico of Round Rock, Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, Ana-Maria Ramos of Dallas, Terry Meza of Irving, Rhetta Bowers of Garland, John Turner of Dallas, Julie Johnson of Carrollton, Gina Calanni of Katy, Jon Rosenthal of Houston and John Bucy of Austin.

But challengers might have to shop around for help outside of the House. So far, Democrats don't seem restrained in the same way, and they're mounting an offensive this year in hopes of gaining a House majority.

The incumbents they're hunting include Morgan Meyer and Angie Chen Button of Dallas, Matt Shaheen and Jeff Leach of Plano, Brad Buckley of Killeen, Lynn Stucky of Denton, Tony Tinderholt of Arlington and Craig Goldman of Fort Worth, among others. Their list of "opportunities" has more than 20 districts on it.

Whatever happens in the elections, the Republican-Democratic split in the House in the 2021 legislative session is likely to be close — close enough, in fact, that it will be hard for anyone to get anything done without at least a few votes from the other party's members.

And with Bonnen gone, the first major vote, a House speaker election, will almost certainly require votes from Democrats, if the House remains Republican, or from Republicans, if Democrats win a majority.

It wouldn't be impossible to get a straight party-line vote from either majority, but the factions within both parties would make it difficult.

Fighting incumbents who might be back would strain relationships, making that kind of cooperation harder. That's some of what Bonnen was getting at, back when he was preaching unity. It's not something voters and donors think about, necessarily. But legislators do.

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**Analysis: The politics of paying one Texan's local sales taxes to another Texan's city - A longstanding economic development incentive tied to local sales taxes has run into a hurdle, as voters find out some of their local dollars are ending up in faraway localities. Blame the internet.**

February 10, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Ross Ramsey | Section: News | 841 Words  
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Sometimes, the best way to challenge something is to notice it.

Texas Comptroller Glenn Hegar has proposed a change in the state's tax rules that could scramble how online sales taxes are collected across the state. Under current law, local taxes on the things Texans buy online go to cities where the sellers are — or say they are. And those tax proceeds are often split by the cities and the companies. In other words, some companies are collecting sales taxes and then getting a portion of them back because they have a deal with a particular city.

If that sounds like a mutation of "Buy Local," you're thinking like Hegar.

"Nobody knows about this," Hegar says. "This is taxation without representation."

He has proposed sending the tax money from online sales to the buyer's location, booting up a discussion that might eventually blossom into a reconsideration of how sales taxes work in Texas.

Right now, it's stirred confusion. It's also brought some light to a longstanding practice that doesn't sit right with some voters — especially if you tag it with slogans like "taxation without representation."

Picture this moment from Wednesday's legislative hearing on taxes: Two first-term state representatives, James Talarico of Round Rock and Erin Zwiener of Driftwood, came to talk in opposition to a proposal on internet sales taxes from Hegar's office.

They were alike in several respects: Young freshmen lawmakers from Austin-adjacent districts, digital natives in a Texas Capitol where that's not necessarily the norm, arguing against a proposed change in the rules on behalf of big companies with ties to their districts.

In Talarico's case, the retailer in question is Dell, headquartered in Round Rock, employer of thousands of local residents who use city services and infrastructure financed, in some measure, by sales taxes on the computers and other electronics the company sells online. Buy a Dell online in Austin, and the local sales taxes go to Round Rock. By Talarico's reckoning, which he shared with the members of the House Ways and Means Committee at a public hearing, that money belongs in Round Rock because that's where the company and a lot of its employees are.

Maybe you think the local sales taxes from those sales should go to Austin, maybe not. But Talarico got some heads in that room nodding assent.

Zwiener's district includes San Marcos, about an hour south on Interstate 35, which Best Buy chose as the location of its Texas online sales. That means the appliances or electronics bought online by Texans from that chain generate sales taxes for San Marcos instead of for their own cities. A big difference between the two examples is that Best Buy's operations center has fewer than 100 employees, isn't a headquarters and exists, more or less, as a physical anchor for its sales tax setup.

Those two cities — and they're just examples of a practice allowed by state law for more than 20 years — attracted those businesses by offering to effectively share the local sales tax proceeds with them.

Retailers collect sales taxes from customers and remit them to the government. The state gets 6.25 cents on every taxable dollar you spend, and local governments get up to 2 cents on top of that. The law allows cities to share some of the money they collect to encourage economic development, and some do that by giving a retailer some of that local tax as an incentive for the retailer to locate in their city.

It's good for San Marcos to be the host for Best Buy's online Texas sales, even if it has to share the tax money with Best Buy. Same for Round Rock and Dell.

In Round Rock's case, the presence of a big company with a lot of employees requires some expenditures from the city budget. Those employees who live in Round Rock are using the parks and the libraries and the police, and the money's got to come from somewhere. Meanwhile, cities like San Marcos get a free ride, with relatively small retail operations generating piles of tax income without also bringing thousands of employees who'll need city services.

Talarico has a more sympathetic argument than Zwiener. But both of them, like most of the rest of the legislators in Texas, have cities in their districts that are losing money because of the way online taxes are distributed now.

And all of them have constituents who shop online, and who might be surprised to learn that the taxes they pay on the things they buy might be benefiting Texans in cities that are far, far away.

Disclosure: Dell has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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Feb. 3, 2020

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## Democrats think campaigning on health care will flip an Austin-area U.S. House seat. But will the nominee also need star power? - In a district with no clear frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, the party is looking to re-create MJ Hegar's momentum — and hopes focusing on issues will flip the seat.

February 20, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Carrington Tatum | Section: News | 1394 Words

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### Texas 2020 Elections

Get Texas results here for the 2020 primary on Super Tuesday. MJ Hegar is headed to a runoff, while Joe Biden won the presidential primary in Texas. Some Texans were waiting in line for hours after polls closed — and we want to hear from more of them. Email Alexa Ura at [aura@texastribune.org](mailto:aura@texastribune.org) to share your voting story.

### More in this series

Democrats who want to be Republican U.S. Rep. John Carter's challenger in November think focusing on health care will turn the 31st District north of Austin blue. But Republicans, who have long held the seat, say their opponents won't have much luck without a high-profile candidate like 2018's MJ Hegar, who is now focusing on a U.S. Senate run.

Democratic candidates Eric Hanke, Donna Imam, Dan Janjigian, Christine Mann and Tammy Young are vying for their party's nomination in the district includes suburban Williamson County and the more rural Bell County. They say rising health care costs and support for military veterans are voters' top priorities — and most want to expand access to affordable health care to address those concerns.

"I would put health care at the top of the list because we have a lot of people that don't have access to health care because it's not affordable," said Hanke, a 41-year-old singer-songwriter who recorded a new song, "Turn Texas Blue," for a campaign ad.

But whoever snags the party's nomination will need to unseat Carter, who was first elected in 2002 and said the general election in November will be about economic security and safety.

"No matter the political party, there's an overall theme to my constituents' concerns, and that is security. That doesn't just mean national security or border security, it also means financial security through a strong economy, educational security through access to good schools, and safety in our communities," Carter said in an email.

### Tell us your voting story

Have you run into hurdles or problems while trying to vote in Texas? We want your help in reporting on those challenges. [Learn more.](#)

Early voting in the primary began Tuesday. Election day is March 3. A primary candidate needs more than 50% of the vote to avoid a runoff for the nomination. Carter is likely to win his party's nomination, though he faces two opponents.

Mike Brewer, a bartender in downtown Round Rock, has lived in the suburb for 10 years. Brewer said health care costs might be his only concern when it comes to voting.

"It sucks — it's expensive, man. Not a lot of local businesses can afford to pay their employees. I would really like to see universal health care — free across the board," Brewer said.

The district includes some of the area surrounding Fort Hood, the state's largest military base, and has the largest veteran population in Texas, according to data from the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

Latest in the Texas 2020 Elections series

In 2018, Hegar, a political newcomer, became a strong challenger to Carter after a viral ad documenting her military service garnered millions of views. She came within 3 percentage points of unseating Carter, making the district a target for the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee this cycle.

"MJ really put this race on the map and showed us that this was possible," said Young, a 51-year-old Round Rock City Council member. "For too long, we've allowed Washington insiders to stay in office as long as they want, not believing things could change. MJ showed us what is possible with the right candidate."

Imam said the district's broad voter base includes a range of lifestyles and problems that don't always overlap.

"The landscape of Williamson County has changed in such a huge way over the last five years. That's unfathomable for most people in the United States," said Imam, a computer engineer. "In Bell County, the makeup of the people that live there and the whole area of what they do for living is completely different from Williamson County."

Mann, a 54-year-old physician, was the runner-up in the 2018 Democratic primary runoff against Hegar and considers veterans to be integral to the identity of the voter base. She said Carter has talked about bringing greater funding for veteran support services but hasn't delivered.

"Veterans come to me and tell me about their difficulty getting their mental health covered, and their families tell me about the struggles that they have with homelessness and suicide in their peers that are in the military," Mann said.

Dan Janjigian, an actor from Austin best known for his role in the cult classic film "The Room," did not respond to interview requests.

Voters' priorities

Grey Caraway, who lives in Round Rock, is a veteran and said he doesn't vote along party lines anymore because both sides have let him down. Unsatisfied with the support he receives from the VA, Caraway said he will wait to see the parties' nominees to determine if he votes in the general election. He is looking for a candidate to champion racial equality in criminal justice and veterans' interests.

"We're not represented. We get the mouth a lot on a lot of things. [Veterans Affairs has] gotten a lot better since I got out in 2006, but again, it's still the same old goat rope. It's still the same old red tape. Don't call us, we won't call you kind of thing," Caraway said.

Nathan Hamersley is a barista at a Round Rock coffee shop and said he wants a candidate who will invest in rail lines as alternatives to highways.

"I've lived in countries where you could go anywhere on the public transportation," Hamersley said. "It may take time, but it was possible."

Nycia Emerson recently opened a rentable workspace in Round Rock and said as a black woman business owner, she would like to see more diversity and representation in Congress to address racism.

"In order for us to have a bigger input in the big things that happen, we need to have diversity. ... It has to be different shades at the table, so that's why it's a big deal for me," Emerson said.

So far, there is no clear Democratic front-runner, according to State Rep. James Talarico. He campaigned alongside Hegar for his seat in the Texas House and said the key to flipping the congressional district is to have an inclusive platform and work across the aisle.

"It's going to take a candidate who has a message that appeals to a broad base of community members. One that fires up our Democratic base while still being inclusive of independents and even some disillusioned Republicans," said Talarico.

Mann, who entered the primary before the other four candidates, has been the top fundraiser in contributions, collecting \$171,000 through Dec. 31, according to Federal Election Commission records. Imam has raised \$208,000, though it includes a \$100,000 loan to herself.

#### Replicating success

Steve Armbruster, chair of the Williamson County Republican Party, sees Hegar's 2018 run as lightning in a bottle and is doubtful Democrats will replicate her performance.

"I don't think that the Democrats have anybody on their side of the aisle that they could choose that would have the ability to draw voters out like they had two years ago," Armbruster said.

Hegar said she believes this year's Democratic lineup is competitive enough to finish what she started in 2018.

"We have a strong batch of candidates, and I am confident that by continuing to mobilize volunteers and voters the eventual nominee will close the 2.9 [percentage point] gap we had left and send John Carter to retirement in 2020," Hegar said in an email.

Carter remains unconcerned with losing his seat in the district and said his approach to preventing a flip is to continue with the strategy he's had for nearly two decades.

"I'm going to do what I've always done, and that is to listen to my constituents, focus on grassroots, knock on doors, and deliver results to Central Texas. Last cycle, I was outspent four to one and I still earned the support of my constituents. Voters are smart, they see past viral videos, glitzy mail and catchy soundbites, I have a record of getting things done for Texas' 31st district and voters see that," Carter said.

#### Related News

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MJ Hegar leads the Democratic U.S. Senate candidates, UT/TT Poll finds

Feb. 17, 2020

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5 takeaways from the latest congressional fundraising reports

Feb. 3, 2020

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Tatum, C. (2020, February 20). Democrats think campaigning on health care will flip an Austin-area U.S. House seat. But will the nominee also need star power? - In a district with no clear frontrunner for the Democratic nomination, the party is looking to re-create MJ Hegar's momentum — and hopes focusing on issues will flip the seat.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?>

p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/17939B27C94857C0.

## Democratic runoff to challenge Cornyn sets up crisp contrast between Hegar, West - After a 12-way primary, Texas Democrats get a chance to size up two candidates with very different pitches.

March 5, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1492 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

For months, the 12 Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate mostly played nice at forum after forum, reciting their elevator pitches and reiterating their issue positions. A few episodes fueled sharp disagreements, but none that permanently derailed an otherwise cordial primary.

Now the race is down to two people, and the contrast between them is quickly coming into focus.

One, MJ Hegar, is a tattooed, motorcycle-riding military hero running as a political outsider and fed-up working mom. The other, Royce West, is a seasoned 27-year veteran of the Texas Senate running on his long record, including his ability to get things done — with both parties — in the Republican-dominated chamber.

In an interview Thursday, Hegar did not hesitate to frame the runoff.

"I think that there is wisdom to sending ... an effective disrupter to D.C. to take on a system when that system is not serving working people in Texas," Hegar said, suggesting that the Republican incumbent, John Cornyn — and West — are too willing to accept the status quo.

Cornyn and West "are both career politicians and attorneys that are very well off," Hegar added. "Do they understand the struggles of working families?"

West responded in an interview later Thursday, saying Hegar "knows nothing about my background whatsoever, apparently." He also said he hoped the runoff would not be one where Democrats "burn bridges" ahead of a crucial November election.

With all polling locations reporting Thursday, Hegar finished the primary with 22.3% of the vote to 14.5% for West, according to unofficial returns. Coming in third was progressive organizer Cristina Tzintzún Ramirez, who got 13.2%.

In drawing West over Tzintzún Ramirez, Hegar is less likely to face a runoff centered on ideology and more likely to face one hinging on experience. West said the choice before runoff voters is between "someone with experience, business experience and legislative experience, and someone that doesn't have legislative experience." He also noted the support he has from many of his Democratic colleagues in the Legislature.

West told WFAA-TV on Wednesday that he was appealing to Tzintzún Ramirez and other former opponents for their endorsements, saying that it would "signal, for the first time in Texas history ... Latinos and African Americans coming together." During the primary, West, who is black, won the support of both the State Tejano Democrats and Texas Coalition of Black Democrats.

In a news release announcing her concession Wednesday afternoon, Tzintzún Ramirez's campaign said she "has not yet decided on her next steps, but she knows that no matter what, she will continue to fight the politics of hate and advocate for working Texans."

Hegar got her own post-primary boost Thursday morning from EMILY's List, the influential national group that works to elect Democratic women who support abortion rights. The group endorsed Hegar after staying out of the primary, which featured several female candidates.

It was not entirely a surprise — EMILY's List President Stephanie Schriock said earlier this year that the group would "absolutely" get involved in a runoff between a man and a woman. But the endorsement officially gives Hegar a deep-pocketed ally as she enters an overtime round that West has declared a "brand new day."

Hegar said "zero" would change about her campaign in the runoff as she continues to push a relentless focus on Cornyn, a move that helped her earn the endorsement of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee in December. Yet she has long been also running as the anti-politician, a profile that her supporters believe gives her a more immediate advantage over West.

"Sen. West has served our state so admirably for so many years," said state Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock, who backs Hegar. "He absolutely has a great record to run on, and we would be lucky to have him as our nominee — and certainly as our next U.S. senator — but I think the current political moment requires someone who is coming from outside of our broken political system, and that's what MJ uniquely offers in this race."

Tensions between Hegar and West had been simmering in the weeks leading up to the primary, including during a joint interview with the Austin American-Statesman editorial board, which eventually endorsed Hegar. At one point, West talked about working across the aisle "recognizing that I may not get 100% of everything that I want at the time, but if I can get 15 to 20% and then come back and fight for the rest, that's what you do."

Hegar shook her head as he spoke and returned to the topic minutes later.

"I have to say — this is something we very much disagree about. You don't fight for 15 or 20% of what you want," Hegar said, invoking her successful crusade to open all military combat jobs to women. "We opened all the jobs because that's the value, and if we give on that, then we show we don't fully believe we should open these jobs for women."

West shook his head and grinned while she spoke, saying she "obviously misunderstood ... the point I was trying to make."

"I recognize you don't settle for 15 or 20%," he said, pointing to a time he "fought for 100% and ... got 100%" — insisting that the LGBTQ community be included in a hate crimes bill. "If you can't get the 100%, you get as much as you can and come back and fight for other things later on."

"This is the biggest difference between us," Hegar said amid crosstalk, which ended with them cordially agreeing to disagree.

Looking back

It was not clear until Wednesday afternoon that West would be in the runoff with Hegar, who jumped out to a clear lead after polls closed the night before. He was able to overtake Tzintzún Ramirez on the strength of his performance in his home base — Dallas-Fort Worth — cities whose counties contributed nearly half of his statewide vote total.

West said he recognized that to make the runoff, "I had to shore up as much as possible my home base. We were able to do that ... and that helped me out tremendously."

Barbara Radnofsky, a top West supporter who serves as his campaign treasurer, said he now has opportunity for growth specifically in the Houston area. She pointed to counties like Harris and Fort Bend, where he finished fourth behind Hegar and Houstonians Chris Bell and Amanda Edwards.

"We need to do more" in those places, Radnofsky said, noting West has the support of Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner and is naturally set to gain there with the elimination of the 10 other candidates.

Hegar's support was more geographically diffuse, though her backyard — Austin and its northern suburbs —

similarly came through for her. She racked up over a quarter of her statewide vote total from Travis and Williamson counties.

Hegar's campaign knew she had a base in the Austin area but could not exclusively rely on it and had to make inroads in the bigger population centers. The results show she had success: She carried Harris County over Bell and Edwards and placed second to West in Dallas and Tarrant counties, albeit a distant second in Dallas.

Both candidates had to spend big to secure their runoff spots, each burning through more than 70% of the money they raised through Feb. 12. That means they will have to quickly pivot to replenishing their campaign coffers for the runoff, let alone for a general election for which Cornyn has \$12 million in the bank.

Hegar, however, spent much more than West per vote: \$7.38 to \$3.08, according to their fundraising figures through Feb. 12. That dollar-to-vote ratio is before the \$3.5 million in spending that was done on Hegar's behalf by VoteVets, a national organization that boosts Democratic veterans running for office.

Cornyn and other Republicans cited that big-money backing Wednesday and Thursday as they sought to portray Hegar's vote share as an underwhelming showing.

Radnofsky, too, said she thought the "DSCC may look more closely at whether or not they made what I think was an error in judgment" by backing Hegar. The committee showed no immediate signs of that Tuesday night, releasing a statement touting her "impressive performance."

Cornyn's campaign has previously gone after both Hegar and West, deriding the former as "Hollywood Hegar" for her celebrity support and airing TV ads against the latter shortly after he got in the primary last summer. On Thursday, though, Cornyn told reporters that he "certainly [does not] have a preference" in the runoff.

#### Related News

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MJ Hegar, Royce West head to runoff in Democratic primary to challenge U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

Updated: March 4, 2020

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MJ Hegar keeps fundraising lead as Democratic primary to challenge Cornyn reaches end

Feb. 21, 2020

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Royce West helped flip Dallas County for Democrats in 2006. Could he flip Texas in 2020?

Feb. 13, 2020

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2020, March 5). Democratic runoff to challenge Cornyn sets up crisp contrast between Hegar, West - After a 12-way primary, Texas Democrats get a chance to size up two candidates with very different pitches.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infolweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1798908E59157A70>.

## The number of Texans filing for unemployment has soared 1,600% in two weeks - Last week alone, 275,597 out-of-work Texans filed for unemployment relief.

April 2, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Naomi Andu | Section: News | 846 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

### Coronavirus in Texas

Get the latest updates on coronavirus in Texas here. At least 364 Texans' deaths have been linked to COVID-19, and at least 15,492 people have been diagnosed with the disease. Hospitals are adding more beds, while medical professionals and state leaders are urging Texans to socially distance themselves from others. The state is testing thousands of people a day, but it is often taking longer than a week for Texans to get those results. Learn more about how to get tested here. Meanwhile, hundreds of thousands of Texans are without work as unemployment claims overload the state's systems. Schools across the state are closed at least until May 4. And Texans all over the state are confronting new challenges during the pandemic.

### More in this series

The number of Texans applying for unemployment relief continues to climb as more workers are laid off or furloughed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Last week, 275,597 Texans applied — a 1,604% increase over the 16,176 Texans who filed in the week ending March 14.

The week ending March 21 saw the first spike of the pandemic, with 155,657 out-of-work Texans applying for relief. Both numbers are miles higher than the worst week of the Great Recession, which saw 49,398 Texans file for benefits, and the 63,788 who filed after Hurricane Harvey devastated the Houston area. In the last year, the Texas Workforce Commission has typically fielded 13,600 individuals applying each week.

Those numbers are expected to rise, as Gov. Greg Abbott on Wednesday issued a statewide stay-at-home order, which allows only essential businesses to operate through April 30. Previously, many cities and counties had announced similar orders.

Meanwhile, many Texans who have been trying to apply for unemployment relief for days or weeks say they can't get through. The crush of people filing has overwhelmed the Texas Workforce Commission's capacity, leading to busy phone lines and website outages.

Both the commission and Abbott have assured worried Texans that all who need relief will get it.

"Just know that you're not going to be denied your claim just because you're having a hard time getting through," Abbott said at a press conference Tuesday.

Last Thursday, TWC Executive Director Ed Serna asked Texans to "have a little patience with us." The commission is hiring additional staff, extending operating hours and beefing up server capacity to address the increased need. So far, the commission has hired 700 new employees, Abbott told KSAT-TV on Thursday.

But state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said in a tweet that Texas' insufficient unemployment resources aren't unique to the pandemic.

"This isn't a case of a good system overwhelmed by unprecedented demand," he tweeted. "This is a \*bad\* system overwhelmed by unprecedented demand. Even in good times, only 1/3 of unemployed Texans get unemployment benefits."

Talarico cited underfunding and the exclusion of gig and part-time workers.

"This pandemic will continue to expose broken state policies that were designed to hurt some of us, but really hurt ALL of us," he added.

State unemployment agencies may be getting federal help soon, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on a press call Thursday.

"Some are much better prepared than others or just have a different timetable," Pelosi said. "So one of the things that we may have to do is to get more resources to the state agencies that do this. Again, though, we want this done as soon as possible, and we won't have another bill for a few weeks at least because we're not [in Washington]. But again, we can give some hope to people that that would be a priority."

Already, some requirements for unemployment benefits have been relaxed: There is no longer a work search requirement, and anyone who was previously overpaid while receiving unemployment won't see benefits reduced. But other Texans still fall through the cracks. Gig workers and those who are self-employed remain ineligible for state unemployment benefits, but they may be covered by the recently passed federal stimulus package.

Nationally, the employment situation is just as dire: 6.6 million Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week, doubling the previous week when 3.3 million Americans filed and again setting a record, previously held by the 1982 recession.

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Updated: March 24, 2020

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"It's going to hurt": New coronavirus shocks Texas economy as length of public health crisis remains unknown

March 19, 2020

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Andu, N. (2020, April 2). The number of Texans filing for unemployment has soared 1,600% in two weeks - Last week alone, 275,597 out-of-work Texans filed for unemployment relief.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/17A1C7B7E2837300>.



## **Texas is testing everyone in nursing homes for coronavirus, but not state-run homes for people with disabilities - The facilities are still only testing residents and patients who are symptomatic or were potentially exposed to the virus, despite concerns raised by employees and family members about outbreaks.**

May 18, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Sami Sparber | Section: News | 906 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

### Coronavirus in Texas

As the coronavirus spreads across the state, The Texas Tribune is covering the most important health, economic and breaking developments that affect Texans, every day. Watch our Texas unemployment tracker, use our explainer on the coronavirus for essential information, and visit our map tracker for the number of cases, deaths and tests in Texas.

### More in this series

Last week, Texas announced it would be testing every resident and staff member in nursing homes, which have emerged as hot spots for the new coronavirus. But state-run homes for people with disabilities and state-run psychiatric hospitals — which collectively serve 4,703 vulnerable Texans and employ 18,873 full-time staff members — will not receive that same level of state support to test all residents, patients and employees, according to a spokesperson for the agency that oversees the facilities.

The facilities at this time are still only testing residents and patients who are symptomatic or have potentially been exposed, despite concerns raised by employees and family members about outbreaks.

"Working with local health departments, the Department of State Health Services, and following CDC [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] guidelines, we test every resident/patient who shows possible symptoms of COVID-19 or has potential exposure to COVID-19," Christine Mann, spokesperson for the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, said in an email. "At this time, more individuals at state hospitals and state supported living centers have recovered from COVID-19 than have active infections."

As of Sunday, there were 159 total positive cases among residents and patients, with 98 having recovered, according to new data the agency started releasing on state supported living centers and state hospitals earlier this month. "Fewer than 10" residents and patients have died due to complications related to COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, the state reported.

That data does not account for staff members who fall ill, and the state is still not releasing the names of facilities with coronavirus cases, leaving many family members in the dark about their loved ones. Eight of the 23 facilities have at least one positive patient or resident, according to the data. Local health authorities in Denton County stand out as the lone agency providing daily updates on the outbreak at the Denton home, reporting 55 cases among residents and 64 among staff, as of Sunday.

Similar to nursing homes, residents and patients at state-run homes and psychiatric hospitals live in close quarters and interact closely with the staff who care for them. The 10 state psychiatric hospitals serve Texans with mental health issues. Across the 13 state supported living centers, which house people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, about 43% of the residents are medically fragile. Family members worry about rapid spread there, because depending on the severity of their disabilities, residents may not understand rules about hand-washing or maintaining a safe distance from others.

Citing a need to protect the state's "vulnerable populations," state officials have clamped down on nursing homes,

launching mass testing and reporting new levels of data showing the scope of the virus. On Friday, less than a week after Gov. Greg Abbott directed state officials to test all residents and staff members in Texas nursing homes, the Texas Department of State Health Services released, for the first time, the total number of residents who have tested positive. Among the 311 nursing homes with positive cases, 3,011 residents have tested positive and 490 have died. Another 494 residents have recovered, according to the data. The state is still not providing information about how many cases are at individual nursing homes.

The Texas Health and Human Services Commission, which previously refused to disclose comprehensive data on the number of cases among staff and residents at state supported living centers, is now providing twice-weekly updates on the number of cases at those facilities and in state hospitals.

In April, a bipartisan group of state lawmakers sent Abbott a letter asking for greater transparency in reporting and mandatory testing for everyone in state supported living centers and state hospitals, in addition to nursing homes.

"While media outlets have rightly focused on the deaths in nursing homes across the country, people with disabilities and older adults face increased risks in all institutional and congregate settings," wrote state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who authored the letter. "Like nursing homes, there have been similar outbreaks and deaths in our state supported living centers, state hospitals, and group homes. Our state government can and must do more to protect our most vulnerable Texans."

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Texas will not release information about coronavirus clusters at state-run homes for Texans with disabilities

April 22, 2020

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State-run homes for Texans with developmental disabilities aren't ready for coronavirus outbreaks, some workers warn

April 9, 2020

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Texas still won't say which nursing homes have COVID-19 cases. Families are demanding answers.

April 30, 2020

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Sparber, S. (2020, May 18). Texas is testing everyone in nursing homes for coronavirus, but not state-run homes for people with disabilities - The facilities are still only testing residents and patients who are symptomatic or were potentially exposed to the virus, despite concerns raised by employees and family members about outbreaks.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/17B0E89C26AB8D28>.

## Texas Democrats urge Abbott to call special session as details emerge showing Javier Ambler's death at the hands of sheriff's deputies - In 2019, Williamson County sheriff's deputies held down Ambler and stunned him four times before his body went limp. He died at a hospital about an hour later.

June 15, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Stacy Fernández | Section: News | 1071 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Local and state leaders are calling for the resignation of Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody and for the deputies involved in Javier Ambler's death to be fired. They're raising alarm about yet another case of a black person dying at the hands of police officers as people across the nation continue to march in protest of police brutality and racial injustice, sparked by the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.

Some Texas Democrats are urging Gov. Greg Abbott to call a special legislative session to pass laws on policing and criminal justice and asking why the governor hasn't yet publicly acknowledged the Ambler case even as he condemned Floyd's death in Minneapolis as a "horrific act of police brutality" that he said must be prevented in Texas.

Last year, Williamson County deputies pursued Ambler in a car chase for 22 minutes after trying to pull him over for not dimming his headlights. After he crashed, deputies held Ambler down and shocked him with a Taser four times before his body went limp. Ambler told the officers he had congestive heart failure and couldn't breathe, according to the Austin American-Statesman, which first reported on the newly available body camera footage this month. Ambler died in a hospital about an hour after he was last shocked with a Taser. He was unarmed, and body camera footage showed he wasn't resisting.

His death was ruled a homicide. None of the officers involved have been arrested or fired.

"This is another unarmed black man killed in America. This time, it's in our backyard. This time, it's our neighbor. This time, it was followed by 15 months of secrecy," said state Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat, who has called for Chody to resign.

State Rep. Celia Israel, D-Austin, wrote a letter to Abbott to call for a special session. Democratic state Reps. Lorraine Birabil of Dallas, Donna Howard of Austin, Michelle Beckley of Carrollton, John Bucy III of Austin, and Talarico have also called for a special session.

"Once again, Americans are mourning a Black man taken by an unjust and deadly police force, and this murder has sparked a nationwide response against institutional racism and police brutality. Here in Texas, this is sadly something with which we are all too familiar," Israel wrote in a letter to the governor. "Enough is enough — meaningful, systemic reform cannot wait."

Abbott did not respond to request for comment for this story.

Texas Democratic Party Chair Gilberto Hinojosa called on GOP leaders to join Democrats in demanding justice for Ambler.

"Texas' Republican leadership — Gov. Abbott, Lt. Gov. [Dan] Patrick, and Sens. [John] Cornyn and [Ted] Cruz — must join Texas Democrats in calling for his prompt resignation and full accountability," he said.

All four of the Republicans condemned Floyd's death and the actions of the Minneapolis police department, but they have not publicly acknowledged Ambler's case.

Calls for Chody's ouster have come from his own county's commissioners, state representatives and former presidential candidate Julián Castro.

"The only natural response would be for Williamson County Sheriff Chody to resign, for the officers to lose their job. And for there to be an independent investigation of the department," Talarico said.

Chody has said he will not resign and cast those who call for his removal as being anti-police.

"Representative Talarico has done zero for law enforcement in regards to the county in his two years in office. Another progressive who wants to defund police. I'll accept his resignation instead," he tweeted in response to Talarico's comments.

The Williamson County sheriff's department maintains that its deputies did nothing wrong, according to an internal affairs investigation obtained by the Statesman.

Of Williamson County's four commissioners, two — Cynthia Long and Terry Cook — called for Chody's resignation, and the other two condemned his actions, according to reports.

In an email, Cook declined to comment but said the county "cannot fire any elected officials."

Chody could not be reached for comment.

These calls to action come as protests sparked by the death of Floyd — a black man who died after a white Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes — have initiated a nationwide reimagining of policing across the country.

In addition to the body camera footage, the Williamson County incident was also caught on camera for an episode of "Live PD," a recently canceled police reality show that never aired.

In a tweet, Chody denied accusations from Travis County District Attorney Margaret Moore that he's purposefully slowed the investigation of Ambler's death or tried to cover it up.

Chody said his office turned over its footage of the incident and "participated fully" in the Austin Police Department's investigation.

"Travis County D.A. Moore needs to focus on completing her 16-month-old Ambler investigation. Instead, she is trying to blame her own failures on the Williamson County Sheriff's Department," Chody tweeted.

State Sen. John Whitmire, chair of the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, proposed that the Texas Rangers take over the investigation into Ambler's death, according to reports.

In a Statesman op-ed last week, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton asked the Legislature to allow his office to investigate instances when police kill people. Currently, the officer's agency is in charge of conducting such an investigation.

"When it comes to officer-involved deaths, local agencies need more accountability," Paxton wrote. "... Given that fact, it's not reasonable to expect local prosecutors to easily turn to investigate and even prosecute those with whom they work on a regular basis."

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For these Texas organizers and officials, defunding the police means remedying effects of racism

June 13, 2020

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June 11, 2020

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Texas attorney general asks for power to investigate police who kill people

June 11, 2020

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Fernández, S. (2020, June 15). Texas Democrats urge Abbott to call special session as details emerge showing Javier Ambler's death at the hands of sheriff's deputies - In 2019, Williamson County sheriff's deputies held down Ambler and stunned him four times before his body went limp. He died at a hospital about an hour later.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/17BA23AFC9B06478>.

## **Williamson County sheriff charged with felony evidence tampering in Javier Ambler case - Last year, Williamson County sheriff's deputies held Ambler down and stunned him four times with a Taser before his body went limp. It was filmed for a police reality TV show.**

September 28, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Stacy Fernández | Section: News | 423 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

A grand jury has indicted Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody on a felony evidence tampering charge in the case of Javier Ambler, a Black man who died in 2019 after being stunned with a Taser multiple times by deputies.

The grand jury accused Chody of destroying or concealing video and audio recordings "with the intent to impair their ability as evidence in the investigation," according to the indictment. Jason Nassour, a county attorney, was also indicted on the same charge.

Chody said he didn't tamper with evidence at a press conference Monday afternoon.

"The Travis county District Attorney dropped the ball on the investigation, and when the video surfaced during her campaign, she had to find someone to blame for her own mistakes," Chody said during the press conference.

Chody was booked into Williamson County Jail on Monday and was released after posting a \$10,000 bond, KVUE reported.

Ambler died after a 22-minute police chase that started after he failed to dim his headlights.

Body camera footage that was made public in June by the Austin American-Statesman showed deputies shocked Ambler with a Taser four times before his body went limp. The video showed Ambler pleading that he could not breathe and that he had a heart condition. Ambler was declared dead in a hospital about an hour after he was last shocked, the Statesman reported.

The incident was caught on camera for an episode of the since-canceled police reality show "Live PD," that never aired.

The felony charge comes months after community members, local and state leaders called for the sheriff's resignation and termination of the deputies involved in Ambler's death. Chody has said he will not resign.

Ambler's death and the death of Mike Ramos in Austin became rallying cries this summer in Texas for protesters already angry about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, who were both killed by police officers.

Michael Ramos, a Black and Latino man, died in April after being shot by an Austin police officer. He was first shot with a bean bag round as he stood next to his car, hands in the air, shouting that he was unarmed. Ramos ducked into the car and had started to drive away when an officer shot him with a rifle.

In a statements following the indictment, Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, once again called for Chody's resignation.

Talarico said he is working with the Ambler family to write legislation to ban Texas police departments from working with reality TV shows like "Live PD."

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Fernández, S. (2020, September 28). Williamson County sheriff charged with felony evidence tampering in Javier Ambler case - Last year, Williamson County sheriff's deputies held Ambler down and stunned him four times with a Taser before his body went limp. It was filmed for a police reality TV show.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/17DCC0FCEDFFF488>.

## **Fundraising in Texas House races signals a wildly competitive contest for control of the chamber - Democrats outraised Republicans in battleground districts in the third quarter, though Republicans still have the cash-on-hand advantage.**

October 7, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1338 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

At least 10 Republicans in the Texas House were outraised on their latest campaign finance reports, though most GOP incumbents in battleground seats maintain a cash-on-hand advantage heading into the final month of the nationally watched battle for the House majority.

Taken together, the reports point to a wildly competitive battle for control of the lower chamber, where Democrats are nine seats away from the majority. They are eyeing roughly 22 GOP-held districts they see as flippable, while they also have to defend the 12 seats they picked up in 2018.

Across that 34-seat battlefield, Democrats raised a combined \$6.7 million from early July through Sept. 24, while Republicans took in \$5.3 million, according to the most recent filings. Republicans held \$9.9 million cash on hand across the 34 districts, while Democrats had \$6.2 million.

The candidates' direct fundraising is only part of the story, though. Many reported larger-than-usual amounts of in-kind donations, a reflection of the statewide and national groups that are rushing to their aid to help fund things like TV ads, direct mail, canvassing and polling.

Factoring in in-kind donations, Republicans had a fundraising advantage on the latest reports, taking in \$10 million across the 34 districts to \$9.1 million for Democrats.

Candidates are also being helped by significant outside spending — for example, the national Democratic super PAC Forward Majority is investing \$6.2 million this fall in the state.

The latest campaign finance reports were due Monday to the Texas Ethics Commission. Most cover the 86-day period from July 1 through Sept. 24, though some start on July 5 if a candidate had to get through a primary runoff later that month.

In calculating which incumbents were outraised, the Tribune used candidates' total monetary contributions, or their total contributions minus the in-kind contributions.

The Republican members who were outraised included state Reps. Lynn Stucky of Denton, Matt Shaheen of Plano, Craig Goldman of Fort Worth, Sam Harless of Houston, Sarah Davis of Houston, Steve Allison of San Antonio, Morgan Meyer of Dallas, Brad Buckley of Killeen, Jeff Leach of Plano and Angie Chen Button of Richardson. Some of the disparities were close, while others were wide: Of the 10 Republicans, four were outraised by a margin of at least 2 to 1.

The list of GOP incumbents who were outpaced is smaller once in-kind donations are tallied: Stucky, Shaheen, Leach, Krause, Goldman and Button.

Furthermore, in the four open seats that Democrats are trying to flip, all the GOP nominees were outraised. The money race was most stark in House District 138 in Houston, one of Democrats' best pickup opportunities. The Democratic candidate, Akilah Bacy, outraised her GOP opponent, Lacey Hull, by more than 3 to 1, spent more than twice as much as her and had over four times as much in reserves. In another hotly contested open seat, House District 92 in Tarrant County, the GOP nominee, Jeff Cason, concluded the period with just \$1,305 cash on hand, or 0.55% of that of his Democratic opponent, Jeff Whitfield.

In one of the open seats, that of retiring Rep. Bill Zedler, R-Arlington, the GOP nominee, David Cook, raised more than his Democratic opponent when in-kind contributions were taken into consideration.

Across the 12 seats that Democrats are defending, two incumbents were outraised: Reps. Vikki Goodwin of Austin and Rhetta Bowers of Garland. Bowers has been consistently outpaced on fundraising by her GOP challenger, Will Douglas, who more than doubled her haul on the latest filing and cemented a more than 5-to-1 cash-on-hand lead.

Considering in-kind contributions, four more Democratic freshmen were outraised: Reps. James Talarico of Round Rock, Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson, John Turner of Dallas and Jon Rosenthal of Houston.

Democrats are further taking encouragement from the number of donations their candidates raked in, a sign of grassroots enthusiasm. In Allison's race, for instance, he posted 306 contributions, while his Democratic foe, Celina Montoya, had 14,538 individual donations, according to her campaign's analysis. In several races, Democratic candidates' reports were still not appearing in full Wednesday on the TEC website, apparently due to their size.

Republican incumbents can draw their optimism from their cash-on-hand leads, a relatively expected advantage given that many have been in office for years and have had more time to build up sizable stockpiles.

For example, three of the most endangered Republicans who were outraised — Button, Leach and Meyer — ended the period with much more saved up for the homestretch than their Democratic opponents did. Button still had \$954,000 in the bank, more than four times that of her Democratic foe, Brandy Chambers. Leach maintained a more than 2-to-1 cash-on-hand advantage in his race, and Meyer's was almost 2-to-1.

Still, silver linings are limited for some vulnerable Republicans. For example, Shaheen's Democratic rival, Sharon Hirsch, outraised him, outspent him and ended the stretch with a cash-on-hand edge.

The filings also detailed the latest finances for the groups that are most active in the House fight. The Democrats' main political arm in the battle for the majority, the House Democratic Campaign Committee, hauled in \$3.6 million — more than double what it raised in the first six months of the year, which itself was a committee record — and had \$1.4 million cash on hand.

A number of individual Democratic members are also spearheading groups to flip the House. One Texas, which is associated with San Antonio Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, entered the final weeks of the battle with \$369,000 in the bank.

In addition to Forward Majority, another national outside group, Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund, has committed over \$2.2 million to flipping the Texas House, targeting Republicans over inaction after the state's string of mass shootings in recent years.

The Republican side of the funding war is more nebulous, though three state-based groups dedicated to defending the majority — Leading Texas Forward, the House GOP Caucus political action committee and the Associated Republicans of Texas — raised \$1.7 million combined from early July through Sept. 24. There is \$3 million in the bank across the three outfits.

Still, Republicans have ample additional sources if it comes to that. Texans for Lawsuit Reform, the powerful tort reform player that mostly backs Republicans, is sitting on \$15.5 million in the bank. Gov. Greg Abbott has vowed to be a leading figure in defending the House, and while his campaign only spent modestly helping candidates during the most recent period, it is expected to ratchet up its activity in the final weeks before the election.

The Republican State Leadership Committee, the main national GOP group focused on state legislative races, is also playing big in Texas. An account that it has on file with the state raised \$5.3 million over the latest period, including \$4.5 million from GOP megadonor Sheldon Adelson and his wife, Miriam. The account reported spending \$3.1 million, though roughly half was listed as "expenditures not related to Texas." The account had \$5.7 million cash on

hand.

There is also a newer group, Pro-Life America, that is backed by seven figures and already spending against Democrats in battleground races. The group is a state affiliate of the Susan B. Anthony List, the national anti-abortion organization, and so far it has been exclusively bankrolled by Jan Duncan, the wife of late Houston oil billionaire Dan Duncan. She contributed \$2.2 million to Pro-Life America on its most recent filing, which showed it spent \$476,000 and kept \$2.2 million in the bank.

Disclosure: Everytown for Gun Safety and Texans for Lawsuit Reform have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them [here](#).

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## **In Texas House fight, Democrats bet big on health care, while Republicans emphasize police support - Candidates from both parties are bringing up everything from school funding to lemonade stands in the final weeks of a heated contest for control of the state's lower chamber.**

October 21, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek and Cassandra Pollock | Section: News | 2266 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

When Democrat Brandy Chambers read in The Dallas Morning News last month that her opponent, state Rep. Angie Chen Button, R-Richardson, now supports Medicaid expansion, Chambers could not believe it.

"Shocked would be a good word," Chambers recalled in an interview.

Button and other Texas Republicans have long resisted expanding Medicaid, the state-federal health insurance program, even though Texas has the country's highest uninsured rate. But Button said she now sees the need for expanding the program due to the coronavirus pandemic, which has left many Texans jobless — and without health insurance.

Button is not the only Republican lawmaker raising eyebrows about seemingly new policy positions now that the party's majority in the Texas House is on the line. Another endangered incumbent, Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, recently expressed regret for supporting the divisive "bathroom bill" that sought to limit public restroom access for transgender people and headlined the 2017 legislative year without ever becoming law.

That legislation, along with Medicaid expansion, is among a litany of issues that are cropping up in the final weeks of the Nov. 3 election that will decide the balance of power in the Legislature's lower chamber. The stakes are high, with the battle unfolding ahead of the 2021 redistricting process during which lawmakers will draw new political boundaries for the state.

Democrats are nine seats away from the majority after picking up 12 seats in 2018, some of which Republicans are serious about winning back. But in many cases, Republican lawmakers who have held the House majority since the 2003 session are facing the first truly competitive general elections of their lives — and being forced to answer for votes in a way they have never had to before.

Take for example the Legislature's massive cuts to public education in 2011, which Democrats are using to try to undercut the GOP's renewed focus on school funding during the most recent session.

"That was 10 years ago, and over the last four sessions since, we've steadily increased public education funding," Rep. Sarah Davis, R-Houston, said in a recent interview, playing down the issue.

While Democrats press Republicans over health care and public education, the GOP is hoping to portray their Democratic opponents as too liberal and beholden to national Democrats, seeking to put them on defense over issues including police funding and taxes.

For example, as Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, fights for reelection, he is airing a TV ad that claims the policies of his Democratic opponent, Keke Williams, would threaten Texas' economic recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's no surprise Keke Williams doesn't fight for us," a narrator says. "Williams is bankrolled by out-of-state liberal extremists."

Health care

National Democratic super PAC Forward Majority is spending over \$12 million in the state House fight this fall, and

health care is its top issue. The Democrats' dominant focus on health care mirrors the strategy they led with to help flip the U.S. House in 2018 — and are relying on again this year to pad their ranks, especially in Texas.

Forward Majority is flooding state House districts with ads tying Republicans on the ballot to their party's yearslong push to repeal the Affordable Care Act and with it, its protections for people with preexisting conditions. The U.S. Supreme Court is slated to hear a Texas-led challenge to the federal health care law Nov. 10.

Forward Majority's ads accuse GOP lawmakers of doing the bidding of insurance and drug companies when it comes to health care. "And who suffers?" a narrator asks. "Patients with preexisting conditions like heart disease or cancer, denied coverage."

Republicans are pushing back by pointing to their passage of Senate Bill 1940 last session. If Obamacare went away, that law would allow the Texas Department of Insurance to take initial steps to temporarily bring back the high-risk insurance pool that the Legislature abolished in 2013. That option provided high-priced coverage to Texans with preexisting conditions who could not find it elsewhere, and by the time it was ended, it covered a small number of Texans — 23,000.

One health-care expert — Stacey Pogue, senior policy analyst at the left-leaning Every Texan think tank in Austin — said the law is a "wholly inadequate substitute" for the Affordable Care Act.

"It does nothing," Pogue said. "It's perplexing that anybody would point to that as an achievement."

#### Defunding the police

The dominant issue Republicans are using to criticize Democrats is law enforcement, with GOP candidates touting their support for police and seeking to tie their Democratic opponents to the "defund the police" movement. The term means different things to different people, but among some activists protesting police brutality, the movement aims to redirect some funds from police budgets to social services.

Abbott has done his part to make support for law enforcement the central issue of the general election for Republicans, asking candidates to sign a pledge against "defunding the police" and releasing multiple legislative proposals to punish local governments who cut police budgets.

While no Democrat running in a battleground district is known to have explicitly embraced the idea, Republicans are working to portray their opponents as being anti-law enforcement. A prime example is House District 67, where Leach, the incumbent Plano Republican, is airing a TV ad that labels his Democratic rival, Lorenzo Sanchez, an "anti-police zealot."

The attack is based on anti-police Facebook posts from a Sanchez campaign staffer, including one calling police a "terrorist organization," as well as a June campaign event where Sanchez said he agreed after a speaker advocated for taking guns away from police.

When the issues first came up earlier this fall, Sanchez issued a statement that did not directly address them but said he does "not support defunding" police. As for the staffer's comments, The Dallas Morning News editorial board reported that Sanchez told them "that he can't be responsible for everything anyone associated with his campaign says." And in a story published last week by the Plano Star Courier, Sanchez said he believes in deadly force as a last resort but that "it would be foolish to de-arm cops."

In other contests, the police-related attacks appear to have less of a basis. Rep. Steve Allison, R-San Antonio, is airing a TV ad in which he says, "I stand with our police; my opponent wants to defund them." But the Tribune could not find any evidence of his opponent, Celina Montoya, expressing such support, and Allison's campaign has not provided any backup.

"I think that there's absolutely, without question, room for us to have some criminal justice reform, but none of us

are calling to, you know, abolish the police or anything of that sort. It's silliness," Akilah Bacy, the Democrat running against Republican Lacey Hull for an open Houston seat, said during a Texas Tribune event Friday.

Some Republican candidates are acknowledging they also have to say what they support when it comes to police reform. Justin Berry, an Austin police officer challenging Rep. Vikki Goodwin, D-Austin, is broadcasting a TV ad where he calls for "de-escalation training and body cameras for all officers." Those ideas also appear in a commercial from Jacey Jetton, the GOP nominee for an open seat in Fort Bend County. Jetton's spot additionally advocates for "ensuring our police look more like the communities they serve."

Republicans are also trying to put Democrats on defense on fiscal issues, claiming the party's candidates would support higher taxes — and even a state income tax. In most cases, that claim appears to be based on Democratic opposition to Proposition 4, the 2019 constitutional amendment that made it harder than ever for Texas to institute a state income tax. Critics called the proposition a political stunt that could hamstring future generations when the Texas economy is not doing as well.

While Democrats insist that opposing the proposition does not equate to supporting a state income tax, Republicans say the optics are tough for Democrats.

"That's a very painful" position, said Dave Carney, the governor's top political adviser.

Abbott's campaign conducted a statewide survey in August and settled on taxes as one of the four most effective lines of attack against Democrats in battleground House contests.

In one race where the issue has flared up, Elizabeth Beck, the Democratic nominee against Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth, is asking TV stations to take down an ad he's airing that attacks her on taxes, saying it contains "blatant lies." Among other things, the commercial claims she "supports a statewide income tax," citing a 2019 tweet from her urging followers to vote against Proposition 4.

The ad also seizes on an October event where she talked about "creating new streams of revenue" — "New revenue means new taxes," a narrator says — though it leaves out part of the event where she clarifies that she "would not be in favor of raising taxes or creating a state income tax."

## Gun violence

Gun violence is also factoring into some races, mainly at the behest of Everytown for Gun Safety Action Fund, the national gun control group. It announced last month that it would spend \$2.2 million on digital ads and direct mail across 12 districts, seeking to elect a "gun sense majority" to the Texas House.

Everytown's ads invoke the 2019 El Paso Walmart shooting in which a gunman killed 23 people and injured 23 others while targeting Hispanic Texans to criticize Texas Republicans for inaction on universal background checks. One spot says the coronavirus pandemic "is not the only public health crisis facing Texas families."

A few Democratic challengers are bringing up gun issues on their own. In one of Democrats' best pickup opportunities, Joanna Cattanach is running a TV spot against Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas, that says he has "stuck to the far right's agenda ... voting to allow guns in schools." The commercial cites Meyer's vote for House Bill 1387, the 2019 law that lifted the cap on the number of school marshals who could be armed on public school campuses.

## School funding

Public education has also been an issue that's come up in a number of competitive races, with Republicans highlighting an \$11.6 billion school finance reform bill the Legislature passed in 2019.

In Tarrant County, Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington, has aired a TV ad casting himself as a lawmaker "on a new mission to improve Texas schools."

Tinderholt, a member of the hardline conservative Texas House Freedom Caucus, voted for the legislation, which was championed by GOP state leaders and received bipartisan support. But his ad is notable — it marks yet another push by Republicans to bolster their credentials and track records at the Legislature on public education. Tinderholt faces a challenge from Democrat Alisa Simmons.

Democrats facing competitive reelection bids are also trying to capitalize on the school finance bill from last year. In Williamson County, Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat, recently released a TV ad titled "A teacher in the House." The ad highlights his experience as a teacher and how that helped him work "across the aisle to pass historic school reform" in 2019. Talarico faces a challenge from Republican Lucio Valdez.

### Individual issues

Candidate-specific issues have, of course, also emerged in certain races. In the open race for House District 96 in Tarrant County, the national Democratic group Forward Majority has criticized the Republican in the race, David Cook, for overseeing an attempt while serving as Mansfield mayor in 2016 to fund an indoor ice rink using a \$1.8 million contribution from Mansfield schools.

The Mansfield City Council ultimately reversed course and decided against asking Mansfield ISD to be a funding partner after school district taxpayers pushed back on it, Cook told The Dallas Morning News in September. But Forward Majority still seized on the issue, saying in an ad it aired for the race that Democrat Joe Drago will "put kids ahead of politicians' wasteful pet projects."

In another Dallas-area race, Linda Koop, a Republican running for the seat she lost last cycle to Democratic Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos, recently aired an ad knocking Ramos over her lone vote against a bill in 2019 to legalize children's lemonade stands. Ramos, for her part, has argued that she voted against the legislation because it "takes away local control and is about public safety."

### Legislative priorities

It's unclear whether any of the issues that have emerged in some of the most competitive races will end up getting much play at the Legislature when it convenes for its regular session in January.

On top of questions over how exactly the Capitol will operate in the era of the pandemic, the uncertainty over which party will control the House is looming over what issues lawmakers could debate.

Matt Mackowiak, a GOP strategist and chair of the Travis County Republican Party, said the legislative session "will likely be consumed" by grappling with the billions of dollars in shortfalls facing the state budget and responding to the pandemic, among other issues.

"The 2021 legislative session is going to be a very difficult one," he said, "and it's hard to predict which direction things will go until we see the makeup of the Texas House and learn who the new Speaker will be."

Every Texan, Everytown for Gun Safety and Facebook have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Bill filing for 2021 Texas session begins with legislation on abortion, police stops and redistricting - Thousands of bills are expected to be filed during the legislative session, when lawmakers will tackle issues including the next state budget and redrawing the state's political maps.**

November 9, 2020 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Cassandra Pollock and Sami Sparber | Section: News | 1125 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

The 87th Texas Legislature won't gavel in until January, but state lawmakers on Monday got their first chance to file legislation for what's expected to be a particularly tough 140-day stretch at the Capitol next year.

By mid-afternoon Monday, the first day to pre-file legislation, more than 530 bills had already been filed in the House and Senate. Thousands of bills are expected to be filed throughout the legislative session, though only a fraction of them will make it through both chambers and end up on Gov. Greg Abbott's desk.

State leaders have already said they expect the upcoming session to be the toughest state lawmakers have seen in years. The state is forecasting billions of dollars in shortfalls to the state budget, which the coronavirus pandemic has fueled. On top of that, lawmakers are set to undergo the once-in-a-decade process of redrawing the state's political maps.

House Redistricting Committee Chair Phil King, a Weatherford Republican, filed legislation Monday morning related to the composition of House districts and State Board of Education districts with House Bill 63 and 64, respectively. Later Monday, King filed a bill related to congressional districts.

With fights over voter access and ballot integrity dominating the election offices and courthouse across the state in recent months, lawmakers are also seeking to resolve some of the central issues around how Texans vote with a battery of bills filed in the early hours Monday. Before noon, nearly 30 pieces of elections-related legislation had already been proposed in both chambers.

Mail-in voting and voter registration emerged as two key focal points in bills filed by members of both parties. There was also legislation focused on countywide voting centers, voter identification, access for voters with disabilities, straight-ticket voting and designating any day an election is held statewide, including primaries, as a state holiday.

State Rep. Drew Springer, R-Muenster, filed proposals aimed at curbing the power of the governor's emergency powers, including one that would create an "Emergency Powers Board" to provide oversight during a declared disaster. The state's "Big Three" — the governor, lieutenant governor and speaker of the House — would sit on the board, as would the chairs of the House and Senate State Affairs Committees. Some Republicans have argued Abbott has overstepped his authority as the state has responded to the pandemic.

Filing a bill early typically results in a low number. But the lowest numbers are reserved for the highest priority bills set by the House speaker and lieutenant governor — and sometimes, those pieces of legislation won't be filed until session is well underway.

A list of notable bills filed from the day, which will be updated regularly:

\* House Bill 25 by state Rep. Valoree Swanson, R-Spring, would prohibit the state or elections officials from distributing mail-in ballot applications to voters who had not requested them. The bill comes after months of battle between Texas Republicans and nearby Harris County over a plan, ultimately blocked, to send unrequested applications to some 1.9 million registered voters younger than 65.

\* House Bills 36 and 219 by Houston Democratic state Reps. Jarvis Johnson and Shawn Thierry, respectively, would abolish Confederate Heroes Day in Texas. The Jan. 19 state holiday is meant to honor Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and "other Confederate heroes," according to Texas' Government Code. Meanwhile, House Bill 311 by Springer, the Muenster Republican, would aim to protect historical monuments by limiting Texans' options for removing, relocating or altering them.

\* House Bill 54 by state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, would prohibit law enforcement departments from working with reality television shows. The bill comes after a grand jury in September indicted Williamson County Sheriff Robert Chody on a felony evidence tampering charge in the case of Javier Ambler, a Black man who died in 2019 after being stunned with a Taser multiple times by deputies. The incident was caught on camera for an episode of the since-canceled police reality show "Live PD," that never aired.

\* House Bill 59 by state Rep. Andrew Murr, R-Junction, would abolish school district maintenance and operations taxes in the state. During the last legislative session in 2019, Murr tried to pass a proposal that would have eliminated such taxes in 2022 and directed a committee to find a new funding source before 2021. Those property taxes, paid by local residents of each public school district, plus state funding make up the bulk of a district's budget.

\* House Bill 69 by state Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, would ban abortions at or after the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Current state law prohibits abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy. If passed, the bill would go into effect Sept. 1, 2021.

\* House Bill 88 by state Rep. Senfronia Thompson, D-Houston, known as the George Floyd Act, is named after George Floyd, a Black man killed over the summer in Minneapolis police custody, and would make a number of policing and criminal justice reforms.

\* Senate Bill 90 by state Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, and House Bill 94 by state Rep. Ron Reynolds, D-Missouri City, would expand the state's medical marijuana program to make more patients eligible and lower fees associated with operating a dispensary, among other things.

\* House Bill 103 by state Rep. Brooks Landgraf, R-Odessa, would establish the "Texas Active Shooter Alert System" to notify Texans if there is an active shooter in the area. The legislation would require the Texas Department of Public Safety to develop the system and the Texas Department of Transportation to create a plan for releasing information to people who are within 50 miles of an active shooter. Landgraf's legislation comes after a gunman fatally shot seven people and injured 22 others in Midland and Odessa last year.

\* House Bill 171 by state Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, would expand Medicaid eligibility to certain people under the federal Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Texas is currently in the minority of states that have declined to expand Medicaid coverage to people with incomes near or below the poverty line. If passed, the bill would also establish an annual report on the effects of expanding eligibility for medical assistance, including the effects on uninsured Texans and on state and local health care costs.

\* House Bill 371 by state Rep. Art Fierro, D-El Paso, would designate the day after the Super Bowl a state holiday.

Karen Brooks Harper and Aliyya Swaby contributed to this report.

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## **As Islamic holidays near, Texas Muslims back bill creating a more inclusive calendar for government employees - Texas Muslims view a recently introduced bill offering government employees days off for Islamic holidays as a step toward inclusivity.**

April 20, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Dalia Faheid, Mediill News Service | Section: News | 862 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

At the end of Ramadan in 2019, Zohaib Qadri was torn between keeping up with his hectic job planning a legislative agenda and compiling policy research as a Texas legislative aid or using paid time off to go to Houston to celebrate Eid al-Fitr with family and friends.

Not wanting to fall behind at work, Qadri attended morning Eid prayers at Nueces Mosque in Austin before rushing back to fast-paced work at the Texas House by noon. He had decided that, in addition to work demands, he needed to save his paid time off for the online graduate classes he was taking at Rice University.

"I wish it was like how we get off for Christmas and Easter and a lot of other holidays, we could just get off for Eid," he said. "It's important to feel a part of this state versus that 'othering' effect."

A bipartisan bill introduced in the Texas House on Jan. 20 would make it easier for state employees like Qadri to celebrate Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, the two Islamic holidays following Ramadan, a holy month of fasting and worship that this year began on Tuesday. House Bill 1231 would designate the two holidays as optional employee holidays, which Muslim state employees then could observe if they worked on another state holiday instead. Texas optional holidays include Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Good Friday and Cesar Chavez Day.

The House State Affairs Committee is scheduled to hear testimony on the bill at a Tuesday hearing.

"This is about recognizing and affirming our fellow Texans that celebrate these holidays," state Rep. Joe Moody, the El Paso Democrat who sponsored the bill, told The Texas Tribune. "Any system we have should affirm and lift up people to practice their faith, to live their faith and that shouldn't stop at Judeo-Christian faith sets."

Nabila Mansoor, executive director of Emgage Texas, a Muslim American lobbying group that proposed the bill to Moody, said it would show the Muslim community "that they're valued members of the Texas population." Another bill Emgage pushed would add imams to the list of religious officials who can explicitly perform marriage ceremonies in Texas alongside rabbis, priests and ministers; Rep. James Talarico introduced the measure on Feb. 22.

Muslim politicians in Texas, home to the largest Muslim population in the U.S., say the optional holiday bill would be a step toward greater representation of their community.

"It's these baby steps and changes that take place at higher levels," said Sadaf Haq, the first Muslim woman to run for Frisco City Council. "There's so much need for education and awareness when it comes to our religion."

Salman Bhojani, the first Muslim American City Council member in Euless, hopes that having Islamic holidays recognized by the Texas Legislature would encourage private employers to follow suit.

Texas House administrative director Aisha Zaman also supported the idea, saying "having Eid as an optional holiday might help avoid having a conversation that many people are not comfortable with," referring to Muslims having to explain to their supervisors why they need Eid days off.

Muslim Texans also are working to get Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha recognized by cities and school boards.

Haq said Frisco Muslim parents were unhappy when the school district scheduled the STAAR test on Eid Al-Fitr and hopes the bill would bring more awareness of the holiday. Emgage plans to remedy such conflicts by working to have Eid recognized by school boards with large populations of Muslim students.

In Houston, home to 250,000 Muslims, Letitia Plummer, the first Muslim woman on that City Council, plans to campaign to make Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha optional holidays for city employees. Plummer believes that the House bill will help Eid become a state holiday eventually.

Moody expects a committee hearing on the bill to be scheduled soon with little opposition. The bill is co-sponsored by three Republicans: Reps. Tom Oliverson of Cypress, Jacey Jetton of Richmond and Lacey Hull of Houston.

Meanwhile, Zaman, the only Muslim in her office, plans to ask her chief of staff permission to use paid time off to celebrate this year's Eid al-Fitr in May. She hopes to be with her family in Houston eating traditional vermicelli pudding dessert and exchanging Eid gifts with her three younger siblings.

"It's nice to commemorate the end of Ramadan with your family," Zaman said. "Eid has always been a pretty big part of my life."

Disclosure: Rice University has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Texas bill limiting teaching of current events, historic racism appears headed for governor after Senate revives it - Texas educators worry the bill would have a chilling effect on tough conversations about race and racism. GOP lawmakers say they wanted to ensure teachers' personal biases stay out of their lessons.**

May 28, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Kate McGee | Section: News | 1074 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas GOP senators revived a contentious bill Friday night that would limit how Texas teachers can talk about current events and America's history of racism in the classroom, hours after House Democrats seemed to have successfully killed the legislation. The bill now appears back on track to reach Gov. Greg Abbott's desk for approval.

House Bill 3979 originated in the House, but the Senate substantially changed it earlier this month. Those changes included stripping out more than two dozen requirements that students study the writings or stories of multiple women and people of color.

When the bill went back before the House on Friday, state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, raised a procedural violation, arguing that some changes from the Senate were not relevant to the bill. His point of order was sustained, appearing to block the bill in the final days of the Legislature.

But hours later, senators removed the amended language and reverted back to the House version of the bill, over the objections of Democratic senators. State Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, called his own point of order in the upper chamber to try to block the Senate's move, noting that the Senate rules say that a four-fifths vote is required to pass out a bill this late in the legislative session. But Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate, overruled that objection. Patrick told senators, some of whom seemed confused, that the vote was not on passing the bill — but simply on removing their previous amendments to it. The Senate then agreed to strip their previous amendments.

The bill says teachers cannot be compelled to discuss current events, and must explore various view points without giving deference to either side. And the Senate's move Friday also revived the requirement that various historical women and people of color and their writings be studied.

Many educators and education advocacy groups had opposed the bill, which still states that teachers cannot be compelled to discuss current events and if they do, they must "give deference to both sides." Opponents say it limits honest conversations about race and racism in American society.

After Senate Republicans tried to revive the House version, Senate Democrats still raised issues that the bill does not reflect the necessary hard conversations that teachers and schools must have with today's youth.

"We keep talking about a United States, but we keep on doing things like this that frankly divide us," West said.

Educators and advocacy groups also protested that it prohibits students from getting credit or extra credit for participating in civic activities that include political activism or lobbying elected officials on a particular issue.

The version now apparently heading to the governor also bans the teaching of The New York Times' 1619 Project, a reporting endeavor that examines U.S. history from the date when enslaved people first arrived on American soil, marking that as the country's foundational date.

The vote to strip the previous Senate amendments came in a 18-13 vote. In a statement after the Senate's move, Talarico, who'd imperiled the bill in the House earlier, echoed his fellow Democrats.

"It's ironic that Lt. Governor Patrick ignored the Texas Constitution to revive a bill about civics" said Talarico. "I'm proud that my point of order forced the Senate to pass the House version of HB 3979, which includes important Democratic amendments requiring Texas educators to teach the history of white supremacy."

Talarico and Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, sparred on the House floor over amendments the Senate stripped from the bill that would require students to learn about and read historical writings of women and people of color throughout history. Talarico was especially angry his amendment that required schools to teach that white supremacy is morally wrong was also removed.

"Is it fair to say that any bill that strikes language condemning racism is a racist bill?" Talarico asked Toth.

Supporters of HB 3979, which mirrors legislation making its way through state legislatures across the country, argue they are trying to combat personal biases bleeding into public education, pointing to a few individual instances in school districts across the state where parents have raised concerns.

But many teachers and advocates say those issues are few and far between and should be addressed on the local level rather than by state lawmakers.

"The actions taken in the Senate tonight reveal just how politically motivated this piece of legislation actually is, and just how far removed it is from the real lives of teachers and students in Texas," said Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition in a statement.

They also criticized GOP lawmakers for interfering in the classroom to gain political points.

"We know full well at this time in our history that this bill is politically motivated," said Round Rock High School teacher Sheila Mehta, who views the bill as a pushback against efforts among history teachers like herself to include more perspectives and historical accounts in history lessons. "If I look at the words of the bill, I feel like it's almost like I don't have to change anything. I just can't be compelled to do this. Whereas the spirit of the bill, I know that there's a lot of legislators who want me to stop doing what I'm doing."

Teachers said they don't feel trusted as professionals to have these nuanced conversations with students, which they often have and are able to keep their personal opinions to themselves.

Throughout legislative debates over the bill, GOP lawmakers have expressed concerns that teachers are unfairly blaming white people for historical wrongs and distorting the founding fathers' accomplishments. In recent years, there have been calls for more transparency about historical figures' racist beliefs or connections to slavery.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

McGee, K. (2021, May 28). Texas bill limiting teaching of current events, historic racism appears headed for governor after Senate revives it - Texas educators worry the bill would have a chilling effect on tough conversations about race and racism. GOP lawmakers say they wanted to ensure teachers' personal biases stay out of their lessons.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/182C795F310DF008>.

## After 2020 disappointments, Democrats look to prioritize year-round organizing - Two former congressional candidates, Julie Oliver and Mike Siegel, are hoping to help Democrats learn the lessons of 2020 with a new group called Ground Game Texas.

June 9, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1019 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Some of Democrats' biggest regrets about the 2020 election in Texas had to do with organizing. It was not consistent throughout the cycle — and usually isn't in any cycle. It was supplanted by TV ads at the end. And it was hampered by the coronavirus pandemic.

Now, with the backing of the state's most prominent Democrats, two former congressional candidates are trying to turn those regrets into action.

The candidates, Julie Oliver and Mike Siegel, are launching a new nonprofit called Ground Game Texas that will focus on year-round organizing on progressive issues, aiming to fill what they see as a statewide void for their party. The group starts off with a \$1 million investment from Register2Vote, a national nonprofit that the two already help lead.

"There's no off years and there's no off cycles, and folks need to stay engaged year-round," Siegel said in an interview, adding there is "kind of a tendency among Democratic activists" to get involved only in presidential-election years or high-profile down-ballot contests like the 2018 U.S. Senate race. "The Republican Party doesn't do that. They never stop."

Ground Game Texas will organize Texans around issues rather than candidates, with a focus on what Siegel and Oliver are calling "workers, wages and weed" — issues like raising the minimum wage and legalizing marijuana that poll well but are not reflected by Republican policymakers in the state. A February University of Texas/Texas Tribune Poll found that 60% of registered voters in Texas support legalizing some amount of marijuana for any use. A similar number in April expressed support for increasing the federal minimum wage.

The group expects to throw its weight behind local ballot initiatives, which often involve a lot of ground work such as collecting signatures for petitions to put the issues on a ballot. Siegel said he has already had conversations about proposals in 10 cities — places like Mission, Bedford and Elgin. The leading ideas there, he said, are decriminalizing marijuana and creating funding for climate jobs.

Ground Game Texas is beginning at a time when the state's Democrats are seeking to capitalize on their party's mobilization around the latest legislative session, which ended late last month after House Democrats staged a walkout that killed Republicans' priority election bill. But Gov. Greg Abbott has vowed to bring it back in a yet-to-be-scheduled special session, and Democrats are working to channel their troops' energy in the meantime.

On Tuesday, the state Democratic Party launched Project Texas, a voter registration drive on the heels of the legislative session that aims to sign up nearly 2 million new voters believed to be Democrats. The initiative is beginning with a \$1.7 million pilot phase.

Similarly, the launch video for Ground Game Texas urges progressives to fight back against the "most conservative Texas legislative session in recent history."

Ground Game Texas is launching with the support of three of the best-known Texas Democrats: Julián Castro, Wendy Davis and Beto O'Rourke, who said in a statement that the new group "is going to meet Texans where they are at to listen to them about the issues that matter most." And it starts with an advisory board that includes Davis; rising-star state Reps. James Talarico of Round Rock and Jasmine Crockett of Dallas; and longtime party stalwarts

such as former Agriculture Commissioner Jim Hightower and Texas AFL-CIO president Rick Levy.

The advisory board additionally features Democrats who ran in nationally targeted districts last year and suffered some of the toughest losses, like Candace Valenzuela, who narrowly lost to now-U.S. Rep. Beth Van Duyne, R-Irving.

Both Oliver and Siegel have firsthand experience with the challenges Democrats faced last election cycle. They both performed surprisingly well when they ran against Republican incumbents in 2018 — Oliver against U.S. Rep. Roger Williams of Austin and Siegel against Rep. Michael McCaul of Austin. In 2020, both ran again, only to lose by larger margins.

In 2020, both gained the backing of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, which named them to its Red to Blue program for promising challengers. But they remain skeptical of the committee's priorities.

"[The DCCC] doesn't really invest in this sort of infrastructure building that Mike and I did in our campaigns," Oliver said. "That strategy is so different between the DC strategy and the Texas strategy. ... The DC strategy doesn't really work here in Texas, so we want to do year-round organizing."

The DCCC announced Monday that it was including Texas in an initial seven-figure investment nationally in on-the-ground organizing, calling it the "earliest ever organizing investment of this scale and scope in DCCC's history." The committee said it would target areas in Texas such as Dallas, Houston and the Rio Grande Valley, where Democrats notably underperformed last year.

For 2020 candidates like Siegel and Oliver, there was also the Democratic shutdown of in-person campaigning due to the pandemic. Siegel said having his "field program on the sidelines from March onward was just a tremendous loss."

The freeze on in-person canvassing was cited in a state Democratic Party autopsy of the 2020 election, which said it "hurt our ground game."

At the top of the ticket, Joe Biden lost the state by 6 percentage points — the lowest margin of defeat for a Democratic presidential nominee this century, but still disappointing given the party's ambitions. The party had hoped to win multiple congressional seats and flip the Texas House, but fell far short of those goals, too.

The prioritization of issue-based organizing is not new for Texas Democrats, though Oliver and Siegel hope they can make it work on the statewide level in a way that has not happened before. The Texas Organizing Project, for example, has emerged as a force in issued-based campaigns, though its efforts are contained to the state's three largest metropolitan areas: Harris, Bexar and Dallas counties.

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## **Texas "critical race theory" bill limiting teaching of current events signed into law - Texas is one of a handful of states that have approved legislation that prescribes how teachers discuss current events and prohibits students from receiving credit for participating in civic activities.**

June 15, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Kate McGee | Section: News | 811 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Gov. Greg Abbott has signed the controversial bill that prescribes how Texas teachers can talk about current events and America's history of racism in the classroom, according to Texas Legislature Online. His signature makes Texas one of a handful of states across the country that have passed such legislation, which aims to ban the teaching of "critical race theory" in K-12 public school classrooms.

Critical race theory is an academic term that studies how race and racism have impacted social and local structures in the United States. Over the past year, GOP leaders have decried its teaching in public schools, pointing to limited examples in various school districts across the state. In 2020, former President Donald Trump had banned federal employees from training that discusses "critical race theory" or "white privilege," calling it propaganda.

Several versions of the bill passed back and forth between the two chambers as Texas Democrats raised concerns the bill would have a chilling effect on classroom conversations. An amended version sent back to the House had appeared dead at one point after state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, tanked it on a procedural violation. But it was revived by the Texas Senate later that evening after senators reverted back to an earlier approved version of the bill and sent it to the governor's office. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick had signaled support for the legislation since the start of the legislative session.

This law, which goes into effect Sept. 1, includes a list of founding documents that Texas students must be taught. It also includes a list of additional historical documents written by people of color and women that House Democrats had added. It also mandates that students be taught "the history of white supremacy, including but not limited to the institution of slavery, the eugenics movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, and the ways in which it is morally wrong."

Still, many educators and education advocacy groups had opposed the bill, which states that teachers cannot be compelled to discuss current events and if they do, they must "give deference to both sides." Opponents say it limits honest conversations about race and racism in American society and will force teachers to equivocate on controversial or sensitive topics that will result in less educated students.

It also prohibits students from getting credit or extra credit for participating in civic activities that include political activism or lobbying elected officials on a particular issue.

The version signed by the governor also bans the teaching of The New York Times' 1619 Project, a reporting endeavor that examines U.S. history from the date when enslaved people first arrived on American soil, marking that as the country's foundational date.

Supporters of House Bill 3979, which mirrors legislation making its way through state legislatures across the country, argue they are trying to combat personal biases bleeding into public education, pointing to a few individual instances in school districts across the state where parents have raised concerns.

Throughout legislative debates over the bill, they expressed concerns that teachers are unfairly blaming white people for historical wrongs and distorting the founding fathers' accomplishments. In recent years, there have been calls for more transparency about historical figures' racist beliefs or connections to slavery.

But education advocacy groups said the law is ultimately politically motivated.

"The specific references by Republicans to banning Critical Race Theory and the 1619 Project make it clear that they want this to be a wedge issue for state and local political races," said the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers in a statement in late May. "The bill is part of a national movement by conservatives trying to sow a narrative of students being indoctrinated by teachers. Our members rightfully have expressed outrage against this insult of their professionalism to provide balanced conversations with students on controversial issues."

Governors in Idaho and Tennessee have signed similar bills into law with more than a dozen other states considering legislation.

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## **Texas Senate bill seeks to strip required lessons on people of color and women from "critical race theory" law - The bill would also remove a requirement to teach that white supremacy is "morally wrong." One Democratic lawmaker said the bill's attempts could lead to a "frightening dystopian future."**

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Author: Isabella Zou | Section: News | 1486 Words

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Texas lawmakers have filed at least three bills targeting how racism, current events and the country's founding principles are taught in K-12 schools — including a senate bill that would strip out upcoming requirements that students learn white supremacy is "morally wrong" and study particular writings by women and people of color.

Senate Bill 3 features more changes than two House bills that have been filed for the special legislative session that began Thursday. The legislation comes after Gov. Greg Abbott signed into law a bill from this year's regular legislative session that restricts how current events and America's history of racism can be taught in Texas schools. It's been commonly referred to as the "critical race theory" bill, though the term "critical race theory" never appears in it. In signing it, Abbott said "more must be done" to "abolish critical race theory in Texas" and later put the issue on the special session agenda.

Teachers and experts say that critical race theory, an academic framework used to examine structural causes of racial inequity, is not being taught in K-12 schools — and that the phrase is being used as a catch-all for any mention of racism, which is an integral part of teaching history truthfully. Critical race theory itself critiques the focus on individual blame in contemporary discussions of racism, and shifts the focus to legal and social systems that perpetuate inequity.

The law that already passed lists documents, figures and events that must be included in the social studies curriculum. But SB 3, filed by state Sen. Bryan Hughes on Friday, strips out most mentions of women and people of color in that section — more than two dozen requirements that include Native American history, work by civil rights activists Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta, historical documents related to the Chicano movement and women's suffrage, and writings by Martin Luther King Jr., Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass.

It also removes the requirement to teach "the history of white supremacy, including but not limited to the institution of slavery, the eugenics movement, and the Ku Klux Klan, and the ways in which it is morally wrong."

Hughes, a Mineola Republican, did not respond to a request for comment this week. Many of the items his bill would strip were added by House Democrats during the regular legislative session — but were not part of the bill when the Senate originally passed the legislation earlier this year. In his agenda for the special session, Abbott said he wanted legislation that resembled that earlier Senate version.

Keven Ellis, the chair of the State Board of Education, wrote in an email to The Texas Tribune that most of the items in this section of the new law are already included in the state education standards, which are referred to as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. But Ellis said some of the items the new law would require — and that SB 3 seeks to walk back — aren't currently required in schools.

"Some of the items that are not currently included in our TEKS are the writings of Ona Judge and Sally Hemings, Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists, as well as the Ninth Circuit decision in *Mendez v. Westminster*," he wrote.

State Rep. James Talarico, who was a major opponent of the bill already signed into law and had successfully blocked the Senate's original version of the earlier bill from passing, expressed "dismay" over that version now being revived.

"The amendments the House added were essential to ensure that we were teaching students all of American history — the good, the bad and the ugly," the Round Rock Democrat said. "They were put in place to ensure that teachers wouldn't be punished for telling their students the truth. And if we were to strip them, I could see teachers across the state of Texas being silenced."

"It's a frightening dystopian future that starts to come into focus," he added.

State Rep. Steve Toth, who authored the regular session's "critical race theory" bill, said lawmakers wanted to strip those provisions because they "wanted the list to be smaller and a little bit more truncated."

"The mission was to get back to the original list, which was more along the lines of America's founding documents, and to make it a manageable list," he said.

He said that the bill presents a "minimum list of things that have to be read," and it's not an "exhaustive list."

"If it's not in the list, it's not like a teacher can't bring it up," he said.

State Rep. Carl Sherman, another House Democrat who added amendments, said that the removal of people of color amounted to them being "whitewashed from our history."

"If I had put in an amendment that Sam Houston should be included, I'm sure there would be no opposition to that," said the DeSoto Democrat.

Hector Bojorquez is the director of operations and educational practice for the Intercultural Development Research Association and a member of the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition. He said the materials SB 3 seeks to cut could give teachers some protection, and "a sigh of relief that they could address" things like white supremacy explicitly. He said the rest of the bill creates an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, making it harder for teachers to teach about racism truthfully.

"If it's not explicitly stated that we can talk about [white supremacy] with our students, then we're bound to repeat it, especially when you have too many people out there saying that there is no such thing as white supremacy," he said.

Even though the bill wouldn't ban any teachings, specifically omitting writings from and lessons on women and people of color "plainly sends a message" to students, Bojorquez said.

"It basically says, we don't care about you or your histories," he said. "It tells our students that they're not important, and it sends our teachers even further into uncertainty."

The lower chamber's new bills

Meanwhile, the special session's House Bill 178 walks back a couple of the more controversial aspects of the new law.

The original bill said that social studies teachers can't "be compelled" to discuss "current events or widely debated and currently controversial issues of public policy or social affairs." It says if they do, they need to "explore the topic from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective."

HB 178 would let districts require teachers to discuss current events. But it would leave in place the requirement that no one perspective be given "deference."

It also expands that requirement from social studies teachers to all instructors. And HB 178 would also extend to all K-12 teachers prohibitions on requiring or incentivizing students' political activism and teaching that "one race or

sex is inherently superior to another race or sex."

HB 178 also removes a provision that teachers can't require an understanding of the 1619 Project, a series by the New York Times that examines how racism has shaped U.S. history.

Toth said that he removed that explicit ban because the new law already prohibits certain aspects he attributes to that work, such as the idea that "the advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding of the United States."

One provision in the new law prohibits teaching that "slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from, betrayals of, or failures to live up to, the authentic founding principles of the United States, which include liberty and equality." Toth said that should counter accusations that "we're whitewashing history, or that we're not talking about history, or we're not addressing history and the wrongs of history, the evils of our past," since the bill actually "encourages us to look at history."

The bill also would require teachers to disclose all of their teaching materials and activities online every month.

"If you're gonna teach something, just let parents know about it," Toth said.

State Rep. Jasmine Crockett, a Dallas Democrat, filed House Bill 216, which would remove the ban on requiring or incentivizing students' political activism and policy advocacy. But Toth said he expects the legislation that ends up passing during the special session will look more like his bill.

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## **A tale of two capital cities: Texas Democrats continue fight for voting rights in Washington as Republicans push them to return - Both Republicans in Austin and Democrats in D.C. have engaged in the political drama over the past two weeks, with the two camps battling it out on cable news interviews and social media over the quorum bust and who is to blame for it.**

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Author: Cassandra Pollock and Abby Livingston | Section: News | 2572 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Outside of the Texas House chamber, state Rep. Briscoe Cain is setting traps for Democrats.

The first was a case of Miller Lite placed under a brown shipping box propped open with a stick, a nod to the now-viral photograph of House Democrats smiling on a bus with a 12-pack visible in one of the seats as they left the state earlier this month to prevent passage of a GOP election bill at the Texas Legislature.

This week, Cain, a Deer Park Republican, swapped out the beer in his trap for a case of Dr. Pepper, first aid supplies, a sewing kit, a bottle of Purell hand sanitizer, a can of hairspray and some Lifesavers.

"Hey Democrats, here's the Care Package you requested," Cain tweeted Monday, responding to a request from Dallas-area Democrats for goods to send the lawmakers camped out in Washington D.C. "It's right outside the House Chamber for you. Get back to work."

Cain's traps are the latest example of the political drama that both Republicans in Austin and Democrats in D.C. have engaged in over the past two weeks, with the two camps battling it out on cable news interviews and social media over the quorum bust and who is to blame for it.

Unable to pass their priority legislation, Republicans have spent their days in the special session pointing the finger at the 57 House Democrats who left, accusing them of abandoning their jobs and constituents. They've called on their colleagues to return to the Legislature to focus on issues important to Texas voters, such as providing additional money to retired teachers or increasing funding for foster care.

Democrats, meanwhile, have paraded around Capitol Hill, meeting with powerful leaders to convince Congress to pass federal voting laws. They've participated in a marathon of primetime TV appearances defending the decision to break quorum, while criticizing their GOP colleagues for pushing a voting bill they refer to as an attempt at voter suppression.

In a fiery Virginia news conference earlier this month, state Rep. Senfronia Thompson said she will "stay in the fight until I can't fight no more because I'm tired of people picking on us for no reason."

"We are Americans, and we are proud Americans, and we deserve the same rights and respect and considerations that everybody has," the Houston Democrat added. "And I'm going to fight until we get it."

But in their downtime, the Democrats are trying to find some normalcy amid a chaotic situation — one that's taken many of them away from their homes and families, while half a dozen members were sickened with the coronavirus and forced to quarantine in a hotel.

Both groups of lawmakers say they are staying busy. Democrats in D.C. have met with lawmakers on Capitol Hill and other party leaders in an effort to convince Congress to pass federal voting legislation. And Republicans in Austin have held multiple briefings with retired teachers in Texas and providers for the state's foster care system to discuss legislation on the governor's special session agenda.

State Rep. James White, a Hillister Republican, said the current situation has given him more time to dive into the

policies on the special session agenda and to meet with stakeholders involved with the legislation.

"We're not sitting around Ranch 616, sucking down Ranch Waters," White said, referencing a local Austin restaurant that's well known for its tequila drink. "There's always real business to do."

Similarly, the Democrats are mostly careful to avoid the appearances that they are treating this stay as a vacation. In the afternoons, the pool at their hotel in the hip Logan Circle neighborhood is mostly occupied by families who seem oblivious to the national political drama playing out in the hotel lobby, conference rooms and television hits taking place in their neighbors' hotel rooms.

It's not been a luxurious getaway, they and their supporters said.

"They have sacrificed to be here for us," said civil rights activist Al Sharpton in an appearance with about a dozen Texas Democrats on Wednesday. "This is not convenient to leave home. This is not a pleasure trip...this is all missing your family."

State Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock did his laundry at a nearby stranger's home who is a friend of state Rep. Julie Johnson of Farmers Branch.

"It's somewhere between taking a trip and moving," he said.

State Rep. Rafael Anchía, a Dallas Democrat, lamented that he was in such a rush to get to Washington, D.C. that he didn't properly pack and arrived without a suit.

"I found separates at Marshall's and put together an outfit for about \$65 which is great, and I have used it over and over and over again," he laughed.

Living out of their suitcases and in the hotel, the Democrats have created something of a routine — but concerns about the resurgence of COVID-19 loom large.

The Democrats report downstairs in their hotel at 8 a.m. every morning for a COVID-19 test.

The members who test negative have breakfast together, and then they typically spend their mornings in a room not accessible to the public due to COVID-19 protocols. There they engage in virtual conversations with various secretaries of state and legislators from around the country, union leaders, civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s daughter, Bernice King, Crystal Mason, a Tarrant County woman facing a five-year prison sentence for casting a provisional ballot in the 2016 election while she was on supervised release for a federal conviction, and other like-minded advocates for their voting rights push.

On Wednesday, the group met at the Dr. Martin Luther King Memorial for an event with Sharpton, Martin Luther King III and his wife, Arndrea Waters King.

Outside of the scheduled time, the Democrats attempt to catch up on work from their jobs outside of the Legislature and take interviews with local and national press. Lately, they're fixtures on cable news, with frequent appearances on MSNBC, CNN and even Fox News. Most notably, the liberal-leaning MSNBC devoted an entire hour of prime time programming to the Texans last week.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak sickened six of the members last week, they've scaled back their trips to the U.S. Capitol. Early on, the several dozen lawmakers traveled to the Capitol in a bus. But given the heightened precautions and quarantining, the meetings are fewer and smaller.

Initially, the outbreak among the Texans shocked Washington. The positive tests were the impetus for some Capitol Hill staffers and members to revive mask-wearing at the Capitol.

"Sorry, I'm washing my hands, we're doing a lot of handwashing," said state Rep. Gina Hinojosa of Austin during a phone interview last week.

At some point midday, they take a roll call attendance to ensure everyone is accounted for.

Hinojosa said it's at times been difficult to operate in the constant state of flux.

"I had this desire a few days ago for a dry erase calendar. It was this need I had to try to regain control over our time here," she said. "Having a calendar I can look at because we're building this plane as we're flying it, right? And so, our time commitments are just more fluid here."

The Democrats communicate internally via phone tree, where members are assigned to small groups to quickly disseminate information.

Talarico was on one of his now-regular evening walks last week among the monuments on the National Mall when news reached him about a shooting in broad daylight a few blocks up from the Texans' hotel. He quickly checked in with several members of his texting pod and was relieved to learn that while some Texans were close to the incident, everyone was safe.

He compared the situation to the last time Texas Democrats broke quorum 18 years ago.

"There are a lot of similarities, but that 2003 group did not have to survive a virus or a mass shooting like we have with this quorum break," Talarico said.

Back in Austin, Republicans voted overwhelmingly to issue what's known as a "call of the House," which authorized law enforcement to track down Democrats who fled. The procedural move carried little weight since the Democrats who left are beyond the jurisdiction of the state's law enforcement, though it does prevent members present in the House from leaving unless they have permission in writing from the speaker and promise to return the next day.

A day later, House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, and the remaining members posed for a portrait inside the chamber, with many of the seated Republicans smiling from their desks as rows of empty seats surrounded them.

The picture, at least from their vantage point, sent a message: Republicans had shown up to work on the issues important to Texans, while Democrats had walked off the job, fleeing the state on private chartered jets paid for by their caucus.

"We await the return of our colleagues to work on providing retired teachers a 13th check, protecting foster kids, defending taxpayers, and ensuring dangerous criminals aren't allowed lenient bail," Phelan tweeted with the photo. The 13th check refers to a one-time extra monthly payment the Legislature was planning to provide for retired teachers.

Republicans have since tried to capitalize on that messaging. Cain, the Deer Park Republican, has posted a daily photo — and, more recently, videos on TikTok — that counts how many days the chamber has gone without meeting quorum.

Another House Republican, state Rep. Jared Patterson of Frisco, is keeping track of how much Texas taxpayers are spending on the special session since Democrats' quorum bust. The price tag — it was \$649,950 on Tuesday, according to Patterson — is based on items such as legislative per diems for lawmakers and other budgeted costs, the lawmaker has said.

"Texas taxpayers deserve to know what this Democratic walkout is costing them. Every day, House Democrats are costing taxpayers \$43,330, or basically, a teacher's salary every day they aren't here," Patterson tweeted earlier this month.

Phelan, for his part, has called on Democrats who left the state to return their per diems — \$221 every day lawmakers are in session — and released a list of members earlier this month that had not yet started the process of doing so, according to his office.

The quorum break and subsequent call of the House have upended most lawmakers' plans for the summer, such as family vacations and other scheduled trips.

State Rep. Phil King, a Weatherford Republican, told the Tribune earlier this week that he's been busy with conference calls and virtual meetings with the American Legislative Exchange Council, which is hosting an annual conference this week in Salt Lake City, Utah. He also said he had to miss most of his family's vacation, which was in Colorado this year.

King, who sits on ALEC's national board, was unable to attend in-person after a call of the House was issued — a disappointment for the lawmaker who said he already had to miss this year's spring event due to the regular legislative session that ended in May.

The House has continued to meet most days since Democrats have left, though committees cannot meet and members are often released by Phelan within an hour or two as the chamber stands at ease.

Phelan's daily dismissal ritual has become a moment of levity for the remaining members as they crowd around his desk to accept their permission slips to leave. Last week, the speaker described the slips of paper as "harvest grape" on Monday, "Whataburger orange" on Tuesday and "crawfish boil red" on Wednesday.

After he dismisses them, Phelan gives them instructions on when to return the following day. Recently, the speaker has mentioned that the time is in Central Standard Time, a nod to the dozens of Democrats operating in the east coast time zone.

King, who has been through a previous Democratic quorum break, said eventually the Democrats will have no choice but to return and that the Legislature will get back to business.

"I went through this in 2003 — you just have to have patient endurance," he said. "You just wait and eventually they wear out and come back."

Democrats maintain they are determined to wait out this special session. While they express confidence that donors will cover the costs incurred from the hotel and other expenses, being away from home has personal and professional consequences.

Back home, legislators left behind children, partners, ailing parents and pets. Two weeks in, several of the members' children have joined them in Washington.

The trip complicated the summer plans of Rep. Ana Hernandez of Houston, who shares custody of her young son with her ex-husband.

"My son flew up on Saturday, but I'm not sure at what point he'll be returning," she said. "It was a one-way ticket to Washington, D.C."

Hernandez and the other lawmakers also have day jobs outside of their legislative careers. She told the Tribune that she is able to continue to practice law from afar, thanks to the fact that many court proceedings continue to take place virtually, due to COVID-19 protocols.

But other lawmakers are not so lucky.

"Not everyone can work as effectively remotely as others so we have people who are away from a small business they run or a legal practice or whatever, and they are losing money being here," Hinojosa said. "Their families are

losing income because they're here."

Gov. Greg Abbott has said he will call lawmakers back for a second overtime round to address the legislation on his agenda that the Legislature wasn't able to tackle during this first 30-day stretch.

Though the quorum bust has caused tensions among some House members, White, the Hillister Republican, brushed off the suggestion that the chamber may enter the next special session as a more polarized body than before.

"You can't walk around in this business with grudges and resentments in your pocket," he said. "I think this is a full-contact sport — this is politics — and that same member that you didn't get on House Bill A may be the member you get to pass House Bill D. You take that vote and you move on."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock and Abby Livingston, C. (2021, July 28). A tale of two capital cities: Texas Democrats continue fight for voting rights in Washington as Republicans push them to return - Both Republicans in Austin and Democrats in D.C. have engaged in the political drama over the past two weeks, with the two camps battling it out on cable news interviews and social media over the quorum bust and who is to blame for it.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/184098D8087BAD38>.

## **Texas Democrats at odds with one another as some return to Legislature and others stay in Washington, D.C. - While the quorum-busting Democrats were able to maintain a largely united front during the first special session, which ended Friday, it was clear they reached a fork in the road when the second special session began a day later.**

August 9, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 798 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Some of the Texas House Democrats who are still in Washington, D.C., did not hold back Monday as they watched more of their colleagues return to Austin and bring the chamber within single digits of a quorum.

"you all threw us under the bus today! Why?" Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Dallas said in a tweet addressed to three of her Democratic colleagues who came back to Austin.

The House had as many as 95 members on hand at one point Monday afternoon, five members short of quorum but the nearest the chamber has gotten to being able to start business since most Democrats fled last month over the Republican elections bill. It was the third day of the second special session, and the GOP-led House again issued a "call of the House," a procedural move to lock the doors of the chamber and prevent members from leaving without permission.

The 95 members who were present included at least four new Democrats: El Paso-area state Reps. Art Fierro, Mary González and Joe Moody, as well as state Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock. Moody is the former speaker pro tem, a title that House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, stripped from Moody in retaliation for the quorum break during the first special session.

Talarico was the most open about his return, announcing it on Twitter and issuing a statement explaining his decision, saying he was coming back to work on "real issues Texans face" after a productive time in Washington.

The House met hours after a state district judge in Travis County issued an order blocking the arrest of House Democrats who broke quorum by leaving the state. The Democrats who remain in Washington cited that order Monday afternoon as they criticized their colleagues who left the nation's capital.

"I've said this before... it's a Team Sport... now we see who plays what positions on the Team," state Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Dallas tweeted. "The fact that some of us secured a Temporary Restraining Order to protect ALL of us, yet some are trying to please the Governor and His OPPRESSIVE Agenda?! JUST WOW!"

While the quorum-busting Democrats were able to maintain a largely united front during the first special session, which ended Friday, it was clear they reached a fork in the road when the second special session began a day later. A group of them released a statement saying that 26 House Democrats would be staying behind in Washington to keep up their fight to pass federal voting rights legislation in Congress.

Another House Democrat still in Washington, state Rep. Gina Hinojosa of Austin, also scrutinized the Democrats who returned Monday afternoon on Twitter, calling out Fierro, González, Moody and Talarico as the House was waiting to see if it could still reach quorum for the day.

"Quorum is still not met," Hinojosa tweeted. "Praying no other Democrats willingly go to Floor."

Ramos appeared to be the most critical, tweeting at least four times about the Democrats who went back. In one of her tweets, she said the Democrats who returned were there to "sell us out."

In his statement explaining his return, Talarico claimed the Democrats had made progress on their lobbying for

federal legislation, which remains a long shot on Capitol Hill.

"We have reinvigorated the national conversation about voting rights, and have pushed Congress closer than ever to passing voter protection legislation," Talarico said, also citing the mounting issues before the Legislature back home, such as the resurgent coronavirus pandemic.

Talarico represents a competitive district in suburban Austin, where he has drawn two serious Republican challengers since leaving the state. One of them, Caroline Harris, is a staffer for the Senate author of the elections bill, state Sen. Bryan Hughes, R-Mineola.

The scene Monday was a departure from the first special session, when the quorum-breaking Democrats were able to achieve unity. The core group of 57 who went to Washington saw only one of them, state Rep. Philip Cortez of San Antonio, go home to Austin, and he returned to Washington days later.

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**Forging ahead, Texas Senate committee again passes voting restrictions bill - Senate Bill 1 is nearly identical to legislation considered in the first special session, containing many of the provisions that have spawned a monthslong game of legislative brinkmanship with House Democrats, who continue to deny Republicans the quorum needed to enact the bill.**

August 9, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Alexa Ura | Section: News | 1019 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Kicking off the third round of the GOP's bid to tighten Texas voting laws, state Senate Republicans on Monday began moving ahead with the latest iteration of their priority legislation.

On just the third day of the second special legislative session, the Republican majority on the Senate State Affairs Committee voted to advance the revived Senate Bill 1, meaning the full Senate could vote on it later this week. It remained unclear Monday evening when the House would regain the quorum needed to consider voting legislation.

SB 1, approved in a 6-3 party line vote, is nearly identical to legislation considered in the first special session and still contains many of the provisions that have spawned a monthslong game of legislative brinkmanship. Democratic lawmakers, civil rights groups and advocates for people with disabilities say the bill will in effect suppress voting by people of color and limit access for those with disabilities. Those provisions have prompted Democrats to repeatedly leave the House without enough members present to do business in an effort to block the GOP's proposals.

The legislation would ratchet up the state's election rules by outlawing local voting initiatives meant to widen access as well as further tightening the voting-by-mail process. It would also bolster partisan poll watchers' freedoms inside polling locations and establish new rules — and possible criminal penalties — for those who help voters, including those with disabilities, cast their ballots.

"None of us can deny that we can and should always work toward a better election process — one that is safer and more accessible — and that's what Senate Bill 1 does," said state Sen. Bryan Hughes, the Mineola Republican who has authored each version of the legislation.

With Monday marking the third Senate public hearing on the legislation, many of the arguments were familiar.

Republicans continued to frame their proposals as an effort to safeguard the state's elections from fraud, though there is no evidence that fraud occurs on a widespread scale. During the hearing, Hughes pointed to provisions that create new requirements for people assisting voters, including new documentation and an oath taken under penalty of perjury, as vehicles that could be used to "build a record" against wrongdoers.

"The security measures in this bill are aimed not at the voters trying to cheat but at ballot harvesters, at folks trying to influence, trying to coerce, trying to steal votes, trying to mislead voters," Hughes added.

But advocates for people with disabilities on Monday again warned Hughes and other lawmakers that the wording of their proposals risks disenfranchising the voters who lawmakers claim they want to protect by limiting the assistance they could receive and potentially subjecting those helping them to increased penalties for mistakes.

"Don't punish law-abiding voters with disabilities by creating new barriers that's going to make it harder for them to vote," said Jeff Miller with Disability Rights Texas, who said he's heard from voters with disabilities that they would be less likely to ask someone to help them if it created a risk of being investigated.

Republicans also have defended the bill by pointing to tweaks to state law that would add extra time for voting. The bill would add one extra hour of required early voting hours, increasing it from 8 hours to 9 hours per day. It also

would lower the population threshold for counties required to provide at least 12 hours of voting during the second week of early voting in state elections.

But the GOP's proposal would still ban late-night voting and the voting options — 24-hour voting and drive-thru voting — championed in diverse, Democratic Harris County that were particularly successful in reaching voters of color. The top elections official for the Texas Secretary of State has told lawmakers that he is not aware of evidence of fraud tied to those initiatives.

"Using the same innovative measures you're working so hard to shut down, Harris County successfully held safe and secure elections in July, November, December, May and June — five elections and counting," Isabel Longoria, the Harris County elections administrator, told the committee as it listened to public testimony. "We engaged voters in a way that should make each of you proud. Senate Bill 1, however, only pushes Texans out of the Democratic process."

The bill also prohibits local election officials from sending unsolicited applications to request a mail-in ballot, even to voters 65 and older who automatically qualify to vote by mail. Political parties would still be able to send out unsolicited applications on their own dime.

The committee's vote came after a relatively short public hearing — a departure from the marathon sessions it previously hosted both in the spring and during last month's special session. The in-person hearing comes amid a surge in COVID-19 cases as the delta variant continues to rage across the state, which many advocates indicated limited public testimony.

"[Texas Impact] will not be testifying because it is patently unsafe to go in the Capitol," Bee Moorhead, the executive director of the statewide interfaith organization, said on Twitter. Its members have been advocating against the legislation for months.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Ura, A. (2021, August 9). Forging ahead, Texas Senate committee again passes voting restrictions bill - Senate Bill 1 is nearly identical to legislation considered in the first special session, containing many of the provisions that have spawned a monthslong game of legislative brinkmanship with House Democrats, who continue to deny Republicans the quorum needed to enact the bill.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18448E5CB5A45878>.

**Texas House, just shy of a quorum, issues order to lock members inside the chamber - This is the second time in recent weeks the majority Republican House has voted to issue a "call of the House," though members on Monday did not offer or debate a motion to enable law enforcement to track down members still missing from the chamber.**

August 9, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Cassandra Pollock | Section: News | 1207 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas House on Monday fell just short of having enough members to begin conducting official business and voted overwhelmingly in favor of a procedural move that locked the doors of the chamber to prevent members from leaving in an effort to retain a quorum.

The move, known as a "call of the House," signals the continuation of a weekslong impasse between Democrats and Republicans in the chamber over a GOP elections bill as the second special session gets underway.

This is the second time in recent weeks the majority Republican House has voted to issue a call of the House to wrangle Democrats, though members on Monday did not offer or debate a motion to enable law enforcement to track down members still missing from the chamber. During the first special legislative session that ended Friday, the House voted overwhelmingly for such a motion while over 50 Democrats were camped out in Washington, D.C., to block that elections legislation.

The elections legislation at hand would outlaw local voting options intended to expand voting access, further tighten the voting-by-mail process and bolster access for partisan poll watchers, among several other changes to state elections. Republicans have championed the proposal as "election integrity" that would bring what they argue are much-needed reforms to the state's voting system, while Democrats and voting rights groups have criticized the proposal as a vehicle that would harm marginalized voters in the state.

Earlier Monday, a state district judge in Travis County granted a temporary restraining order to block the arrest of those quorum-busting Democrats, enabling those still out of state to remain in their locations without the threat of arrest.

The chamber came within five members of having a quorum Monday evening after at least four House Democrats who were in Washington were back on the floor, including state Reps. Joe Moody of El Paso and Mary González of Clint. Moody last month was stripped from his speaker pro tempore position by House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, as political retribution for joining his colleagues in Washington.

Under a call of the House, which was offered Monday by state Rep. Tony Tinderholt, R-Arlington, doors to the chamber are locked and members must receive permission in writing from the speaker before they are allowed to leave. The motion passed, 80-8.

Soon after members adopted the motion, Phelan released members until 4 p.m. Tuesday.

As the House gavelled in Monday afternoon, there were 93 members voting "present," with Phelan teasing that a quorum could be within reach as he anticipated "the arrival of several members within the hour." Soon after, state Rep. Travis Clardy, R-Nacogdoches, and a Democrat — Eddie Morales Jr. of Eagle Pass — were shown to be voting as present as well, bringing that tally to 95 members, five short of a quorum.

Clardy, though not technically on the House floor, was in an adjacent room to the chamber after recently testing positive for the coronavirus. Under House rules adopted unanimously in January, members can cast votes for legislation "from a secure portable device" inside the chamber, in the House gallery or "in an adjacent room or hallway on the same level as the House floor or gallery." Clardy was among a handful of other Republicans who

were not on the floor Monday, contributing to the lack of a quorum.

The House has yet to have a quorum for the new special session which started Saturday, short about two dozen members, both Republicans and Democrats.

After the more than 50 Democrats left in July, the chamber has been unable to debate or pass legislation, rendering the first special session effectively moot.

That 30-day stretch of the first special session ended Friday, and the governor convened a second overtime round to tackle issues including the elections bill as well as a host of other items, such as doling out federal COVID-19 relief funds and changing the timeline for the 2022 primary elections. Democrats also walked out in the final days of the regular session which ended in May to block the elections bill.

While the Senate has moved at a breakneck pace already to pass legislation on Abbott's special session agenda, it's been less clear whether enough Democrats would return for the House to regain quorum.

As Monday's developments in Austin played out, Democrats still in the nation's capital expressed anger at their colleagues who had returned to Austin. Over the weekend, a group of 26 Democrats said they intended to remain in Washington to continue pushing Congress to act on federal voting legislation.

"you all threw us under the bus today! Why?" tweeted state Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson. She tagged Democrats Moody, González and state Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock, who was also on the House floor Monday, in her tweet.

In a statement as the House gavelled in, Talarico said he had returned to the chamber floor "to work on the real issues Texans face," such as tackling a recent surge in coronavirus cases and reforming the state's energy grid.

"Since the beginning of the quorum break, I have been very honest about our options in Texas — we don't have many," he said. "This is by design. Under one-party rule: democracy suffers."

Meanwhile, in the Senate, lawmakers there continued working through the special session agenda and approved legislation in the chamber to give retired teachers a 13th pension check, change the state's bail reform system and give more property tax breaks to new homeowners as well as elderly and disabled homeowners.

In statements touting the passage of bills through the Senate, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick castigated House Democrats for blocking the bills in the lower chamber through their quorum break. He vowed to pass the bills "over and over again until the House finally has a quorum."

Senators also approved in committee a joint resolution to lower the quorum requirements from two-thirds in each legislative chamber to a simple majority. That bill now moves to the Senate floor and can be taken up by the chamber later this week. The attempt to change the quorum rules in the state constitution comes after House Democrats have broken quorum twice this year to block the passage of a Republican elections bill they say would restrict voting rights.

Even if that bill is approved by both chambers, voters still need to approve the constitutional amendment in an election.

Senators also held committee hearings to advance other bills that will likely be approved by the full chamber later this week. Among those was the election bill that Democrats oppose, which was approved along party lines in the Senate State Affairs Committee.

— James Barragán contributed to this report.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock, C. (2021, August 9). Texas House, just shy of a quorum, issues order to lock members inside the chamber - This is the second time in recent weeks the majority Republican House has voted to issue a "call of the House," though members on Monday did not offer or debate a motion to enable law enforcement to track down members still missing from the chamber.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current:  
<https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18448E5CC978B2A8>.

## **Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan signs arrest warrants for absent Democrats in bid to end chamber's weeklong stalemate - The Texas Supreme Court earlier Tuesday ruled that Democrats who refuse to show up could be detained by law enforcement and brought back to the state Capitol.**

August 10, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Cassandra Pollock and Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1092 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan on Tuesday evening signed civil arrest warrants for 52 House Democrats still missing from the state Capitol as he aimed to regain the quorum needed for the chamber to begin moving legislation during the second special session.

The move was confirmed by Phelan spokesperson Enrique Marquez, who said the warrants "will be delivered to the House Sergeant-at-Arms tomorrow morning for service."

The warrants were first reported by The Dallas Morning News. Democrats who may be arrested would not face criminal charges or fines and could only be brought to the House chamber. Dozens of minority party members fled to Washington, D.C., during the first special session to block a GOP voting restrictions bill.

The 52 warrants represent all but 15 Democrats in the lower chamber. There were at least 11 present Tuesday. There were no additional new Democrats on the floor Tuesday after four returned a day earlier — and drew the wrath of some Democratic colleagues still in Washington, and prompted a renewed push inside the party to hold the line.

Earlier Tuesday, the House voted overwhelmingly to authorize law enforcement to track down lawmakers absent from the chamber.

That 80-12 vote came hours after the Texas Supreme Court ordered that those missing Democrats could soon be detained by state authorities. The order by the all-GOP court came at the request of Gov. Greg Abbott and Phelan, both of whom had asked the court Monday to overturn a ruling from a state district judge that blocked those leaders from ordering the arrest of the quorum-breaking Democrats.

In a statement after the warrants were signed Tuesday evening, state Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, who chairs the House Democratic Caucus, said it is "fully within our rights as legislators to break quorum to protect our constituents" and reiterated Democrats' commitment "to fighting with everything we have against Republicans' attacks on our freedom to vote."

Since the Legislature gavelled in Saturday for its second special session ordered by Abbott, the House has been unable to make a quorum as dozens of Democrats have remained absent from the chamber.

When the House was unable to meet its 100-member threshold to conduct business Monday, members adopted a procedural move known as a "call of the House" in an effort to secure a quorum. That move locks doors to the chamber and prevents members on the floor from leaving unless they have permission in writing from the speaker.

That vote earlier Tuesday marks the second time in recent weeks that the chamber has voted to send law enforcement after Democrats still missing from the House.

During the first special session in July, and after more than 50 House Democrats flew to D.C., members present authorized state authorities to track down their colleagues — but the move carried little weight since Texas law enforcement lacks jurisdiction outside the state.

By the time that first 30-day stretch ended last week, Phelan had signed only one civil arrest warrant, for Rep. Philip Cortez, a San Antonio Democrat. But that move came too late since Cortez, who had briefly returned to Austin, had already gone back to the nation's capital.

Intraparty pressure has been mounting on House Democrats since the second special session started. After at least four of them returned to the floor Monday, bringing the chamber within five members of a quorum, some of their Democratic colleagues who were still in Washington unleashed on them. Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson tweeted at the returning Democrats that they "all threw us under the bus today."

Pressure ramped up Tuesday morning, when a coalition of Democratic-aligned groups released a statement urging House Democrats to hold firm and continue breaking quorum. The 21 groups included Planned Parenthood Texas Votes, the state's Sierra Club chapter, the Texas Organizing Project, Progress Texas, the Communications Workers of America and several groups that advocate for Latino Texans.

"To every pro-democracy Texas lawmaker: the only way to preserve our right to vote and the best way to fight is to stay off the House floor," the coalition's statement said.

The group also released a four-page memo arguing that far more was at stake in the second special session than just the elections bill, citing a "host of radical conservative priorities" throughout the agenda. The memo was particularly emphatic about a new proposal for the second special session — dropping the quorum threshold to a simple majority — calling it an "ominous allusion to reducing or eliminating minority rights in the Legislature, breaking centuries of Texas bipartisanship."

Meanwhile, a number of House Democrats have returned to Texas but have not come to the House floor to help provide quorum.

One of them is state Rep. Evelina "Lina" Ortega, who says she is home in El Paso but not showing up on the House floor until there is already a quorum or a majority of the Democratic caucus decides to be there.

"I pretty much feel that it's a shame that the governor and Republicans ... are really using the dirtiest tactic available to them," Ortega told the Tribune on Tuesday evening after the House's vote to send law enforcement after the absentee Democrats. "To me it's all about a power grab. I'm glad to stay away and continue to fight them."

As for whether she is concerned about arrest, Ortega said she believes it would be a "big mistake" by Republicans.

"We'll see what happens," she said.

Disclosure: Planned Parenthood and Progress Texas have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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Correction, Aug. 10, 2021: An earlier version of this story misstated in one instance when the Texas House took a vote to order the arrests of absent members. The vote occurred Tuesday, not Monday.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock and Patrick Svitek, C. (2021, August 10). Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan signs arrest warrants for absent Democrats in bid to end chamber's weeklong stalemate - The Texas Supreme Court earlier Tuesday ruled that Democrats who refuse to show up could be detained by law enforcement and brought back to the state Capitol.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from

NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1844E41CF39E3BC0>.

## **Texas Supreme Court allows for arrest of Democrats who don't show up to Legislature - The Texas Supreme Court voided a lower court ruling that blocked the arrests of the Democrats who don't show up for the year's second special legislative session.**

August 10, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: James Barragán | Section: News | 1057 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

House Democrats who refuse to show up for the Legislature could soon be detained by law enforcement and brought back to the state Capitol, after the Texas Supreme Court on Tuesday voided a state district judge's temporary restraining order barring their arrest.

The all-Republican high court's order came at the request of Gov. Greg Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan, also both Republicans, who petitioned the court on Monday to overturn a recent ruling by a Travis County district judge that blocked them from ordering the arrest of quorum-busting Democrats, who were in Washington, D.C., for about a month. The House Democrats in the suit have until Thursday at 4 p.m. to respond to the court. Democrats who are arrested would not face criminal charges and could not be jailed or fined. Law enforcement officers carrying out arrest orders by state officials could only try to bring them to the House chambers.

"The Supreme Court of Texas swiftly rejected this dangerous attempt by Texas Democrats to undermine our Constitution and avoid doing the job they were elected to do," said Renae Eze, an Abbott spokeswoman. "We look forward to the Supreme Court upholding the rule of law and stopping another stall tactic by the Texas Democrats."

In a joint statement, Democratic State Reps. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio, Gina Hinojosa of Austin and Jasmine Crockett of Dallas, said they would continue to fight for a temporary injunction at the district court level.

"It is no surprise that Republican Governor Greg Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan want to arrest their political opponents. Thankfully, this is still the United States of America. We will defend the freedom to vote, and we look forward to our temporary injunction hearing on August 20th."

The Democrats fled the state in July to block the passage of a Republican elections bill they say would restrict voting rights in the state. They successfully thwarted the bill during a 30-day specially called session that ended Friday, but Abbott immediately called for a second special session that began Saturday. Although some House Democrats have returned, many have stayed away from the Capitol to prevent the chamber from having enough members present to conduct business.

"There's no way in hell I'm going to that House floor while I've got the protection of a judge's order," State Rep. Celia Israel, D-Austin, told The Texas Tribune on Tuesday morning before the Supreme Court's action. Israel said she is back in Austin.

In the first special session, Republican lawmakers voted for a "call of the House," a procedural move that allowed them to authorize law enforcement to arrest members who were not present. But it had no teeth since Texas law enforcement has no jurisdiction outside the state. On Monday, the House, which is still a few members shy of a quorum, issued the call for a second time. But this time it only called for the doors of the chamber to be locked and did not address arresting members, likely because of the temporary restraining order blocking such arrests.

After the Supreme Court blocked the lower court's order on Tuesday, House lawmakers again ordered the chamber's sergeant at arms and any law enforcement officer under their direction to round up the missing Democrats "under warrant of arrest if necessary."

Without the Supreme Court's intervention, Abbott and Phelan would have had no assurance whether the temporary restraining order would be lifted, and such orders are not appealable. The first scheduled hearing in district court is

set for Aug. 20, when Judge Brad Urrutia, a Democrat, would decide whether to grant the House Democrats a temporary injunction. Waiting until then "virtually guarantees that no significant legislation will be passed during this session," Judd E. Stone II, the state's solicitor general, argued in his emergency motion to the Supreme Court.

The state also argued that the Supreme Court's action is warranted because the House speaker is immune from suits for legislative acts.

"Compelling the attendance of absent members by the House is a quintessential legislative act," the state's motion read, adding that Urrutia's "hasty" order "ignores this fundamental principle."

The state also argued that the House Democrats' claims are "quintessential political questions" that lie beyond a court's power to decide. The House's rules allow for present members to compel the attendance of missing lawmakers, and at least 41 other states have similar provisions in their constitutions, the motion read.

In a response, lawyers for the House Democrats who received the temporary restraining order said the state sought an order that will free it to "to forcibly arrest political opponents who have committed no crime."

Unlike other states, whose rules only require the presence of a majority of members to reach quorum, Texas requires a two-thirds supermajority "because the framers of the Texas Constitution prioritized high levels of participation and consensus-building in legislative decision making, even if it increased the costs of the process and the possibility that the process could deadlock," the Democrats' lawyers argued.

"In other words, the architects of the Texas government fully expected, and even encouraged, the power of a cohesive minority of members to 'bust the quorum' as a means of participation in the decision-making process," their response read, adding that the Democrats were "acting like true Texans."

They also argued that the state did not prove it would be harmed if the Supreme Court did not grant a stay, while the House Democrats — some of whom had already returned to the state on the understanding that Urrutia's order protected them from arrest — would suffer harm.

Once one of those lawmakers was arrested "without a premeditating crime or due process, the Court cannot un-ring that bell," the Democrats' lawyers argued.

Patrick Svitek contributed to this report.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Barragán, J. (2021, August 10). Texas Supreme Court allows for arrest of Democrats who don't show up to Legislature - The Texas Supreme Court voided a lower court ruling that blocked the arrests of the Democrats who don't show up for the year's second special legislative session.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1844E41CD85F45E8>.

## **Ted Cruz shuts down federal voting bill before U.S. Senate leaves for recess, dashing Texas Democrats' hopes - U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz blocked a last Democratic attempt to pass federal voting rights legislation this summer. The Senate left town but is expected to pick up the issue again in the fall.**

August 11, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Abby Livingston | Section: News | 577 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

WASHINGTON — Despite high hopes and desperate pleas from Texas Democrats, the U.S. Senate failed to move federal voting rights legislation before leaving for summer recess. And it was a Texas Republican — U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz — who blocked the last attempt to vote on a bill before the Senate left town.

During that overnight final session, Senate Majority Leader Charles Schumer, D-New York, requested unanimous consent from the Senate to immediately consider the For the People Act, a sweeping overhaul of federal elections that would preempt attempts from states to restrict voting access, would overhaul campaign finance laws and would end congressional gerrymandering, among other provisions.

Only one senator is needed to block a unanimous consent request — a procedural move typically reserved for items that aren't controversial — and Cruz jumped at the opportunity.

"This bill would constitute a federal government takeover of elections. ... It would strike down virtually every reasonable voter integrity law in the country," Cruz said.

Schumer proposed unanimous consent for two more proposals that would address redistricting and campaign finance, and Cruz also objected to those as motions.

The great hope among many of the more than 50 Texas Democrats who had decamped to the nation's capital this summer was that the U.S. Senate would make tangible progress toward a federal voting rights bill before Congress' annual August recess period. The Texas Democrats, who busted the state Legislature's quorum to block GOP voting legislation for the past month, pinned their hopes on Congress because they are the minority party in all branches of state government.

Few Capitol Hill observers anticipated the Senate would vote on a voting access bill this week, and Schumer's motions were perceived as a symbolic nod to voting rights groups.

This quiet period comes as some Texas state House Democrats remain in Washington. The once-bustling city that allowed them to hobnob with and lobby the nation's most powerful leaders is now a legislative ghost town. Earlier in the summer, Texas Democrats met with pivotal senators, congressional leaders and Vice President Kamala Harris. As of Wednesday, they had yet to meet with President Joe Biden.

Capitol Hill leaders are still expected to address voting rights legislation when the Congress returns after Labor Day, and there is some speculation the U.S. House may return to Washington earlier than planned, in late August. For now, the Senate is expected to return in mid-September.

Chances are slim that the For The People Act will pass the Senate in its current form. But there remains hope among some Texas and Capitol Hill Democrats that a scaled-back bill might have a shot at becoming law.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Livingston, A. (2021, August 11). Ted Cruz shuts down federal voting bill before U.S. Senate leaves for recess, dashing Texas Democrats' hopes - U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz blocked a last Democratic attempt to pass federal voting rights legislation this summer. The Senate left town but is expected to pick up the issue again in the fall.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/184537A36D1DD9B8>.

**Signed warrants produce no arrests of Texas Democrats for now, but perhaps a hardened resolve to stay away - It's unclear how far Republican leadership plans to take the arrests, and there remains debate about the limits of law enforcement's authority to detain lawmakers who are not accused of committing crimes.**

August 11, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Cassandra Pollock, Alexa Ura and James Barragán | Section: News | 1807 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Even with the fresh threat of arrests hanging over them, a majority of House Democrats still refused to show up at the Texas Capitol on Wednesday.

On Tuesday night, House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, took the extraordinary step of signing 52 civil arrest warrants for the missing Democrats, many of whom fled the state last month for Washington, D.C., to block the GOP elections bill.

But instead of prompting absent Democrats to return to the chamber on Wednesday as it gaveled back in soon after 10 a.m., the warrants were met by lawmakers from the minority party doubling down in their intentions to fight tooth and nail to extend their now weeklong quorum break.

"That's why we didn't go back," state Rep. Michelle Beckley, D-Carrollton, who remains in Washington, said later Wednesday. "We knew this was going to happen."

Beckley told The Texas Tribune that "there's been talk of leaving again," referring to some of her colleagues who returned to Texas this week as the House inched closer to regaining enough members to start up business.

Meanwhile, it's still unclear how far Phelan and Republican leadership plan to take the arrests, and there remains debate about the limits of law enforcement's authority to detain lawmakers who are not accused of committing crimes.

Phelan's office said Wednesday that the speaker will continue to keep all options under House rules available to him as Republicans push to regain a quorum.

"Speaker Phelan has stated clearly that every option provided by the House Rules that members approved unanimously is on the table," Enrique Marquez, a Phelan spokesperson, said in a statement to the Tribune. "Speaker Phelan looks forward to seeing his colleagues to move forward with the people's business."

The 52 warrants were turned over Wednesday morning to the House sergeant-at-arms, who gets to decide whether to tap law enforcement to help track down those absent lawmakers.

On Wednesday, it didn't appear as though state troopers had been deployed, and a spokesperson for the Texas Department of Public Safety did not respond to a request for comment.

Copies of the warrants were distributed to Democratic representatives Wednesday morning in emails from House sergeant-at-arms Michael Black, who offered to "assist" members in "making any necessary arrangements" to be present.

"I respectfully request that you appear voluntarily in the House chamber today and report to the Journal Clerk so that your presence can be recorded in the Journal and the House can proceed with its business," Black wrote.

Later Wednesday, Black and other House sergeants delivered the warrants to members' offices, according to footage from KXAN and The Dallas Morning News, reading off scripts that asked whether the lawmaker was at the

Capitol and requested they reach out should they need help returning to the chamber floor.

The arrest warrants were signed after House members voted overwhelmingly to authorize law enforcement to go after the missing Democrats, as part of a procedural move known as a "call of the House" in an attempt to regain quorum.

Though state authorities do not have jurisdiction to detain Democrats still in Washington, a number of lawmakers have returned to Texas in recent days. If lawmakers are arrested, they would not face criminal charges or fines and could only be brought to the House chamber.

The elections legislation that the absent Democrats are aiming to block would outlaw local voting options intended to expand voting access, further tighten the voting-by-mail process and bolster access for partisan poll watchers, among several other changes to state elections. Republicans have championed the proposal as "election integrity" that would bring what they argue are much-needed reforms to the state's voting system, while Democrats and voting rights groups have criticized the proposal as a vehicle that would harm marginalized voters in the state.

At least one Democrat said he has shielded himself against the warrants, at least for the time being: Gene Wu of Houston, who on Wednesday was granted an order by a state district judge to temporarily avoid arrest if law enforcement tracks him down. The lawmaker said in a statement that he and his legal counsel were working to grant that same protection for his quorum-busting colleagues.

"The battle is far from over," Wu said, "but we are fired up and ready to keep on fighting."

But Attorney General Ken Paxton told the Chad Hasty Radio Show on Wednesday that he'd fight Wu's protective order just like the state had fought a previous restraining order by a Travis County state district judge to block the arrest of other Democrats.

"The same thing will happen in Houston," Paxton said of Wu's order. "If we have to take it to the Texas Supreme Court, we'll do it."

Earlier this week, a Travis County judge granted 19 House Democrats a temporary restraining order that would bar their arrest, but it was voided by the Texas Supreme Court on Tuesday. Those Democrats plan to push forward with their request for a temporary injunction in a Travis County court on Aug. 20. If granted, the injunction could again grant them protection from arrest.

Republicans have mainly applauded Phelan for signing the warrants. State Rep. Greg Bonnen of Friendswood, who chairs the powerful budget-writing House Appropriations Committee, said "the damage [the quorum-busting Democrats] have brought upon the [Legislature], and the great State of Texas, must end now."

"We are not the federal government," Bonnen tweeted Wednesday, "nor will we allow our proud institution of the Texas House of Representatives to become its reflection."

Over 50 Democrats left the state in July to help prevent the passage of a controversial GOP voting bill filed during the first special session, but Democrats are no longer disclosing how many members are still in Washington.

Just 18 Democratic members were seen in a picture posted Wednesday afternoon by state Rep. Jasmine Crockett, D-Dallas, on the steps of the National City Christian Church, located across the street from the hotel where Democrats have been staying. Representatives for the Democrats who stayed behind in Washington indicated the picture did not include every member still there.

It's unclear what Democrats still in Washington hope to accomplish by remaining in the nation's capital aside from perhaps continuing to shave days off the second 30-day overtime round that began Saturday.

During the first special session, members met in person and virtually with White House officials and Capitol Hill

leaders to push Congress to act on a pair of federal voting rights bills that would preempt much of Texas Republicans' priority legislation.

Those hopes were stymied late Tuesday after Texas' junior senator, Republican Ted Cruz, blocked a last attempt in the Senate to vote on one of the bills before lawmakers left town. The U.S. House could take up its version of separate legislation in late August, which would be earlier than originally anticipated — and a victory for Texas Democrats, according to members such as state Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, who chairs the House Democratic Caucus.

"There is no question that Texas House Democrats' hard work the last month has accelerated the timeline in Washington and sparked a renewed sense of urgency," Turner said in a statement Wednesday, noting that Democrats "will keep fighting with everything we have to stop Republicans from undermining our democracy."

State Rep. Carl Sherman, D-DeSoto, who was among those pictured in the photo in Washington but has declined to confirm his location, said he was being treated like a fugitive for fighting for his constituents' right to vote.

"When you're obsessed with doing whatever it takes to change our democracy, you're willing to arrest people," he said of Republicans, who dominate the House. "That's their mode of operating. I wish it wasn't so. I pray for our democracy."

Meanwhile, many of the members who have departed from Washington have not divulged their locations — though several of the absent Democrats have said they have no plans to head for the House just yet.

"I clearly feel very strongly about this issue," state Rep. Jon Rosenthal, D-Houston, told The Texas Tribune before the House gavelled in Wednesday morning. "To me, staying out is doing the job of protecting the voting rights of my citizens."

While the House rules say absent lawmakers without excused absences could be "sent for and arrested," it is unclear whether law enforcement officers could forcibly return lawmakers to the Capitol against their will. The quorum busting lawmakers have not broken any criminal law, only the House rules, and the issue has not been ruled on by state courts.

"It's a completely blank slate, it's never been interpreted or adjudicated," said Randall H. Erben, an adjunct professor at the University of Texas Law School and a former legislative director for Gov. Greg Abbott.

"If history is any guide, hopefully we won't have to," he added, noting that several Democrats had already returned to the chamber.

When the Democrats last broke quorum in 2003, lawmakers returned to the Legislature on their own, so the issue never came to a head.

When the so-called "Killer Bees," a group of liberal senators, broke quorum in the Senate in 1979 to block the passage of an elections bill, Lt. Gov. Bill Hobby ordered law enforcement officers to find the lawmakers and return them to the chamber.

The senators hid out in a garage to stop a bill that would have split primary elections in the state to allow conservatives to vote for a Republican candidate for president in an earlier primary and then participate in a later Democratic primary where they could elect conservative Democrats to state and local offices without sacrificing a conservative vote in the presidential race.

But even when Department of Public Safety troopers were sent by Hobby to arrest Sen. Gene Jones of Houston in his home, where he was visiting his granddaughter, law enforcement officers never met a state lawmaker.

They arrested Clayton Jones, the senator's brother, who was then transported to Austin. The senator jumped the

fence behind his home and escaped while the Texas Rangers arrested his brother.

Patrick Svitek contributed to this report.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock, C. (2021, August 11). Signed warrants produce no arrests of Texas Democrats for now, but perhaps a hardened resolve to stay away - It's unclear how far Republican leadership plans to take the arrests, and there remains debate about the limits of law enforcement's authority to detain lawmakers who are not accused of committing crimes.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/184537A31895B768>.

**TribCast: Local officials defy Gov. Greg Abbott on mask orders as COVID-19 rages - In this week's episode, Matthew speaks with James, Patrick and Joshua about COVID-19 overwhelming hospitals again and efforts to restore a quorum in the Texas House.**

August 11, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Matthew Watkins and Michael Rey de Leon | Section: News | 179 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

In this week's episode of The Texas Tribune's weekly conversation about Texas politics, Matthew speaks with James, Patrick and Joshua about COVID-19 overwhelming hospitals again and efforts to restore a quorum in the Texas House.

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Watkins and Michael Rey de Leon, M. (2021, August 11). TribCast: Local officials defy Gov. Greg Abbott on mask orders as COVID-19 rages - In this week's episode, Matthew speaks with James, Patrick and Joshua about COVID-19 overwhelming hospitals again and efforts to restore a quorum in the Texas House.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/184537A2C79B53A0>.

**Texas Supreme Court says House Democrats can be arrested and brought to the Capitol, siding with Republicans trying to secure a quorum - In a bid to block a voting restrictions bill, House Democrats for weeks have denied the lower chamber the number of present members needed to pass legislation. House Speaker Dade Phelan has already signed dozens of civil arrest warrants.**

August 17, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Joshua Fechter | Section: News | 432 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House Democrats who refuse to show up to the state Capitol in their bid to prevent Republican lawmakers from passing a voting restrictions bill can be arrested and brought to the lower chamber, the Texas Supreme Court ruled Tuesday.

The all-Republican court sided with Gov. Greg Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan — and ordered a Travis County district judge to revoke his temporary restraining order blocking the civil arrest of Democratic lawmakers whose absences have denied the chamber the number of present members needed to move any legislation.

"The legal question before this Court concerns only whether the Texas Constitution gives the House of Representatives the authority to physically compel the attendance of absent members," Justice Jimmy Blacklock wrote in the court's opinion. "We conclude that it does, and we therefore direct the district court to withdraw the TRO."

The state Supreme Court already has blocked court rulings in Travis and Harris counties to shield the quorum-busting Democrats from arrest — but Tuesday's ruling signified that it's legal under the state Constitution for House leaders to compel members to be physically present in the House, even if it means their arrest.

More than 50 House Democrats flew to Washington, D.C., in early July to block the Republican elections bill — a wide-ranging piece of legislation that, among other changes, would place restrictions on mail-in ballots and give partisan poll watchers greater access to polling sites.

Democrats and voting rights groups have slammed the bill as a way for the state's Republican leaders to disenfranchise marginalized voters. Republicans have cast the bill as necessary to improve "election integrity" and reform the state's voting system.

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Correction, Aug. 17, 2021: A previous version of this article incorrectly stated when Texas House Democrats flew to Washington, D.C., to break quorum. They left in early July, not early August.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Fechter, J. (2021, August 17). Texas Supreme Court says House Democrats can be arrested and brought to the Capitol, siding with Republicans trying to secure a quorum - In a bid to block a voting restrictions bill, House Democrats for weeks have denied the lower chamber the number of present members needed to pass legislation. House Speaker Dade Phelan has already signed dozens of civil arrest warrants.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18472A2864696170>.

## **After a nearly six-week exodus over GOP voting bill, enough Democrats return to Texas House to resume work - Democrat Reps. Garnet Coleman, Armando Walle and Ana Hernandez were the latest to rejoin the House on Thursday, narrowly clinching a quorum.**

August 19, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: James Barragán | Section: News | 1342 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

For the first time in nearly six weeks, state officials said there were enough lawmakers present in the Texas House on Thursday for the chamber to conduct business — opening the door for the passage of the GOP priority elections bill that Democrats have been attempting to kill for the past several weeks by staying far away from the Capitol.

The margin was razor thin on Thursday and it was unclear for hours before gaveling in whether Republicans had gotten enough members in the chamber to begin their work. Ultimately, 99 members voted that they were present with 49 stated absences. (The regular 100-member threshold for a quorum dropped to 99 on Thursday after San Antonio Democrat Leo Pacheco's resignation went into effect.) The House then adjourned until 4 p.m. on Monday after referring a slew of bills to committee.

Even Republican State Rep. Steve Allison of San Antonio, who confirmed he was positive for COVID-19 a day earlier, showed up to the House to help swing the numbers — though he stayed isolated in a room on the side of the chamber.

"It's time to get back to the business of the people of Texas," said House Speaker Dade Phelan. "I appreciate every one of you. I'm looking forward to working with you over the coming week or two."

The quorum was reached on Thursday with the help of three Democrats who broke ranks with other members still refusing to return — Houston Democrats Garnet Coleman, Armando Walle and Ana Hernandez. The three members arrived together with Walle pushing a wheelchair for Coleman, who'd recently undergone surgery on his leg.

In a joint statement, the three Democrats said they were "proud of the heroic work and commitment" their caucus had shown in breaking quorum.

"We took the fight for voting rights to Washington, D.C. and brought national attention to the partisan push in our state to weaken ballot access. Our efforts were successful and served as the primary catalyst to push Congress to take action on federal voter protection legislation," the statement read. "Now, we continue the fight on the House Floor."

Walle and Hernandez were among the more than 50 House Democrats who initially left the statehouse in July to travel to the nation's capital to block the passage of the GOP elections bill. Coleman, who was recovering from serious illness, did not go to D.C. but participated in the quorum break from his home.

Those three Democrats join a smattering of other Democrats who have already trickled back to the chamber after initially participating in the quorum bust — like Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock; Joe Moody, Art Fierro and Mary Gonzáles of El Paso; and Eddie Lucio III of Brownsville.

But Democrats are not united in their return to the House. Many members are attempting to keep up the fight and have criticized their colleagues for defecting.

"This is how Texas Democrats lose elections," Rep. Michelle Beckley, D-Carrollton, tweeted in response to the announcement that Walle, Hernandez and Coleman were returning.

Several of the lawmakers who were marked as present were not actually in the building Thursday, but had

previously been in the chamber earlier this session.

One of the remaining Democrat holdouts, Rep. Diego Bernal of San Antonio, criticized House leaders for declaring a quorum when lawmakers claiming to be present were notably absent.

"The party arguing for 'election integrity' just established quorum by voting members present who weren't on the floor," he said on Twitter.

The House quorum on Thursday signals what could be the beginning of the end for Democrats who have staved off the passage of the GOP priority elections bill through multiple legislative sessions so far, despite being in the minority party in both chambers. The GOP elections bill would, among other things, outlaw local voting options intended to expand voting access and bolster access for partisan poll watchers. Democrats and voting rights advocates say it restricts voting rights in the state. Republicans, who control both chambers of the Legislature, say the proposal is intended to secure "election integrity."

Democrats first orchestrated a plan in May to kill the voting legislation when they walked out of the House chamber in the final hours of the regular legislative session, preventing final passage before the clock ran out.

Abbott responded by calling a 30-day special session that began in July. That led to more than 50 Democrats leaving Texas to camp out in Washington, D.C. — away from the reach of Texas law enforcement officials — for several weeks.

The Democrats successfully blocked the bill's passage during that session, which ended Aug. 6. But Abbott, who made the elections bill and a bail bill priorities this year, immediately called another 30-day session to push the bills forward. Abbott has said he won't stop calling lawmakers back into session until the elections bill is passed.

The second special session began Aug. 7 without a quorum in the House, with most Democrats initially committing to staying away from the state Capitol — even as House leadership deployed law enforcement to conduct civil arrests and return them to the chamber. Those warrants to secure the presence of the lawmakers "by arrest, if necessary" were dissolved Thursday with the meeting of a quorum and the chamber's adjournment.

Although the House reached the minimum number of lawmakers to conduct official business Thursday, it's unclear whether the chamber will be able to maintain those numbers for the duration of the second special session, which ends Sept. 5.

The three returning Democratic lawmakers pointed to the surge in COVID-19 cases in the state, an overwhelmed hospital system and the return of children to school as efforts that the Legislature needed to work on.

"It is time to move past these partisan legislative calls, and to come together to help our state mitigate the effects of the current COVID-19 surge by allowing public health officials to do their jobs, provide critical resources for school districts to conduct virtual learning when necessary, while also ensuring schools are a safe place for in-person instruction, and will not become a series of daily super-spreader events," they said in their statement.

Lawmakers will also have to repair relationships that were fractured during the quorum break. Republicans frowned upon Democrats who called the elections legislation "Jim Crow 2.0," saying the implication was that they were racists. Democrats said Republicans have rolled over the minority party the entire year and have not negotiated in good faith to bring a resolution to the quorum break or to their concerns with the voting legislation.

In an invocation, Coleman alluded to that friction between the two sides.

"I pray that all of us look inside, about where we want this world to go, this state, this house and look at it from the perspective of trying to find as much common ground as could be had," he said.

In the Senate, which has already tackled many of the items on Abbott's special session agenda, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick

celebrated the House's return.

"The Texas Senate welcomes the House to the 87th Second Called Special Session," Patrick said on Twitter.

Alexa Ura contributed to this report.

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Correction, Aug. 20, 2021: An earlier version of this story erroneously stated the Senate had already passed all of the items on the special session agenda. The Senate has not yet passed a bill to restore the Legislature's funding which is also on the agenda.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Barragán, J. (2021, August 19). After a nearly six-week exodus over GOP voting bill, enough Democrats return to Texas House to resume work - Democrat Reps. Garnet Coleman, Armando Walle and Ana Hernandez were the latest to rejoin the House on Thursday, narrowly clinching a quorum.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1847D9220CD7CFB0>.

## **After some Democrats return to the Texas House, holdouts say they're complicit in moving GOP elections bill forward - The return of three Democrats on Thursday allowed the House to reach a quorum, meaning enough members were present so lawmakers could work for the first time in nearly six weeks.**

August 20, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: James Barragán | Section: News | 1607 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The holdout Democrats did not mince words. They felt betrayed, heartbroken and disappointed.

After 38 days of staying away from the Texas House to block the passage of a GOP elections bill they said would restrict voting rights, three of their fellow Democrats returned to the chamber floor Thursday and provided the Republican majority enough lawmakers to restart the legislative process and almost certainly approve the controversial bill.

Their return has created a glaring split among members of the House's minority party, some of whom were openly criticizing fellow Democrats.

"Some people have to make certain decisions and I think we could have been strategic about it had we worked as a team," said Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos, a Richardson Democrat who was among those pushing to continue the holdout. "Unfortunately, these individuals chose to make decisions for themselves and not for the team.

"If you're going to be there ... for the most part you're only advancing them ramming that legislation through," she added.

The voting bill would, among other things, outlaw local voting options intended to expand voting access and bolster access for partisan poll watchers. Republicans, who control both chambers of the Legislature, say the proposal is intended to secure "election integrity" and make it "easier to vote and harder to cheat."

The three Democrats who returned Thursday — Houston's Garnet Coleman, Armando Walle and Ana Hernandez — said they were proud of the "heroic work" the House Democratic Caucus had done to fight the bill but would now "continue the fight on the House floor."

That did not shield them from criticism from fellow Democrats who said their actions betrayed the caucus and made them accomplices to Republicans in passing legislation the Democrats had been fighting the entire summer.

"Republicans are now fully enabled and empowered to enact virtually all of [Gov. Greg] Abbott's directives, including many dangerous pieces of legislation that will fundamentally hurt the lives of Texans," read a statement from 34 Democrats. "Millions of Texans will be deeply harmed by the policy that will pass in the next 17 days."

Walle, who is the caucus' finance chair and helped raise about \$1 million to pull off the quorum break, said he felt Democrats had done everything they could to fight the bill outside of the statehouse.

In Washington, D.C., where more than 50 Democrats stayed for nearly a month to push Congress to pass federal voting rights legislation that would preempt the state's proposal, the Texas lawmakers met with national figures like Vice President Kamala Harris and U.S. Sens. Joe Manchin and Chuck Schumer, the chamber's majority leader.

"We've met with every leader in Washington, D.C.," Walle said. "I respect my colleagues if they have a difference of opinion than me on this. I'm grateful to have colleagues that are passionate. I just think we have to fight on multiple fronts."

Other items on Abbott's special session agenda include more legislation limiting what Republicans call critical race theory in public schools, banning transgender student athletes from competing on school sports teams aligned with their gender identity, and prohibiting mask mandates in Texas public schools.

Walle said he remained "gravely concerned" about the elections bill proposed by Texas Republicans but said that staying away from the chamber longer was not an option. The state is facing another increase in COVID-19 cases, and its hospital systems and schools need help controlling the delta variant, he said. And state lawmakers will have to return to the statehouse again later this year for the decennial redrawing of political maps.

"We have to come back at some point," he said. "I was 100% in it and for the cause. That's not changed because I'm taking this fight down to the House floor."

Coleman also said it was time to return to the House and work within the system to fight the legislation.

"There are things that we need to do, and we need people who can create goodwill and people who can kick the shit out of them," said Coleman, a veteran lawmaker, referring to Republican lawmakers. "I'm not going to justify my actions because all of it sounds like a rationalization. I understand why people would be upset, but I'm not going to get into a tit for tat."

Hernandez declined to comment.

Other Democrats like James Talarico of Round Rock; Joe Moody, Art Fierro and Mary González of El Paso; and Eddie Lucio III of Brownsville had already returned to the chamber earlier this month, boosting the House's likelihood of reaching a quorum and restarting business.

Democrats like Dallas Rep. Jasmine Crockett publicly blasted the actions of Democrats who returned to the House.

"I'm devastated," she said on Spectrum TV's "Capitol Tonight." "I can tell you with absolute certainty that my Democratic colleagues have just hurt all of Texas. We know it wasn't just the voting bill. There is an onslaught of terrible legislation targeting trans children and even as it relates to COVID-19."

Under the House rules, two-thirds of the chamber's members must be present to meet quorum, the number of lawmakers needed to move legislation. On Thursday, the House tally showed 99 members present out of 148, meeting that requirement. But several of those lawmakers were not in the chamber.

All of them had been present at some point during the second special session, and lawmakers often vote for absent colleagues on routine votes. But lawmakers can always call on the chamber to verify lawmakers' presence, which no Democrat did Thursday.

That upset Democrats who wanted to continue the quorum break. And the inaction by Democrats on the floor to call attention to the absence of lawmakers was another sign of the division within the caucus.

Ramos said she'd asked several Democrats on the House floor, including Talarico and John Turner of Dallas, to request that verification, but no one did.

"The only way to help our efforts if you're going to show up is to call that out. Why be silent on something so obvious?" she said.

Turner, who was not among the Democrats who broke quorum, said Ramos had asked him to verify the roll call votes on Aug. 7, the first day of the special session, but he had no need to do so because the chamber had not reached a quorum.

"No one asked me to call for a verification of the roll call yesterday," Turner said. "That said, this is logically something that someone who is aiding the quorum break would do, and I have not been in that category since the

beginning of the first special session, so I did not decide to request a verification yesterday."

In a statement, Talarico said he doesn't comment on private conversations with other lawmakers but that there may have been confusion between him and Ramos.

"I confirmed with the House parliamentarian yesterday that a quorum would be verified through a record registration vote because the public has a right to know that information," he said. "A strict enforcement vote is not necessary to verify that 99 members of the House have agreed to reestablish quorum."

None of the lawmakers who were marked present have disputed their roll call votes, but the holdout Democrats say their colleagues could have held up proceedings just by proving that the quorum wasn't present.

The holdouts also said they were blindsided by the decision by the three lawmakers to return Thursday.

"This could have been shared with caucus members before hand," Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, wrote on Twitter.

Although he declined to speak on caucus conversations, Walle said "it was evident where members stood on strategy" and whether they favored returning to the chamber.

Not all of the quorum-busting Democrats were critical of those who returned to the chamber. Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, said she disagreed with their tactics but shared their values.

"Serving with Ana, Walle, and Garnet has taught me that they are consistently guided by their values," Zwiener said on Twitter. "I believe them when they say that they believe they can do more good on the House floor than off of it."

Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie, who chairs the House Democratic Caucus, said he hopes more Democrats will take that approach as the special session moves forward and his party moves to fighting the voting bill in a different way.

"We have a diversity of opinion and thought in our caucus, but we all share the same values. In terms of voting, that's centered around protecting the freedom to vote for all Texans," he said. "That's where I'm encouraging our members to focus on and pool our collective voices and considerable strength to fight back against these bills in the next phase of this fight."

He said there are many strong leaders and diverse opinions in the group, which sometimes spill out into public view. But he said the caucus remains united in fighting the voting bill, and the scraps between the caucus' members "are things that subside over time."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Barragán, J. (2021, August 20). After some Democrats return to the Texas House, holdouts say they're complicit in moving GOP elections bill forward - The return of three Democrats on Thursday allowed the House to reach a quorum, meaning enough members were present so lawmakers could work for the first time in nearly six weeks.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18482BECB6719388>.

## With a full plate of controversial bills to go, Texas House committee OKs funding for virtual learning - Public hearing on bill about teaching race and history draws a crowd.

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Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1478 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

With a quorum restored and legislation moving in the Texas House again, GOP lawmakers are hoping to push through a wide array of education-related bills in the next two weeks, covering issues from priorities of the socially conservative wing of the party to restoring funding so schools can offer online learning during the pandemic.

A slew of bills were sent to the Texas House Public Education Committee ahead of Tuesday's hearing, covering funds for virtual learning funding, a decision on "critical race theory" in schools, treatment of transgender athletes, pro- and anti-masking rules, notifications to parents of positive COVID-19 cases in their children's schools, and requiring schools to teach and adopt policies regarding child abuse.

The Senate has already tackled most items on the governor's special session agenda and now it's the House that must work before the session ends in about two weeks.

At the heart of the discussion in Tuesday's hearing — as it has been since the school year started — was virtual learning funding. On a 9-1 vote, the committee passed Senate Bill 15, which would provide that funding, with some limits.

A bill that would've established and expanded virtual learning this fall died in the regular session after Texas House Democrats walked out to prevent passage of a GOP-backed elections bill that would outlaw local voting options, among several other changes.

Those against the long-term establishment of virtual learning say that students learn best in classrooms and cite declining STAAR scores during the period of virtual learning during the pandemic. Those in favor say it gives families options, especially for students who excelled in virtual learning last year and those with medical issues.

SB 15 is touted as a measure with enough guardrails to make sure students succeed and to help those who might fall through the cracks. The bill would pay for virtual learning until September 2023 and give local school districts and charter schools the autonomy to set up their own virtual learning programs. Lawmakers set the fall 2023 date to allow them to revisit the issue during their next regular session.

However, the bill as approved by the committee would allow remote learning to be offered only in schools that received a C grade or higher in the most recent round of state accountability testing. No more than 10% of the district's student population could be enrolled online, and schools could require students to return to in-classroom learning if they do not meet academic standards.

School districts that for whatever reason don't offer virtual learning would be allowed to contract with other districts that do, according to the bill. To reduce the strain on teachers and schools, educators would be allowed to teach only virtually or in-person.

"Senate Bill 15 empowers our districts to be innovative and flexible to meet the needs of our students," said Rep. Keith Bell, R-Forney.

Monty Exter, a lobbyist for the Association of Texas Professional Educators, said the ATPE opposes the bill because it believes virtual learning doesn't work for most students and the bill would give districts an incentive to expand their virtual offerings.

Exter told the committee that Gov. Greg Abbott has had the power all along to fund virtual learning without making school officials scramble for funding as they've had to do over the past month. Committee members also mentioned that education commissioner Mike Morath could have issued the same waiver that funded virtual learning last year, although he loses that power as of Sept. 1, under a new law.

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, agreed that Abbott could have done what Morath did last spring, but right now it seems that Abbott's approach to the pandemic is to move past it as fast as possible.

"Politically, the governor is paying very close attention to what his base wants with respect to the pandemic, and that means trying to return to normal," he said.

Bob Popinski, director of policy at Raise Your Hand Texas, said that the education policy and research group supports the virtual funding bill because, while it believes all students should be in classrooms, they know the pandemic is still a very real thing and schools should be funded for a virtual option.

Popinski also believes there are enough provisions in the bill to help students succeed regardless of whether they are learning virtually or in person.

In a statement, the Texas State Teachers Association said it opposes SB 15 because it would expand virtual learning even after the pandemic subsides and could divert tax dollars from classrooms, where most students perform the best. Instead, the organization called on Abbott to use his emergency powers to fund virtual learning in the short term.

"We believe the classroom is the best learning environment for students, but we understand that many parents want to keep their children at home learning remotely, especially since Gov. Abbott is fighting mask requirements in school districts," the statement said.

Another bill discussed by the committee Tuesday was House Bill 28, which seeks to restrict how race and history is taught in schools. By early evening on Tuesday, dozens of people were still waiting to speak on the bill.

Abbott already signed into law HB 3979, which proponents said aimed to eliminate the teaching of "critical race theory" in K-12 public school classrooms. But Republican lawmakers want more done. If HB 28 becomes law as written, it would replace HB 3979 and remove the current requirements that students be taught about a long list of topics such as Native American history, the work of civil rights activists, the Chicano movement and women's suffrage. Critical race theory is not mentioned in HB 3979 by name, and educators say the theory is not taught in public schools.

HB 28 bans teachers from teaching things such as that slavery contributed to the founding of the United States. The bill also would remove a requirement to teach that white supremacy is "morally wrong," which was included in HB 3979.

According to experts and theorists, critical race theory is an academic discipline that emerged in the 1970s and holds that racism is inherent in our societal systems that perpetuate racial inequity broadly.

Keven Ellis, chair of the State Board of Education, told committee members on Tuesday that while HB 28 gets rid of lesson requirements that were included in the law Abbott signed, that doesn't mean that those writings won't be taught.

The bill adds that school districts must post information on their websites explaining what is being taught to students. This part of the bill does not apply to school districts with fewer than 300 students. State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said that part of the bill targets big districts that have a large number of students of color.

Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, author of HB 28, said he would be willing to discuss applying that section to

every school district, regardless of size. He said the bill aims to promote teaching that isn't defined by the color of someone's skin.

Talarico told Toth that instead of trying to solve the nonexistent "critical race theory" problem, the committee should be focusing on more important issues such as the ongoing pandemic and its effect on students, parents and educators.

"I appreciate Chairman Dutton and Chairman Huberty and Representative Bernal — they are all trying to work with you to make this bill less bad, to put some lipstick on this pig, but it's still a pig," Talarico said. "What you're doing is trying to solve a manufactured problem [that] is not a problem except on Fox News."

The TSTA said in a statement that the "critical race theory" bills are a disservice to Texas students, who deserve to learn about the failures as well as the successes of the country.

"The critical race theory bills are more efforts to whitewash the teaching of racism in our nation's history and culture," the organization said.

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## **GOP's so-called critical race theory bill advances as bill to restrict transgender student athletes stalls in House committee - The committee action came less than 24 hours after Dutton had taunted Patrick, threatening to hold his prized legislation back amid rumors that the Senate was stalling a bill to restore funding to the Legislature.**

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Author: James Barragán | Section: News | 897 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Setting up a potential showdown with Republicans in the final days of the second special legislative session, a House Democrat blocked a committee vote to advance a bill that restricts transgender student athletes from participating in school sports.

For the second time in two days, Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, on Tuesday adjourned the public education committee he leads without voting out Senate Bill 2, a priority of Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who presides over the Senate. The bill which is widely opposed by Democrats and LGBTQ advocates, would require transgender student athletes to participate in sports based on the gender on their birth certificate instead of their gender identity.

The bill's failure to advance on Tuesday does not spell its doom, the committee can still approve it. But with less than six days left before the special session ends, the delay complicates its passage in the House.

In the same meeting, Dutton allowed another conservative priority, the so-called critical race theory bill which would limit how Texas educators can talk about race in public schools, to advance to the floor for a full vote. The bill has already passed the Senate and has a high chance of passing in the Republican-controlled House.

The committee action came less than 24 hours after Dutton had taunted Patrick, threatening to hold his prized legislation back amid rumors that the Senate was stalling a bill to restore funding to the Legislature. Gov. Greg Abbott vetoed the entire Legislature's funding as retribution for Democrats walking out of the regular session in May to kill the GOP voting bill.

"What I am told, is that if we don't pass these two bills — the [critical race theory] bill and the transgender bill — the Senate is not going to consider trying to fix the funding in Article X," Dutton said Monday night, referring to the section in the budget which funds the Legislature. "So, I want to see if [Patrick] has his big boy pants on. This meeting is adjourned."

On Tuesday, neither the House nor the Senate had yet passed its version of a bill to restore the Legislature's funding, which includes the salaries and benefits of 2,100 state workers. But Dutton had changed his tune on at least one of the bills.

Republican Rep. Dan Huberty, of Houston, tried to sweeten the pot with Democrats on the transgender student athletes bill with an amendment to delay its implementation by a year while the state studied how many students would be impacted. But Democrats argued that if the bill was only delayed by a year, it would not allow lawmakers to use the study's findings to craft good policy and would let potentially harmful legislation go into effect and impact kids.

Dutton asked Republicans if the study could be done without the bill taking effect. After a long pause in debate, Dutton said: "This is one of those things that I as chairman will take the heat for. So, this meeting is adjourned."

During the regular legislative session, Dutton was criticized by fellow Democrats and LGBTQ advocates for reviving a version of the transgender student athletes bill after it had already died in committee. At the time, the move appeared to be in retaliation to members of his own party for spiking one of his bills.

The critical race theory bill, Senate Bill 3, was approved in committee by a party line vote of 7-5 and could be heard on the House floor as early as Thursday.

A former educator, Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, said moving forward with the bill in its current state "would be irresponsible" and asked the committee to delay its vote.

"This bill has been a mess from the beginning," he said. "It's still a mess now."

But Huberty promised to work with lawmakers to address their concerns, winning over lawmakers like Rep. J.M. Lozano, R-Kingsville, who had expressed a wish to postpone the bill's vote to craft amendments before its passage in committee. Lozano voted instead to approve the bill Tuesday and work with Huberty on amendments before it is considered in the House.

"I don't want to delay if it could potentially kill the legislation," he said.

Critical race theory is an academic discipline that studies how race and racism have impacted social and local structures. The bill became a rallying cry for conservatives across the nation last year and several legislatures, including Texas', have already passed bills limiting its teaching in public schools. Academic experts say GOP leaders have misrepresented the tenets of the framework.

Abbott vetoed legislative funding in June in retaliation for the defeat of his priority election and bail changes bills when Democrats first walked out of the House in May during the final days of the regular legislative session. Both of those bills passed have now received final approval during the current special session.

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**How the quorum break got broken: Texas Democrats splintered during second session break - For House Democrats, the story of the second special session is much different from that of the first one. The excitement of leaving the state had worn off, the media spotlight had dimmed and the pressures to return home were mounting.**

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Author: Patrick Svitek and Cassandra Pollock | Section: News | 3041 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House Democrats had essentially moved in lockstep — fleeing for Washington, D.C., in July and staying there for weeks to prevent a quorum needed by Republicans to pass their priority elections bill during the first special session. The group of over 50 lawmakers maintained a united front in TV interviews and on social media, keeping their plans closely guarded.

But after lawmakers were called back for a second special session by Gov. Greg Abbott, who was determined to pass the elections legislation, Democrats were faced with planning their next moves and the fractures emerged.

On July 31, in the final days of the first special session, Democrats who were camped out in the nation's capital met for over eight hours in a hotel conference room taking a number of votes on what they should do next, several members and staffers who were there told The Texas Tribune.

Many of the members were ready to go home. By that point, they'd been away from their districts and families for more than three weeks. Fifty-one percent of the group that voted was for continuing to stay out of Texas, while 49% supported continuing the quorum break back in their home state, according to one of their polls.

In another vote, 20% of Democrats voted for ending the quorum break and showing up on the House floor for the next legislative overtime round.

In virtually every scenario they voted on, a majority of the group agreed they should stay away from the Texas Capitol in the second special session that began Aug. 7 to again block the elections bill they had railed against as a form of voter suppression.

Crucially, members disagreed about the significance of the votes they were taking. Some took the polls to mean they would all commit to doing the will of the majority — that they would continue to move together as a bloc, as they had for so many weeks. Others viewed it as merely a temperature check to get a better sense of the group's standing.

That misunderstanding later fueled a sense of betrayal by some of the Democrats as they watched, angry and befuddled, as their colleagues trickled back to the House over the next few weeks.

"I still don't know to this day why that happened, and I truly believe that the quorum break probably would still be going on had the majority's will actually been honored," said Rep. Jasmine Crockett of Dallas, who was a vocal advocate for remaining in Washington.

The dam broke on Aug. 23, as the largest group of Democrats came back to the floor and helped restore an indisputable quorum that paved the way for Republicans to ram through the elections bill and send it to Abbott, who signed it into law Tuesday in Tyler.

"Election integrity is now law in the state of Texas," Abbott said, issuing the kind of declaration of victory that the Democrats had wanted to postpone for as long as possible — but knew they could not stop in the end.

The legislation, Senate Bill 1 as passed during the second special session, overhauls the state's election laws,

including further tightening the voting-by-mail process and outlawing local voting options aimed at expanding access. Republicans have argued the measures would bolster "election integrity," despite there being no evidence of widespread voter fraud. Democrats and voting rights groups criticized the legislation as an infringement on marginalized voters in the state.

Before the House gave the bill a final stamp of approval last month, Rep. Senfronia Thompson, a Houston Democrat and the longest-serving Black lawmaker in the Legislature's history, sent a warning shot to Republicans.

"If you think you're winning today by the things you have put in this bill, let me give you a prophetic statement: You will reap what you sow. And you know what? It won't be years or decades from now. It will be sooner than you think," she said.

For House Democrats, the story of the second special session is much different from that of the first one. The excitement of leaving the state had worn off, the media spotlight had dimmed, the uphill battle of getting federal legislation to President Joe Biden's desk was looking steeper than ever and the pressures to return home were mounting.

"I think we're all leaders, but we were in need of leadership, and that's the one thing about the Democratic caucus," said Rep. Jarvis Johnson of Houston, acknowledging there are "different mindsets and different ways of achieving a particular goal."

"When you look at those teams that win, those teams that win [do so] because they're on one message," he added.

On top of that, the polarizing process of redrawing the state's political maps was looming over lawmakers — and the threat of staying away for much longer, at least for some Democrats, was not appealing if their districts were on the line.

"At some point, we have to deal with these things in the arena that we're in, and that's on the floor of the Legislature," said Rep. Garnet Coleman, a Houston Democrat who was excused throughout both special sessions due to an illness until he returned to the House floor, in an interview with The Texas Tribune last month. "I know for some, that doesn't hold water. But I am sort of a traditionalist in some ways — you can only go so far, then you have to honor your office."

"Practical decisions"

Despite the debate inside the Democratic caucus, only two of its members returned for the first day of the second special session on Aug. 7: Reps. Eddie Lucio III of Brownsville and Bobby Guerra of Mission. Lucio said he returned for both personal and professional reasons and respected his colleagues' decisions to continue breaking quorum — but he also made clear they were in a new phase.

"The chapter of the first special session closed, right?" he told reporters after the chamber adjourned. "It doesn't mean that the fight closed, but the chapter of the session — and that strategy — closed."

Meanwhile, a separate drama was playing out: Over 20 quorum-breaking Democrats had signed on to a lawsuit against Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, arguing that Republicans' efforts to bring them back to the Capitol infringed on their constitutional rights. By the next day though, a number of Democrats said they had never authorized their names being used in the suit, with some releasing statements to that effect.

That particular suit was just one of the efforts made by Democrats, who had at one point been granted temporary protections against civil arrests, after Republicans in the House signed off on sending law enforcement to track down members. Soon after though, the all-Republican Texas Supreme Court ordered that missing Democrats could in fact be detained by state authorities and brought back to the Capitol.

That was the beginning of the end in the eyes of at least one caucus leader, Rep. Rafael Anchía of Dallas, who

chairs the Mexican American Legislative Caucus. He said it had become clear the House was "precariously close" to regaining a quorum, "and it was just a matter of time, through arrests or otherwise," that the chamber would get there.

"At that point, we had to make practical decisions," Anchía said. "We had deaths in families. We had missed weddings. We had parents getting sick. We had people needing to take care of their businesses. And so there were any number of very real pressures on legislators, and I'm never going to second-guess a legislator's decision because I cannot walk in their shoes."

On Aug. 9, the quorum-breakers experienced their biggest defection yet as four of them returned to the House floor. The group included Rep. Joe Moody, who Phelan had removed as speaker pro tem at the start of the quorum break, and two other El Paso-area lawmakers, Reps. Mary González and Art Fierro. There was also Rep. James Talarico, the rising-star legislator from suburban Austin who was most open about his return, announcing it on Twitter ahead of time.

Talarico and others who would be back on the floor in the coming days would say their return was due to a number of factors, including moving the needle in Washington on federal voting rights legislation, which has so far been blocked by the U.S. Senate, and an acknowledgment that the fight in many ways had returned back to the state Capitol.

"Given this success and recognizing that we can't break quorum indefinitely, some of my fellow quorum breakers and I returned to the Texas House to begin the work of rebuilding relationships, negotiating policy, and reducing harm," Talarico wrote in an Aug. 27 op-ed published on Texas Signal's website. "Harm reduction is not sexy or glamorous. It doesn't make for good Tweets or lucrative fundraising emails, but it's necessary work."

The four defections prompted criticism from some of their colleagues, who argued that returning to the House floor was enabling Republicans' efforts to pass a list of conservative priorities, including that controversial elections legislation. Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos of Richardson tweeted at the four lawmakers saying they "all threw us under the bus today!"

"The fact that some of us secured a Temporary Restraining Order to protect ALL of us, yet some are trying to please the Governor and His OPPRESSIVE Agenda?!" Crockett tweeted. "JUST WOW!"

The next morning, a coalition of Democratic groups — including the Texas Organizing Project and Planned Parenthood Texas Votes — released a memo urging members to keep up the quorum break.

The intraparty pushback seemed to work. For the next nine days, there were no further defections.

"It was like blow on top of blow"

Then, on the evening of Aug. 18, Coleman of Houston told the Dallas Morning News he would be returning to the floor. Coleman, who had been breaking quorum from his home in Houston while recovering from a leg amputation, said that he regretted playing a role in dividing the chamber and that he hoped his presence would help bring more Democrats home.

As the House's meeting time approached the next day, it was not clear if Coleman's gambit would work. But sure enough, Coleman arrived on the floor with two more defectors, fellow Houston Reps. Ana Hernandez and Armando Walle. In a joint statement sent out around the same time, the three Houston lawmakers cited the COVID-19 surge in Texas as the reason for their return.

A short time later, 99 members of the House — the exact threshold for quorum — were announced as present — and it appeared the quorum break was over after nearly six weeks.

Crockett said the return of the three Houston lawmakers "really hurt," noting they were all lawmakers of color, they

all represented safe Democratic districts and they all were from Harris County, whose voting initiatives last year were the impetus for much of the elections bill.

"It was like blow on top of blow on top of blow," Crockett said.

Thirty-four Democrats who stayed away issued a statement that they were betrayed and heartbroken by the members of their party who returned.

"Republicans are now fully enabled and empowered to enact virtually all of Abbott's directives, including many dangerous pieces of legislation that will fundamentally hurt the lives of Texans," they wrote.

While Republicans celebrated the restoration of quorum, Democratic lawmakers who were still watching from outside the chamber were overcome with suspicion. Based on reports from the floor, it was clear that not everyone who was marked as present was physically there.

The message from some of the most strident quorum-breakers to their colleagues was clear: Don't fall for it. There's still no real quorum. Hold the line.

On Aug. 23, any doubt that the House did not have a quorum dissolved after Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, requested a verification vote to confirm that there were in fact enough members present on the floor for the chamber to conduct business. That vote confirmed that 100 members were present, one over the minimum needed for a quorum.

Some additional members had been monitoring the floor from the nearby Texas AFL-CIO building, watching the live broadcast to see if the House would officially make quorum. After it did, they began streaming to the floor — over a dozen, including Anchia and the chairman of the Democratic caucus, Rep. Chris Turner of Grand Prairie.

The quorum break was, in effect, over. In an interview with reporters once the chamber adjourned for the day, Turner, Anchia and Toni Rose of Dallas said they had returned once a quorum had been confirmed to represent their districts, and that the fight that had previously been in Washington was now back in Austin at the Capitol.

Asked whether Democrats were still unified, Turner said the caucus could not have pulled off a weekslong "quorum break without incredible unity."

"Though members may disagree on tactic or strategy at times," he told reporters, "we all have shared unity and purpose, shared values and we have a shared commitment to defending the freedom to vote."

Still, divisions inside the Democratic caucus crystallized three days later, when at least 20 members announced the formation of a new Progressive Caucus. While the announcement did not explicitly mention the quorum break, almost all the members of the new caucus were those who had stayed off the floor until late in the second special session, if they returned at all.

That divide was largely reflective of a broader fracture in the caucus, one that split between members who were supportive of caucus leadership and those who more closely aligned with a more firebrand style that was spearheaded by Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio.

Martinez Fischer had challenged Turner for the post of caucus chair earlier in the year, and, though the race was close, was unsuccessful in his efforts to unseat his colleague. Members say that tensions from that race at times resurfaced throughout the quorum break as the caucus debated its strategy over how to block the elections legislation.

Coleman acknowledged that the experience of the past several weeks has done some damage to his caucus.

"We're used to dealing with legislation and people who don't agree with our philosophy. We're used to losing a

vote. And we're used to putting up a fight," Coleman told the Tribune. "It's when your colleagues that are part of the same party you're in basically motherfuck you because they think they can do that. They need to look inside their own cupboard and see the things they've done over the decades."

"We lose if we do not come together"

Of the core 57 Democrats who broke quorum during the first special session, there was only one defection, Rep. Philip Cortez of San Antonio. However, he returned to Washington days later, citing unproductive talks with Republicans and amid fierce pushback from some members of his own party.

The extent to which there was dialogue between Republicans in Austin and Democrats in Washington — and whether members made specific deals with one another during that impasse — is fuzzy. Phelan has denied that he was involved in any deals.

The author of the elections bill, Rep. Andrew Murr of Junction, declined to say Tuesday during a Republican caucus news conference how many quorum-breaking Democrats he spoke with. He said he was willing to speak with any colleague about the elections legislation who wanted to — but offered a significant caveat.

"Much of that discussion typically was in person, and all of that discussion needed to occur in the Capitol," Murr told reporters. "We thought that was best."

House leadership was clearly uneasy with perhaps the most drastic measure available to them: following through on a threat to physically detain the missing Democrats and bring them back to the Capitol.

While Phelan, the House speaker, signed 52 civil arrest warrants for missing members and law enforcement visited the homes of some lawmakers, no member was ever arrested and brought back to the building in Austin.

In an interview with the Tribune after the second special session adjourned, Phelan suggested that the threat of physically detaining members to bring them back to the Capitol is what helped compel the chamber making a quorum.

"I think many members saw that if we were gonna go there, they were gonna be the ones maybe possibly causing this harm to the House, and that's why I think you saw a lot of members show up," Phelan said.

A University of Texas/Texas Politics Project poll that was released Thursday showed that Republicans had voters on the side. Respondents disapproved of the quorum break by an 11-percentage-point margin, while they approved of the elections legislation by a 14-point margin.

How those numbers could impact an election that is still over a year away is an open question.

Democrats are getting only a few weeks to regroup before the next special session, which is scheduled to begin Sept. 20. While the battle over the elections bill is over, Abbott's agenda for the third special session includes redistricting, which is always a contentious process that pits members against one another as they fight for their district lines.

"Redistricting is tough under any circumstances," Anchía said. "Regardless of how people feel about each other right now, it's gonna be really important for people to go into this process with a lot of goodwill."

Rose, the Dallas Democrat, said she is confident her caucus will reunite ahead of the next special session.

"House Democrats — we are a family — and it's just like any other family," she said. "There will be disagreements. We will lose if we do not come together."

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bold ideas about politics, public policy and the day's news, curated by The Texas Tribune's award-winning journalists. Learn more.

Disclosure: Planned Parenthood has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek and Cassandra Pollock, P. (2021, September 10). How the quorum break got broken: Texas Democrats splintered during second session break - For House Democrats, the story of the second special session is much different from that of the first one. The excitement of leaving the state had worn off, the media spotlight had dimmed and the pressures to return home were mounting.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/184F1AF8919C4530>.

**Texas House proposes map that increases Republican strength and decreases Black and Hispanic majority districts - The Texas Legislature is in the midst of its third special session, which is dedicated to redrawing political maps based on the latest census data that showed people of color fueled 95% of Texas' population growth over the past decade.**

September 30, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Cassandra Pollock, Carla Astudillo and Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 1262 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House members on Thursday released the first proposal for a new map redrawing the chamber's 150-member districts. The initial draft would both increase Republicans' strength across the state and the number of districts in which white residents make up a majority of eligible voters.

House Bill 1, authored by Corpus Christi Rep. Todd Hunter, the GOP chair of the House Redistricting Committee, is just the first draft, and it will likely change as it makes its way through the legislative process before it's signed into law by Gov. Greg Abbott.

The Texas Legislature is in the midst of its third special session. This one is dedicated to redrawing political maps based on the latest census data that showed people of color fueled 95% of Texas' population growth over the past decade. The percent of Hispanics is now nearly equal to white people in Texas.

But, the new map creates fewer districts where Black and Hispanic people make up a majority of eligible voters. Black and Hispanic Texans make up two racial groups that along with Asian Texans outpaced the growth of white residents in the state over the last decade.

Currently 83 of the chamber's 150 districts are areas in which white residents make up a majority of eligible voters; 33 are districts where Hispanic voters make up the majority, while Black residents are the majority of eligible voters in seven districts.

Under the new proposal, the map adds six more districts where white residents make up the majority of eligible voters while the number of Hispanic and Black districts would each drop by three.

The proposed map would also change the partisan breakdown among the 150 districts, tilting the scale toward Republicans.

Currently, there are 76 districts that went to former President Donald Trump during the 2020 general election while 74 went to President Joe Biden. Among those, 50 districts voted 60% or more for Trump, — indicating the district is safely Republican — while 40 districts had more than 60% support for Biden — indicating strong Democratic support. Under the proposed new map, 86 districts would have gone for Trump, while 64 would have went for Biden. The number of districts that voted 60% or more for Trump or Biden would be tied at 46.

The House draft would also pit several incumbents against one another, including two El Paso Democrats — state Reps. Evelina "Lina" Ortega and Claudia Ordaz Perez — who would have to vie for the new House District 77.

In statements soon after the initial draft was released, both lawmakers criticized the proposal for pitting two Hispanic incumbents against the other.

Ortega, who referred to the proposal as "a direct attack on our border community," said she was "committed to working for our community to stop this injustice from occurring." Ordaz Perez said she would "refuse to sell out my values or those of the people I represent for political gain," adding that she intends to return to the lower chamber for another term "to fight for the people of El Paso."

In two other cases, state Reps. Jacey Jetton, R-Richmond, and Phil Stephenson, R-Wharton, would have to compete for the proposed House District 26, while state Reps. Kyle Biedermann, R-Fredericksburg, and Terry Wilson, R-Marble Falls, would face off for the new House District 19.

Later Thursday, disagreement emerged between Jetton and Stephenson over whether the latter had been drawn out of his district.

Stephenson's office told the Tribune that Jetton "isn't playing the nicest with this new map" and blamed him for drawing Stephenson out of his district.

Jetton, in a statement to the Tribune, acknowledged that while "there has been some confusion about Representative Stephenson's residence," it was his understanding that Stephenson resides in Wharton County, "so we are not actually paired in HD-26."

As for the other GOP matchup, it appeared later Thursday that the two incumbents could avoid a primary after Biedermann tweeted he may run in another district.

Other incumbent pairings under the House proposal involve a lawmaker who is either running for another office or has already announced their retirement.

In the proposed Dallas-area House District 108, for example, state Rep. John Turner, D-Dallas, who would have to face off against state Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas, has already announced he will not seek another term to the lower chamber.

And in another North Texas race for House District 63, state Rep. Tan Parker, R-Flower Mound, who would have to compete against his colleague state Rep. Michelle Beckley, D-Carrollton, is running for a seat in the Senate, while Beckley is vying for a spot in Congress.

Beyond the incumbent pairings, the proposed map offered disappointing news for state Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, who was drawn out of her district and into an adjacent, far more Republican one. She told the Tribune on Thursday afternoon that she is "hoping that there's some space to fix it" in the coming days but was not sure. She said she was unlikely to be able to move to follow the newly proposed version of her current district, which would be solidly Democratic.

One Republican incumbent, state Rep. Jeff Cason of Bedford, got especially bad news as he saw his district get redrawn to be a deep shade of blue — on that Biden carried by 27 points. Cason did not have an immediate comment.

At least a few other incumbents are looking at proposed districts that would be notably less favorable to them than they currently are. In South Texas, the district of state Rep. Ryan Guillen, D-Rio Grande City, would go from one that Trump won by 13 points to one he carried by almost double that margin. In suburban Austin, the district of state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, would transform from that Biden won easily to one that Trump carried by 6 points.

At the same time, several House Republicans whose districts Biden carried last year received redder districts under the proposed map — but probably not red enough to avert another competitive contest next year. For example, in suburban Dallas, Biden had a 9-point margin victory in the district of state Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, though the map proposal shifts only to a district that Trump carried by 2 points.

Only two seats flipped last year in the lower chamber — both in the Houston area — and the proposed map makes each more friendly for the incumbent rather than more competitive. The seat of State Rep. Mike Schofield, R-Katy, would become redder, while the seat of state Rep. Ann Johnson, D-Houston, would become bluer.

This is the first time in decades federal law allows Texas to draw and use political maps without first getting federal

approval to ensure that they're not violating the rights people of color. That federal preclearance requirement in the Voting Rights Act was gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013.

Since the enactment of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, Texas has not made it through a single decade without a federal court admonishing it for violating federal protections for voters of color.

The 2021 Texas Tribune Festival, the weeklong celebration of politics and policy featuring big names and bold ideas, wrapped on Sept. 25, but there's still time to tune in. Explore dozens of free, on-demand events before midnight Thursday, Sept. 30, at [tribfest.org](https://tribfest.org).

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pollock, C. (2021, September 30). Texas House proposes map that increases Republican strength and decreases Black and Hispanic majority districts - The Texas Legislature is in the midst of its third special session, which is dedicated to redrawing political maps based on the latest census data that showed people of color fueled 95% of Texas' population growth over the past decade.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1855A70B78754710>.

**After his Round Rock district was redrawn to help Republicans, state Rep. James Talarico says he'll move to Austin to run in 2022 - "Republicans have gerrymandered me out of my district," Talarico tweeted. "If they think they can keep me off the House floor, they better think again."**

October 13, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 484 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, announced Wednesday he is moving to run for reelection in a different House district because his current district is being redrawn to be more favorable to Republicans.

Talarico said he would run in nearby House District 50, where the Democratic incumbent, Celia Israel, is not seeking reelection as she prepares to run for Austin mayor. He announced the new campaign with the support of the biggest names in Democratic politics in Texas, including Beto O'Rourke, Wendy Davis and Joaquin Castro.

Talarico currently represents House District 52, which is set to become redder in redistricting — going from a district that President Joe Biden won by 10 percentage points to one that Donald Trump would have carried by 4. HD-50, meanwhile, is likely to remain solidly blue after redistricting.

Talarico's announcement came hours after the House approved the proposed map, with few major changes expected going forward.

"Republicans have gerrymandered me out of my district," Talarico tweeted. "If they think they can keep me off the House floor, they better think again."

Talarico said he was not angry at Republicans for proposing a district more slanted toward them but how they did it — "trying to get rid of me by dividing the communities of color in my district."

Whether Talarico can avoid a competitive primary for HD-50 is an open question. Earlier Wednesday, Pflugerville City Councilman Rudy Metayer announced he was exploring a run for the seat. Metayer is also the president of the Texas Black Caucus Foundation, and he released a list of supporters topped by two of the state's most prominent Black politicians, state Sens. Borris Miles of Houston and Royce West of Dallas.

HD-50 is more diverse than the district Talarico, who is white, currently represents. In a series of tweets announcing his new campaign, Talarico prominently highlighted how he "call[s] out White supremacy on the floor," a reference to his outspoken advocacy against Republican legislation aiming to restrict the teaching of "critical race theory" in Texas classrooms.

Talarico was part of the over 50 House Democrats who broke quorum this summer in protest of the GOP's priority elections bill, though he was part of the first several to return, causing friction with some in his own party.

With Talarico running for the new HD-50, HD-52 becomes an open seat where at least two Republicans had already been running, hoping to unseat Talarico. They are Texas Senate staffer Caroline Harris and former Senate staffer Nelson Jarrin.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2021, October 13). After his Round Rock district was redrawn to help Republicans, state Rep. James Talarico says he'll move to Austin to run in 2022 - "Republicans have gerrymandered me out of my district," Talarico tweeted. "If they think they can keep me off the House floor, they better think again.". *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1859FFBBA21D71B8>.



**In fast-growing Central Texas, redistricting sparks political reshuffling in upcoming statehouse and congressional races - The fast-growing region likely will see a considerable number of new state and federal lawmakers after the 2022 election. And in many cases, they will be representing districts whose boundaries have significantly shifted.**

October 21, 2021 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 2063 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Redistricting is causing political upheaval across Texas, but nowhere has it been more intense than in Central Texas.

Since the hours after the first redistricting map proposal was released last month, political dominoes began falling in the region, with members of both parties scrambling to take advantage of new opportunities — and change course after previous opportunities disappeared.

While few, if any, seats are expected to change party control, it is likely that there will be a considerable number of new faces among the region's state and federal lawmakers after the 2022 election. And in many cases, they will be representing districts whose boundaries have significantly shifted.

A major reason for the dynamic is that redistricting is done every decade to account for population changes — and Central Texas is the fastest-growing part of the state.

The three Texas counties with the quickest growth rates over the last decades were all in Central Texas, according to the latest census. The No. 1 fastest-growing county, Hays, saw its population grow by more than 50% from 2010 to 2020.

There are, of course, political considerations by the Republican mapmakers as well. As Central Texas has ballooned in population, many Republicans representing the area in Austin and Washington, D.C., have seen increasingly competitive races.

The explosive population growth resulted in the Austin area receiving one of the state's two new congressional districts, the other going to the Houston area.

On Monday, longtime U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett, D-Austin, announced he was running for reelection in the Austin area's new 37th Congressional District, instead of his current one. It is one of many political storylines in Central Texas that have come out of the redistricting process so far.

Here's a rundown of how the new Texas House, Texas Senate and U.S. House maps are affecting 2022 races:

#### Texas Senate

Within hours of the release of the first draft of the Senate map, former state Sen. Pete Flores, R-Pleasanton, announced he was running for the new Senate District 24. Flores lost reelection last year in the current Senate District 19, a Democratic-leaning district that he flipped in a 2018 special election upset.

The new SD-24 looked far more hospitable to Flores. For starters, it was an open seat, with its incumbent, Sen. Dawn Buckingham, R-Lakeway, running for land commissioner next year. The district was drawn to conspicuously encompass Flores' hometown of Pleasanton, before swooping up around the San Antonio area into the Hill Country. And Flores would not have to worry about the general election in the proposed district, which former President Donald Trump carried by double digits last year.

The GOP's determination to put Flores back in the Senate became only more explicit in the hours and days after he declared his candidacy. Buckingham endorsed him, then Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and then Trump, who remains close with Patrick.

Flores' rapid rise was a blow to Ellen Troxclair, the former Austin City Council member who had been campaigning for months as effectively the frontrunner for the current version of SD-24. Troxclair initially held out hope that the map proposal could evolve to her benefit, but as it became increasingly clear that would not happen, she announced she was ending her campaign and instead running for a newly proposed seat in the state House.

Still, Flores will not have the SD-24 primary to himself. Six days after Troxclair ended her campaign for SD-24, another Republican, Raul Reyes, jumped in. Reyes ran last year for the battleground 23rd Congressional District, where he battled fellow Republican Tony Gonzales in a primary runoff that went to a recount. Gonzales finished 45 votes ahead and ultimately remained the winner, but the runoff drew national attention because U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz endorsed Reyes and Trump backed Gonzales.

Reyes quickly made clear he would run aggressively against Flores. Speaking on the campaign trail a few days after launching his campaign, Reyes said SD-24 needs "a bulldog — not a lapdog — in the Senate," suggesting the chamber's leadership paved the way for Flores' return because they believe they can control him.

Reyes will not have Cruz on his side this time, though. A couple days after Reyes announced his campaign, the U.S. senator endorsed Flores.

## Texas House

When the initial draft of the state House map came out, there were two major political takeaways for Central Texas: Rep. Erin Zwiener, D-Driftwood, appeared doomed, and a crowd of Republican incumbents and candidates were going to have to make some tough decisions.

First up: Zwiener. Her residence was drawn out of her current district — the battleground 45th — and moved in to the neighboring 73rd District. The 73rd was set to be safely Republican, and Zwiener would stand virtually no chance of reelection there. She said she hoped she could get back her current district as the proposed map developed, but she also said she was unlikely to move if it stayed the same, suggesting she would not be returning to the House.

After days of uncertainty, Zwiener was rescued by an amendment to the map proposal on the House floor that moved her back into District 45. The amendment easily passed and Zwiener confirmed afterward that she will run for reelection there.

Things ended up more complicated for Republicans in the region. The initial draft of the House map placed both Rep. Kyle Biedermann of Fredericksburg and Terry Wilson of Marble Falls in the same district, the 19th.

However, it did not take long for the prospect of an incumbent-versus-incumbent matchup to go away. Wilson announced days later he would move to seek reelection in the newly proposed version of his current district, the 20th.

Biedermann, meanwhile, revealed that he owned a home in Comal County, inside another newly redrawn district, the 73rd. That effectively left him with the choice of seeking reelection in the new HD-19 or the new HD-73.

Around the same time, two 2020 Republican candidates who had already launched comeback bids for the state House in Central Texas, Justin Berry and Carrie Isaac, were having to strategize. Not only were the boundaries of the districts they ran for last year shifting, but the districts were also becoming much less competitive.

One factor became Troxclair, who announced Oct. 1 that she was abandoning her state Senate campaign and instead running for the new HD-19.

About two weeks later, another piece of the political puzzle fell in place when Isaac announced her decision: She would run for the new HD-73.

Those decisions meant Biedermann would face a competitive primary in whichever district he chose. On Wednesday, he ruled out one of them, HD-73, saying in a series of tweets that whatever he runs for next "will be close to my home" in Gillespie County, which is inside HD-19. While his tweets did not mention HD-19, he confirmed to the Tribune afterward that he was still contemplating a run for it.

A day earlier, though, arrived the most dramatic news for Central Texas Republicans: Berry would run for HD-19, facing a fellow Republican, Troxclair, with whom he had built a political alliance. In early August, they had teamed up to endorse one another — Berry backing Troxclair for the state Senate, and Troxclair supporting Berry for the state House.

In launching his campaign, Berry said he currently lives "just outside" HD-19 and would move into it. He also took aim at Troxclair, saying it is "unfortunate Ellen switched to running against me instead of keeping her word."

To be clear, Troxclair made her plans public over two weeks in advance of Berry's announcement. He said he was waiting to announce his decision until the House map was finalized, which happened in recent days.

While Troxclair made her plans public well in advance of Berry — on Oct. 1 — Berry said he suggested to her the day before that he would run for HD-19 and he thought he was "confiding in a friend and a supporter." Troxclair said they talked about "a lot of different options he might pursue" and that she called him later that day to let him know she would run for HD-19.

"But the voters in this Hill Country district don't care who announced for what, when," Troxclair said. "They want someone who is going to stand up in the face of adversity to protect our rights and freedoms, lower taxes and get politics out of the classroom — all which I have a proven record of doing."

Despite the turmoil, all these seats are expected to stay under the control of the party that currently holds them. The one exception, however, is House District 52, currently represented by Round Rock Democrat James Talarico. The district was redrawn to be more favorable to Republicans, and Talarico announced last week he would move and seek reelection in House District 50, where Rep. Celia Israel, D-Austin, is not running again as she prepares for an Austin mayoral bid.

Talarico's decision created an open seat in HD-52, where two Republicans, Caroline Harris and Nelson Jarrin, were already running. And as for HD-50, Talarico announced the district change with a star-studded endorsement list topped by Beto O'Rourke, but it may not keep the primary entirely clear. Hours before Talarico made the announcement, Pflugerville City Councilman Rudy Metayer launched an exploratory committee for the seat.

## U.S. House

Most of the political intrigue related to the congressional map in Central Texas centers on the 35th District and the 37th District. The 37th is one of two new districts that Texas is receiving due to population growth, and GOP mapmakers packed it with Democratic voters concentrated in Austin.

One big question was answered Monday when Doggett, who currently represents the 35th District, announced he would seek reelection in the new 37th District. He is the heavy favorite there, with a campaign war chest exceeding \$5 million and a long list of endorsements led by some of the top Democratic elected officials from the area.

But Doggett likely will not be unopposed in the primary. Julie Oliver, a Democrat who twice challenged Rep. Roger Williams, R-Austin, filed paperwork with the Federal Election Commission on Tuesday to form an exploratory committee for the new 37th District. Her campaign website currently teases a 2022 run and says, "Austin deserves a choice."

In any case, Doggett's decision creates a vacancy in the 35th District, which is set to remain safely Democratic and stretch from Austin to San Antonio, and the Democratic field began taking shape after Doggett announced his switch. Greg Casar, a member of the Austin City Council, launched an exploratory committee for the seat Tuesday and said he was likely to run. State Rep. Eddie Rodriguez of Austin said he was also exploring running. And state Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio confirmed he too was interested in running, telling The Texas Tribune he was giving it "serious consideration with both eyes wide open."

Martinez Fischer's interest in the seat became public days earlier when the Texas Senate's redistricting lead, Sen. Joan Huffman, R-Houston, outed him as having asked her to draw his residence into the district. Martinez Fischer did not deny that but said it "doesn't take a lot of genius to draw a map" that puts him in the district given how close he already lives to it. He also joked that he understands how Republicans "would say or do anything if they can get me out of the Texas House."

The latest machinations around the two districts have cast uncertainty over the plans of at least a couple Austin Democrats who were previously seen as potential candidates. One of them is Wendy Davis, the former Fort Worth state senator and 2014 gubernatorial nominee who unsuccessfully challenged U.S. Rep. Chip Roy, R-Austin, last year. She has not commented on her plans since Doggett announced his decision, but she was listed among Casar's supporters, meaning she probably will not run for the 35th District.

State Rep. Gina Hinojosa of Austin was viewed as a possible contender for the 37th District before Doggett switched over. Hinojosa told the Tribune on Tuesday, hours after the end of the third special session, that she is making "no major decisions for the next 2 weeks" and needs "some time to assess & reflect."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2021, October 21). In fast-growing Central Texas, redistricting sparks political reshuffling in upcoming statehouse and congressional races - The fast-growing region likely will see a considerable number of new state and federal lawmakers after the 2022 election. And in many cases, they will be representing districts whose boundaries have significantly shifted.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/185C9A37F63BD5B8>.

## **Lawmakers decry collapsing Texas juvenile prison system, ask Abbott to call special session - Without a jolt of funding, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department will struggle to hire workers and regain control over the safety and treatment of almost 600 incarcerated youth, its acting director told lawmakers at a hearing.**

August 9, 2022 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Jolie McCullough | Section: News | 1061 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas' youth prison system urgently needs money to crawl out of its growing crisis, in which children are at times locked in cells 23 hours a day and nearly half of detained youth have been on suicide watch, the agency's director told lawmakers Tuesday.

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department — currently under federal investigation for an alleged pattern of abuse and mistreatment — is severely understaffed, with agency officials saying last month it is nearing systemic collapse. After The Texas Tribune reported last week on dire conditions inside the state's five youth prisons, the Texas House Juvenile Justice and Family Issues Committee looked for possible solutions at a legislative hearing.

"I think we can all agree this is cruel and unusual," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, citing reports of children using water bottles as makeshift toilets while stuck in their cells and routinely hurting themselves to get attention from staff. "Is there anything between now and next [legislative] session that's going to solve this?"

Talarico and 33 other House Democrats sent Gov. Greg Abbott a letter Monday asking him to bring lawmakers together immediately in a special legislative session to address the emergency. Abbott's office did not immediately respond to questions about the letter Tuesday.

TJJD sounded the alarm last month, when interim director Shandra Carter stopped accepting newly sentenced kids from county detention centers. The agency can't guarantee the safety of the fewer than 600 youth already in its care, she said, because it can't keep people on the job. Last year, the turnover rate for detention officers hit more than 70%, and most new hires quit within six months.

As of Tuesday, more than 160 children were waiting to be transferred from also understaffed county detention centers to the state's five juvenile prisons, Carter told the committee. For many children, the wait, which in some cases has been as long as three months, means more time in lockup since they are unable to begin and complete required programming.

"At the rate that I am recruiting and retaining staff, that waitlist will continue to grow," Carter told the committee. "With what we have in front of us, I think a further increase would help us stabilize quicker and absorb that waitlist."

Last month, TJJD was able to make permanent an emergency 15% raise for officers by postponing reentry programs and using savings from unfilled positions. Carter said Tuesday the new pay, bringing starting salaries up to \$41,700, has shown promise, with more people applying for jobs. She said money isn't the only solution to the department's chronic problems, but it is the necessary first step.

"Our exit interviews are really clear. It's overwhelmingly pay and difficulty of the work is the reason that people are leaving, and this prevents us from stabilizing," Carter told lawmakers. "I can't even guarantee they're going to get a bathroom break on their shift."

A spokesperson for Abbott, who alone can call lawmakers to the Texas Capitol outside of regular legislative sessions every two years, said last week that he will support TJJD's request to increase salaries next session. The legislative session begins in January, and any budget decisions would largely not take effect until next September.

Talarico said more immediate action is needed.

In his Monday letter, he said a special legislative session must include measures to close "failed facilities" and restore and increase funding for anti-violence and rehabilitation programs. He also called for salary increases, prioritizing diverting children from incarceration, and providing alternatives for children in suicidal crises or with other mental health emergencies.

"Waiting until the next session is a death sentence for incarcerated children," the letter read.

Juvenile justice advocates have long urged closing state prisons and instead putting necessary mental health and rehabilitative resources into local communities. Others have proposed building smaller facilities closer to urban centers, which have larger labor pools than the rural areas where most prisons are located.

For state Rep. Gene Wu, a Houston Democrat who has long worked in juvenile justice, frustration with the state's juvenile justice system comes from "getting the same answers and dealing with the same issues again and again and again, and there never seems to be any resolution."

TJJD has been plagued by sexual abuse and mistreatment scandals for more than a decade. In recent years, counties have shifted more toward keeping children closer to home and sending fewer to the state prisons, shrinking the population from thousands to fewer than 600. But the ones left often are the most difficult to manage because of violent behavior, severe mental health needs or both.

Aside from funding, Wu on Tuesday pushed for sending even fewer kids to state facilities. A juvenile must have been found to have committed a felony to go to TJJD, but Wu said many smaller counties still send children to state prisons for low-level, nonviolent felonies.

While the majority of new admissions to TJJD last year were for violent offenses, 10% were for unauthorized use of a vehicle or possession of a controlled substance, according to data from Texas Appleseed, a social justice advocacy organization.

"Maybe we should ... talk about not sending state jail felonies to TJJD," he said in the hearing. "It seems like joyriding in a car seems like a bad offense to be sent to a state prison."

Disclosure: Texas Appleseed has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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The full program is now LIVE for the 2022 The Texas Tribune Festival, happening Sept. 22-24 in Austin. Explore the schedule of 100+ mind-expanding conversations coming to TribFest, including the inside track on the 2022 elections and the 2023 legislative session, the state of public and higher ed at this stage in the pandemic, why Texas suburbs are booming, why broadband access matters, the legacy of slavery, what really happened in Uvalde and so much more. See the program.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

McCullough, J. (2022, August 9). Lawmakers decry collapsing Texas juvenile prison system, ask Abbott to call special session - Without a jolt of funding, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department will struggle to hire workers and regain control over the safety and treatment of almost 600 incarcerated youth, its acting director told lawmakers at a hearing.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18BCDBC787B4E680>.

## Republicans narrowly increase their majorities in Texas Legislature - Republican incumbents are successfully defending their seats while the party appears to be making inroads in South Texas.

November 9, 2022 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Zach Despart and James Barragán | Section: News | 964 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Republicans narrowly expanded their legislative majorities in both the House and Senate early Wednesday morning, though they fell short of taking some seats they targeted in this year's midterm elections.

In the House, the GOP grew its ranks by one — giving them an 86-to-64 advantage in the 150-member chamber for the 2023 legislative session. The Senate has 31 members, and Republicans previously outnumbered Democrats 18 to 13. The GOP will hold at least 19 seats next session. Democrats will hold at least 11, though they are leading in one Senate race that is still too close to call.

The Republicans' victories were felt prominently in South Texas, where the GOP won key races after targeting the historically Democratic region of Texas after Democratic President Joe Biden underperformed there in 2020.

In House District 37, now anchored in Harlingen, Republican Janie Lopez beat Democrat Luis Villareal Jr. The seat is currently held by Democratic state Rep. Alex Dominguez, who unsuccessfully ran for state Senate rather than seek reelection. The district was redrawn to cut out many of the Democratic voters in Brownsville from the district to the benefit Republicans. Biden carried District 37 by 17.1 points in 2020 under the old boundaries, but would have won by only 2.2 points under the new map.

Lopez would be the first Latina Republican to represent the Rio Grande Valley in the House.

In another major South Texas victory, Rep. Ryan Guillen of Rio Grande City, who defected from the Democratic Party and ran this cycle as a Republican, won reelection handily.

In another crucial battle in southern Bexar County, which has traditionally been dominated by Democrats, Republican incumbent John Lujan prevailed over Democrat Frank Ramirez, a former San Antonio City Council member.

Republicans hung on to that House District 118 seat by reconfiguring it during last year's legislative session to have a much narrower advantage for Democrats. Biden won the district by 14 points two years ago, but would have won by only 3 points under the new boundaries.

Republicans also poured big money into the race, with Lujan out-raising Ramirez nearly 5 to 1 in the latest campaign finance reports.

But Democrat Morgan LaMantia was in a tight race with Republican Adam Hinojosa in Senate District 27, an open seat vacated by Eddie Lucio Jr., a conservative Democrat who sometimes bucked his party in the Legislature on major issues like abortion and LGBTQ rights. LaMantia was ahead early Wednesday morning with all precincts reporting, but the Democrat's lead was less than 600 votes, putting it squarely in recount territory.

While LaMantia is a well-known Democrat in the Rio Grande Valley, Republicans added more conservative voters from Bee and San Patricio counties during last year's redistricting process, making the district more competitive for their party. Biden won the district by 15.7 points in 2020, but would have won it by only 4.7 points under the new boundaries.

Texas Democratic Party Chair Gilberto Hinojosa tried to pour cold water on any Republican celebrations in South

Texas. The GOP set its sights on flipping three congressional seats in the area, but Democrats held them off in two of them.

"Republicans in Austin and D.C. should understand that if they could barely eke out this one win here, they should probably pack up their bags and get the hell out of our region," he said on Twitter.

Democrats fared well in other races where Republicans had been bullish on pulling off upsets. Incumbent Democrat Eddie Morales fended off a challenge from Katherine Parker in House District 74, which includes Eagle Pass and much of the Texas-Mexico border.

And Democrats also won some seats that were drawn to be more favorable to them during last year's redistricting cycle. Democrat Mihaela Plesa flipped an open seat in House District 70 in fast-growing Collin County, which has long been controlled by Republicans. Jamee Jolly, Plesa's Republican opponent, conceded Wednesday.

And in House District 34, Democratic incumbent Abel Herrero beat back a challenge from Republican Carolyn Vaughn to earn a sixth term representing the Nueces County district.

In House District 52, Republican Caroline Harris, a former legislative staffer, defeated Democrat Luis Echegaray in a district formerly held by Democrat James Talarico. The district was redrawn last year to give Republicans an advantage, and Talarico moved to nearby House District 50, anchored in Austin, where he won the seat over Republican Victor Johnson. That seat was open after Democrat Celia Israel decided to run for Austin mayor.

In Harris County, Republican Mano DeAyala cruised over Democrat Mohamad Maarouf in House District 133. The seat had been vacated by longtime Republican Rep. Jim Murphy.

With districts that were drawn to be more favorable to the GOP, the Republican incumbents in Dallas County won much more comfortable reelections than they did two years ago. Morgan Meyer defeated Democrat Elizabeth Ginsberg in House District 108, anchored in Highland Park and University Park, while Angie Chen Button prevailed over Democrat Elva Curl in House District 112 in northeast Dallas County.

In the Senate, Republicans extended their majority by one after state Rep. Phil King, R-Weatherford, won election to Senate District 10, formerly held by Democrat Beverly Powell. The district was formerly anchored entirely in Tarrant County, but was dispersed to the west and south in last year's redistricting process and made more advantageous for Republicans.

Powell, who had filed for reelection, eventually quit the race, claiming it was unwinnable after the GOP redrawing.

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The Texas Tribune is a nonprofit statewide news organization dedicated to keeping Texans informed on politics and policy issues that impact their communities. This election season, Texans around the state will turn to The Texas Tribune for the information they need on voting, election results, analysis of key races and more. Get the latest.

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## Texas lawmakers target property taxes, election fraud and transgender people in new legislation ahead of 2023 session - Thousands of bills are expected to be filed for the legislative session that begins in January. Lawmakers are expected to have a budget surplus when they return to Austin.

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Author: Sneha Dey, Alex Nguyen and Eleanor Klibanoff | Section: News | 2491 Words

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Texas lawmakers won't gavel in for the new legislative session until January, but they got their first chance to file bills Monday.

By 1 p.m., Texas legislators filed more than 800 bills pertaining to an array of matters. Thousands of pieces of legislation are filed each session, but most never make it into law. The first day of bill filing, though, can shed light on legislators' priorities and what battles could be shaping up in Austin next year. Republicans continue to hold both chambers — and narrowly expanded their control of the Legislature.

When the 88th legislative session convenes, the state is expected to have an unprecedented amount of funds at its disposal. The state comptroller forecast that there will be at least an extra \$27 billion in the two-year budget compared with the last regular legislative session. Lawmakers will also see an increase in their savings account, also known as the rainy day fund.

Filing early means bills will typically get a low number. But the lowest numbers are reserved for the highest-priority bills set by the House speaker and lieutenant governor. House Speaker Dade Phelan and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick have yet to announce what their priorities are.

Here's a look at some of the notable bills filed Monday, which will be updated regularly.

Some areas Texas lawmakers want to tackle

Two Houston Democrats have filed legislation pushing for more inclusion of ethnic studies in schools. House Bill 45, filed by Rep. Christina Morales, D-Houston, would mandate most public school districts to offer Mexican American and African American studies. Meanwhile, House Bill 368 by Rep. Jarvis Johnson would create an African American studies advisory board within the State Board of Education to expand the teaching of "citizenship, culture, economics, science, technology, geography, and politics as they relate to the history of African Americans."

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, has filed a bill that would change how the state funds Texas' 1,204 public school districts and open-enrollment charters. With House Bill 31, Hinojosa wants to fund schools based on their average enrollment.

Currently, schools are funded on their average daily attendance. The average daily attendance is calculated by the sum of children present divided by days of instruction that schools are required to give. Texas schools have to be open for a minimum of 75,600 minutes over a school year, which includes recess and lunch.

This means if a kid is absent, the school loses that money. Some superintendents have been calling to be funded based on enrollment so they don't lose money regardless of attendance.

House Bill 338, filed by Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, would require publishers to assign content ratings to books that they want to sell to schools. The scores, which function similar to movie ratings, would place restrictions on which books students can access depending on their age. If the ratings are not deemed proper, the books could be recalled.

The legislation follows a year of rapid book banning in the state. PEN America, a free expression advocacy nonprofit, found that 22 school districts in Texas banned 801 books — the highest number in the country — between July 2021 and June 2022. The bans particularly targeted books focusing on race, abortion and LGBTQ issues. — Brian Lopez and Alex Nguyen

Following the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas legislators filed a flurry of bills aimed at limiting who can possess firearms, where they can be purchased and increasing accountability around gun purchases.

Limiting firearms purchases or who can own guns could be an uphill battle in the GOP-controlled Legislature. Despite several mass shootings in recent years, Texas Republicans have repeatedly loosened gun laws.

Rep. Joe Moody, D-El Paso, and Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, filed similar bills that would require sales of multiple firearms to be reported to law enforcement agencies. Moody's bill, which includes the sale of multiple magazines, would require the Texas Department of Public Safety to inform the sheriff where the purchaser resides. The shooter who targeted Robb Elementary School legally purchased multiple AR-style rifles immediately after his 18th birthday.

Sen. Roland Gutierrez, a Democrat who represents Uvalde, has also introduced Senate Bill 145 to raise the minimum age to purchase some weapons. — William Melhado and Sneha Dey

Texas law bans all abortions from the moment of conception, except to save the life of the pregnant patient. A group of Democrats have filed two bills that would expand those exceptions.

Senate Bill 122 would add an exception to the ban in the case of rape. It would not require the pregnant patient to file a police report, provide forensic evidence or prosecute the crime to obtain an abortion under this exception. Several Republicans have said they would consider supporting rape or incest exceptions.

Senate Bill 123, filed by Democrats, would allow abortions to save the life of the pregnant patient, to preserve the patient's physical or mental health, or in cases of lethal fetal anomalies or other fetal conditions that are incompatible with life "without extraordinary medical interventions." The bill would require those decisions to be made by a doctor and patient, not a medical review board.

Republicans are expected to file bills this session to tighten and ensure enforcement of existing abortion laws. Rep. Candy Noble, R-Lucas, has filed House Bill 61, which would stop Texas municipalities from helping people pay for out-of-state abortions. — Eleanor Klibanoff

Texas Republicans have targeted transgender people several times in recent sessions. Already, there is a wave of bills aimed at gender-affirming health care.

House Bill 42, filed by Rep. Bryan Slaton, R-Royse City, would expand the state's definition of child abuse to include providing gender-affirming health care under the guidance of a doctor or mental health care provider. The Legislature declined to pass a similar bill last session.

House Bill 112, filed by Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, would also criminalize gender-affirming health care. In particular, the legislation would bar health care providers from offering various gender-affirming procedures and treatments for children, including puberty blockers and testosterone or estrogen doses. Violations could result in a second-degree felony. Toth also introduced this proposed ban in House Bill 41, which would also take away professional liability insurance policy from providers who offer these treatments.

Gender-affirming care is recommended by all major medical associations to treat gender dysphoria, the distress someone can feel when their physical presentation does not align with their gender identity. For teens and youth, gender-affirming care is often limited to social transition — using different pronouns or wearing different clothes — but can include puberty blockers, which are fully reversible, and hormone therapy.

In February, Attorney General Ken Paxton issued a nonbinding legal opinion that equated gender-affirming care with child abuse, prompting Gov. Greg Abbott to direct the state's child welfare agency to investigate parents. Those investigations are largely blocked by court order, but if state law changed, they could potentially resume. — Sneha Dey, Eleanor Klibanoff and Alex Nguyen

Republican lawmakers filed bills that would make building renewable energy facilities more difficult. For example, a bill by Rep. David Spiller, R-Jacksboro, would increase setback requirements on the location of wind turbines and allow county commissioner courts to create designated areas for wind turbines and prohibit them elsewhere in the county. An identical bill was filed by Sen. Drew Springer, R-Muenster, in the Senate.

Democratic lawmakers filed bills that seek to harden energy and water infrastructure to endure severe weather events, some of which, like hurricanes, are enhanced by climate change. Rep. Richard Peña Raymond, D-Laredo, for example, proposed bills that would require regulators to create plans to protect the state's oil and gas infrastructure and the state's water treatment facilities from severe weather events and power outages. In the Senate, Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, proposed bills that would direct regulators to provide funds for public water supply systems to acquire backup power generators in economically stressed areas and develop an alert system for boil water notices.

The energy bills come after a 2021 winter storm that caused the state's power grid to collapse, which ultimately killed hundreds of Texans and left millions without electricity for several days. The power grid crisis also prompted cascading problems with the state's water supplies — millions of people were told to boil their water after water treatment plants lost power. — Erin Douglas

Rep. Lina Ortega, D-El Paso, and Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, have filed bills to expand postpartum Medicaid to 12 months. House Republicans have called this a top priority, particularly in the wake of the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.

Last year, the House voted to give new moms access to Medicaid for a year after they gave birth, but the Senate reduced that time period to six months. The federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services has said that the state's application is "not approvable"; applications for 12-month extensions were automatically approved through the American Rescue Plan.

House Bill 70 by Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, would make menstrual supplies like tampons and pads tax-exempt. Howard has filed similar bills every session since 2017, but this year, Gov. Greg Abbott and other key Republicans have signaled their support for eliminating the "tampon tax." — Eleanor Klibanoff and Sneha Dey

House Bill 39, introduced by Rep. Andrew Murr, R-Junction, would bump the penalty for election fraud from a Class A misdemeanor to a state jail felony.

In 2021, Abbott called for stiffer penalties for illegal voting — less than a month after he signed a bill that lowered penalties. Phelan, in response, said it was not an appropriate time "to re-litigate" the legislation known as Senate Bill 1.

The bill filed Monday would amend existing voting law. Some offenses include causing "any false or intentionally misleading statement, representation, or information to be provided to an election official" and causing "the ballot not to reflect the intent of the voter."

Similar legislation, House Bill 397, House Bill 222 and House Bill 52, would increase penalties for illegal voting to a second-degree felony. These bills are filed by Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth; Rep. Bryan Slaton, R-Royse City; and Rep. David Spiller, R-Jacksboro, respectively.

Senate Bill 118, filed by Sens. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, and Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, would require counties to put polling sites on university and college campuses with at least 5,000 students. While the proposal is similar to what Menéndez introduced in 2019 and 2021, this year's bill goes further by mandating at least two voting

locations on campuses with 10,000 students, plus one extra site for every additional 10,000 students.

The lack of on-campus polling locations is a big barrier to youth voter turnout in Texas, on top of strict voting laws. In the recent midterms cycle, 50% of the state's 36 public universities had on-campus early-voting sites, while only around 20% of the nine historically Black colleges and universities did. — Sneha Dey and Alex Nguyen

A series of bills by state Sen. Nathan Johnson, a Dallas Democrat, would require more legislative oversight into the Texas governor's ability to renew disaster declarations — which grant the state's top elected official more authority outside the checks and balances by state lawmakers typically in place

The package of legislation includes Senate Bill 99, which would require the governor to call a special session of the Legislature if a disaster declaration is to be renewed past 90 days, provided the Legislature is not already in session at the time.

Gov. Greg Abbott has taken criticism from some Republicans for using his authority under the pandemic disaster declaration to extend the early-voting period during the height of the pandemic. He has also been criticized by Democrats for using a disaster declaration along the Texas-Mexico border to funnel billions in tax dollars to his Operation Lone Star with no legislative appropriations process.

Proponents say limiting the governor's ability to renew declarations curbs potential for abuse of power and allows voters to weigh in during the process.

Johnson also is attempting to curtail the authority of the governor and other leaders to sweep money unchecked out of state agencies' budgets to fund unrelated programs — such as the hundreds of millions Abbott has moved out of agencies like the prison system and juvenile justice department in order to fund Operation Lone Star, his border-security project. Under SB 96, such budget moves that happen outside the normal appropriations process or when the Legislature is not in session would require a public hearing before the Legislative Budget Board.

"This specifically relates to the actions of this governor, but it's not because of this governor — this is something that's been on people's minds," Johnson said. "It's not something wacky — it's of broad interest and it's about good government, limited government, checks and balances, transparency and separation of powers." — Karen Brooks Harper

State lawmakers have so far filed dozens of bills seeking to tame Texas' property taxes — which are among the highest in the nation because that's largely how public schools are financed and the state doesn't have an income tax. Republican leaders have said they want to use the massive budget surplus to help lower homeowners' tax bills.

State Rep. Andrew S. Murr, R-Junction, filed a bill that would abolish school districts' maintenance and operations tax, which they use to pay teachers' salaries and day-to-day expenses. Public schools make up the bulk of any given homeowner's tax bill. The idea of getting rid of the M&O tax has gained traction in Republican circles this year.

Murr's bill would also establish a joint committee to handle the nitty-gritty of how exactly the state would abolish the maintenance and operations tax.

Another proposal — House Bill 32, from state Rep. Giovanni Capriglione, R-Southlake — would place limits on how much appraisal districts can raise a single-family home's value. State Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, once more filed a bill requiring appraisers to only value a home based on the value of neighboring homes, a proposal aimed at preventing displacement in gentrifying neighborhoods.

House Bill 379 by state Rep. Cecil Bell Jr., R-Magnolia, directs the state comptroller to automatically put half of any budget surplus at the end of each biennium into the Texas Education Agency to help reduce property taxes. Republican leaders have said they want to use a massive budget surplus to help lower Texas homeowners' property taxes. — Karen Brooks Harper and Joshua Fechter

With Senate Bill 86, state Sens. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, and Bob Hall, R-Edgewood, have launched a bipartisan effort to remove the penalty for those who manufacture, possess, deliver or use testing equipment for identifying fentanyl. Similar bills are being pushed individually in House Bill 85, House Bill 362 and Senate Bill 207. They were filed respectively by Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock; Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, and state Sen. Sarah Eckhardt, D-Austin. Possession of drug testing supplies is currently punishable by a \$500 fine and distribution of drug testing supplies is punishable by up to a year in jail. — Alex Nguyen and Sneha Dey

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## **Texas GOP lawmakers warming to opioid harm-reduction policies they once opposed - Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republicans have expressed support for legalizing fentanyl test strips, which help users identify whether the drugs they are planning on taking contain the deadly synthetic opioid.**

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Author: James Barragán | Section: News | 2320 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texans seeking help for substance use can call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's free help line at 800-662-4357. They can also access services in their region through the Texas Health and Human Services website.

Texas lawmakers are changing their tune about how to tackle a growing fentanyl crisis in the state ahead of the next legislative session starting in January.

Earlier this month, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott led the way by coming out in favor of legalizing fentanyl test strips, which help users identify whether the drugs they are planning on taking contain the deadly synthetic opioid. Abbott previously opposed such a policy but said the increase in opioid overdose deaths had brought a "better understanding" that more needs to be done by the state to tackle the problem.

"The message from Abbott that he's willing to support that is huge because that gives the go-ahead to the House and Senate," said Katharine Neill Harris, a drug policy fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. "It signals that if we get this passed, it's not going to necessarily get vetoed."

Bills to legalize fentanyl test strips, and other similar programs like syringe exchange services that aim to minimize harm for those addicted to drugs, have been filed in the past, but were mostly authored by Democrats and had little chance of becoming law in a Republican-dominated Legislature. Many tough-on-crime Republicans have opposed such measures, concerned that they enable drug use.

Now, some of the Capitol's most conservative names — like state Sen. Bob Hall of Edgewood and Rep. Tom Oliverson of Cypress— are taking up the case for legalizing fentanyl test strips. And the issue is getting help from top legislative leaders.

"I believe that recommendations made by the public health committee will receive broad support in our chamber, such as legalizing fentanyl testing strips, encouraging the availability of naloxone and promoting a more centralized and coordinated data collection effort to better inform law enforcement and emergency medical services," House Speaker Dade Phelan said in a statement.

Abbott also said he wanted to make Narcan, a drug used to reverse opioid overdoses that is generically called naloxone, more readily available across the state. First responders and harm-reduction groups that work with people who use drugs have difficulty supplying Narcan because of its cost — about \$125 for a kit with two doses.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers are working together to pass harm-reduction measures. That's been encouraging for drug policy experts who have been sounding the alarm about the rise of fentanyl in the state for years, but they said the state still needs to do more.

"We are excited about the possibility of legalizing fentanyl testing strips, but that's one tiny step forward, and we really need to be taking huge strides to get our arms around this crisis," said Cate Graziani, co-executive director of the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance.

The proposed policy changes come as the opioid crisis continues to batter the country. Nationwide, the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2021, the last available year. Synthetic opioids were responsible for 71,000 of those deaths, and they were largely from fentanyl.

In Texas, the CDC predicts that more than 5,000 people died of drug overdoses between July 2021 and July 2022. Overdose deaths involving fentanyl in the state rose 399%, from 333 people dying in fiscal year 2019 to 1,662 in fiscal year 2021.

The change from Republican leaders in Austin also comes nearly two years into Abbott's unprecedented border mission, Operation Lone Star, which has cost the state \$4 billion for border security and sent thousands of National Guard members and Department of Public Safety troopers to the border with underwhelming results. One of the operation's main goals is to stop the flow of drugs across the border, but fentanyl deaths have increased in the state in recent years.

"If 50 years of the war on drugs isn't enough to prove it doesn't work, then we can look to the past two years," Graziani said. "Those strategies aren't working. We need public health strategies, and we need to stop criminalizing paraphernalia so we can focus on the care."

Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, who filed a bill for the new session to decriminalize strips and other technology that can help detect fentanyl, said the state needs to take swift action.

"We have a lot of people dying of accidental drug overdoses as a result of taking drugs that they didn't know contain fentanyl," he said. "This affects a lot of people, including college kids, and we, in Texas and nationwide, have suffered devastating overdose losses of life."

Showing the issue's bipartisan appeal, Johnson has teamed up with Hall to push the bill through. Similar bills have been filed by Oliverson and Austin Democratic Reps. Sheryl Cole and James Talarico.

"We don't agree on a whole lot of things, but it does show you that sometimes they're just the right answers," Johnson said.

Hall did not respond to a request for comment.

A broader bill around legalizing fentanyl test strips and other drug paraphernalia filed by Dallas Democrat Jasmine Crockett did not get a hearing on the House floor last session. But with more lawmakers having constituents affected by the opioid epidemic, a narrower bill that deals only with fentanyl testing tools, and support from top Republican leaders, the odds for passage of this year's proposals are much better.

Marc Levin, a criminal justice expert who has worked on legislation in Texas in recent years, said the change in attitude is "noticeable."

"It's not just that opioids have had a significant effect on rural areas, which are represented by Republicans generally, but the connection to China and illegal smuggling across the border — those two things have elevated the issue among Republicans," said Levin, chief policy counsel for the Council on Criminal Justice, a nonpartisan think tank.

Still, he said, it's beneficial for lawmakers to reevaluate their past positions on policy based on data and new information.

Fentanyl test strips are seen by drug policy experts as an important tool in preventing overdose deaths. Drug users often do not know that the drugs they are taking are laced with fentanyl.

The test strips allow users to safely learn whether the drugs they have bought contain the dangerous drug and head off a potentially dangerous overdose.

Drug policy experts say that providing the test strips to users and giving them a chance to avoid fatal overdoses opens the door to a continuum of care that could help get people off drugs.

"If you're out on the street and giving them care packages with Narcan and fentanyl testing strips, that's an engagement with a health care worker that these people may not [otherwise] be getting," Neill Harris said.

In recent years, states have moved toward legalizing fentanyl test strips, including Republican-dominated ones like Wyoming, Nebraska, South Carolina, Alabama and Tennessee.

Some law enforcement groups, which have long been resistant, are warming to the legalization of fentanyl test strips as a tool in the battle against opioid deaths.

Jennifer Szimanski, public affairs director for the Combined Law Enforcement Associations of Texas, said her group is generally supportive of decriminalizing fentanyl test strips but would have to look at specific legislation.

Others are still expressing some apprehension.

Kevin Lawrence, executive director of the Texas Municipal Police Association, said his group is still considering the idea.

"Our concern is how widespread is it, what kind of controls will there be and what are the repercussions for abuses of this?" he said.

Neill Harris said the reticence toward legalizing test strips is similar to opposition from law enforcement to a 2015 law that allowed people other than doctors to have and deploy naloxone, an opioid-reversing drug. Opponents at the time argued that investing in increased access to naloxone could encourage drug use. That law also granted legal immunity to a person who tried to give the drug to someone they believed to be suffering from an opioid overdose.

Narcan is an intranasal form of that drug, and law enforcement officers are now clamoring for the state to make it more readily available to them. That's after years of education from experts have taught police across the state how easy the drug is to use, how effective it is in saving lives and the law's protections for first responders who use it to try to reverse an overdose.

"We need to get Narcan in the hands of more police officers," Szimanski said. "We've had members reach out in the last few months if there's any way CLEAT can provide Narcan because their administrations are not providing it."

Another version of naloxone is cheaper, costing between \$1 and \$25 a unit — but that must be injected, requiring more training.

This year, a federally funded state-run program out of the UT Health San Antonio School of Nursing that provided free Narcan ran out of funds halfway through the year.

The program was also a victim of its own success. So many groups had become dependent on it for free Narcan that it could not fulfill all the requests it received. In 2023, the program, called "More Narcan Please," is limiting groups to 48 units per order and emphasizing the need to get the lifesaving drug directly into the hands of those most affected.

Graziani with the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance said she wants to see more details about Abbott's plan for making Narcan more readily available. Some states have prioritized getting the drug in the hands of law enforcement, but some drug policy experts say it is more effective to get Narcan in the hands of drug users, their family members or harm-reduction groups that directly interact with drug users since those are the people most likely to have an interaction with a person experiencing an overdose.

Graziani also said she wants to know more about the state's plan to disperse the drug equitably to ensure that it gets to rural areas that have less resources to buy Narcan, and to harm reduction groups like hers that have direct contact with users. Having Narcan in schools and universities is also an important part of the battle, she said.

"We would love to see a plan in place that prioritizes community-based distributions," she said, adding that naloxone needs to be "ubiquitous."

Abbott is also pushing for stiffer penalties for people who knowingly sell drugs laced with fentanyl.

"I want it to be categorized as murder for someone to knowingly provide a fentanyl-laced pill to someone who ingests it and dies," he said earlier this year.

Drug policy experts oppose such a move and say it is a continuation of "war on drugs" strategies that have not worked in the past.

"Our drug supply is more deadly now than ever because we continue to double down on those prohibitionists or tough-on-crime policies, and we know that through research, increasing criminal penalties does nothing to decrease drug use," Graziani said.

Levin said the policy proposal is "well-intentioned" but has problematic unintended consequences.

"The biggest concern that I've seen with other states is that while it is intended to go after drug kingpins, most of the people who have been prosecuted have been family members or other people who were there at the time of the overdose," he said.

Studies have shown that with an increase in "drug-induced homicide" prosecutions in jurisdictions that pass these laws, the rate of overdose deaths actually goes up. In an analysis in Wisconsin, 90% of the people prosecuted on these charges were friends, relatives or low-level drug dealers selling to support their own drug use. In another in New Jersey, 25 of the 32 such prosecutions were friends of the deceased who did not regularly sell drugs.

Experts say lawmakers should instead focus on policies driven by public health research. They say the effort to decriminalize fentanyl test strips should expand beyond that drug to cover other potentially dangerous substances. Drug traffickers are already using other substances to increase the power of street drugs, and legalizing test strips only for fentanyl could leave users prey to other drugs.

"What I would like to see is the legalization of any drug-checking tools or technology that are used for reducing risk," Neill Harris said.

Experts are also pushing for other changes, like the legalization of syringe exchange programs, which swap out used syringes for new ones to prevent drug users from contracting diseases, and changes to the state's "overdose Good Samaritan" law, which protects from arrest or prosecution a person who calls for emergency help — but has steep requirements for people to receive that protection.

The Good Samaritan law does not protect people who have felony drug charges on their criminal records or who have called for emergency help in the last 18 months. Both requirements would rule out a large number of drug users or their families.

"We understand that regardless of someone's history, they need to be able to call [for help]," Graziani said. "It's punishing the person who might die because someone around them has a [criminal] history."

Abbott has not indicated support for either of those policy ideas, which makes their passage by the Legislature less likely.

But drug addiction experts say they will continue to push for a more holistic approach to combating the nation's

opioid overdose epidemic in Texas.

"Narcan access and even fentanyl testing strips are steps in the right direction, but we're going to need more than that to address this," Neill Harris said. "We sort of need everything. We need to throw the kitchen sink at this."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Barragán, J. (2022, December 23). Texas GOP lawmakers warming to opioid harm-reduction policies they once opposed - Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republicans have expressed support for legalizing fentanyl test strips, which help users identify whether the drugs they are planning on taking contain the deadly synthetic opioid.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18E9A6EA232D0CF8>.

## **Texas teens embark on an idealistic quest to shut down the state's last five youth prisons - Spurred by reports of inhumane conditions at Texas Juvenile Justice Department facilities, Austin-area teenagers are lobbying the Legislature to reform the system.**

January 18, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Jolie McCullough | Section: News | 1463 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Brimming with adrenaline, determination and wide-eyed optimism, a group of teenagers gathered outside the state Capitol last week, ready to take their first steps into the underbelly of Texas politics.

Most had been under the iconic Pink Dome only for school field trips. But on the first day of the Texas legislative session, the dozen or so high schoolers and recent graduates were eager to take on a more active role: demanding their elected representatives address the ongoing crisis within the state's youth prisons.

Last year, The Texas Tribune reported on severe understaffing in the prisons that routinely left children inside cells alone for up to 23 hours a day, forcing them to use water bottles and food trays as toilets. Almost half of the nearly 600 kids in the prisons had been on suicide watch.

In response, the Austin-area teens joined up with a local criminal justice reform group to create a new advocacy campaign. Named Finish the 5, the youth-led coalition plans to spend the next five months at the state Capitol, urging lawmakers to close Texas' five remaining juvenile prisons.

"If we as youth are not standing in solidarity with our fellow youth who are experiencing violence at the hands of the state, then who will stand for them?" Krupali Kumar, the 19-year-old co-founder of the Austin Liberation Youth Movement, shouted into a microphone last Tuesday at the Capitol's southern gate.

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department's prisons have been entrenched in repeated scandals of sexual abuse, physical abuse and other mistreatment for decades. But they've also changed significantly after such crises in the past.

After a sexual abuse scandal in 2007, the agency was rebranded and restructured to merge with local juvenile justice systems. A new focus aimed to keep kids in trouble closer to home under county supervision, largely in probation or diversion programs. Following the policy shift and a drop in juvenile arrests, far fewer kids were sent to state lockups, and the number of youth prisons shrank from 13 to the remaining five, located mainly in rural areas.

State officials have previously dismissed ideas to close more, however, because the hundreds of youth still detained there are often the most difficult to manage and care for, often because of violent behavior, severe mental health needs or both.

The push by the Finish the 5 campaign, led by the young people and social justice advocacy group Texas Center for Justice and Equity, proposes phasing out the five prisons by 2027. Instead, the prison funding would go to counties to better handle difficult youth populations, as well as implement better intervention and prevention programming to keep kids out of cells in the first place.

Though closing all juvenile prisons would be a dramatic change, the young activists are hopeful the dire conditions will propel substantive reforms, similar to what happened after the 2007 scandal. Big changes are especially up for grabs since TJJD this year is undergoing a decennial review for lawmakers to decide whether and how to continue its existence.

So far, the agency's response to the crisis has largely been to implement emergency raises and push for more salary funding to entice new employees and help retain some of its fleeing workforce.

During a bustling opening day at the Capitol, the young activists spent their time chanting into megaphones, passing out flyers to curious passersby and cramming into lawmakers' offices to nervously pitch their campaign. While Kumar, a debate camp attendee, confidently orated at the microphone and spoke with ease to political party members walking by, others focused their eyes on their typed speeches and spoke with soft voices.

"I'm 16, oh wait, no, I just turned 17," chuckled Mya Leger, her long, thin braids trailing down her back. Having grown up in public housing, Leger joined the coalition after seeing many of her peers die or go to jail. She said low-income kids weren't given many other options.

With either shaky or steady voices, the teens repeated a similar sentiment: confidence they could enact real change in this space, even if they can't get everything they are seeking.

"Honestly, it makes me really nervous, but also very excited," said Amani Ahmad, an 18-year-old college freshman, laughing off her nerves about lobbying lawmakers and testifying in future committee hearings.

"It feels like we actually have an avenue to people that are in charge, and that feels so much more powerful than just organizing from the outside," she added, having participated in protests with Kumar for other social justice causes.

Elle Johnson, whose father was in Texas youth prisons and was recently sent to the adult prison system, echoed the thought.

"I'm confident that even if we don't close [the prisons], we'll change them. And that for right now is enough," the 18-year-old said.

Donning a campaign T-shirt and pigtail braids, Johnson said she joined the movement to break the cycle of incarceration for herself and for her 4-year-old brother, who will grow up to be a Black man in a world "so cruel to men of color and people of color in general."

"To know that I could help set up a system that would care for him rather than punish him was really a motivator," she said.

Other young people without personal connections to the criminal justice system also joined the fight Tuesday, including 17-year-old Eden Schimanek. With sparkly eyeshadow and a bright pink fanny pack, the high schooler said she got into social justice by watching crime shows with her mom, and hoped to work for the Innocence Project after college.

"Two years ago, I had no idea that organizations such as Austin Liberation Youth Movement or TCJE even existed, or of the presence of the five youth prisons in Texas," Schimanek said into a microphone at the Capitol gate. "After recognizing how ignorant I was on the topic, I sat down and I did my research and I became engrossed in this movement. I could just not grapple with the fact that kids my age are in cells not seeing daylight for 23 hours, or that they were kids my age, using water bottles and food trays to go to the bathroom."

No bill has yet been filed to close the youth prisons, but the Finish the 5 campaign has been talking with Democratic state Reps. James Talarico and Jarvis Johnson, according to TCJE policy and advocacy director Alycia Castillo. Talarico said a bill will be filed, but the details are not yet worked out.

The youth are focused. After their opening day at the Capitol, they plan to continue talks with lawmakers and other stakeholders behind the scenes, as well as publicly testify when any related bills are brought up in legislative committees.

Walking into the Capitol on Tuesday, Johnson's positivity radiated off of her. She felt powered not only by her mission for her brother and so many like him, but for her younger peers she could inspire to take a front seat with

their government.

"When I was here for a school trip, there were actually protests going on outside," she reflected, her braids bouncing in time with her steps. "I didn't know you could do that. And it was so impactful."

She hoped kids could see her now in her advocacy, that she could create a similar experience for them.

"It sparks that thought process of like, 'Wow, we can like, change things,'" she said. "Especially since we look like them."

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McCullough, J. (2023, January 18). Texas teens embark on an idealistic quest to shut down the state's last five youth prisons - Spurred by reports of inhumane conditions at Texas Juvenile Justice Department facilities, Austin-area teenagers are lobbying the Legislature to reform the system.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18F23A030797F458>.

## **Most Texans support more school funding and teacher raises, new survey finds - As legislators begin to debate their public education priorities, the Charles Butt Foundation released a poll Tuesday showing Texans are mostly supportive of their public schools but are split on voucher-like programs.**

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Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 713 Words  
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As legislators start a new session with a historic surplus and already pointing to their priorities on public education, a new survey released Tuesday shows Texans support teacher raises, want an increase in public school funding and are split on voucher-like programs.

The Charles Butt Foundation surveyed 1,125 Texan adults for its fourth annual Texas Education Poll, which included about 340 public school parents. Most respondents were supportive of public schools and approved of their performance.

"Texas parents are satisfied with the quality of their school so that is something that gave us a lot of hope," said Audrey Boklage, vice president of learning and impact at the Charles Butt Foundation. Boklage said her team has been handing out the poll's results to lawmakers at the Capitol so they can consider the data as conversations over public education policy begin.

With teacher shortages, financial struggles, pandemic-related learning loss and political spats over how race and sex should be taught, schools and the public education system will be among the most prominent topics that lawmakers will discuss this session. Legislation is already being considered that could possibly change the way the state funds schools, give schools more money per student and expand contentious "school choice" programs that give parents state money to school their children outside of the public education system.

In the Butt survey, 89% of respondents supported increasing state funding to boost teacher salaries, which haven't seen an increase since 2019.

Some lawmakers and public education advocates believe giving teachers pay raises will help tackle the teacher shortage that the pandemic exacerbated. Lawmakers in both the Texas House and Senate have pitched raises for teachers, including allocating additional funding for a program that gives teachers raises based on their performance. The House's budget proposal also calls for an increase in the amount schools get per student, which has not increased in four years. On Tuesday, state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed House Bill 1548, which would give teachers a \$15,000 pay raise.

In the wake of May's school shooting in Uvalde, survey participants said that school safety is a top priority, with 91% of them saying they support increased funding for safety programs. More than half of the parents who responded to the survey said they thought their child has at least a moderate chance of experiencing cyberbullying, and 48% said the same about physical bullying or fights. Two-thirds of parents surveyed said there is a moderate risk that their child may experience some form of bullying, sexual harassment or discrimination while at school.

Lawmakers have allotted about \$600 million to improve school safety under both the House and Senate budget proposals.

"School choice" programs like vouchers — state-sponsored scholarships for private schools that have also become a shorthand when talking about measures that would take taxpayer money from public schools — were more divisive among poll respondents. Of all respondents, 54% said they opposed a voucher program in their communities if it would reduce local public schools' funding; parents were evenly split on the same question, with 49% saying they were in favor and 49% saying they were against.

Prominent political figures such as Gov. Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and the Texas GOP have listed "school choice" as a legislative priority. Republican lawmakers who support voucher-like programs believe this session may be their best shot to pass something like an education savings account program, which would allow parents to use state funds to pay for their children's private school, online schooling or private tutors.

When asked about a scenario in which private schools were to get state funds, 88% of survey respondents believe the state should require them to publicly report their finances, and 73% of respondents believe the state should require them to follow state curriculum.

Boklage said the most important finding from the survey is that a majority of Texans think positively about public schools after almost three years of uncertainty.

"Texans, from this poll, seem pretty plugged in," she said. "They have opinions about their public schools and they are coming from a place of support."

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Lopez, B. (2023, January 24). Most Texans support more school funding and teacher raises, new survey finds - As legislators begin to debate their public education priorities, the Charles Butt Foundation released a poll Tuesday showing Texans are mostly supportive of their public schools but are split on voucher-like programs.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18F43410C9AE64C0>.

**With full state coffers and bipartisan support, Texas teachers are hopeful they'll get a raise this year - The COVID-19 pandemic, inflation and burnout have pummeled teachers in the last few years. Lawmakers from both parties agree they should get a pay bump — but it won't happen without some negotiation.**

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Laura Herrera's salary has barely gone up in her 20 years of teaching — about \$700 in all.

The San Antonio-area teacher takes home about \$3,700 a month. About \$1,400 goes to rent, and the rest is sometimes barely enough to pay the bills and stretch through the month. There have been times when she hasn't been able to afford buying insulin to treat her diabetes.

The raises she's received — most of them in the last seven years — barely accounted for inflation.

"I'm living paycheck to paycheck," Herrera said. "If something happens to my car, or I have to take care of an emergency in any way, I wouldn't be able to afford it."

And while her salary has stayed practically the same, her workload keeps increasing — from having to learn how to teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic to the lesson plans and grading she does after hours. She is contractually obligated to work from 7:15 a.m. to 3:45 p.m., but her work hours usually extend beyond that for meetings with parents or school administrators.

That's why Herrera is hopeful that the state Legislature this session will give raises to the hundreds of thousands of teachers across Texas in the same situation as her. Not only for her sake, but also to keep teachers from leaving and to attract more talent.

"We're losing [teachers] in the first two, three, five years because nobody's going to work for these pennies," she said.

The last few years have been some of the most challenging for educators, who have had to adapt to virtual teaching during the pandemic, balance their health concerns with the return to in-person classes and be at the front lines of the culture wars over how race and sex are taught at schools. Many experiencing burnout and disillusionment have left the profession, which has worsened a teacher shortage that predates the pandemic.

Meanwhile, teacher compensation has stagnated. Texas ranks 28th in the nation for teacher pay, \$7,652 less than the national average, according to the latest National Education Association report.

"There [is] obviously more than one issue that could be improved within public education right now," said Monty Exter, director of governmental relations at the Association of Texas Professional Educators. "But the largest front-burner issue certainly seems to be our inability to hold on to teachers."

But the political winds might be blowing in teachers' favor this legislative session, as lawmakers return to Austin with the task of determining how to spend a historic \$32.7 billion surplus and both Republicans and Democrats signal their intentions to allot some of that money to teacher raises.

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick listed teacher pay raises as one of his legislative priorities late last year, and Gov. Greg Abbott's office said in a statement last week that he will "continue working with the Legislature to support our teachers."

A couple of bills have already been filed calling for teacher raises, including House Bill 1548, which would give teachers a \$15,000 pay raise and a 25% pay raise for other school employees. At least one estimate from the Association of Texas Professional Educators says such raises would cost \$12 billion every two years.

"We have no excuse," state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who authored the bill, said during a press conference last week. "Hoarding this surplus while educators and children are suffering is immoral."

Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said that Democrats and Republicans have been able to find consensus on teacher pay raises in the past because both parties strive to gain favor from pro-public-education groups.

"One of the few things that legislators have historically agreed on is protecting public schools," he said.

But while Republicans and Democrats agree that teacher pay raises should be a priority, how much money they give educators remains to be seen.

Rottinghaus said it's not surprising for a Democrat to have made the boldest proposal on teacher raises so far, adding that it's one of the few issues they can champion and win in the Republican-controlled Legislature.

However, Talarico knows that the \$15,000 may not be the final figure that lawmakers settle on.

"This is our starting proposal," he said. "You ask for what you need. You ask for the ideal. And then in this building, sometimes, you find somewhere in the middle."

Zeph Capó, president of the Texas American Federation of Teachers, said he's glad lawmakers are considering teacher pay raises because teachers in his union have been asking for one. But he worries that Republicans may use teacher raises as a bargaining chip to seek support for "school choice" programs, which give families state funds for private schooling and which critics say siphon money out of public schools.

Rottinghaus believes there's a realistic possibility that teacher raises will be linked to "school choice" legislation this session as some Republicans once again push for it.

"Linking a less popular policy with a popular policy is a way to move the needle," he said.

And while there seems to be bipartisan support for teacher raises, Capó also warned that there is still a long way to go in the legislative process.

"Everybody loves a moonshot," Capó said. "But does the Legislature have the will to get it done?"

Talarico said that at least he knows his colleagues across the aisle are willing to negotiate. He said he has spoken with Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan over teacher raises and he is "concerned about what's happening to the teaching profession." Phelan's office declined to comment when asked about raises and his conversation with Talarico.

State Rep. Gary VanDeaver, R-New Boston, who is on the House Public Education Committee, said teacher raises are going to be a bipartisan issue this session, but Republicans may be at odds with Democrats on how to get it done.

While he has no issue with Talarico's proposal, VanDeaver believes it would be best if lawmakers raise the amount of money schools get per student instead. This would allow schools to pay for raises but also give them money to address other financial difficulties they may be facing.

"Allow the school districts to make those decisions based on their local issues and their local conditions, rather than us from the state prescribing," he said.

Under current budget proposals, both the Senate and House have pitched raises for teachers, including allocating additional funding for a program that gives teachers raises based on their performance. The House's budget proposal calls for an increase in the amount of money schools get per student, which has not increased in four years and would free money for teacher raises.

State Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, also filed House Bill 882, which would increase the amount schools get per student from \$6,160 to \$7,075 and would adjust that figure annually according to inflation.

Raising the amount of money schools get per student would also mean more money for teacher raises, since school districts must use 30% of any additional revenue they receive for employee salary increases.

Herrera said any sort of across-the-board raise would be helpful — even if the number were to drop from \$15,000 to \$1,000.

"I will be able to live not worrying about my overdraft fees and worry about 'OK, I gotta ration [my pay] for this month,'" she said.

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**Texas Legislature gears up to tackle long-standing and fresh issues in public education. Here's what you need to know. - Lawmakers are looking at ways to keep teachers in the profession, make schools safer, give parents money for private schooling and censor conversations about sex and gender.**

February 2, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1513 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

With the legislative session now underway, lawmakers will once again have the chance to tackle issues that have plagued Texas' public schools since the COVID-19 pandemic hit three years ago, like school funding and teacher shortages.

And they have a historic \$32.7 billion surplus to work with. Both the Senate and House's budget proposals include money for school safety, and lawmakers from both sides of the aisle have expressed willingness to increase school funding for teacher raises.

But they'll also address other issues that have dominated the discussion on public education recently, including how sexual orientation and gender identity are taught in schools, a renewed push to pass a "school choice" program and school safety in the aftermath of the mass shooting in Uvalde, where 19 elementary school students and two teachers were killed in May.

Here are the public education issues to keep an eye on during this session.

#### Public education in the 2023 Texas Legislature

Three years into a pandemic that has upended school districts' finances and amid rising inflation, some districts are facing tough decisions that might include closing schools and shutting down programs.

Lawmakers have already filed some legislation that would give more money to school districts.

State Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, filed House Bill 31, which proposes basing the state's public education funding system on student enrollment instead of average attendance.

Currently, Texas gives schools money based on their average daily attendance rate. If a student misses school, their district's attendance average goes down, and so does the amount of money it receives. And in a post-COVID-19 world in which parents are quicker to keep their children home if they're feeling ill, some districts' finances have become more volatile than ever.

Texas has about 5.5 million K-12 students, but only about 92% of them regularly attended classes last school year, meaning schools missed out on millions in funding from the remaining students. Hinojosa's bill would help schools receive funding for every enrolled student, even if they miss class.

Hinojosa estimates that it would cost the state an extra \$5 billion during the next state budget cycle to change the formula from attendance to enrollment. So far, there is little indication that lawmakers will want to overhaul the school finance system the way the 2019 Legislature did.

Other lawmakers would rather see the state increase the amount of money schools receive per student. Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, filed House Bill 882, which would increase that amount to \$7,075 and would adjust it annually according to inflation. Educators say inflation has diminished the value of the dollar amount they get per student, which has been sitting at \$6,160 since 2019.

Increasing that amount would also mean more money for teacher raises, since school districts must use 30% of any additional revenue they receive to increase employee salaries.

In the aftermath of the Uvalde massacre, school safety is on top of the priority list for both Republicans and Democrats. Ways to make school safer and provide more mental health services are being discussed.

Under both the House and Senate budget proposals, \$600 million will be set aside to enhance school safety measures.

Senators recommended providing additional funding for individual campuses to improve their security and proposed creating review teams that would conduct threat assessments on Texas schools. Senators also recommended expanding access to the state's mental health telemedicine system to all school districts and hiring more mental health professionals to support this expansion.

Sen. José Menéndez, D-San Antonio, has filed two other bills related to mental health. Senate Bill 112 would require high school students to take one mental health course before graduating, and Senate Bill 113 would reimburse school districts after contracting mental health providers for on-campus services.

In addition, a recent Senate report also recommends lawmakers pass legislation that would make it a state felony for anyone who is barred from owning a gun to purchase one. Such a law would not have prevented the Uvalde shooter from purchasing guns since he legally purchased two semi-automatic rifles in the days before the shooting.

After the Uvalde shooting, parents of the victims and Democrats have called for lawmakers to raise the minimum age to buy an assault-style rifle. Sen. Ronald Gutierrez, D-San Antonio, filed Senate Bill 145, which proposes raising the minimum age for buying or renting firearms from 18 to 21. The gunman in the Uvalde shooting had just turned 18 years old when he bought two AR-15-style rifles that he used in the massacre.

In the House, Rep. Shawn Nicole Thierry, D-Houston, has filed House Bill 801, which would require districts to have only one entrance per school campus.

Even before COVID-19, Texas was already facing a teacher shortage. Issues like low pay, working overtime, health worries during the pandemic and being caught in the middle of Texas' culture wars have led more teachers to leave the profession.

The Texas Education Agency has noted that the state is struggling to fill its teacher vacancies. Retaining teachers has also become increasingly difficult, and schools are having to refill positions on a yearly basis.

To combat this, Menéndez filed Senate Bill 657, which would create a retention incentive program. Under the bill, teachers that stay in the profession and in the same district could receive \$10,000 annually for four years. His bill also would give students a \$40,000 scholarship to pursue teaching. Rep. Diego Bernal, D-San Antonio, filed House Bill 74, which would establish a scholarship program similar to Menéndez's.

Other ways lawmakers could address the shortage is through raises. Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed House Bill 1548, which would give teachers a \$15,000 pay raise. Howard's HB 882, which would raise the funding per student, would require school districts to use 30% of the additional revenue on employee salaries.

Some Republicans believe this is the session that school choice will be expanded in Texas.

"School choice" is a term used to describe programs that give families state funds for private schooling. Critics say such programs would siphon money out of public schools and have been vehemently opposed by lawmakers representing rural parts of the state, where schools often act as important community hubs.

Some lawmakers who support school choice programs believe that they will have enough backing this session from families displeased with public schools over pandemic response rules and how race and history are taught. Gov.

Greg Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and the Texas GOP have listed school choice as a legislative priority.

Sen. Mayes Middleton, R-Galveston, filed Senate Bill 176, which could become the most expansive school choice program in the state. It would create an education savings account program that would allow parents to use state funds to pay for their children's private school, online schooling or private tutors.

Under Middleton's legislation, families that opt out of the state's public education system would receive the average amount of money it costs Texas public schools to educate a child, which is currently about \$10,000 a year. The money would roll over on a year-to-year basis and could be used to help families pay for higher education. The funds for the program could come from both taxpayer money and donations.

In addition to Middleton's bill, Rep. Matt Shaheen, R-Plano, has filed House Bill 619, which would give tax credits to individuals who make contributions to private school scholarship funds. Rep. Cody Vasut, R-Angleton, filed House Bill 557, which would reimburse parents who pay for private school tuition.

Two years after the Legislature passed the state's so-called critical race theory law, discussion at school board meetings has shifted from how to teach students about race to banning books that center on race, racism, abortion and LGBTQ issues.

Texas lawmakers have already filed at least two bills that would ban classroom instruction about sexual orientation and gender identity in Texas public schools before certain grade levels.

Reps. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands, and Jared Patterson, R-Frisco, have filed House Bill 631 and House Bill 1155, respectively. Both are similar to legislation in Florida that critics have dubbed the "Don't Say Gay" law.

HB 631 would ban schools from teaching students from kindergarten through fifth grade about sexual orientation or gender identity. HB 1155 would extend that ban to eighth grade.

Their proposals would also prohibit lessons on sexuality and gender identity at any grade level if they are "not age appropriate or developmentally appropriate."

Groups like Equality Texas, an LGBTQ advocacy organization, are tracking anti-LGBTQ legislation this session in an effort to stop them from passing.

"We've seen the way the Florida bill has left students and families feeling unsafe and unsure about their futures," said Ricardo Martinez, CEO of Equality Texas. "The chaos and trauma we're seeing in Florida schools should be a warning to legislators — these bills will harm Texas kids."

Disclosure: Equality Texas has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Texas teachers need raises, more training and better working conditions to fix shortages, state task force finds - The yearlong review also recommends increasing the funds schools get per student, a measure already favored by lawmakers looking how to spend a historic state budget surplus.**

February 24, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1098 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Nearly a year after Gov. Greg Abbott ordered a task force to look at the state's teacher shortages, the group is recommending that lawmakers increase salaries, improve training and commit to respecting teachers' time.

"The Texas legislature, the [Texas Education Agency], and school systems should prioritize enacting and fully funding these recommendations to ensure that every Texas school is staffed with effective, supportive, and committed teachers," the task force said in a report released Friday.

The job of the task force — a mix of educators and school administrators — was to investigate why these shortages exist, recommend policy changes to the TEA and consider more flexibility in the teacher certification process. The report will be shared with the members of the House and Senate education committees and is available to the public online.

The recommendations come as state lawmakers looking at how to spend a historic \$32.7 billion budget surplus are prioritizing teacher raises and increasing the base amount of money that school districts receive per student. Abbott said lawmakers are ready to have the report guide them as they work on improving the teaching profession in the state.

"We will develop and implement strategies that attract, retain, and support highly qualified educators to provide students across the state with even greater opportunities to learn and grow," he said.

While Texas and the rest of the country have dealt with teacher shortages for years, the pandemic exacerbated them. Shifting requirements on masking and the closure then reopening of schools have taken a toll on teachers. At the same time, schools have become the center of the state's culture wars, and teachers are caught in the crossfire.

Meanwhile, teacher compensation has stagnated. Texas ranks 28th in the nation for teacher pay, \$7,652 less than the national average, according to the latest National Education Association report.

Zeph Capo, president of the Texas American Federation of Teachers, said the report echoes what his union has heard over the last several years and is hopeful lawmakers will enact its recommendations.

"I'm glad that they're recognizing and lifting up what we have been fighting and pushing for," he said. "What we've been hearing from members and educators across the state is this lack of respect."

Matthew Gutierrez, superintendent of the Seguin Independent School District, said the report is a good starting point for lawmakers to understand teachers' needs and hopes that the debate over voucher-like programs like education savings accounts doesn't derail any potential funding for school districts.

"I'm cautiously optimistic about additional funding coming into public education," he said.

Here are the report's findings.

Teacher should get raises

The task force recommends that the state increase the basic allotment, which is currently at \$6,160 per student. State law requires that school districts must use 30% of any additional revenue they receive to increase employee salaries. The allotment has not increased since 2019, when lawmakers overhauled the school finance system.

"Salaries have not kept up with recent inflation, and pay disparities continue to exist across the state," the task force noted in the report.

The task force is also asking lawmakers to raise the percentage of the allotment that must go to teacher salaries, though it did not say by how much.

In addition, the group recommends increasing the minimum salary schedule, which is the minimum teachers should be making per year of experience. Currently, it would take at least 20 years of experience for teachers to make over \$54,000 a year. While many school districts already pay more than the minimum salary, teachers at small and rural school districts earn the minimum amount or slightly more.

"The minimum salary schedule should be raised to reflect the impact of teachers and differentiated by factors that positively impact student outcomes such as tenure and certification pathways," the task force said.

The report said the total compensation teachers receive must also be increased as health care costs on average went up about 5% over the past 20 years, but the state and district's contribution to health plans remained the same.

Lawmakers have already filed some bills that would raise teacher pay. State Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin, filed House Bill 882, which would increase the basic allotment per student to \$7,075 and would adjust it annually according to inflation. State Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, filed House Bill 1548, which would give all Texas teachers a \$15,000 pay raise.

#### More training and support

While the task force believes pay is a top priority, it also called for a better employment pipeline and improved retention techniques to keep teachers in the field.

The group recommends expanding programs and pathways for high school students wanting to become teachers. It also said the state should establish and fund teacher residency programs that would pay would-be teachers to train for a year and work with an experienced educator in a public PK-12 classroom, similar to the medical field.

"Research shows that teacher residency models increase teacher retention, effectively place teachers in hard-to-staff areas, and positively impact student outcomes," the task force said.

The task force recommended expanding mentorship programs for teachers and helping them take more leadership roles. It also said teachers spend much of their time creating and looking for lesson plans and should have easy access to high-quality teaching materials to help them.

#### Better working conditions needed

In a task force survey, teachers said that an unsustainable workload is the No. 1 reason they leave the workforce. They also cited campus morale, discipline and lack of adequate mental health support as contributing factors to workplace stress.

The task force recommends that the Legislature fund a study of how teachers use their time to better understand their duties and how to streamline them. Administrators should also redesign their district's schedule to allow teachers more time for planning and development, the task force said. In addition, school systems and the TEA need to adopt better staffing plans so teachers don't get more work when a colleague is out and a substitute is

unavailable.

The task force is also calling for more counseling staff to combat student behavioral issues and offer more effective disciplinary measures. School administrators should also receive training on best discipline practices and how to foster a positive learning environment.

"I am confident that state leadership will act upon these recommendations which are the result of nearly a year's worth of collaboration and hard work among district leaders, teachers, educational organizations, and other stakeholders," said Josué Tamárez Torres, task force chair and a 4th and 5th grade bilingual math teacher.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Lopez, B. (2023, February 24). Texas teachers need raises, more training and better working conditions to fix shortages, state task force finds - The yearlong review also recommends increasing the funds schools get per student, a measure already favored by lawmakers looking how to spend a historic state budget surplus.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/18FE813B751AAA60>.

## Lawmakers offer stark choices for ending the crisis in Texas' youth prisons — shut them all down, or build more - Plagued by decades of scandals over sexual and physical abuse of children, the Texas Juvenile Justice Department is at a crossroads.

March 9, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Jolie McCullough | Section: News | 1584 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Long entrenched in a continuous string of scandals over child abuse and mistreatment, Texas' youth prison system is broken beyond repair and should be shut down, according to a state lawmaker.

In a dramatic proposal Thursday, state Rep. James Talarico announced legislation asking his colleagues to close the state's five juvenile prisons and dismantle the agency that runs them by 2030.

"For more than a century, kids in Texas child prisons have been beaten, raped and even murdered behind bars," the Round Rock Democrat said at the state Capitol. "The incarceration that we inflict on our kids causes unimaginable trauma, and it leads kids to be more likely to commit crimes in the future."

But Talarico's measure to close the youth prisons and channel their funding into local rehabilitative systems isn't the only drastic option on the table. Other lawmakers, and the Texas Juvenile Justice Department itself, want to address the failing system by building more prisons.

Last year, the agency's five prisons neared total collapse as officers fled the job in droves and most new employees left almost as quickly as they were hired. Without enough staff to properly supervise the nearly 600 youth in the prisons, children were locked alone in cells for up to 23 hours, often forced to use lunch trays or water bottles as makeshift toilets.

Nearly half of the imprisoned youth had been on suicide watch, with children hurting themselves more and more, sometimes as a way to get out of their cells.

After The Texas Tribune reported on the dire conditions in August, youth justice advocates renewed longstanding efforts to close the juvenile prisons, and dozens of Democratic lawmakers unsuccessfully called on Gov. Greg Abbott to call a special session to address the emergency.

With lawmakers now in session at the Texas Capitol, the topic is again rising to the forefront. Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan announced this week that legislation keeping fewer kids in state prisons is one of his priorities, putting his weight behind state Rep. Joe Moody's "Closer to Home" bill. The measure would aim to divert more youth from state prisons by establishing a network of community-based programs for rehabilitation and criminal prevention, like mental health services, mentoring and after-school activities.

"Protecting Texas kids has and will continue to be a priority for the Texas House, and I thank Representative Moody for filing this legislation that puts these children on a better track by prioritizing community resources and keeping them closer to their families," Phelan said in a statement Thursday.

Talarico, a former public school teacher, wants lawmakers to go further. At a press conference, standing alongside state Rep. Jarvis Johnson, D-Houston, he announced House Bill 4356 to close the prisons. The lawmakers were surrounded by former child prisoners, teens spurred to advocate for youth prison abolition by the Tribune's reporting, a former juvenile prison officer and other youth justice advocates.

"I know what I was doing was wrong, but I was never taught how to do it the right way," said Jernard Brown, a 23-year-old who as a teenager was placed into a youth prison eight hours from his Houston home.

Without any contact with his mom or support in the prisons, he said, "it makes you feel like life is not worth living no more, because no one cares."

"We have kids with so much potential to be so great, but we have yet to pour our investments into them. What we do is take from them," Brown said.

Aside from closing the state's five youth prisons by 2030, HB 4356 would dissolve TJJJ and create a new office under the state's health department, dubbed the Office of Youth Safety and Rehabilitation. The office would enact a plan to end all youth commitments to state prisons and establish alternative services and detention options in each county by 2026.

The office would also manage funding to local community placements and develop new diversion and prevention opportunities, including mental health treatment. (More than 80% of youth placed into state-run prisons last year needed mental health treatment, according to TJJJ.)

Repeated reform attempts in the past have failed, Talarico said, calling for a fundamental shift in the state's approach. In the last 20 years, lawmakers have rebranded and retooled the system to counter the ongoing scandals of sexual abuse, physical abuse and mistreatment.

"Despite decades of reforms, this system still abuses and traumatizes kids every day," Talarico said.

He called the system not only immoral, but ineffective and expensive. He cited research showing local services better help rehabilitate children and noted the agency spends nearly \$300 million each biennium to imprison less than 600 youth.

"That's \$500,000 per child. Half a million dollars could buy you the best therapist, the best counselor, the best tutor," the lawmaker said. "This money could be spent on doing what works, what we know works, what the evidence tells us works, which is rehabilitating kids so that they can rejoin society."

TJJJ — currently under federal investigation for an alleged pattern of abuse and mistreatment — has somewhat stabilized its staffing levels this year after it made permanent 15% emergency raises for officers, bringing the starting pay from about \$36,000 to nearly \$42,000. The money was gained from the agency's many unfilled positions and by canceling a reentry program to help youth successfully leave the criminal system.

The relative stability has meant children are less often kept in their cells and other programming has resumed. But the agency is still severely limited by understaffing, with a list of children detained in crowded local jails while waiting to be admitted to TJJJ to begin their sentences.

Talarico recognizes that his bill, which does not yet have a Senate sponsor, faces an uphill battle. But he sees it as a starting point to move the needle and is thrilled that Phelan is supporting Moody's "Closer to Home" bill, which Talarico said complements his.

Other lawmakers, however, appear to be headed down a different path. In its time of crisis, TJJJ is also under a decennial legislative review, in which lawmakers decide how and if a state agency should continue to exist. This sunset review, as it's called, slammed the agency's failures but largely suggested boosting its funds, not closing prisons.

State Sen. Charles Schwertner, chair of the Sunset Commission, has proposed building new prisons to accommodate at least 200 more youth as state projections expect more youth to be sent to the prisons after a pandemic-era slump. The initial versions of both the House and Senate budget proposals would spend an additional \$200 million to complete such a task.

Schwertner's office did not respond to questions for this story.

Building more prisons would be a stark reversal from more than a decade of trending away from imprisoning children. With TJJD plagued by scandal for more than a decade, counties have shifted toward keeping children under local supervision and sending fewer to the state prisons, leading to the closing of eight prisons and shrinking of the imprisoned population from thousands to less than 600.

But the youth still sent to the state prisons are often the most difficult to manage because of violent behavior, severe mental health needs or both. TJJD officials told lawmakers in budget hearings this year that three new, smaller facilities would help them have specialized programming to better manage that difficult population.

"We really need a classification system that serves the individual needs of our population," TJJD Executive Director Shandra Carter told senators last month.

The agency is asking for new facilities, on top of its existing five, for a specialized mental health unit, a "highly secure facility" for the most violent offenders, and a prison for girls.

Talarico recognized some of his colleagues in both parties have been alarmed by prison failures and have urged against a strategy of "doubling down."

"We can either keep funding what doesn't work, or we can finally fund what does," he said.

Deborah Fowler, executive director of Texas Appleseed, a social justice group that has long advocated for closing the state's five remaining youth prisons, said she would be more supportive of new, specialized facilities if the agency was also moving to close the troubled ones. She also noted that the staffing problems would not go away in new facilities, as urban areas have also struggled to keep local juvenile detention officers.

But she acknowledged that the Texas Legislature, largely led by the Senate, has become more conservative in recent years, veering back toward tough-on-crime policies after an uptick in violent crime.

"My fear is what will pass this session is nothing that is consistent with evidence or research-based practices, and all we'll be left with is more facilities," Fowler said.

Disclosure: Texas Appleseed has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Bills call for Texas teachers to be trained to administer lifesaving overdose drugs to students - Texas is attempting to address the fentanyl crisis gripping schools by having staff learn how to administer lifesaving medication.**

March 23, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Stephen Simpson | Section: News | 1337 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texans seeking help for substance use can call the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's free help line at 800-662-4357. They can also access services in their region through the Texas Health and Human Services website.

As illegal opioid use rises among young people, several bills filed by state lawmakers would require Texas teachers to be trained and equipped to treat fentanyl overdoses, both on campus and at school-related events.

Several bills call for educators and school staff at public, charter and private schools, as well as those at colleges and universities, to know how to reverse deadly opioid overdoses with Narcan and other overdose medications known as "opioid antagonists."

Eight bills calling for some sort of opioid emergency training for school personnel have been filed by Democrats: state. Sen. José Menéndez of San Antonio and state Reps. Philip Cortez of San Antonio, Bobby Guerra of Mission, Jolanda Jones of Houston, Erin Zwiener of Driftwood, Sheryl Cole of Austin; and Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock.

These bills cover a wide range of topics regarding the use of overdose reversal medications, including allowing physicians to dispense such medication to schools without requiring identification of the user and setting training standards for school personnel.

"We are adding this to the things that we've already done in the past when it comes to epinephrine pens and medication for people who suffer from asthma," said Menéndez, author of Senate Bill 629. "We're just saying that this is important as other lifesaving measures that you have in schools."

Narcan (the brand name for the drug naloxone) or other opioid antagonists would be stored on campuses and school personnel would be trained in its use. All of these bills would also require the state health commissioner to establish an advisory committee to conduct a follow-up review after each time the medication is used.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Prescription fentanyl can be taken safely when prescribed by doctors. But a rise in its illicit use began during the pandemic and continues today.

"Currently, an opioid epidemic is sweeping the nation, and Texas is not an exception," said Hannah Reinhard, chief of staff for Cortez. "This bill comes from the fact that anyone can suffer from addiction and a potential overdose. Not only that, but children can easily mistake an opioid for candy and risk devastating effects."

These bills would put Texas in line with similar states like South Dakota that have provided naloxone, the overdose-reversing nasal spray, to schools through a grant program.

"The more people authorized to administer naloxone, the better," said Katharine Neill Harris, a drug policy fellow at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. "I've heard from some people who have tried to get naloxone in schools that nurses/teachers have felt they aren't allowed to administer it. The law would clear up any liability concerns and thus encourage more schools to have it available throughout campuses."

Menéndez's bill doesn't specify how the medication and the training would be funded, but the San Antonio

lawmaker believes settlement funds the state has received from opioid companies should be more than enough. Texas is estimated to receive about \$1.17 billion over the course of 18 years from three large pharmaceutical distribution companies through a settlement agreement reached in 2021.

House Bill 4801, authored by Talarico, would allow the state to use money from the opioid settlement to purchase opioid antagonists in bulk from manufacturers to decrease the price burden on organizations distributing the medication. First responders and groups that work with people who use drugs have difficulty supplying Narcan because of its cost — about \$125 for a kit with two doses.

Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2021, the last available year. Synthetic opioids were responsible for 71,000 of those deaths, and they were largely from fentanyl.

Opioid overdose deaths increased by 94% among people ages 14 to 18 from 2019 to 2020 and by 20% from 2020 to 2021, the CDC reported. Since the pandemic began, there's been wider accessibility to fentanyl and other opioids through social media.

In Texas, the CDC reported more than 5,000 people died of drug overdoses between October 2021 and October 2022. Overdose deaths involving fentanyl in the state rose 399%, from 333 people dying in 2019 to 1,662 people in 2021.

A majority of people who ingested a fatal dose of fentanyl had no idea the synthetic opioid had been laced with other drugs they were attempting to use.

Makers of illegal drugs often use fentanyl as a booster for other drugs they are selling,

Since September, Carrollton-Farmers Branch Independent School District in the Dallas-Fort Worth area has reported three student deaths while six others were hospitalized, all from fentanyl overdoses. Four Hays Consolidated Independent School District students died last year from fentanyl overdoses. None of these occurred on school campuses.

Just 2 milligrams of fentanyl can be a lethal dose depending on a person's body size, tolerance and past usage, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

The agency has warned that fentanyl is increasingly finding its way into "fake prescription pills" that are "easily accessible and often sold on social media and e-commerce platforms."

Republican and Democratic lawmakers have been recently working together when it comes to tackling the growing fentanyl crisis in the state.

State Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas, has teamed up with state Sen. Bob Hall, R-Edgewood, to push through a bill to decriminalize the use of testing strips and other methods used to detect fentanyl.

Late last year, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott came out in favor of legalizing fentanyl test strips which help users identify whether the drugs they are planning on taking contain the deadly synthetic opioid. Abbott previously opposed such a policy but said the increase in opioid overdose deaths had brought a "better understanding" that more needs to be done by the state to tackle the problem.

The Texas governor also said he wanted to make Narcan more readily available across the state.

Rep. Ryan Guillen, R-Rio Grande City, has also proposed a bill that would create a task force to study methods to incentivize manufacturers of opioid antagonists to increase production. The task force must submit a report to the Legislature no later than Dec. 1, 2024.

The commissioner of the Texas Department of State Health Services would be required to issue a statewide standing order prescribing opioid antagonists to those in need and would have all liability removed to accomplish this under Senate Bill 954, proposed by Sen. Charles Perry, R-Lubbock. A matching bill, House Bill 1543, was authored by Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, and Democratic Reps. Donna Howard of Austin and Venton Jones of Dallas.

Menéndez said the idea for his bill came after hearing the fears from local parents and students about how easily fentanyl can accidentally be consumed.

"There is a powerful drug out there in our society and we need to be prepared," he said. "It's scary how pervasive this thing could become very quickly. And how damaging, unless we get on top of this, it can be specifically for those living in areas with limited access to health care."

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**Watch a Texas Tribune conversation about efforts to address fentanyl abuse in Texas - Tribune politics reporter James Barragán moderated a panel on the drastic rise in opioid overdose deaths and what lawmakers and advocates can do to protect Texans.**

March 31, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Texas Tribune Events Staff | Section: News | 1399 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

The lethality of the fentanyl crisis has spurred a rare sense of bipartisanship in the Texas Capitol, but experts say the synthetic opioid might be unique in this regard.

State Reps. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, and James Talarico, D-Round Rock, have been working together these past couple of months to pass a bill that would decriminalize fentanyl test strips, which warn people if a drug they are about to take contains traces of the deadly synthetic opioid.

The House voted 143-2 to approve House Bill 362 by Oliverson. The bill will now head to the Senate and, if passed, would take fentanyl test strips off the state's "drug paraphernalia" list, meaning it would no longer be a crime to carry them.

"I think what you see is there's been a recognition nationwide, on both sides of the aisle recently, that this drug really is sort of the exception of exceptions," Oliverson said Tuesday at a Texas Tribune event.

Talarico agreed with this premise.

"We can't afford for this to be tainted by partisanship," Talarico said. "And that goes both ways. Democrats, I think, have to be more willing to talk about these issues and to be more willing to come to the table with our Republican colleagues to find common ground."

These comments were part of an hourlong panel discussion that featured Cate Graziani, executive director of the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, along with Oliverson and Talarico. The "What Should Texas Be Doing About Fentanyl?" event was moderated by Tribune politics reporter James Barragán and was held at The Texas Tribune's Studio 919 in downtown Austin. The discussion was centered around combating opioid overdose deaths, specifically fentanyl.

Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. Prescription fentanyl can be taken safely when prescribed by doctors. But a rise in its illicit use began during the COVID-19 pandemic and continues today.

"It's an extremely hard drug to use and abuse because the amount that's needed to produce a high, but not stop a person from breathing, is a fraction," Oliverson told the audience. "It's an incredibly dangerous narcotic that is essentially just doing what is in its nature to do."

Makers of illegal drugs often use fentanyl as a booster for other drugs they are selling because it is cheap to make and makes drugs more addictive. Powdered fentanyl is commonly mixed with drugs such as heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine and made into counterfeit pills that resemble prescription drugs.

Just 2 milligrams of fentanyl can be a lethal dose depending on a person's body size, tolerance and past usage, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration.

A majority of people who ingested a fatal dose of fentanyl had no idea the synthetic opioid had been laced into other drugs they were attempting to use.

Oliverson compared consuming an illegal pill in Texas right now to stepping on a trap door in an Indiana Jones film.

"The next thing that you step on could be the thing that just brings the roof down on your head, and you have no warning whatsoever," he said.

Nationwide, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than 107,000 people died from drug overdoses in 2021. Synthetic opioids were responsible for 71,000 of those deaths, and they were largely caused by fentanyl.

In Texas, the CDC predicts that more than 5,000 people died of drug overdoses between July 2021 and July 2022. Overdose deaths involving fentanyl in the state more than quadrupled in two years, rising from 333 people dying in fiscal year 2019 to 1,662 deaths in fiscal year 2021.

The synthetic opioid has become a main talking point across the nation due to the number of school-aged children dying from overdoses after taking pills laced with fentanyl.

Gov. Greg Abbott, who previously opposed decriminalizing fentanyl test strips, came out in favor of the policy late last year.

Oliverson said Abbott led the way in changing the Republican party's perspective on fentanyl testing strips. He said personal conversations with people at the Texas Pain Society changed his perspective on the issue. Oliverson is a board-certified anesthesiologist based in Cypress.

"I had friends, who are all chronic pain management physicians, saying we're losing our patients to fentanyl, and they're not getting it from us," Oliverson said. "They're going out on the street because they can't get a prescription for OxyContin or for hydrocodone like they used to be able to."

Eight bills calling for some sort of opioid emergency training for school personnel have been filed by Democrats: state Sen. José Menéndez of San Antonio and state Reps. Philip Cortez of San Antonio, Bobby Guerra of Mission, Jolanda Jones of Houston, Erin Zwiener of Driftwood, Sheryl Cole of Austin; and Talarico.

These bills cover a wide range of topics regarding the use of overdose reversal medications, including allowing physicians to dispense such medication to schools without requiring identification of the user and setting training standards for school personnel.

Abbott announced last week a \$10 million fentanyl awareness campaign titled "One Pill Kills" and a plan to distribute doses of Narcan, the overdose-reversing medication, to all 254 counties in the state.

"Believe me, I disagree with Gov. Abbott on many things, maybe most things, but the fact that we agree on this and it can save people's lives means I, as a public servant, not as a Democrat, but as a public servant, I have a moral obligation to sit down at the table with him," Talarico said.

These bills and policies have been heralded by some as a step forward, but drug policy experts say they don't go far enough.

Graziani said the state's "overdose Good Samaritan law," which protects a person from arrest or prosecution if they call for emergency help, has received less support this year than in previous legislative sessions, but it would be a way to address the crisis.

The Good Samaritan law does not protect people who have felony drug charges on their criminal records or who have called for emergency help in the last 18 months. Both requirements would rule out a large number of drug users or their families, she said.

"So we're actually moving backward in some areas, unfortunately, and those are the areas that would have the

biggest impact on overdose deaths," Graziani said. "It's really hard to work in harm reduction because our state doesn't support it and doesn't invest in it and doesn't authorize it, and we're facing an uphill battle when it comes to overdose deaths because of that."

Graziani said the state needs to move away from penalty enhancements and punitive strategies when it comes to drug addiction and move toward more public health approaches.

"There are lots of harm reduction tools that will help fight this overdose crisis and keep people alive, but a lot of it has been limited or restricted [and] underfunded, and many of our harm reduction experts are afraid to speak up right now because they don't want to be in conflict with the state," Graziani said.

Oliverson warned that fentanyl might be the exception when it comes to passing legislation on harm reduction policies.

"I don't want to paint an overly rosy picture with respect to all types of harm reduction and all the different things that are out there," Oliverson said. "I want to be clear that I think fentanyl itself is a fairly unique nexus for policymakers because of its potency, because of its narrow therapeutic index and because of the fact that the vast majority of people who are taking it don't realize they're taking it."

The full conversation is available to view on demand.

Disclosure: The Texas Tribune is a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Texas lawmakers' attempts to ban school library books deemed inappropriate for kids spur confusion — and concerns - The authors of bills in both legislative chambers say their bills' aim is simple: keeping sexually explicit content off school bookshelves. But opponents say the legislation is vague and broad enough to wreak havoc.**

March 31, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Alejandro Serrano | Section: News | 1898 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

State Rep. James Talarico's favorite book includes nine sex scenes and a sexual assault and happens to be a Texas classic.

If not the great Texas novel.

So during a legislative debate about a bill trying to rid school libraries of "sexually explicit material," Talarico asked bill author Rep. Jared Patterson if Larry McMurtry's beloved, Pulitzer Prize-winning "Lonesome Dove," would be removed under the proposed legislation.

"I don't care if it's 'Lonesome Dove' or any other novel — if it has sexually explicit material, I would view that as an incredible win for the students of the state to not have that material in the library," said Patterson, who had not read the book.

Patterson told members of the House Public Education Committee that the aim of his bill is simple: If a book has sexually explicit content, it has no home on any bookshelf in any of Texas' nearly 9,000 K-12 campuses.

To many of those who would be affected by the bill, the legislation is anything but simple.

Legal experts, librarians and some parents have raised concerns that the bill's language is vague and broad enough to ensnare books that are not inappropriate. They worry those titles' absences from shelves could restrict the learning and growth of students whose experiences may not be reflected in the books that would remain.

Among other things, House Bill 900 — deemed a priority of Speaker Dade Phelan — would require a mandatory school library standard, ratings by book vendors before they sell them to schools and banning some books that portray sexual conduct, as well as parental consent to access library materials that include sexual content that is allowed under the bill. The Public Education Committee advanced the bill Wednesday, the same day a Senate bill that limits school library books was debated in a committee meeting in the upper chamber.

Proponents of such measures say schools are infested with inappropriate books that deal with matters that are better discussed at home — if at all. Opponents fear the books that will end up being targeted will be those that explore race; sexual orientation and gender identity; and unique, traumatic experiences that a student may not be comfortable discussing but could read about in a book. Other bills would make it easier to charge municipal librarians with crimes for allowing access to books deemed inappropriate.

The legislation targeting school library books is the latest frontier in a larger battle that's being waged across the state about what information public schools provide kids. In 2021, lawmakers restricted how educators can teach controversial current events and America's history of racism. This year, legislators are considering proposals that would outlaw gay pride events at schools and limit school lessons about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Though the bills do not explicitly mention books that center LGBTQ people or experiences, some worry that's what will be targeted in any bans that pass.

"There's a lot of ways that these bills that are plainly aimed at attacking LGBTQ+ youth, and educators are going to

sweep much broader," said Paige Duggins-Clay, a legal analyst at the Intercultural Development Research Association, a San Antonio education nonprofit. "Just the fact that we are debating these issues and debating the humanity and the dignity of queer youth is causing a lot of harm."

Patterson did not respond to interview requests sent via email, but denied such characterizations.

"This is not a fight about silencing minority voices and this is not an argument about race or gender, or religion or political ideology," Patterson said at the beginning of the hearing. "There is one common denominator in the books that we're addressing with this bill and that is sexually explicit content."

#### Rating books' content

Under HB 900, any entity that sells books to schools in the state will have to give every title that has references or depictions of sex one of two designations — sexually relevant or sexually explicit.

The bill defines "sexually relevant" as material that describes or portrays sexual activity and is part of required school curriculum. It defines "sexually explicit" as material describing or portraying sexual behavior that is "patently offensive" and not part of required curriculum. State law defines "patently offensive" as materials that are an affront to "current community standards of decency."

Vendors will not be able to sell to districts or to open-enrollment charters any books they deem to have "sexually explicit material." Students wanting to check out "sexually relevant" material would have to get parental approval.

And by September, vendors will have to retroactively give every book they've sold to school districts in the past one of those two labels. The same list will be required to be submitted annually for books sold during the preceding year.

The rating requirement and its deadline will "create a state of chaos" that will hinder business in the state and limit the quantity of material that will be going into school libraries, said Shirley Robinson, executive director of the Texas Library Association.

Vendors range from independent local shops to big-time companies and stores like Amazon or Walmart, Robinson said.

"We're all trying to get at the same thing, which is to make sure that librarians and parents are partnering together for the best interest of our students," she said. "Where it starts to get really difficult is in some of the specific requirements of these bills that do not take into consideration how broad the state of Texas is."

The state has about 5.3 million schoolchildren and more than 1,000 school systems with varying resources and capabilities. The bill would also require school systems to follow library collection standards to be adopted by the State Library and Archives Commission in consultation with the State Board of Education. Currently, the state's voluntary library standards offer guidelines that school districts must consider, but are not required to follow. A library commission spokesperson said the state agency had no position on this year's proposed bills.

School boards have typically set policy that helps support library standards at the district level, serving as a sort of first line of defense to help ensure that materials are appropriate, Robinson said. There are also policies that inform specific situations — such as when a book needs to be replaced — as well as policies for people to contest the availability of particular books.

"There are so many processes and policies that are in place that are in accordance with our state and federal statutes that already comply with the Texas penal code," Robinson said, adding she and her colleagues "are trying to figure out" how HB 900 would change those.

The bill would prohibit the acquisition of harmful material; prohibit the possession, acquisition and purchasing of

books rated sexually explicit; allow the exclusion of materials that are pervasively vulgar or deemed educationally unsuitable; and recognize that obscene content is not protected by the First Amendment, according to the bill's text.

But librarians and educators say the bill's definitions could be interpreted any number of ways. And that some books that have literary, scientific or other value could be unfairly deemed sexually explicit.

Some librarians worry the legislation will keep important literature away from kids, which could exacerbate mental health issues the COVID-19 pandemic already worsened, they say. The disruptions caused by the pandemic — such as school closures and social isolation — affected students throughout the country. Without books that reflect their experiences, youth from marginalized communities may feel further isolated.

But some librarians fear speaking out because they're scared of potential backlash.

"The concern here is that they are trying to go to a one-size-fits-all solution for libraries," said Lucy Podmore of the Texas Association of School Librarians. "Librarians know that campus needs vary from campus to campus."

Current standards don't require campuses to have certified librarians, individuals required to have a bachelor's degree, a master's degree in library or information science, at least two years of classroom instruction experience and certification. HB 900 does not create a mandate that campus librarians be certified.

The Senate's approach

Although similar, Senate Bill 13, a priority of Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, has some key differences from HB 900.

The bill would require that parents have access to a list of school library materials a child has obtained.

Districts will be required to notify parents who opt in each time their child obtains a library material from the school library, including the title, author and genre.

Similar to HB 900, the Senate pitch would create new library standards — although a bit differently. The state library commission would submit proposed standards to the education board for approval or disapproval.

The standards would prohibit material deemed harmful and require a commitment to limit children's exposure to pornography.

School systems would be required to adhere to the standards.

Sen. Angela Paxton of McKinney, who filed the bill, said during a Senate committee hearing this week that an amended version of the legislation bars content that meets the Federal Communications Commission's definition of indecent material, which has been upheld by the Supreme Court. Additionally, she said the new SB 13 would make it clear the bill's standards for the library commission apply to school libraries, not all libraries. The Texas Tribune could not immediately get a copy of the reworked bill.

"The premise of this bill is very simple," Paxton said. "No child should pick up a book in their school library and find inappropriate, harmful material within its pages."

The bill relies on existing state law's definition of harmful material, which is content that appeals focused on sex, nudity or excretion; is considered patently offensive; and has no "redeeming social value" for kids.

It would also remove from state law the ability of teachers or librarians to argue that material has educational value as a way to defend themselves against criminal charges. That would pave the way for educators to be prosecuted when accused of selling, distributing or displaying materials deemed harmful to a minor.

Some people testifying before the Senate panel pushed back on that portion of the bill and expressed fear that subjective interpretations of what is and isn't harmful could be applied unevenly and unfairly, with little recourse for librarians and teachers.

"The First Amendment of our Constitution protects everyone. Texas law should as well," David Wheeler, the owner of a game and comic store, testified during the hearing. "Librarians, book sellers, teachers and others should be protected if they in good faith believe that books that they have included in a collection, displayed or sold have literary, artistic, political or scientific value."

Paxton said the bill "does not do anything" to get librarians arrested and said that affirmative educational defenses have been used as an excuse in the past.

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Serrano, A. (2023, March 31). Texas lawmakers' attempts to ban school library books deemed inappropriate for kids spur confusion — and concerns - The authors of bills in both legislative chambers say their bills' aim is simple: keeping sexually explicit content off school bookshelves. But opponents say the legislation is vague and broad enough to wreak havoc.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/190A007E786F28A8>.

## **Gov. Greg Abbott is turning up the pressure on passing school choice. Will it pay off? - Passage of a school choice measure is anything but a sure bet, as there is little evidence that the governor has been able to convince rural Republicans in the Texas House — who have for years been a reliable firewall — to drop their opposition.**

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Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 2842 Words  
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Six years ago, Gov. Greg Abbott riled up a crowd of school choice supporters on the steps of the Texas Capitol, calling on lawmakers to send him a bill that would allow parents to use tax dollars to take their kids out of public schools.

"I hope and I urge that that law reach my desk," Abbott said, donning a yellow scarf — the uniform of school choice advocates — to mark National School Choice Week.

That never happened, and soon enough, the proposal lost momentum as state leaders realized just how uphill of a battle it was. For the next two legislative sessions, Abbott skipped the Capitol rallies for National School Choice Week and was more muted in his support for the proposals.

But now, Abbott is pushing harder than ever for school choice as part of a broad focus on "parental rights" this session, strongly signaling that the issue is his top legislative priority. He has crisscrossed the state speaking at a dozen "Parent Empowerment" events often at nonpublic schools in more rural communities, laying out why he believes the Legislature should back so-called education savings accounts for every Texas parent.

But passage of a school choice measure is anything but a sure bet, as there is little evidence that he's been able to convince rural Republicans in the Texas House — who have for years been a reliable firewall — to drop their opposition.

To go all in on such a risky bet is an unusual play by Abbott, a cautious operator who's used to getting his way when it comes to his highest legislative priorities — and who tries to avoid waging losing battles. On issues that have split his own party, Abbott is known to withhold wielding his political capital until there's a clear path for victory — as was the case with the 2021 passage of permitless carry of handguns, as one example.

"There does seem to be more emphasis and more of a priority on getting this legislation passed this session," said Shannon Holmes, executive director of the Association of Texas Professional Educators, which opposes Abbott on this issue. "Obviously in past sessions ... bills have been filed and it hasn't been a real focus for Abbott."

"School choice" generally refers to policies that allow parents to take their kids out of their assigned neighborhood public school and send them to other types of schools, like private or religious, with the help of government funding. The chief school-policy proposal this session is Senate Bill 8, which would create an education savings account with up to \$8,000 in taxpayer money per student. The proposal differs from vouchers, which were the previous vehicle for school choice legislative proposals, in that the money would go straight to the parents instead of the school. The Senate Education Committee approved that bill Tuesday.

Such proposals have been met with resistance in the House by Democrats and rural Republicans who are protective of the public schools they see as the lifeblood of their close-knit communities. Lawmakers have sought to win them over this time by shielding school districts with fewer than 20,000 students from any funding losses caused by SB 8.

Abbott has named "education freedom" one of seven emergency items for the session and hit the road for it more than any other priority. Since early January, he has spoken at a dozen "Parent Empowerment" nights across the state, spanning Texas from Corpus Christi to Amarillo.

Some advocates for school choice who've previously criticized Abbott for a lack of commitment have taken notice of how far the governor is going now. Luke Macias, the far-right Texas consultant who previously worked for an Abbott primary challenger, said on a recent podcast that Abbott's efforts were "incredibly encouraging."

"I haven't seen anything like it," Corey DeAngelis, the national school-choice activist, tweeted last week. "This is true leadership. All Republican Governors should be fighting just as hard to empower all families with school choice."

Abbott's intense campaigning has anti-school-choice lawmakers on alert. But they're confident that their coalition in the Legislature will withstand the governor's lobbying effort.

"I think that coalition is holding strong and I think Gov. Abbott knows how unpopular vouchers are in the Texas Legislature," said Rep. James Talarico of Round Rock, one of the Democrats on the House Public Education Committee. "That's why you're seeing the governor putting as much lipstick on this pig as possible."

Talarico and other lawmakers hope that the House will send a strong signal on the issue Thursday, when it is scheduled to take up the state budget and consider amendments to it. In 2021, lawmakers approved an amendment that prohibited the "use of appropriated money for school choice programs." It passed 115-29, with a majority of Republicans joining Democrats to approve it. The amendment never made it into the final budget, but it served as a key indicator of the House's appetite for such proposals.

The author of that 2021 amendment, Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, has proposed a similar amendment for the budget debate Thursday. A copy of the amendment released Monday features the support of Rep. Charlie Geren, R-Fort Worth, a key member of House GOP leadership who serves as speaker pro tem.

The first stop for any school choice bill in the House would likely be the Public Education Committee, which has a new chair this session, Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, who has generated considerable intrigue. When House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, appointed Buckley to lead the panel in early February, school choice advocates voiced optimism. But it was unclear why — Buckley has been on the record against vouchers — and most groups did not explain why they were so hopeful.

One pro-school-choice group, the American Federation for Children, remains confident in Buckley.

"We praised Rep. Buckley's appointment because he has always been a fair-minded guy and has long been committed to providing the best education possible for Texas children," AFC spokesperson Nathan Cunneen wrote in an email. "We still believe that."

Buckley has repeatedly declined to share his thinking on the matter this session. And he did not attend the second parent empowerment night that Abbott headlined, which was just outside Buckley's district in Central Texas.

"I look forward to hearing bills that explore a wide range of options that keep parents at the center of their children's educational opportunities," Buckley said in a statement for this story. "In the end, the members of the public education committee will decide which options, if any, make their way to the floor for debate."

Of the eight House Republicans that Abbott has appeared with on his parent empowerment tour across the state, four voted for the budget amendment in 2021 that banned state funds for school choice programs. Three opposed the amendment. The eighth Republican was not in the Legislature at the time.

The Texas Tribune reached out to all eight House Republicans that Abbott has appeared with and asked if they supported universal education savings accounts. Their offices either did not respond or declined to comment.

The Tribune also contacted the offices of nine more House Republicans, all representing rural areas, and they also chose not to comment on Abbott's push.

Notably — and perhaps strategically — the education savings account legislation also contains other school priorities important to some Republican lawmakers, including a provision that would restrict classroom discussion about sexual orientation and gender identity through the 12th grade.

Phelan himself has said he is fine with an "up-or-down vote" on the proposal, but he has noted the historical opposition it has faced in the House. He also was the only one of the so-called "Big Three" — a reference to the governor, the House speaker and the lieutenant governor — to not name school choice as priority legislation.

As for Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Senate's presiding officer, he has long championed school choice and proclaimed in his inaugural address in January that he is "all in" on it with Abbott. Patrick has also vowed to try to force a special session if lawmakers cannot pass a school choice bill in the regular session. That decision is ultimately up to the governor.

Abbott's office did not answer a list of questions for this story, including whether he was prepared to call a special session over the issue.

### Abbott's evolution

Abbott's last push on school choice came in 2017, when the Senate passed an education savings account bill, but it died in the House. The same thing happened in 2015.

The issue fell off the radar in the 2019 session, when Abbott and other state leaders decided to prioritize property tax relief and public education funding ahead of what was expected to be a challenging election.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic happened. School choice advocates say the pandemic opened parents' eyes to what their kids were being taught and spurred frustration with prolonged school closures at the hands of Democrats and teachers unions.

"They just went too far, and it's a perfect storm," said Dave Carney, Abbott's top political adviser.

Indeed, it was a natural next step for Abbott, who had spent much of the pandemic fighting to make sure no local entities — including schools — could mandate COVID-19 safety policies.

Parents wanted more control over issues like mask mandates. Then, as the nation endured a racial reckoning after George Floyd was murdered by police in 2020, some parents and politicians started pushing back against conversations and books about race in schools.

After the 2021 session, Abbott rekindled some hope for school choice advocates when he signed into law an expansion of an education savings account program for students with disabilities.

It was not until his reelection campaign began that he really seized on the issue, introducing a "Parental Bill of Rights" in January 2022 that offered a host of ideas for giving parents more say over their kids' schooling. His most consequential statement, though, came four months later, when he declared during a San Antonio campaign stop that parents should be able to "send their children to any public school, charter school or private school with state funding following the student."

It was his clearest support yet for a voucher-like plan. And he later acknowledged it was a deliberate move, saying he wanted to make it "abundantly clear" he not only supported school choice but the strategy to achieve it.

The timing of the statement was intriguing. Abbott had already won his primary, but the governor, ever attuned to criticism on his right, was getting flak from some — including DeAngelis — for endorsing Texas House candidates in primary runoffs that month who allegedly opposed school choice.

Like many moments in Abbott's reelection campaign, he bet — successfully — that soothing his right flank was worth the wrath of the other side. His Democratic challenger, Beto O'Rourke, assailed Abbott over his comments that funding should follow the student, especially in rural Texas, but lost by 11 percentage points in November.

Abbott came off that win believing he had a mandate for the next legislative session to push harder for school choice than ever before.

"I've talked about school choice every year that I've been governor," Abbott said in early March while addressing the Texas Pastor Council in Austin. "But not only do we have a better opportunity this session than we've had before, but as I will explain to you, we have a necessity."

One factor that Abbott cited, in an explanation that he does not often use publicly, was "an extraordinary movement to expand transgenderism in schools in the state of Texas." He accused public school teachers of "using their positions to try to cultivate and groom these young kids" into being transgender.

If Abbott prevails, it could be a legacy-making moment for a third-term governor who occasionally faces questions about what exactly he will be remembered for. It could also bolster him with Republicans if he decides to run for president in 2024, a race that already includes former President Donald Trump.

Abbott regularly gets compared to a likely 2024 candidate, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who signed a universal school-choice bill into law Monday, expanding a suite of programs the state already had in place. During a visit to Texas in early March, DeSantis gave a speech to Harris County Republicans in which he wished Texas luck in "bringing a big school choice package across the finish line."

#### The rural Republicans

Speaking to the pastors, Abbott was frank about the challenge before him, saying it is House Republicans who "are holding up our ability to pass school choice" and they are "coming from rural Texas."

Abbott has sought to appeal to rural Republicans by trying to convince them that the policy is popular. Over 80% of Republican primary voters approved a ballot proposition on it last year — and it enjoyed nearly as much support in rural Texas. Abbott's office has further broken it down by House district, eager to show individual members that their base voters would have their back.

In some settings, Abbott has spoken more harshly about the forces weighing on rural Republicans.

"These Republicans who say, 'Listen, I want to support it, but my constituents back home, they just are against it' — that's wrong!" Abbott said. "Now, some of their constituents are against it. We call them 'educrats.' The educrats — whether they be superintendents or some teachers or primarily the teacher unions — they're against it, but they're a minority and they're a minority of voters in that district."

Abbott's appearances have put rural Republicans in a tough position politically — caught between their historical opposition to vouchers and their desire to please their party's popular leader. The makeup of the legislation — which includes "anti-woke" policies that mimics Florida's infamous "don't say gay" legislation — also muddies the waters for Republicans who are at odds with only the education savings account component of the bill.

For the House Republicans who have agreed to introduce Abbott at his school choice tour events, their remarks have been carefully worded — and have avoided any specific policy endorsement.

One House Republican introduced Abbott at his event last week in Giddings by touting the schooling options that are already available to parents.

"Here in Texas, parents have great choices for how they choose to educate their children — excellent public schools, charter schools, private schools and more freedom to educate their kids at home than any other state in

the country," Rep. Stan Gerdes, R-Smithville, said.

One of the most interesting lawmaker appearances on Abbott's school choice tour came in Corsicana, where Rep. Cody Harris, R-Palestine, introduced the governor. A member of the House Public Education Committee, Harris has firmly opposed vouchers but has been an Abbott booster on other issues. (His Twitter profile picture is a photo of him talking with the governor.)

In his introductory remarks in Corsicana, Harris did not explicitly back Abbott on school choice but found a way to appeal to his rural constituents.

"[Abbott]'s leading the effort to push back on the woke indoctrination of Texas kids that we're seeing in urban schools," Harris said. "And he's doing that by putting you, the parent, back in the driver's seat."

In reality, Abbott himself has rebuffed the notion that such "indoctrination" is a solely urban trend. He told the pastors it was happening regardless of whether "you're in a tiny little town in East Texas or a large urban area."

Regardless of whether it is successful, the school choice battle will likely spill over into the 2024 primaries for state House as members will face pressure to explain why they sided with — or against — Abbott on the issue. Abbott's campaign says it stands ready to help lawmakers who stick out their necks to support his agenda.

"There should be no question, except if you drink too much, that Abbott doesn't back up your support of him with his political support of you around election time," Carney said.

Disclosure: The Association of Texas Professional Educators has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **Texas education board could ban textbooks that discuss gender identity under proposed bill - Other legislation this session has targeted school library books, which are optional reading materials, but House Bill 1804 might be the first to go after textbooks that teachers use for their lessons.**

April 25, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1185 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Conservative lawmakers are trying to expand their war on books they find objectionable with a bill that critics fear would allow the state's authorities on school curriculum to reject textbooks based on their political and religious beliefs.

House Bill 1804, authored by freshman state Rep. Terri Leo-Wilson, R-Galveston, would allow the State Board of Education to reject textbooks for students below ninth grade if they include content on sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual activity. Textbooks could also be rejected if they fail to present U.S. history in a positive light or "encourage lifestyles that deviate from generally accepted standards of society."

"It is imperative that we empower parents and their elected voices rather than textbook publishers in regards to the content of our children's textbooks," Leo-Wilson wrote in a tweet.

Leo-Wilson's bill was left pending in the House Committee on Public Education on Thursday. Members will need to vote it out for it to go before the full House floor.

Texas has banned more books at the local level than any other state in the last year, mostly targeting titles centering on race, racism, abortion and LGBTQ topics. Usually, these books have been from school libraries and optional to read. HB 1804 might be the first recent attempt to target textbooks that teachers use for their lessons.

Other legislation trying to restrict the kinds of books kids can access includes Senate Bill 13, from Sen. Angela Paxton, R-McKinney, which aims to keep sexually explicit material off school library shelves and has already passed in the Senate. In the House, members passed House Bill 900 — a priority for House Speaker Dade Phelan — which would also take sexually explicit books off school library shelves and would require that some books with sexual references get parental consent before a student can check them out.

HB 1804 is also part of a long list of bills targeting LGBTQ Texans this legislative session. So far, the Senate has passed a bill that would restrict classroom lessons, campus activities and educator guidance about sexual orientation and gender identity in public and charter schools up to 12th grade, with very limited exceptions. It also passed a bill that would defund public libraries where drag queens read to children.

The State Board of Education, a 15-member elected board, dictates the state standards for what children need to learn in classrooms, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. The board's only criteria at the moment is that textbooks be free from factual errors and suitable for the grade level and subject being taught, and that academic experts have reviewed them. School districts aren't required to use the board-approved books.

The bill would essentially restore a power to the SBOE that lawmakers restricted over a decade ago and potentially resurface an old controversy.

Until 2011, the board could reject textbooks based on subjective criteria, but legislators took that power away after the board recommended textbooks that questioned the theory of evolution.

HB 1804 would reverse that decision. The bill says textbooks selected by the state board must present strengths and weaknesses for scientific theories like the theory of evolution.

Marti Bier, vice president of programs at the Texas Freedom Network, which fights for more inclusive classroom materials, said the bill would create subjective criteria for SBOE members to select books. The legislation's two-sides take on scientific theories would open the door for the board to adopt textbooks that give equal weight to creationism and science, they said.

"We condemn the actions of radical right-wing members of the state House who are seeking to allow textbook censorship based on the personal and political beliefs of extremist SBOE members," Bier said.

The bill also says that textbooks may not include works that condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard for the law. It also says they must present both sides of political or social movements throughout history.

The SBOE has moved further to the right recently, with new members elected in November who ran on campaigns railing against the teaching of "critical race theory" in schools. Critical race theory is a college-level discipline that examines why racism continues in American law and culture decades after the civil rights movement in the United States. It is not taught in elementary or secondary schools in Texas, but conservatives have used the term as a shorthand to criticize what they see as a liberal bent on how schools teach children about race.

During the hearing Thursday, Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said the bill makes him nervous because it could open the door for textbooks that give two perspectives on the Civil War, slavery or the Holocaust.

Supporters of the bill argued that it would give textbook publishers clear standards of what to include in their products when pitching them to the state board.

"Having these parameters will give transparent expectations to publishers to ensure they not only follow the TEKS but create appropriate content that educates and presents both sides of the issue," said Mary Castle, director of government relations for Texas Values Action, the legislative arm of Texas Values, a conservative religious advocacy group.

Jonathan Covey, policy director for Texas Values, said the bill would refocus schools on teaching the basics such as math and science while decreasing the money and time spent "creating social justice warriors."

"We have a long way to go, but the way to get there is to come together as Texans and Americans and not encourage division," he said.

Chloe Latham Sikes, deputy director of policy at the Intercultural Development Research Association, said in a statement that the provision against condoning civil disorder could allow for adoption of materials that avoid topics such as the Rodney King riots of 1992 and the U.S. Capitol insurrection on Jan. 6, 2021.

Billy Beard, a private citizen who testified against the bill, said its language is so broad that textbooks might be tempted to omit mentioning historical events like the Boston Tea Party because it is a condoned act of violence.

Ricardo Martinez, CEO of Equality Texas, said the bill would be harmful to young queer people, who strive in their academics when they can see themselves represented in books and the classroom setting.

"Removing any of these supports makes it harder for young queer people to feel a sense of belonging," Martinez said. "Not having those supports can lead to lower academic achievement, absenteeism and lower postsecondary aspirations and attainment."

Disclosure: Equality Texas and Texas Freedom Network have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## Protesters decry stalled fentanyl test strip bill as Texas House backs get-tough criminal penalties - Stuck in committee, the test-strip legislation has support from Gov. Greg Abbott and bipartisan lawmakers, who see it as a way to save lives.

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Author: James Barragán and Karen Brooks Harper | Section: News | 1416 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Advocates for changing the state's drug policies took over Sen. Joan Huffman's Capitol office Thursday morning demanding her support for legislation that would legalize test strips that can detect fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is blamed for a rapidly growing number of overdose deaths.

The legislation has bipartisan support and the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican who has made combating opioid overdose deaths a key issue this session. But the advocates say Huffman, a Houston Republican, is blocking the consideration of multiple bills to legalize the potentially lifesaving test strips.

"This bill needs to move," said Paulette Soltani, director of organizing for the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, which organized the protest. "We need everybody to support this basic harm-reduction tool."

Huffman's office did not respond to a request for comment on her position on the bill.

The protest came as the legislative session, which ends on Memorial Day, hits its home stretch and a House-passed bill to legalize fentanyl test strips languishes in a Senate committee without a hearing. It also came as the House voted on a bill that would increase criminal penalties for people who sell or distribute fentanyl, including opening the door for prosecutors to charge those people with murder.

That legislation, a key bill for Republicans pursuing a "tough on crime" approach to the opioid epidemic, advanced in the House on Thursday with bipartisan support — putting the legislation on track to become one of the first leadership priorities to reach the governor's desk.

Huffman's companion bill, which is nearly identical, passed the Senate unanimously last month. The measure now goes to a conference committee to hammer out minor differences between the two versions.

House Bill 6, by Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth, advanced on Thursday just a few hours after a small group of chanting protesters crowded the entry to the House gallery overlooking the lawmakers at their desks and yelled "No more drug war!" at lawmakers. The demonstrators were blocked at the gallery door by a handful of state troopers, and the tension ended after about five minutes.

HB 6 would increase the penalties related to the sale and production of fentanyl by classifying overdoses from the drug as "poisonings," triggering murder charges for those convicted of giving someone a fatal dose of fentanyl.

"If you have not had a family member die from fentanyl overdose, if you don't know anyone who has died from fentanyl overdose, consider yourself lucky. Because you're in the minority," Goldman said during the debate. "On behalf of all our family members who have died innocently by taking medication laced with fentanyl, we're here today to tell the people who deal that drug ... we're coming after you."

The House legislation passed 121-24, with 36 Democrats joining their GOP colleagues in voting for it. Proponents say the measure would help address a growing crisis in the state by holding dealers accountable and giving prosecutors more tools to charge those who manufacture and distribute the drug.

But opponents, who said the policy would prolong a 50-year, trillion-dollar war on drugs, argue that it would not fix the problem and would discourage people from seeking help for someone suffering from an overdose. Drug policy

experts say the move to charge people who sell or make fentanyl with murder has backfired in other states, leading to more overdose deaths and criminal charges for family and friends who were present when the victim took the drug.

"No study has ever shown that increasing penalties for drug usage has ever reduced drug usage in people who have a drug addiction," said Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston. "You've probably already decided how you're going to vote, and that's fine. What I'm here to do today is speak against the continuation of the drug war and the continued incarceration of people for drug addiction instead of providing them the help and care they need to not be addicts."

The bill — supported by Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dade Phelan — still needs final approval from the House, with that vote expected Friday.

The fentanyl test strip bill, however, is on a more tenuous track.

The Senate roadblock on House Bill 362 has baffled supporters, who see the legalization of fentanyl test strips as a smart public health approach in a state that has historically responded to drug epidemics through punitive measures. The bill has the support of top GOP leaders like Abbott, who had previously opposed the policy but said in December that he had developed a "better understanding" that the state needs to take more drastic action to save lives.

The bill would remove fentanyl test strips from the state's list of drug paraphernalia, letting people avoid a potential misdemeanor charge for possessing one. Currently, possession of drug paraphernalia — items used to consume illegal substances that can include fentanyl testing strips, used syringes and pipes — is a Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500.

Huffman was not in her office Thursday morning when a group of about 20 protesters entered, chanting "Huffman lies, people die!" and "Shame on her!" Huffman has not publicly stated her opposition to the bill, but she is on the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, where the bill has sat idle since early April. Houston Democratic Sen. John Whitmire, who leads the committee, told The Dallas Morning News on Wednesday that he supports the bill but that it does not have the backing of Republicans on the committee, who make up the panel's majority.

"We've received calls that she is lobbying in committee against the bill," Soltani told Huffman's staff. "We're not leaving until we learn her position."

Huffman has led on other bills related to fentanyl, including a push to make it easier to report overdoses to public health authorities. As the Senate's lead budget writer, she inserted \$18 million over the next two years to help the state provide the public with more medications like naloxone — commonly known by the brand name Narcan — that help reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

Chanting "Get Huffman on the phone," the protesters gave Huffman's staff a petition signed by 700 people who support the bill. After about 15 minutes, DPS troopers escorted them out of Huffman's office.

The other three Republican senators on the committee — Pete Flores of Pleasanton, Phil King of Weatherford and Paul Bettencourt of Houston — did not respond to requests for comment.

For those who want to change the state's drug policies, the test strip legislation is seen as a small step in the right direction that falls short of other needed action, such as decriminalizing tools that could test for other emerging drugs, like xylazine, an animal tranquilizer which is being mixed into drugs to make them more potent and can cause wounds of scaly, dead tissue.

The bill's Republican sponsors, like Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress, are opposed to using the bill to expand the list of drug paraphernalia that would be legalized. As written, HB 362 has not received major opposition, even from law enforcement groups that usually oppose the decriminalization of drug paraphernalia under the argument that could lead to more permissive drug policies.

"This is the one thing we could pass in Texas because we have the support of conservatives, and [Huffman's] holding it up," said Cate Graziani, executive director of the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance.

Oliverson said he remains optimistic that the bill can pass and said his conversations with Senate leaders have been positive.

"They understand that fentanyl is a different category of drug," he said. "You have to win minds and hearts. It's part of what we do here."

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## **Protesters decry stalled fentanyl test strip bill; Texas House passes get-tough criminal penalties - Stuck in committee, the test-strip legislation has support from Gov. Greg Abbott and bipartisan lawmakers, who see it as a way to save lives.**

April 27, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: James Barragán and Karen Brooks Harper | Section: News | 1409 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Advocates for changing the state's drug policies took over Sen. Joan Huffman's Capitol office Thursday morning demanding her support for legislation that would legalize test strips that can detect fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is blamed for a rapidly growing number of overdose deaths.

The legislation has bipartisan support and the backing of Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican who has made combating opioid overdose deaths a key issue this session. But the advocates say Huffman, a Houston Republican, is blocking the consideration of multiple bills to legalize the potentially lifesaving test strips.

"This bill needs to move," said Paulette Soltani, director of organizing for the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, which organized the protest. "We need everybody to support this basic harm-reduction tool."

Huffman's office did not respond to a request for comment on her position on the bill.

The protest came as the legislative session, which ends on Memorial Day, hits its home stretch and a House-passed bill to legalize fentanyl test strips languishes in a Senate committee without a hearing. It also came as the House voted on a bill that would increase criminal penalties for people who sell or distribute fentanyl, including opening the door for prosecutors to charge those people with murder.

That legislation, a key bill for Republicans pursuing a "tough on crime" approach to the opioid epidemic, won final House approval Friday on a 124-21 vote — putting the legislation on track to become one of the first leadership priorities to reach the governor's desk.

Huffman's companion bill, which is nearly identical, passed the Senate unanimously last month.

House Bill 6, by Rep. Craig Goldman, R-Fort Worth, advanced on Thursday just a few hours after a small group of chanting protesters crowded the entry to the House gallery overlooking the lawmakers at their desks and yelled "No more drug war!" at lawmakers. The demonstrators were blocked at the gallery door by a handful of state troopers, and the tension ended after about five minutes.

HB 6 would increase the penalties related to the sale and production of fentanyl by classifying overdoses from the drug as "poisonings," triggering murder charges for those convicted of giving someone a fatal dose of fentanyl.

"If you have not had a family member die from fentanyl overdose, if you don't know anyone who has died from fentanyl overdose, consider yourself lucky. Because you're in the minority," Goldman said during the debate. "On behalf of all our family members who have died innocently by taking medication laced with fentanyl, we're here today to tell the people who deal that drug ... we're coming after you."

Proponents say the measure would help address a growing crisis in the state by holding dealers accountable and giving prosecutors more tools to charge those who manufacture and distribute the drug.

But opponents, who said the policy would prolong a 50-year, trillion-dollar war on drugs, argue that it would not fix the problem and would discourage people from seeking help for someone suffering from an overdose. Drug policy experts say the move to charge people who sell or make fentanyl with murder has backfired in other states, leading to more overdose deaths and criminal charges for family and friends who were present when the victim took the

drug.

"No study has ever shown that increasing penalties for drug usage has ever reduced drug usage in people who have a drug addiction," said Rep. Gene Wu, D-Houston. "You've probably already decided how you're going to vote, and that's fine. What I'm here to do today is speak against the continuation of the drug war and the continued incarceration of people for drug addiction instead of providing them the help and care they need to not be addicts."

The bill — supported by Abbott, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dade Phelan — now goes to a conference committee to hammer out differences, a technical process that is not expected to delay the bill's ride to Abbott's desk.

The fentanyl test strip bill, however, is on a more tenuous track.

The Senate roadblock on House Bill 362 has baffled supporters, who see the legalization of fentanyl test strips as a smart public health approach in a state that has historically responded to drug epidemics through punitive measures. The bill has the support of top GOP leaders like Abbott, who had previously opposed the policy but said in December that he had developed a "better understanding" that the state needs to take more drastic action to save lives.

The bill would remove fentanyl test strips from the state's list of drug paraphernalia, letting people avoid a potential misdemeanor charge for possessing one. Currently, possession of drug paraphernalia — items used to consume illegal substances that can include fentanyl testing strips, used syringes and pipes — is a Class C misdemeanor punishable by a fine of up to \$500.

Huffman was not in her office Thursday morning when a group of about 20 protesters entered, chanting "Huffman lies, people die!" and "Shame on her!" Huffman has not publicly stated her opposition to the bill, but she is on the Senate Criminal Justice Committee, where the bill has sat idle since early April. Houston Democratic Sen. John Whitmire, who leads the committee, told The Dallas Morning News on Wednesday that he supports the bill but that it does not have the backing of Republicans on the committee, who make up the panel's majority.

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Huffman has led on other bills related to fentanyl, including a push to make it easier to report overdoses to public health authorities. As the Senate's lead budget writer, she inserted \$18 million over the next two years to help the state provide the public with more medications like naloxone — which can be administered through the nose with products like Narcan and others, or injected more directly into the bloodstream through muscles — that help reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

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## Teachers are losing hope that lawmakers will give them a big raise this session - The most ambitious proposals are all but dead, leaving teachers wondering why they're looking at small raises when the state has a historic budget surplus at its disposal.

May 10, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1839 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

With less than a month left in the legislative session, the odds that teachers will get the kind of raise they say they badly need are rapidly diminishing.

Teachers had hoped this would be the year the Texas Legislature would approve a substantial across-the-board pay raise for them as lawmakers, tasked with deciding how to spend a historic budget surplus, vowed to address the state's yearslong teacher shortage.

But some of the ambitious proposals to put more money in teachers' wallets — including a bill that would have given every teacher in Texas a \$15,000 raise — never made it out of the House or Senate education committees, which have to give first approval to a bill before it gets a full vote by either chamber.

The bills calling for raises left and with the most chances of passing are Senate Bill 9 by Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, and House Bill 100 by Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian. Both would offer significantly more modest raises.

There are still avenues through which big raises could get approved, but it's becoming an increasingly unlikely scenario.

Cecil Lanoux, a teacher at North East Independent School District in San Antonio who has been an educator since 1999, said he's used to hearing legislators float the idea of giving teachers a big raise every session, but this year, the possibility that lawmakers might use some of the surplus to help fund big raises had him "pretty darn excited." Now that the more generous proposals are all but dead, he feels that the ones still on the table will fall short as usual.

"I've been in this long enough that it just gets demoralizing," Lanoux said.

SB 9 would give teachers a one-time bonus of \$2,000, plus an additional \$4,000 for those who work in districts with less than 20,000 students. It was voted out of the Senate and still needs House approval before going to Gov. Greg Abbott's desk.

Teachers and unions have criticized the use of districts' student enrollment to decide which educators get the bigger bonus, saying it's a less-than-ideal way to determine who needs the money the most. Creighton has said the \$6,000 bonus is aimed at helping rural school teachers, as they are usually paid less than their urban and suburban counterparts.

A Texas Tribune analysis shows that teachers in major suburban and urban school districts get paid an average of about \$61,432, almost \$10,000 more than those teaching in rural areas. Costs of living are usually higher in larger metropolitan areas.

Some teachers said they should all be valued the same. Chana Jones, a kindergarten teacher at Snyder ISD, a district with less than 3,000 students about an hour and a half away from Midland, would get the \$6,000 bonus but said she doesn't think the raise is a fair assessment of Texas teachers.

"The size of the campus doesn't devalue my passion," she said.

Zeph Capo, president of Texas American Federation of Teachers, questioned how much thought went into deciding who gets a raise.

"I do think that at least for somebody, somewhere, there was a legitimate concern for what we do for rural teachers that are at the lower salary schedules, because they also are in a crisis," he said. "But they were either lazy on how they put [SB 9] together or didn't really think it through."

In the lower chamber, HB 100 would raise the base amount of money a district gets per student, which is currently \$6,160 per student and has not increased since 2019. The bill is the lower chamber's response to the recommendations of a task force formed last year by Abbott to look into the causes of the state's teacher shortage.

HB 100 would raise the district's allotment per student to \$6,250 next school year and to \$6,300 in 2025, when the state would consider raising that amount more to account for inflation. It would also require districts, which currently have to use 30% of the state funds they receive to pay for employee raises, to increase that share to 50%.

The bill also updates the base amount of money that teachers should make depending on their experience. Currently, a teacher with 10 years of experience has to be paid at least \$45,630. Under HB 100, that teacher would need to be paid at least \$55,000 if they don't have a teaching certificate and at least \$60,000 if they do.

But the raise teachers would receive from King's bill is far from what they had hoped, with some estimates showing teachers would get about an extra \$100 a month in their paychecks at best.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, the lawmaker who had proposed giving all Texas teachers a \$15,000 raise, said he's glad lawmakers are still considering some kind of pay bump, but the remaining proposals don't offer teachers nearly enough.

"We have teachers in our state who are driving Ubers at night and selling their own blood plasma for extra money," he said. "We have so much money that the decision not to help our teachers and our students is immoral to me."

Texas ranks 28th in the nation for teacher pay, \$7,652 less than the national average, according to the latest National Education Association report. Increasing pay was one of the recommendations from the governor's teacher shortage task force as a way to attract and retain educators.

To address the shortage, lawmakers so far this session have advanced other bills that aim to keep new teachers longer in the profession, make it easier for retired educators to be hired, and help teachers spend less time planning lessons and less money on purchasing teaching materials out of pocket.

It has been particularly difficult for schools to fill the positions of the teachers who have left the profession recently. Since the 2011-12 school year, about 10% of teachers in Texas have left the field each year. That number dipped to about 9% during the 2020-21 school year but is going back up — rising to almost 12% during the 2021-22 school year.

Lawmakers this session were given a \$32.7 billion surplus to allocate, but neither the House nor the Senate has made plans to spend the entirety of it.

Both chambers have approved separate proposals that would give school districts billions of dollars so they can lower the taxes they collect from property owners. But that money is just for schools to break even. When the House voted for its version of the state's budget for the next two years, members rejected every amendment that would've diverted additional funds from property tax reform to boost teacher pay.

Other efforts to get teachers more money also failed. Sen. Morgan LaMantia, D-South Padre Island, tried to amend SB 9 to include a \$10,000 a year across-the-board raise, but the measure didn't pass. Creighton said during the floor debate last month that such an increase would cost the state billions of dollars more and unbalance the

budget.

Other lawmakers have echoed that argument, saying that using the surplus to pay for teacher raises would be unsustainable.

"I want to do everything I can — within reason — to ensure that we are not facing a situation two years, four years, six years from now where we're needing to cut \$5 billion from public education," said Rep. Gary VanDeaver, R-New Boston, a joint author on HB 100.

With the legislative session in its final stretch, lawmakers from both chambers will enter negotiations over what will make it into the final budget draft, but significant teacher raises look more and more like a long shot.

For Chandra Villanueva, director of policy and advocacy for the progressive think tank Every Texan, the inaction on meaningful teacher raises makes it clear that educators are not a priority this session.

"We still see that the Legislature is prioritizing these tax cuts over actually funding our schools," she said.

Small increases not enough

Lanoux said a \$15,000 raise like the one that Talarico proposed would've been a "quality-of-life change" for him and his wife, Christina Richardson, who is also a teacher at North East ISD. It would've made paying their bills and student loans a little bit easier, he said.

Lanoux said his salary only recently rose above \$60,000 a year. His wife, who has been in education for about a decade, makes slightly above \$52,000.

If they have to make a big purchase, they usually put it on their credit card and work summer school — like Richardson has done for the last five years — to eventually pay it off. After rent, insurance, bills and other necessities, Richardson said they'd be in trouble if they had an emergency that cost more than \$500.

"That would break us," she said.

Richardson is still hanging on to the hope that lawmakers will find a way to squeeze in a bigger pay raise, but Lanoux — who worked at the Capitol for some time — said he doesn't get excited about lawmakers making promises about raises anymore.

For some teachers, leaving the profession has been the easiest way to make more money. Lanoux has tried to search for options outside of education, even calling up his old boss at the Capitol, but it just hasn't panned out.

"I wanted to [leave], but nobody seems to be interested in a mid-career, middle- to low-income teacher," he said.

Jones, the Snyder ISD teacher, clears about \$3,300 a month and spends anywhere from \$200 to \$400 of that amount in supplies for her classroom. She is able to afford it only because she shares her other expenses with her husband.

She said she'd welcome the \$6,000 one-time bonus proposed in SB 9, but she feels like the state could be investing more money in teachers instead of trying to spend half a billion on voucher-like programs.

"I feel like I'm not valued. I'm not a priority," she said.

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## **School voucher bill hangs by a thread as key deadline approaches - The House public education committee chair said Wednesday he currently has no plans to bring the bill for a vote. Gov. Greg Abbott has vowed to call a special session if the House doesn't "expand the scope of school choice."**

May 17, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 697 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

With a key deadline looming and fierce opposition from all sides, the odds for the latest version of the Texas Senate's priority school voucher bill are looking bleak.

Senate Bill 8, authored by state Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, appears to be in danger of dying in the House public education committee, which must approve a bill before it goes to the House floor for a full vote. The committee's chair, state Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, told The Texas Tribune on Wednesday that he currently has no plans to bring the bill for a vote after Gov. Greg Abbott threatened to veto it.

"It begs the question of — with this threat — is this the legislation to move forward?" Buckley told the Tribune.

On Sunday, Abbott voiced his disapproval of the House version of the bill, which significantly rolls back eligibility for the legislation's proposed voucher program. While the Senate's bill wanted it to be available for most of Texas' 5.5 million public schoolchildren, the House's version would be for only certain groups of students, like those with disabilities or those who attended a campus that has recently gotten a failing grade in its state accountability rating.

Abbott, who has made school vouchers his top cause this session and has traveled across the state advocating for them, said he would call lawmakers in for a special session if the House didn't "expand the scope of school choice" this month.

The House Committee on Public Education, along with every other committee in the lower chamber, has until May 20 to vote out Senate bills before they can hit the House floor.

The education committee met Monday to hear invited testimony on the third iteration of SB 8, but Buckley did not bring it up for a vote that day or the next one, when the committee met again.

Things can change fast in the final days of a legislative session as leaders negotiate over an array of bills, so the proposal's fate won't be sealed until lawmakers leave town. But it will still be a major hurdle to pass through the House a bill that can bring together enough supporters and critics of school vouchers.

Earlier this session, the House passed a budget amendment that would prohibit the use of state funds for "school vouchers or other similar programs." While largely symbolic, the vote showed the House still lacks the appetite for vouchers.

And last week, when Buckley tried to advance a vote on SB 8, the House voted to not let the public education committee meet.

As the House's Saturday deadline approaches, Creighton said in a statement that he isn't giving up on his legislation or school choice yet.

"My goal remains to work with the House to deliver significant education freedom for families to make decisions for their kids that aren't restricted by an address or ZIP code," he said.

SB 8 seeks to introduce a voucher-like program known as education savings accounts, which parents who opt out of their local school district would be able to use to pay for private schools and other educational expenses with taxpayer dollars.

Buckley's version of the bill would also eliminate the highly debated State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness — more commonly known as the STAAR program — and replace it with a new test that would be more aligned with what children learn in the classroom. The legislation also removes the requirement that high schoolers need to pass an assessment to graduate.

These changes were seemingly an effort to get more House members, specifically Democrats and rural Republicans, to vote for SB 8. This bipartisan coalition fears that voucher-like programs would siphon funds away from public schools and have successfully killed these proposals for decades.

"I'm hopeful that our coalition that defeated vouchers this session will stay united and in any special sessions that are called this year," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin.

Zach Despart contributed to this story.

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## **Key supporter of Texas school chaplain bill has pushed for evangelism in schools - Rocky Malloy, a self-described former drug-smuggling pirate saved by divine intervention, has led a group that promotes chaplains as a tool to proselytize to schoolchildren.**

May 19, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Robert Downen and Brian Lopez | Section: News | 2262 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Speaking to state lawmakers last month, Rocky Malloy argued that putting unlicensed religious chaplains in schools could prevent youth violence, teen suicide and teacher burnout. And he rejected concerns that school chaplains might use their access to recruit kids to Christ.

Chaplains "are not working to convert people to religion," Malloy, the head of the National School Chaplain Association, told the Senate Committee on Education. "Chaplains have no other agenda other than to be present in relationships, care for individuals and to make sure everybody on campus is seen and heard."

What Malloy didn't mention was that, for decades, he has led another group that promotes school chaplains as a tool for evangelism. Malloy is the founder of Mission Generation, which had been open about its desire to proselytize in schools across the world until recently, when its website was changed to redirect to the school chaplain association's home page.

The connection, noted this month by activists and Religion News Service, raises new questions about the aim of Senate Bill 763, which would allow local school boards to place unlicensed chaplains alongside school counselors. The bill passed both chambers of the Texas Legislature but was amended in the House to require chaplains to be accredited. However, that provision was removed by a House-Senate conference committee, according to a compromise version of SB 763 released Friday.

The bill is part of a wider push by conservative Christians to insert religion into Texas public life — a campaign that's already led to heated debates before local school boards and the Legislature. This session, Christian lawmakers have called church-state separation "a false doctrine," pushed to display the Ten Commandments in classrooms and challenged the Texas Constitution's prohibitions on public financing of religious organizations, a key plank of the "school choice" movement.

As with other legislation, supporters of the chaplains bill claim it would return morality to Texas schools to better address mass shootings, drug use and other societal ills. School chaplains, Malloy and others argue, would also provide much-needed relief for teachers burdened by low pay, limited resources, ballooning class sizes and ever-looming funding cuts.

But opponents worry that the effort is a thinly veiled attempt by Christian evangelists to recruit children and would exacerbate already simmering tensions at local school boards, which would have the final say on whether to approve chaplaincy programs.

"It does nothing but raise the temperature," said Christopher Tackett, a Fort Worth-based activist who has for years tracked the influx of religion into Texas public schools.

Worse, opponents say, the bill could deepen the state's youth mental health crisis by providing students with unproven, lightly supervised and nonscientific counseling approaches by untrained religious activists.

"This is not what a real chaplaincy program looks like," said Joshua Houston of Texas Impact, an interfaith organization that advocates on behalf of some of the state's largest religious groups. "We have chaplains as members. We have seminaries as members that train chaplains. They all have qualifications. In this bill, they are completely unqualified."

"It is akin to an online marriage ordination," he said of the bill's current training requirements.

A drug-smuggling ex-pirate

"Would you let a Ex-Pirate, drug-smuggling pirate teach your kindergartner? Apparently, God would..."

So reads the broken-grammar tagline for "Pirate School," a short documentary-style film that tracks Malloy's story beginning decades ago, when a friend asked if he wanted to help on a boat — apparently the origin story of his time as a pirate. The plan was to travel to an island, plant 25 pounds of marijuana seed and live like a "hermit," reading from his "large, cathedral-sized white Bible."

"I needed to live the experience of the Bible," Malloy says in the film, which is advertised on the school chaplain association's website. "Jesus chose people of the sea."

According to that website, Malloy was living in Mexico when he was sentenced to life in prison for "conspiracy to over through the national government and international drug trafficking in a misguided attempt to help indigenous people" who were being persecuted for their religion. After 72 hours in prison — which Malloy notes is the same time it took Jesus to resurrect — he says he was freed by divine intervention, a sign that he had a "license from God."

He says he spent the next few years traveling around Central America before settling along the Honduras border, where he preached and taught "the dynamics of construction" to Nicaraguan Contras, the right-wing, CIA-backed rebels who fought the leftist government in one of the cold war's bloody proxy fights.

The violence, Malloy said in an email exchange with The Texas Tribune, made him want "to help children live better lives" and learn "the impact of loving, spiritual care."

Eventually, he had an idea: dramatically increase his outreach to children by gaining access to public schools.

"The largest network in any country was the school system," he said in an interview with Risen Magazine, a California-based Christian publication. "When you add all the parents and teachers, you're talking about around 50% of the country. So our program has the potential to impact half the population of an entire nation. It would have taken me many lifetimes to build enough churches and Bible schools to do the same thing."

Thus was born Mission Generation, which Malloy says started in the 1990s with 44 students in Bolivia before expanding across South America. In 2021, he moved his family to the Houston area on a mission to "give school-aged children the tools they need to make quality life decisions based on a personal relationship with Jesus Christ," according to the school chaplain association website.

In an email, he pushed back against concerns about chaplains in schools.

"Many prominent publications have been unkind to the U.S. school chaplaincy program, ignoring the success of school chaplaincy in other industrialized nations," he wrote. "The results are breathtaking, with up to 80% reduction in teen pregnancy, up to 37% increase in high school graduation, and zero suicide."

But Mission Generation's promotional materials, social media and previous website show that evangelism also has been a goal.

Archived versions of the group's website — which now sends viewers to the chaplain association's homepage — bragged about creating a "viable approach" to getting into public schools to "influence those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with him," Religion News Service reported.

And, in a 2022 interview with the far-right True Texas Project, Malloy called "secularism" its own religion and said publicly funded school chaplains could provide much-needed "absolute truth" at a time of increasing support for transgender rights.

"Right now, it's all relative [truth]," he said. "They get to define what truth is. Right now, there's a big discussion like, 'what is a woman?' Just a couple years ago, that was pretty straightforward."

Later in that interview, Malloy dismissed potential church-state separation concerns about school chaplains, saying they "represent God, not religion." And he claimed the U.S. Constitution's establishment clause was meant to protect religion from the government, not vice versa. The claim is popular among adherents of Christian nationalism, which claims that U.S. institutions and laws should favor Christianity because the country's founding was ordained by God.

Ties to key figures in public education

Malloy is allied with top figures in Texas public education.

Weeks before she was elected to the State Board of Education last fall, Republican Julie Pickren advocated for school chaplains as one way to put God in classrooms.

Pickren's comments came in a speech to the school chaplain association — where she and her husband are board members — that was posted on Mission Generation's Instagram account until the Tribune reached out to her and Malloy for comment last week.

Pickren — who also testified in favor of the chaplains bill at the Capitol — did not answer a list of questions from the Tribune, including whether she agrees with Mission Generation's evangelism goals or how she became involved with the chaplain association or Malloy.

Instead, she provided a statement via email: "Neither NSCA nor Mission Generation have donated to my campaign. The board position is a volunteer position. Proselytizing is a prohibited activity by chaplains in United States."

The SBOE, a 15-member elected board that sets curriculum standards for the state, moved further to the right in last year's elections, when several Republicans, including Pickren, won seats campaigning against critical race theory. Conservatives use the term broadly to describe what they see as indoctrination via lessons that discuss the history of race and racism in America.

The concept, however, is a college-level discipline that examines why racism continues in American law and culture. It is not taught in elementary or secondary schools in Texas.

Pickren was also involved with a new organization looking to provide alternative training to "woke" instruction offered to school board members, she told a Dallas-area publication. She ran for the SBOE after losing reelection to the Alvin Independent School District board of trustees after it was reported that she traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend the Jan. 6, 2021, rally that preceded the attack on the U.S. Capitol.

"A chaplain is not trained in how the brain works"

In hearings at the Texas Capitol, supporters of the chaplains bill said successful chaplaincy programs in other public sectors, including the U.S. military and in Texas prisons, could be replicated in schools.

But Houston, with Texas Impact, pushed back on those claims. For one, he noted, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice's chaplaincy program has for years dealt with questions about religious fairness and discrimination, notably in a U.S. Supreme Court case brought by an inmate who was denied access to a Buddhist chaplain in the state death chamber.

Moreover, Houston said, there are vast differences in the training required to be a prison chaplain and the almost nonexistent standards set forth in the chaplains bill.

"Schoolchildren in Texas aren't going to be provided the same protections as we give to Texas prisoners," he said of the bill.

Mental health experts similarly oppose the idea, arguing that religious-based counseling can be damaging to developing brains because it often focuses on "sin" and "moral failings," rather than diagnosable and treatable issues. Such approaches, experts say, can increase feelings of shame and isolation for common childhood problems, including ADHD and anxiety.

"Spirituality is a predictor of well-being and resiliency, and a chaplain can be a source of development of that in young people," said Dr. Lindsay Bira, a psychologist and assistant professor of psychiatry at UT Health San Antonio who focuses on stress, trauma and anxiety.

But, Bira added, "a chaplain is not trained in how the brain works or what helps it work best. Someone with a religious background could push prayer or other strategies that increase shame. And if those don't work, the child is going to feel like their relationship with God is broken, and that they're a broken and damaged person as a result."

Matthew Gutierrez, superintendent of the Seguin Independent School District, said he understands lawmakers are looking for ways to balance student needs with a shortage of counselors. It would be better, he said, if the state helped increase the number of available counselors.

"I would like to see an investment made in counselor preparation programs," he said. "We are going through a mental health crisis. Chaplains do not have the same level of experience and training."

Others remain concerned about the potential consequences of allowing religious figures into schools amid already intense debates over parental rights and curricula that promote "Judeo-Christian" values while limiting teaching on LGBTQ people and America's history of racism. Some fear the chaplains bill, along with the likely passage of the Ten Commandments legislation, would add to the acrimony over religion that's already gripping some local school boards.

"We have seen a systematic push by certain groups to push the boundaries and erode the separations of church and state," said Tackett, the Fort Worth activist. "And this is all part of a broader Christian nationalist movement that's moving into education and government."

In 2021, Texas lawmakers passed legislation that required donated "In God We Trust" signs to be placed in public classrooms. A North Texas school district later rejected signs that were written in Arabic while accepting English-language versions that were donated by Patriot Mobile, a Grapevine-based conservative cellphone company that has funded numerous Christian nationalist campaigns in the state, including anti-LGBTQ school board candidates.

And, emboldened by a series of recent U.S. Supreme Court decisions and growing acceptance of Christian nationalism on the right, Christian groups have openly discussed using Texas classrooms as a model and vehicle for a "restoration of faith" in an increasingly secular America.

Some Christian lawmakers in Texas are pushing back. This session, Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat and current Presbyterian seminarian, has railed against the infusion of religion in public life, calling such ideas "offensive" and "idolatrous."

Talarico, who was on the conference committee but was the only one of 10 members who did not sign the report on the final version of the chaplains bill, said in an earlier interview that the legislation needed better guardrails and training requirements. Otherwise, he said, "it's a Trojan horse to allow unqualified religious fanatics to enter our school and indoctrinate our kids."

He voiced similar concerns as the bill made its way through the Legislature and as Malloy assured lawmakers that chaplains' "sole responsibility is a child and a teacher's well-being."

After the bill passed the House, Malloy sent a thankful email to supporters: "Texas is leading the nation putting faith and prayer back in school through chaplains!"

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Downen and Brian Lopez, R. (2023, May 19). Key supporter of Texas school chaplain bill has pushed for evangelism in schools - Rocky Malloy, a self-described former drug-smuggling pirate saved by divine intervention, has led a group that promotes chaplains as a tool to proselytize to schoolchildren.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&doref=news/191A26F1CA6B05D0>.

## Time runs out for taxpayer-funded private school tuition bill as special session looms - Gov. Greg Abbott has already signaled he would call a special session if lawmakers failed to pass a voucher-like program open to all students.

May 20, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 949 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

A proposal that would allow Texas families to use taxpayer dollars to pay for private schools — a legislative priority for both Gov. Greg Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick — is dead this weekend after the Texas House failed to advance it before a Saturday deadline.

Abbott has already suggested he'll call a special session to ensure it becomes law.

Senate Bill 8, authored by state Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, passed the Senate in early April. However, it has not received a vote in the House Committee on Public Education. Bills must be approved in committee before being voted on in each respective chamber and the deadline for House committees to approve Senate bills is midnight, but the lower chamber did not meet and neither will most committees.

Creighton didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

With the death of the bill, the House proves it is still a major hurdle for any legislation that would send taxpayer money to private schools. State Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, and chair of the education committee, drastically changed and limited the bill's scope from the version passed in the Senate in an effort to get the votes needed in committee, but it seemingly wasn't enough.

With already fierce opposition from the lower chamber, Abbott seemingly delivered the final blow for the bill when last week he voiced his disapproval of the House version of the bill, which significantly rolls back eligibility for the legislation's proposed program. While the Senate's bill wanted it to be available for most of Texas' 5.5 million public schoolchildren, the House's version would be for only certain groups of students, like those with disabilities or those who attended a campus that has recently gotten a failing grade in its state accountability rating.

Abbott, who has made the proposal, known as education savings accounts, the legislation his top cause this session and has traveled across the state advocating for it, said he would call lawmakers in for a special session if the House didn't "expand the scope of school choice" this month.

"It begs the question of — with this threat — is this the legislation to move forward?" Buckley told The Texas Tribune on Wednesday.

Things can change fast in the final days of a legislative session as leaders negotiate over an array of bills, so the fate of "school choice" — an umbrella term for a host of suite of policies that allow families to send their students to a school other than their assigned public school school — won't be sealed until lawmakers leave town.

The legislation's centerpiece was a voucher-like program known as education savings accounts, which parents who opt out of their local school district would be able to use to pay for private schools and other educational expenses with taxpayer dollars.

Some Republicans for decades have tried to pass voucher-like programs with no success — historically hitting a wall: the Texas House. But the bill's supporters felt different this time around as they thought the theme of parental rights — something Republicans have seized since the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns temporarily closed schools — would get them over the hump.

In the House, Democrats and rural Republicans have formed a coalition to defeat such programs, fearing that would siphon funds away from public schools as Texas gives schools money per student.

"Texans have been fighting against these voucher scams for decades," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin. "I'm proud of the bipartisan coalition that defeated vouchers this session. We will continue defending our public schools in any special sessions that are called."

Already this session, the House took two key votes that signaled that they would not budge on vouchers. When the lower chamber crafted their budget last month, it inserted an amendment that would prohibit state money from going to private schools. While it was largely symbolic, it showed the lack of appetite for a voucher program.

Then last week, when Buckley tried to vote on SB 8 in committee without a public hearing, the House voted to not allow the public education committee to vote, claiming that he was trying to push a large bill without public oversight.

Buckley couldn't seem to craft a proposal that would both pass the House and please Abbott. In an effort to sweeten the deal, his version would have eliminated the highly debated State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness — more commonly known as the STAAR program — and replace it with a new test. The legislation also removes the requirement that high schoolers need to pass an assessment to graduate.

Zeph Capo, president of Texas American Federation of Teachers, said in a statement that the debate over school vouchers this session took valuable time from other issues such as school funding and teacher pay. One of the biggest pieces of school funding legislation, House Bill 100, authored by Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian, would infuse an extra \$5 billion to school districts to increase school budgets and teacher raises, but it has been stuck in the Senate Committee on Education, chaired by Creighton.

"This was a lost session for public education," Capo said. "Texas legislators let a generational surplus slip through their fingers while ignoring the generational threat of teachers streaming out of classrooms. All to chase a voucher scam Texans did not want."

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Lopez, B. (2023, May 20). Time runs out for taxpayer-funded private school tuition bill as special session looms - Gov. Greg Abbott has already signaled he would call a special session if lawmakers failed to pass a voucher-like program open to all students.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/191A7E39D0D10208>.

## **Republican priorities on school choice, border fail, but late-night compromises resurrect others - Rushed agreements and suspended rules rescue legislation on the electric grid and economic incentives for companies, and work is still being done on a property tax proposal.**

May 28, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Jolie McCullough and Joshua Fechter | Section: News | 1523 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House and Senate lawmakers were unable to find a compromise on two of the Gov. Greg Abbott's top priorities this session: border security and school choice. But they rushed Sunday night to push through some other priorities, suspending rules of the chambers to do so.

The two prominent pieces of legislation fell by the wayside this weekend as the deadline for the two chambers to come up with final, agreed-upon versions of bills slipped by. In particular, the failure to pass a measure that would allow parents to use taxpayer dollars to fund private school tuition or cover home-schooling expenses all but assures Gov. Greg Abbott will call the Legislature back for a taxpayer-funded special session to try again.

A third major priority, cutting property taxes for homeowners, missed key deadlines over the weekend. Legislative leaders pressed to pull a compromise out of their hats late Sunday. That would require suspending the rules, since those compromises are supposed to be reached in both chambers by the end of the day Saturday. They successfully did so for two other high-profile bills, one that sought to shore up the state's electricity grid and another that would create a new economic incentive program.

As the clock ticked, lawmakers tried a last-minute dash on a property tax-cut deal. House lawmakers said they signed a deal and were waiting on the Senate to do the same, according to a tweet from Phelan's spokesperson. But the House adjourned Sunday night without a deal. It's possible the chambers could strike a deal Monday on the last day of the session — but that would be highly unusual.

The legislative session ends Monday.

Even without a deal on taxes, lawmakers will wrap up their regular session with some major conservative victories on social issues. On Sunday, they sent to Abbott a bill to ban diversity, equity and inclusion offices on public college campuses. Earlier this month, they approved a measure to ban puberty blockers and hormone treatments for transgender children.

But on pocketbook priorities, the House and Senate have been increasingly at odds on priority issues this session, most notably with House Speaker Dade Phelan and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick routinely and publicly shaming each other over their opposing property tax relief proposals. The tension came to a head earlier this week, when the House killed numerous of the Senate's dearest bills — some of which the chambers had previously agreed on — ahead of another midnight deadline.

For the "school choice" bill and the border bill, meanwhile, there was no last-minute search for a reprieve.

As the clock ticked Saturday into the evening, lawmakers first acknowledged the failure of a multibillion-dollar school funding bill after Senate changes turned it into a last-ditch effort to enact a voucher-like program in the state. Abbott had threatened to call a special session if the Legislature didn't pass a school choice bill to allow parents to use taxpayer dollars to pay for private school tuition. His office did not immediately respond Sunday to questions about the failed bills or whether he'll call for a special session.

The House has long resisted vouchers, as Democrats and rural Republicans fear they would siphon funds away from public schools, which serve as important job engines and community hubs across the state.

Unable to compromise, House Bill 100's failure also means that school districts won't get funding to raise teachers' salaries or balance their budgets, which they said became necessary expenses after the pandemic rattled their finances and inflation diminished the value of the money they get from the state.

Nevertheless, Democrats cheered the bill's failure on Sunday.

"The Texas Senate is holding teacher pay raises hostage in an attempt to pass a private school voucher scam that will defund our public schools," said state Rep. James Talarico, an Austin-area Democrat. "I'm proud of the bipartisan group of Texas House members who refused to give in to the Senate's scheme."

Also killed in the dark of night was the GOP's sweeping immigration bill to create a new state border police force. State Rep. Ryan Guillen, the Rio Grande City Republican who authored the bill, confirmed Sunday the chambers were not able to work out their differences over the legislation after the Senate added provisions to instill harsher penalties for immigration-related offenses. The Senate's version of House Bill 7 also included pieces of other failed Senate bills to create a mandatory 10-year minimum sentence for human smugglers and make it a state crime for migrants to enter the state anywhere but a port of entry. Such entries are already a federal crime though, unlike state police, federal agents process those who request asylum differently than other people caught crossing the border illegally.

Failing to reach a deal on property tax savings, though, would be the most embarrassing. Legislators came to Austin this year with a massive, once-in-a-lifetime budget surplus and made big promises to use that money for property tax cuts. Abbott made property taxes a cornerstone of his reelection campaign and pledged to use half of the state's \$32.7 billion surplus for tax cuts.

"As I travel across Texas, there's one thing I hear loud and clear: Property taxes are suffocating Texans. We must fix that this session," Abbott said in his state of the state speech in February. "Hardworking Texans produced the largest budget surplus in Texas history. That money belongs to the taxpayers. We should return it to you with the largest property tax cut in the history of Texas."

The two chambers agreed to spend \$17.6 billion on tax cuts as part of the state's spending plan for the next two years, which includes \$12.3 billion in new spending and \$5.3 billion to maintain cuts approved in previous spending. But they didn't figure out a plan for how to dole out the \$12.3 billion in new tax cuts before time ran out.

The chief disagreement came over a proposal pushed by Phelan to tighten the state's cap on annual increases to a home's taxable value from 10% to 5%. House Republicans also wanted to extend the benefit to owners of business properties like grocery stores, apartment complexes and movie theaters, which currently don't have a cap. Phelan backed the idea in response to complaints from homeowners and business owners about their rising appraisals, which they fear will result in higher tax bills. But Patrick and senators vehemently opposed the proposal.

Real estate and tax policy experts warned the tighter cap would encourage people to hold on to their homes for an overall longer period of time, pushing down the state's housing supply and driving up housing costs. Business groups also opposed the idea, arguing it would create an unfair playing field among businesses.

Meanwhile, Senate Republicans proposed pushing to boost the state's homestead exemption on school district taxes from \$40,000 to \$70,000, with another \$20,000 bump for seniors. The Senate's \$16.5 billion tax-cut package would've also provided tax credits for businesses.

Both chambers agreed that the state should send more money to school districts in order to drive down tax rates, though they couldn't agree on how much. And to try to convince Senate Republicans to accept the tighter appraisal cap, the House proposed raising the state's homestead exemption to \$100,000 for most homeowners — a dream Patrick has publicly mused about — and to \$110,000 for seniors. But the House's proposal was a no-go for the Senate.

A few other bills also were rescued by last minute negotiations. Lawmakers distributed an agreement on Senate Bill

2627 more than 18 hours after the deadline to do so. Both chambers voted to send the bill to the governor not long after. It will create a low- or no-interest loan program funded by the state for companies that wanted to build or upgrade power plants. It also would pay a bonus to companies that get the new plants connected to the grid within a certain amount of time. Lawmakers set aside \$5 billion in the budget to fund the proposal in case it passed.

A similar maneuver happened with House Bill 5, which creates a new economic incentives package to help lure large companies to the state. A compromise was reached more than 18 hours past the deadline, and then lawmakers rushed to suspend the rules and send them to the governor.

The goal was to create a package to address the shortcomings of a program known as Chapter 313 that was allowed to expire in December after 20 years of offering billions of dollars in school property tax abatements. Critics complained it caused massive inequity in schools and amounted to a corporate welfare program that allowed rich companies to break their promises about job creation. But its supporters said some version was vital to keep Texas' competitive business edge.

Both the tax incentive plan and the grid bill passed both chambers by wide margins.

Karen Brooks Harper and Emily Foxhall contributed to this story.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

McCullough and Joshua Fechter, J. (2023, May 28). Republican priorities on school choice, border fail, but late-night compromises resurrect others - Rushed agreements and suspended rules rescue legislation on the electric grid and economic incentives for companies, and work is still being done on a property tax proposal.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/191D263484D263E8>.

**Gov. Greg Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan join forces on property taxes. It might help the push for school vouchers. - Phelan announced the formation of a House committee that could set the tone in favor of vouchers ahead of an expected special session on education. The move comes weeks after Abbott sided with Phelan on a plan to lower property taxes.**

June 14, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1096 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

This year's regular legislative session ended with nothing to show for two of Gov. Greg Abbott's priorities: property tax cuts and school vouchers. But an unusual alignment between Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan on how to trim property taxes might help carve a path forward on both fronts.

Phelan announced Monday the creation of a 15-member committee that will look into "educational opportunities" for Texas' schoolchildren ahead of an expected special session to revisit the discussion on vouchers, which would let parents use taxpayer money to send their kids to private schools. The committee's first task will be to file a report that lists the "menu of choices" related to learning currently available to students and proposes additional options. The report will be due on Aug. 11.

"With a special session on education matters all but certain, the select committee will begin working immediately to develop a workable roadmap for legislation in the House," Phelan wrote in a tweet.

It remains to be seen whether Phelan's new education committee will help the House move forward on school vouchers, which the lower chamber has opposed for decades.

Phelan's announcement comes weeks after he and Abbott banded together in support of a business-friendly plan to lower property taxes.

As the regular session concluded with a stalemate between the House and the Senate over how to cut property taxes, Phelan announced a new House proposal backed by Abbott that would send \$12.3 billion to school districts so they can lower their tax rates — an idea referred to as tax rate "compression."

That marked a trench line between them and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who has been staunch in his support of a measure that would put the same amount of money toward property tax cuts but would use some of it for compression and the rest to raise the state's homestead exemption, which would lower the amount of a home's value that can be taxed to pay for public schools.

During a special session on property taxes that immediately followed the regular session, Phelan refused to negotiate with the Senate, saying the upper chamber's proposal did not align with the governor's instructions to solely discuss a property tax cut measure that focused on compression. Abbott appears to have softened his stance and has been encouraging the House and Senate to strike a deal.

Abbott and Phelan's partnership on property taxes might also yield benefits in the push for school vouchers.

Passing a voucher-like program was a top priority for Abbott, who toured the state advocating for the issue, and Patrick, who led the swift passage of the Texas Senate's main voucher proposal. Phelan was mostly noncommittal on the question of school vouchers during the regular session.

But the proposal stagnated in the House, where Democrats and Republicans have often come together to kill any legislation that would establish a voucher-like program, which they see as a threat to the state's public education system.

Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, made one last effort to pass a voucher-like program by adding one to the Senate's version House Bill 100, the lower chamber's \$4.5 billion school finance bill. The proposal would have provided a modest influx of funds to schools for teacher raises and other operational expenses, but ultimately died in the final days of the regular session after the House would not compromise on school vouchers.

"I am truly sorry HB 100 did not pass, but in the end I believe students, teachers, and schools are better off with current law than they would be if we accept what the Senate is offering," state Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian, wrote in a press release at the time. "The Governor likes to threaten special sessions, well my opinion is that I stand ready."

It is unclear whether support from Phelan could change the tide for school vouchers in the House.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, who was named to the new committee, said Texans have been fighting off "voucher scams for decades" and is confident the House will continue to do so.

"I'm proud of the bipartisan coalition that defeated vouchers in the regular session," he said. We will continue defending our public schools in any special sessions that are called."

Shannon Holmes, executive director of the Association of Texas Professional Educators, an organization that opposes vouchers, said the Legislature should not be tying school vouchers and funding for public schools together.

"The need to meaningfully support educators and educational institutions should stand on its own. In fact, the Legislature has a constitutional duty to do just that," he said. "The Legislature doesn't have a constitutional duty to fund private schools."

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, who chaired the education committee during the regular session, will lead the new committee. Buckley tried to pass a compromise on school vouchers by narrowing the program in the Senate's priority bill, but the proposal died in committee after Abbott said he would veto it for its limited scope.

The committee will also be able to make recommendations on how to improve educational outcomes, modernize assessments and accountability systems and "meaningfully support educators." Lawmakers left the regular session without giving schools money for teacher raises or to balance their budgets, despite having a historic \$32.7 billion budget surplus in hand.

Mandy Drogin, campaign director of an education initiative for the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation, praised the selection of Buckley as the chair as he will pick up the work left over from the regular session.

"Now is the time to ensure that Texans have an education system that empowers parents with the freedom to select the best education for their child and provides all students with the highest-quality education possible," Drogin said.

Disclosure: Association of Texas Professional Educators and Texas Public Policy Foundation have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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Go behind the headlines with newly announced speakers at the 2023 Texas Tribune Festival, in downtown Austin from Sept. 21-23. Join them to get their take on what's next for Texas and the nation.

Correction, June 15, 2023 at 2:18 p.m. :An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated that state Rep. Brad Buckley added an education savings account program to House Bill 100 in a last-ditch effort to enact school vouchers during the regular legislative session. The proposal was added to the Senate's version of HB 100 by Sen.

- **Citation (apa Style)**

Lopez, B. (2023, June 14). Gov. Greg Abbott and House Speaker Dade Phelan join forces on property taxes. It might help the push for school vouchers. - Phelan announced the formation of a House committee that could set the tone in favor of vouchers ahead of an expected special session on education. The move comes weeks after Abbott sided with Phelan on a plan to lower property taxes.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/19226ACD554626D8>.

## Texas applies to import lower-priced Canadian medications - Texas joins a handful of states turn to the north for cheaper drugs. But feds have been slow to approve requests, three years after giving initial OK.

August 29, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Karen Brooks Harper | Section: News | 1129 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texans struggling with skyrocketing medication costs could see relief under a new program that allows distributors to import cheaper drugs from Canada.

House Bill 25 creates the "Wholesale Prescription Drug Importation Program." The state's Health and Human Services Commission would contract with Canadian drug wholesalers and suppliers to bring safe, eligible prescription drugs to Texas consumers at prices far cheaper than U.S. wholesalers.

Although the law technically goes into effect on Sept. 1, federal drug regulators are moving at a glacial pace to set up programs with the states that want them. Texas won't have its program fully designed until next year, much less approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and implemented, state health officials say.

The Texas bill comes three years after former President Donald Trump authorized the safe importation of pharmaceuticals. Texas will join a handful of states that have applied for partnerships with Canada. So far, no state has been allowed to import a single dose from Canadian wholesalers.

Supporters of the program hope the introduction of a plan by Texas, the largest state so far to show interest in the program, will put pressure on the FDA to move on those applications.

With wholesale costs lower, prices at the register would be driven down, said Texas state Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, the bill's author.

The U.S. currently has a closed distribution system, in which retailers can only purchase medication from U.S. wholesalers — including those prescription drugs manufactured in another country — and does not allow any state discretion on which drugs to bring in.

The bill changes that only in the case of Canada, which has food and drug regulations and a drug track-and-trace system like those used by the U.S. to keep the supply chain secure.

The Texas measure passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in both the House and Senate.

State budget analysts say that the program will cost \$20 million per year to administer, including hiring 25 people to run it. Other costs or benefits to the state cannot be determined yet, analysts say.

States are becoming increasingly impatient to get the program rolling after it was federally authorized in 2020.

When the program wasn't implemented by 2021, President Biden directed the FDA to speed up the process. Florida, among the first states to apply for the program, has sued the FDA for its inaction.

Republican lawmakers who backed the plan said the risks to people who can't afford the American medicines far outweigh the potential risks of importing those drugs.

"It's got to feel weird to see President Trump and President Biden on the same page ... but it is so true," said Texas House Human Services Committee Chair James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, who supported the bill. "And honestly there's probably other countries that we need to look at as well, but I think this is a great start."

U.S. prescription drug prices are among the highest in the world and, by some calculations, around three times more expensive than in Canada, where basic health care is taxpayer-subsidized. The United States is already the world's leading importer of pharmaceuticals.

Canada does not include pharmaceutical coverage in its universal health care coverage, but it has regulated brand-name wholesale drug prices since the 1980s. The U.S. does not.

About one-fourth of U.S. adults say it's difficult to afford their prescriptions, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, and some estimates put that number at one-third. High drug prices disproportionately impact lower-income people and people of color — including Black and Hispanic people who are less likely to have health insurance than white Americans.

The Texas bill was roundly opposed by the pharmaceutical industry, which argues that a state-based program complicates streamlined federal processes by letting state officials or importers negotiate their own prices, pick their own drugs for the program, and take part in the security and labeling process.

Industry representatives also say it could threaten the security of the nation's drug supply chain by sidestepping the U.S. government's own track-and-trace distribution system, which documents a drug's path from its earliest ingredients to the drugstore shelves.

Opponents also argued that the program would be difficult to implement because Canada is struggling with a shortage of some medicines and likely wouldn't be able to meet the demand for them in the U.S.

The importation program has the backing of a range of Texas medical groups and health advocates — from the progressive group Every Texan, which advocates for the needs of lower-income residents, to hard-right conservative organization Texas Public Policy Foundation. The Texas Association of Health Plans, the AARP and Texans Care for Children also supports the bill.

Supporters dismissed pharma industry concerns as a fear of competition that would eat into their profits.

The argument that it sidesteps safety standards is false, Talarico said.

The only country included in the new federally authorized program is Canada, and the drugs imported from wholesalers in that country would have already been subject to their own secure tracking system before they ever hit the U.S., Talarico said. When they do, that information is available to the importer, who contracts with a lab to check it and then sends the Canadian tracking information and the results of the lab testing to the FDA — which runs it through its own standards before approving it for sale in the U.S.

Drugs from foreign countries are clearly being used safely and effectively by their own citizens, Frank said in the hearing.

"We're not seeing, in Europe and Canada, people falling over because their drugs aren't working," he said.

To the contrary, it's Americans who are dying because they can't get their medicines at all, Talarico said.

A recent study predicted that among Medicare beneficiaries alone, some 1.1 million older Americans would die prematurely over the next decade because they couldn't afford to take their medicines.

"As we speak, our constituents are choosing between their medication and their rent, their medication and their groceries ... and going without," Talarico said. "This is a life-threatening, dangerous status quo."

Disclosure: AARP, Every Texan, Texans Care for Children, Texas Association of Health Plans and Texas Public Policy Foundation have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is

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The full program is now LIVE for the 2023 Texas Tribune Festival, happening Sept. 21-23 in Austin. Explore the program featuring more than 100 unforgettable conversations coming to TribFest. Panel topics include the biggest 2024 races and what's ahead, how big cities in Texas and around the country are changing, the integrity of upcoming elections and so much more. See the full program.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Brooks Harper, K. (2023, August 29). Texas applies to import lower-priced Canadian medications - Texas joins a handful of states turn to the north for cheaper drugs. But feds have been slow to approve requests, three years after giving initial OK.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/193B75E0D994DBD0>.

## Compromise or pick a side? Texas House members offer preview of school vouchers debate ahead of special session - Lawmakers at a Texas Tribune Fest panel found common ground on school funding and teacher pay but took starkly different stances on "school choice."

September 23, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Alejandro Serrano | Section: News | 531 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

Three Texas state representatives said Saturday that a looming special legislative session on education could bring increased school funding and teacher pay — two popular and urgent ideas for many public schools facing a teacher shortage.

But that's about all the three agreed on during a Texas Tribune Festival panel about "school choice," a proposal to let parents take their kids out of public schools and enroll them into private ones using taxpayers' money — also often referred to as school vouchers.

The matter is a legislative priority of Gov. Greg Abbott, who has promised political consequences for lawmakers who stand in the way of a bill's passage. The special legislative session is expected to begin next month.

Nodding the governor's persistence, Democratic Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins, of San Antonio, said lawmakers should be open to negotiate and focus on securing what they want out of the deal if a "school choice" bill is inevitable. She said teachers need to be paid better and the basic amount of money schools receive per student should increase.

"Our majority party wants vouchers. That's a fact. Our state leadership wants vouchers. That's a fact," Gervin-Hawkins said. "We can continue to fight and waste a lot of time fighting and see who comes out winning but guess who's losing? Our teachers who are trying to pay their rent. Who's losing? Our children who are not getting what they need."

Gervin-Hawkins' willingness to compromise on one of the most polarizing issues in the state juxtaposed the stance of her Democratic colleague Rep. James Talarico of Austin, who said vouchers of any size would be a threat to public education. Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, on the other hand, said such a school voucher program would give parents more power to make decisions about their children's education.

"Fellas, I hear ya," Gervin-Hawkins told her two colleagues. "But the reality is I see every day — every day — our teachers who need that increase and we need to make that happen."

Talarico said the issue represented such a threat to public education that it requires lawmakers to pick sides.

"We are facing a historic crisis in our schools," he said. "Compromise is not a virtue when our kids are on the line and when our teachers are on the line."

When asked about concerns of parents of children with disabilities, Frank said parents should have the choice to place their child in another school.

"If your needs are being met in a public school, why would you ever move them?" he said. "You're only going to move them if you think they're going to be better served. That's the only reason you're going to move them. I don't know how giving them an option of doing that is going to hurt them."

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As The Texas Tribune's signature event of the year, The Texas Tribune Festival brings Texans closer to politics,

policy and the day's news from Texas and beyond. Browse on-demand recordings and catch up on the biggest headlines from Festival events at the Tribune's Festival news page.

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Serrano, A. (2023, September 23). Compromise or pick a side? Texas House members offer preview of school vouchers debate ahead of special session - Lawmakers at a Texas Tribune Fest panel found common ground on school funding and teacher pay but took starkly different stances on "school choice.". *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1944031381E6C548>.

## 'They just tried to scare us': Anti-abortion centers teach sex ed inside some Texas public schools - The groups work in dozens of school districts across the state, but some public health experts say their curricula can be misleading and biased.

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When Sarah Anderson travels to Texas middle schools to teach sex education, she brings props: a toy baby to represent unplanned pregnancy, a snake for bacterial infections, a pregnancy test for infertility, a skeleton for AIDS and cancer.

The students are told that if they have sex before marriage, emotional risks include depression, guilt and anxiety. They're taught that condoms — while often labeled as a method for "safe sex" — do not keep them safe from pregnancy or sometimes-incurable sexually transmitted infections.

Her curriculum for high schoolers, meanwhile, says that people who "go from sex partner to sex partner are causing their brains to mold and gel so that it eventually begins accepting that sexual pattern as normal." This, the curriculum says, could "interfere with the development of the neurological circuits" needed for a long-term relationship.

Anderson isn't a school district employee. She works for the South Texas Pregnancy Care Center in Seguin, a group founded in 2001 to counsel women against getting abortions. The organization is one of dozens of crisis pregnancy centers across the state that send employees into schools to talk to students and, in some cases, teach sex education classes.

These groups, also known as pregnancy resource centers, began to sprout around the country in the late 1960s as states passed laws legalizing abortion. Sex education has sometimes been a feature of their work. But in Texas, which has among the most crisis pregnancy centers of any state and where state health standards dictate that sex education classes emphasize abstinence, those sex ed efforts are particularly widespread. A Hechinger Report investigation identified more than 35 examples of these centers involved in dozens of school districts across Texas, and the actual number is likely higher.

With the U.S. Supreme Court overturning *Roe v. Wade* last summer and the near-total ban on abortion in Texas, crisis pregnancy centers are poised to play an even bigger role going forward. In April, the Texas Legislature approved \$165 million over two years for the organizations through its Alternatives to Abortion program (recently rebranded as Thriving Texas Families), more than double the 2019 budgeted amount. The money funds the groups' overall work, not sex ed, but went to at least 14 of the centers identified by Hechinger as working in schools.

The growing school-based work of some centers comes despite scant evidence that the sex ed they provide helps reduce teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted infections. According to public health experts, the approaches many of these groups take — such as emphasizing risks, inundating students with statistics and showing graphic pictures of STIs — aren't effective in preventing or changing behavior. Instead, they can cause students to stop absorbing information that might help them make informed decisions about sex in the future.

"You'll tend to see that kind of overload on facts [that] steer into fear," said Leslie Kantor, chair of the Department of Urban-Global Public Health at the Rutgers School of Public Health, in New Jersey. "We know very very well across many many health issues this is not what changes human behavior."

Staff of crisis pregnancy centers argue that their approach works: Their students report directly to them or in internal surveys that they've changed their minds about having sex. Staff also say that their connections with schools grew out of a desire to teach young people how to avoid unplanned pregnancies in the first place,

intervening before teens need their services. They say abstinence is the best, most effective way to prevent any risks associated with having sex and that they also teach students about healthy relationships and planning for their futures.

"We deal with unexpected pregnancies," said Jennifer Shelton, the executive director of Real Options, a pregnancy resource center in Allen, which has taught sex ed in more than a dozen public school districts. "The best way to deal with that is at the beginning of the decision-making process."

In Texas, sex education typically takes up just a few hours of instruction a year in a handful of grades, and many school districts use outside groups and online providers rather than hiring experts in-house or training their own staff. Sex ed curricula are recommended by councils made up primarily of parents and community members. Many pregnancy center programs, which tend to follow a "sexual risk avoidance" approach that in addition to stressing abstinence also includes discussion of birth control and the signs and symptoms of STIs, are offered for free and align with the Texas state standards requiring that abstinence be promoted as the "preferred choice."

But some health experts, legislators and students say crisis pregnancy centers, which have been accused of offering women misleading or inaccurate information about abortion risks, have no place in public schools. They view the sex ed courses as a stealth way for the organizations to develop connections to teens so the young people will turn to crisis pregnancy centers if they do become pregnant later.

State representative and former middle school teacher James Talarico has repeatedly introduced legislation to require all Texas districts to teach medically accurate sex education. "I'm concerned that our state is outsourcing sex education to outside groups with extreme political ideologies," said Talarico, a Democrat who serves north Austin and surrounding areas. "If they are withholding information or emphasizing certain information to push an agenda on our kids, then that's inappropriate."

For three years as a student in Lewisville Independent School District, near Dallas, Nimisha Srikanth was taught by staffers of 180 Degrees, the education arm of Real Options.

When she was in eighth grade, the group gave each student a cup and had them pour water back and forth, she said. The exercise was supposed to represent how easily they could become infected with an STI. Srikanth, who graduated from high school in 2019, said the classmates treated it as a joke and purposefully tried to maximize "infections."

In ninth grade, a lesson quickly derailed when the presenter started talking about how abstinence was best, and someone quipped, "I guess it's too late for me." The room erupted in laughter. The teacher "lost everybody's attention after that," Srikanth recalled.

Each year, she said, the message was always the same: "Don't have sex before marriage. If you do, bad things will happen," Srikanth said. "It's so much fear-based, very opinion-based."

180 Degrees is among the state's most widespread crisis pregnancy center-affiliated sex ed programs, noting on its website that it has sent presenters to 14 districts in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. In 2019, Real Options reached 18,329 students "with education presentations about sexual purity," according to its federal tax filing.

In an emailed statement, Amanda Brim, the Lewisville district's chief communications officer, said that 180 Degrees was never adopted districtwide, but individual schools could choose to use the program. In 2022, she wrote, Lewisville adopted a new sex ed program to meet updated state standards, which went into effect that year.

Shelton, who taught for 180 Degrees for many years, said that her program avoids scare tactics, even if some of the statistics they share may be alarming, and that they are truthful with students about the risks associated with having sex. The program, she noted, covers many different topics beyond abstinence, including birth control, STIs and the emotional side to sex and relationships.

Shelton said she believes that "no matter what side" people are on, they should agree abstinence is the best choice to prevent pregnancy and STIs. "We believe in raising the standard for young people," she said. "They can and most likely will rise to that occasion."

The sex ed curriculum of 180 Degrees was one of six obtained by The Hechinger Report through public records requests and reviews of school and center websites. All of the pregnancy center curricula emphasize the potential harms of having sex and advocate waiting until marriage, suggesting that doing so will eliminate all risk.

Seventh graders in 180 Degrees classes, according to a presentation for parents, are taught that there are 27 different STIs and that, with their various strains, the total number of sexually transmitted diseases nears 1,000. The curriculum used by South Texas Pregnancy Care Center, called SHARE, lists the potential consequences of STIs as pain and suffering, damage to organs, damage to babies, death, embarrassment and rejection.

LifeGuard, the sex ed program affiliated with the crisis pregnancy center The Source, in Austin and Houston, includes a series of graphic photos to give "a medically accurate understanding of how these STIs can impact a person's health."

"They just tried to scare us," said Samuel Ingram, a 2020 graduate of the Leander Independent School District, which says that it has used LifeGuard since 2005. Ingram added that he wished he had been given useful information on safe sex instead of being told "here's what gonorrhea looks like, and you could have it forever."

LifeGuard, whose curriculum says that it reaches 15,000 students annually, declined to comment for this article. Staff instructed two school districts not to provide copies of the group's curriculum in response to Hechinger's public records request. They also wrote to the attorney general seeking an exemption to the records law on the grounds that release of the material would "cause competitive harm" and that the curriculum contained trade secrets. The exemption was denied.

Alicia Westcot, Leander's senior director of math, science and humanities, wrote in an email that the district uses LifeGuard because the program follows state health standards and has "created engaging content for our students at all grade levels." She added that teachers have given positive feedback about having content experts come in to teach the courses.

Four public health experts who reviewed portions of the crisis pregnancy center curricula at the request of The Hechinger Report said the programs frequently fail to provide important context for students to assess the likelihood of various risks and that some parts were biased or misleading, including messaging on contraception effectiveness.

The South Texas Pregnancy Care Center's SHARE script, for example, instructs educators to tell students that teens don't use condoms consistently because their brain is not fully developed. A copy of LifeGuard's eighth grade curriculum instructs the presenter to read quickly through a list of bullet points about correct condom use to emphasize their number and then say, "Are you getting the idea of how consistent and correct use could be challenging?"

While research on the effectiveness of sex ed is difficult to conduct, major medical organizations recommend comprehensive sex education — which typically discusses the benefits of delaying sexual intercourse along with information on methods for preventing pregnancy and STIs, gender identity and consent. They note that studies suggest such courses are more effective than abstinence-only programs at reducing teen pregnancy rates and increasing condom use if young people do choose to have sex, and that comprehensive sex ed produces other benefits, including improved interpersonal skills.

The sexual risk-avoidance approach that many crisis pregnancy centers use covers some content beyond abstinence. But health experts say the programs' focus on the negative consequences of having sex before marriage echo strict abstinence-only approaches.

They say this focus misses the chance to impart useful information and skills. Rather than presenting statistic after statistic about the ubiquitousness of STIs, for example, educators should make sure students feel equipped to talk with potential partners about protection, said Kantor.

"If I have limited time with a young person, am I going to spend that time giving them a bunch of facts that are not very relevant to them in that moment, that frankly, if they were interested, they could look up on their phone?" Kantor said. Instructors "are making an unfortunate decision to spend precious time with a young person who really needs skills giving out what are probably going to be useless pieces of information."

In 2020, The Open Door, a crisis pregnancy center in Cisco and Breckenridge, tried something new. Its staff brought a mobile ultrasound unit and a volunteer pregnant woman to a school to perform a live ultrasound in front of students.

Today, the center works with middle and high schoolers in 15 school districts in central Texas, providing education on sexuality and relationships and in some cases incorporating live ultrasounds into the instruction.

"When we are able to show them a baby moving in the womb, it becomes a lot more tangible," said Shannon Thompson, The Open Door's executive director. "This baby has its own heartbeat and fingers and toes and eyes and nose and is already developing a personality. When they can see that, suddenly things are different for them. It has planted a seed of life."

The live ultrasounds are part of a larger effort led by Thompson to "change the culture" beyond her organization's walls, she said, rather than simply waiting for clients to come to them. Her staff tries to reach community members before they engage in "risky behavior," teaching young people to feel empowered to "say no and mean it," while also introducing her group as a safe place for people to turn to if they do get in trouble or become pregnant.

To that end, The Open Door acquired a curriculum and hired an education liaison to teach sex ed in schools. Staffers have built relationships with school counselors, juvenile departments and camps, and they throw an annual back-to-school bash. This year, they adopted an additional curriculum to reach more grade levels and added a second education liaison to their staff, Thompson said.

Under her leadership, Open Doors' state funding is rising: In 2022, it received nearly \$380,000 via the Alternatives to Abortion program, compared with approximately \$102,000 in 2019.

Thompson said her group doesn't engage in scare tactics, but rather focuses on "empowering" students to make smart decisions and recognize their self-worth by postponing sex.

"Student education has become a very, very important part of our focus," Thompson said in April during a panel on her organization's work at the annual meeting of Heartbeat International, a national network of pregnancy resource centers. "It's a great way for us to begin to instill and teach and to educate these individuals on the pro-life message."

Other pregnancy center sex ed programs also use talking points associated with the anti-abortion movement and encourage students to visit their clinics.

The LifeGuard eighth grade curriculum, for instance, includes a game about fetal development in which students guess whether certain developmental milestones — such as the heart starting to beat and the brain beginning to function — occur at four, six or eight weeks.

LifeGuard programs direct students to the affiliated clinic, The Source, if they need pregnancy tests or STI testing. "There are places like The Source that can provide all the information needed to make an informed decision about an unexpected pregnancy," the curriculum reads.

The Source received nearly \$1.4 million in Alternatives to Abortion funding in 2022. Yet LifeGuard describes itself to

parents and students as an "apolitical" program that doesn't take a stance on controversial issues. Indeed, none of the crisis pregnancy center school curricula reviewed by The Hechinger Report contained explicit religious or anti-abortion content.

But the groups do emphasize their religious values in other aspects of their operations, sometimes stipulating that job applicants be Christian and hold certain values. A LifeGuard job ad for a curriculum specialist noted that the new hire must have a "strong commitment and dedication to the sanctity of human life and sexual abstinence." A job posting for an abstinence educator from 180 Degrees listed the top qualification as: "Pro-Life, Christ follower, and believes that the Bible is the inerrant word of God."

Shelton of 180 Degrees said that while religion is "very important to us personally," staff never bring "religious rhetoric" to the classroom or discuss abortion pros and cons, out of respect for students and a recognition that many come from different backgrounds. Similarly, Thompson said her group shares the "pro-life" message as "one option" but doesn't take a "political stance" in schools.

Speaking at the Heartbeat International conference, Thompson noted that it was, in fact, important for organizations like hers to avoid alienating young people with an anti-abortion, religious message.

"If young women who could be your clients see you waving the pro-life flag loud and proud, remember they could feel like they can't come to you," said Thompson. "They are more likely to open up with you when they have a relationship with you, when they feel comfortable with you and feel like they can trust you."

Talarico, meanwhile, says it's not enough for organizations to simply say that they are unbiased in the classroom. "There is no public school district in the state of Texas that can legally screen educators based on their political beliefs," he said. "The fact that these organizations are hand-picking people that align with their extreme ideology should be incredibly concerning."

The South Texas Pregnancy Care Center assures parents and educators that the religious beliefs that drive the group's work do not influence its education program, SHARE.

"There is overlap between the message of abstinence from a health standpoint and the message of abstinence from a faith standpoint," Anderson, the program's lead teacher, said in a presentation to the Yorktown school district's School Health Advisory Council, or SHAC, in spring 2022. "But that doesn't discredit its value as the best message to give young people when it comes to their health," she added. (Anderson declined interview requests for this story, but wrote in an email that many school districts had vetted and were happy with the SHARE curriculum and that it complied with state health standards.)

Part of Anderson's job is to travel across central Texas attending SHAC meetings and pitching members, most of whom are district parents, on the advantages of choosing her sex ed program. The councils then make official recommendations to their school boards.

And she's been successful. South Texas Pregnancy Care Center's SHARE program started in three schools in 2016; by the 2021-22 school year, two years after Anderson joined, its teachers were presenting in 10 schools.

After the 2022 meeting in Yorktown, she convinced the district to use SHARE, and this year added Seguin to the program's growing list of districts.

In that school district, Anderson plays an additional role — she serves on the SHAC. In April, at the group's regular meeting, she encouraged its members to vote to endorse her SHARE curriculum, noting that it was one of just two under the council's review that aligned with the state health standards. Moments later, council members voted to winnow their choices to those two, and a month later decided to officially recommend Anderson's program.

The case was one of two identified by The Hechinger Report of a pregnancy center employee who serves on a SHAC voting in favor of her own course, in what Talarico said appeared to be a "clear conflict of interest." He said he plans

to raise the issue with his colleagues to explore whether it needs to be addressed legislatively.

Sean Hoffman, communications officer for the Seguin district, said that there was no evidence that Anderson had undue influence on the decision.

"School districts and school boards have to rely on the pulse of their communities," he said, adding that it can be difficult to find enough people to serve on SHACs and that the process of evaluating sex ed curricula took more than a year. "When folks come forward and say they want to serve, we're going to accept them with the knowledge that the intent is to come on and do what's best."

Like many pregnancy resource centers, the South Texas Pregnancy Care Center has been expanding its work in the wake of the fall of Roe. This spring, it started construction on a new building, supported, in part, by donations from Seguin nonprofits and agencies. A construction class at Seguin High School is building the interior walls.

Demand for its services is rising too. The center previously averaged around 20 pregnancy tests a month. In January 2023, it administered 41 tests, Janice Weaver, the group's executive director, said at a city council meeting in February. "There is a big need in Seguin, and we are so excited about the possibility of a new building," she said.

Other groups, including The Open Door, are starting prenatal care units, to position themselves as a resource for more women who need medical help. Open Door's Thompson said the group is located in a medical desert, and it will help provide transportation for pregnant women to prenatal appointments and other support. "Abortion basically being outlawed in the state of Texas did not change the circumstances of the women who find themselves pregnant and scared and not knowing what their future looks like," said Thompson. "If anything, it's increased the need."

Molly Davis is a senior at Texas A&M Corpus Christi and president of the college's Islander Feminists club, which is leading a campaign against a crisis pregnancy center that's expanding near campus. She said she's troubled by the growing role of the groups in Texas and sees their work in schools as being of a piece with their larger efforts to persuade people, sometimes through misinformation, to carry pregnancies to term.

"It makes me so angry to see that crisis pregnancy centers are leading sexual education in the state and not healthcare professionals," said Davis, who has classmates who were taught by the groups. "They are taking advantage of one of the most vulnerable populations we have, which is young people. ... They are teaching young people things to specifically lead them down roads they want them to walk down."

Texas has the ninth-highest teen birth rate of any state, 20.3 births per 1,000 females ages 15 to 19. And while teen birthrates have been falling in the U.S. as a whole since 1991, they remain among the highest in the developed world.

Ingram, the student from Leander, recalls that several of his classmates went on to become pregnant in high school.

"I feel like it was almost a disservice to us," Ingram, now a senior at Texas A&M Corpus Christi where he is also a member of the Islander Feminists, said of the sex ed he received. "They might have gotten what they wanted and people to practice abstinence, but the people who didn't weren't really well-equipped with super good information."

Srikanth, meanwhile, says she didn't learn useful information until she got to college at Texas A&M University and joined the campus group FREE (Feminists for Reproductive Equity And Education) Aggies.

On a Monday morning in May, Srikanth spent two hours giving out free condoms, dental dams, pregnancy tests and Plan B in the student center. She assured people stopping by the table that they were in a "no judgment zone," mindful that some of them likely had also had years of messages that sex was dirty and would give them a disease.

Those middle and high school experiences helped shape her career plans: This fall, she began a master's program

at Yale University and hopes to work in the areas of sexual and reproductive health and justice.

She said, "I want people to have better information than I did growing up."

Disclosure: Texas A&M University has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

This story about sex education curriculum was produced by The Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education. Sign up for the Hechinger newsletter.

Correction, Oct. 6, 2023 at 8:32 a.m. :This story has been updated with correct information on the Alternatives to Abortion program's funding details and rebranded name.

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**Education savings accounts and illegal immigration will be part of third special legislative session's focus - Gov. Greg Abbott announced the items lawmakers can consider when they return Monday. His agenda also includes COVID vaccine mandates and the Colony Ridge development outside Houston.**

October 5, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 984 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Gov. Greg Abbott on Thursday released his agenda for the third legislative special session of the year, asking lawmakers to pass "school choice" and further crack down on illegal immigration. The special session starts at 1 p.m. Monday.

Abbott also asked lawmakers to outlaw COVID-19 vaccine mandates by private employers.

"I am bringing the Texas Legislature back for Special Session #3 to continue building on the achievements we accomplished during the 88th Regular Legislative Session and two special sessions this summer," Abbott said in a statement.

The special session has long been expected, but it comes at a tense time in Texas politics. Last month, the state Senate acquitted Attorney General Ken Paxton in his impeachment trial, ratcheting up tensions with the House that overwhelmingly voted to impeach him in May. And the special session starts about a month before candidate filing begins for the March primary, heightening implications for members' reelection prospects.

Abbott has been pushing all year for legislation that would allow parents to use taxpayer funds to help pay for private school tuition, home schooling expenses or private tutoring. He prioritized it during the regular session, but it did not advance out of the House, where Democrats and rural Republicans have long resisted it.

Abbott's agenda specifically calls for "education savings accounts for all Texas schoolchildren," or taxpayer-funded accounts that parents could use to subsidize alternative education costs.

"Together, we will chart a brighter future for all Texas children by empowering parents to choose the best education option for their child," Abbott said.

Notably, Abbott's agenda does not include any other education issues. That is despite the fact that lawmakers also failed during the regular session to deliver teacher pay raises and an increase in per-student funding earlier this year. Those proposals did not make it across the finish line after getting tied to Abbott's push for education savings accounts.

Democrats quickly responded to Abbott's call for education savings accounts.

"Today, there are schools in my district and all across Texas at risk of closure because the governor is holding public school funding hostage to pass his private school voucher scam," state Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said in a statement. "It's clear Greg Abbott is more interested in doing the bidding of the billionaire mega donors pushing this scam than in serving the people of Texas."

It had also become clear in recent weeks that Abbott would put border security on the call. His agenda revives some proposals that were unsuccessful during the regular session, like increasing human-smuggling penalties and creating a state criminal offense for illegal entry from a foreign country.

But Abbott also included a fresher topic on the call: Colony Ridge, the massive residential settlement north of Houston that conservative media has portrayed as a haven for illegal immigration. The developer, a major GOP

donor named Trey Harris, has fiercely pushed back on the allegations and invited all lawmakers to tour the community Thursday.

It remains unclear what exactly Abbott wants lawmakers to do with regard to Colony Ridge, though. His agenda only calls for "legislation concerning public safety, security, environmental quality, and property ownership in areas like" Colony Ridge.

As for the item on COVID-19 vaccine mandates, Abbott successfully sought a law earlier this year prohibiting such requirements by public entities, like school districts. But it did not extend to private employers, fueling some angst on the right.

"This is fantastic," Texas GOP Chair Matt Rinaldi posted on X after Abbott announced his agenda. "I did not expect vaccine mandates to be added to the call."

The Senate quickly responded to Abbott's agenda by announcing two committee hearings early next week. The Senate Education Committee is set to meet Tuesday to consider legislation on education savings accounts, while the Finance Committee is scheduled to convene a day earlier to discuss "teacher compensation and funding for public schools." While those topics are not on Abbott's agenda, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has insisted the Legislature has broad authority for what it can consider during a special session — a flashpoint with the governor during the earlier special sessions.

The first two special sessions immediately followed the regular session that ended in late May. Lawmakers spent those two special sessions trying to reach a deal on property tax relief, which they finally struck in mid-July.

Along the way, though, Abbott aggressively used his veto pen to try to force a compromise between the House and Senate. He vetoed 76 bills from the regular session, the second highest tally in state history.

In explaining many of the vetoes, he said the bills could be "reconsidered at a future special session only after property tax relief is passed." The agenda Abbott released Thursday includes none of those bills.

The absence of any items on teacher pay raises or school funding is also conspicuous. After the regular session, Abbott had suggested they would be linked again to education savings accounts in a future special session.

Asked about teacher pay raises in August, Abbott told a reporter he is "fully committed" to such legislation but declined to commit to including it in this special session.

Correction, Oct. 6, 2023 at 11:20 a.m. :Due to an editing error, a previous version of this story misstated how money from education savings accounts can be used. They can help pay for private school tuition, home schooling expenses or private tutoring

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Svitek, P. (2023, October 5). Education savings accounts and illegal immigration will be part of third special legislative session's focus - Gov. Greg Abbott announced the items lawmakers can consider when they return Monday. His agenda also includes COVID vaccine mandates and the Colony Ridge development outside Houston.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1947FBE823715958>.

**Vouchers return this special session — and school funding might be left out. Here's what you need to know. - Gov. Greg Abbott called lawmakers back to Austin to try again to pass education savings accounts, which would let families use state funds to pay for their children's private schooling. Teacher pay was not part of his agenda.**

October 6, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1959 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas lawmakers will return to Austin on Monday for their second attempt this year to pass a statewide school voucher program, but whether they'll seek to give schools additional funding — the other big education issue left pending during this year's regular session — is up in the air.

Gov. Greg Abbott called for a special lawmaking session last month and said Thursday one of its focuses will be education savings accounts — a voucher-like program that would give families state money to pay for their children's private schooling.

"Together, we will chart a brighter future for all Texas children by empowering parents to choose the best education option for their child," Abbott said in a statement.

Abbott's agenda — which also included immigration issues and COVID-19 restrictions — did not mention public school funding increases or teacher raises, despite dire teacher shortages across the state and clamoring from cash-strapped schools. Lawmakers came close to passing legislation back in May that would have added billions to school funding and given teachers raises, but it got held up amid negotiations over vouchers.

Lawmakers are free to file legislation in those areas, but some observers say that Abbott's agenda is specific enough to keep any new public school funding off the table. The state constitution says lawmakers can only pass bills related to the governor's agenda items during special sessions.

"Unless Governor Abbott puts public education funding on the special session call at a future time, the Legislature cannot pass legislation that would affect public school funding," said Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University.

Voucher supporters have long sought to establish such a program in the state. They believe many Texas families might be open to leaving the state's public education system after voicing disappointment in recent years with how public schools responded to the pandemic and concerns with how they teach children about race, history and sex. Critics say vouchers would siphon money away from already struggling public schools.

Reaching a compromise in the Legislature may prove to be difficult once again as Democrats and rural Republicans in the House have historically opposed any form of vouchers. They successfully blocked a voucher program during this year's regular session, but at the cost of not passing the measure to provide additional funding for schools to pay for teacher raises and combat rising costs due to inflation.

In the end, many school districts have paid the price. Many school officials have had to adopt deficit budgets, meaning their expenditures outweigh their revenues. Some school districts have dipped into their savings to offer teachers minimal raises, balance their budgets or simply keep the lights on. Others are considering closing some of their campuses altogether to save money.

Even if lawmakers pursue new funding for schools and teachers during the special session, passage would likely depend on a compromise on school vouchers — a tall order considering the widening political gulf between the House and Senate, which has been more supportive of vouchers.

"We need to start off with the reality that school choice was already rejected multiple times by the Texas House," Jones said. "Now, any desire that the House might have had to work with the Senate and the governor was obliterated with the acquittal of Attorney General [Ken] Paxton."

The House impeached Paxton this May; after the Senate acquitted him, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick directly criticized how the House handled the case.

Nevertheless, some believe lawmakers will pass both public school funding and a school voucher program this special session amid increasing political pressure. Abbott has been adamant about a voucher-like program known as education savings accounts, threatening to call for more special sessions if lawmakers fail again to pass a bill he likes and promising political consequences for those who get in the way.

"Education savings accounts and teacher pay [are] on the horizon," said Mandy Drogin, campaign director of an education initiative for the conservative think tank Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Here's what you need to know about what's at stake in Texas education this special session.

### School vouchers

A voucher or "school choice" program is any government mechanism that would allow parents to use taxpayer dollars to send their children to private schools.

The most prominent proposal this year — and the one Abbott endorses — is creating education savings accounts, which are essentially state-managed bank accounts for parents who remove their children from the public education system.

These accounts would give parents access to taxpayer money to pay for educational expenses like private school tuition, homeschooling materials, online schooling or private tutors.

Recent polling shows many Texans support vouchers, but plenty of confusion remains about what they do.

A recent UT/TXP poll showed that 61% of rural respondents expressed support for establishing a voucher program, but that number dropped to 43% when asked if they would support redirecting state tax revenue to private school tuition.

The poll's intention was to show that the wording of the questions made an impact on whether people support school vouchers.

Voucher supporters have made a big push in recent years. A Texas Tribune analysis of campaign contributions shows that the Texas Federation for Children, a pro-school vouchers PAC, spent about \$1.3 million supporting pro-voucher candidates and more than \$600,000 to oppose those against them since June 2020.

The leading education savings account proposal during the regular session was Senate Bill 8, authored by Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe. It would have given families access to up to \$8,000 in taxpayer money per student each year for private schooling and other educational expenses. The program would've given priority access to low-income families and received \$500 million over the next two years.

One of the biggest criticisms opponents raised was that the bill didn't have a mechanism to make sure private schools that receive state funds are held accountable to the same academic standards as public schools.

Creighton said parents' ability to remove their children from any private school they don't like is the ultimate accountability tool. His bill also required that the state comptroller's office audit the program regularly to detect whenever program participants misuse state funds.

But Creighton's bill failed after the House tried to limit its scope. SB 8 called for a voucher program that would've been accessible to most Texas students; the House countered with a program that would've been limited to certain groups of students, like those with disabilities or who are attending failing schools. The new bill never got a vote in the House after Abbott threatened to veto the bill if lawmakers didn't expand its reach.

In a last-ditch effort to pass a voucher program, Creighton attached his broader proposal to House Bill 100, the only school finance bill that advanced during the regular session and would have given aid to schools to pay for teacher raises and combat inflation. The change meant House members would have to greenlight a voucher program in order to approve additional school funding; the lower chamber ultimately decided to say no to both.

It's unclear how lawmakers' positions on school vouchers have changed since the regular session, or whether the special session will end in a compromise or another stalemate.

During a Texas Tribune event in Austin last month, Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, showed he remained firmly against vouchers, and Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, was firmly supportive. Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins, D-San Antonio, showed more willingness to find an agreement, saying neither party must be set in their ways for things to get done.

"Our majority party wants vouchers. That's a fact. Our state leadership wants vouchers. That's a fact," Gervin-Hawkins said. "We can continue to fight and waste a lot of time fighting and see who comes out winning, but guess who's losing? Our teachers who are trying to pay their rent. Who's losing? Our children who are not getting what they need."

#### Public school finance and teacher raises

A House committee report on public education released in August shows that lawmakers in the lower chamber wanted public education funding and teacher raises to be a priority during the special session.

Texas ranks 28th in the nation for teacher pay, which is \$7,652 less than the national average, according to the latest National Education Association report. A Tribune analysis shows that Texas teacher salaries have stagnated over the last decade.

During the regular session, public school advocates asked lawmakers to raise the basic allotment, the base amount of money schools get per student; overhaul the state's school funding formula to account for inflation; and heavily invest in teacher raises.

The main proposal for teacher raises was the doomed HB 100, which would have provided a modest increase to the basic allotment and raised the teacher salary schedule, which dictates the minimum amount teachers should be paid based on their years of experience.

The bill would've also made changes to the core metric used to estimate how much money the state gives to public schools.

In Texas, if a student misses school, their district's attendance average goes down — and so does the amount of money it receives. And in a post-COVID-19 world in which parents are quicker to keep their children home if they're feeling ill, some districts' finances have become more volatile than ever.

Schools have argued that basing school funding on their average student enrollment would give them more stability and let them better plan their budgets. HB 100 would've swapped attendance for enrollment in the school funding formula in some cases.

Lawmakers have given no indication of what kind of school funding proposals they might present during the special session.

## Teacher preparation

Texas schools have been struggling with teacher shortages in recent years. Issues like low pay, excessive overtime, health worries during the pandemic and being caught in the middle of Texas' culture wars have led more teachers to leave the profession.

The Texas Education Agency has noted that the state is struggling to fill its teacher vacancies. Retaining teachers has also become increasingly difficult, and schools are having to refill positions on a yearly basis.

In response, Abbott formed a task force more than a year ago to find ways to fix the shortage. The group met for nearly a year and recommended that lawmakers increase salaries, pass programs to improve teacher preparation and commit to helping teachers spend less time working during their off hours. Those measures would make the profession more lucrative and keep educators from leaving, the task force said.

One proposal that both chambers agreed on to give teachers some relief was House Bill 1605, which went into effect Sept 1. It allocates nearly \$800 million to produce open-source, high-quality instructional materials for teachers in an effort to save them some planning time. The bill also includes provisions that give parents more access to the materials teachers use to instruct their children.

But other proposals in response to the task force's recommendations didn't pass during the regular session. Both the House and the Senate pitched bills that would have provided some teacher raises, allocated funds for training and mentorship programs, and mandated the TEA to conduct a "time study" to take a deeper look at the reasons why teachers are spending so much time completing tasks outside their work hours. But these also died amid the school voucher debate.

Lawmakers might try to address teachers' grievances again during the special session. Creighton has previously said teacher preparation is a topic he intends to revisit.

Disclosure: Rice University and Texas Public Policy Foundation have been financial supporters of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## Texas Senate unveils its priority school voucher bill - The proposal would give families who exit the state's public education system access to \$8,000 of taxpayer money each year to pay for their children's private schooling.

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Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 915 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The Texas Senate unveiled Monday its main bill to establish an education savings account program, a priority for Gov. Greg Abbott this special session.

Senate Bill 1, authored by Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, would allow families access \$8,000 of taxpayer money to pay for private schools and other educational expenses such as uniforms, textbooks, tutoring or transportation among other things.

"Educating the next generation of Texans is a fundamental responsibility, and it is my belief that empowering parents with school choice will encourage competition, innovation and ensure that every student in Texas has the opportunity to find an educational path for their unique needs," Creighton said in a statement.

The state comptroller's office would establish and administer these education savings accounts. The bill seeks to allocate \$500 million from the general revenue fund for the next two years to pay for the program. The comptroller's office would also be in charge of preventing fraud and misuse of funds — a major area of concern for many lawmakers — as well as approving an organization to help process applications and approve vendors and participating private schools.

Creighton says that the program will not siphon money away from public schools as the funding comes from general revenue, not the Foundation School Program, which is the main source of funding for the state's K-12 public schools.

The bill does not require private school students to take a state-administered academic achievement exam, something that school voucher critics in the Texas Legislature have said an education savings account proposal should have to even consider it.

If passed into law, almost any student who was enrolled in a public school last year would be eligible to apply for the program, as well as any student ready to enroll in Pre-K or kindergarten.

The bill includes a formula to prioritize entry to the program if there are more applicants than funds available. Forty percent of open spots would go to students who receive free or reduced lunch; 30% to families who earn between 185% and 500% of the federal poverty line; 20% to those with disabilities; and 10% to those who attended public, private or home-school in the last school year.

The filing of SB 1 came hours after Creighton announced Senate Bill 2, a \$5.2 billion school funding bill that would allocate most of the money to teacher raises and include a small funding increase to help schools pay their rising bills.

It remains to be seen whether the funding bill can even move forward. The only education-related item in Abbott's agenda for the special session was education savings accounts, a school voucher program that would give families access to state funds to pay for their children's private schooling. The state constitution says lawmakers can only pass bills related to the governor's agenda items during special sessions. The governor can at any time modify the agenda.

Creighton said SB 1 and SB 2 work in tandem and show that lawmakers can provide more schooling options for

Texas families while also adding public school funding. During the regular session, two proposals to create an education savings account program and give teachers pay bonuses, also authored by Creighton, fizzled in the House amid disagreements over vouchers and how to give teachers raises.

In a Hail Mary play at the end of the regular session, Creighton attached his education savings account proposal — similar to the one he announced Monday — to House Bill 100, a school finance bill. That bill eventually died after House members once again stood firm against school vouchers, though the move left public schools with no new funding for teacher raises and other rising expenses.

The future of an education savings account program remained uncertain as this year's third special session started Monday with Texas Republicans embroiled in intraparty fighting. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick called on House Speaker Dade Phelan to resign because the speaker demanded he return \$3 million to a major backer, the Defend Texas Liberty PAC, after The Texas Tribune reported its leader had met with a white supremacist and antisemitic activist. Patrick accused Phelan of using this weekend's Hamas attack on Israel for political gain.

Meanwhile, Texas House Democrats signaled their intent to once again stand against any kind of school voucher program.

Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio, chair of the House Democratic Caucus, told reporters his group is "very clear: no vouchers and no deals."

"A voucher scam is a poison pill that will end up taking more out of our public schools than it puts in," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin.

Mark Jones, a political science professor at Rice University, said he believes Abbott and the Senate are on the same page when it comes to public school funding and school vouchers.

SB2 "is the main carrot Abbott is using to entice the anti-voucher Republicans and the small number of persuadable Democrats to vote for school choice legislation," Jones said. "The quid-pro-quo is that once school choice legislation is en route to the governor's desk, Abbott will place public school funding on the special session agenda, thereby allowing the Senate and House to quickly pass SB2 or a comparable House bill."

Disclosure: Rice University has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## Special session on school vouchers begins with Republicans in disarray - Gov. Greg Abbott needs a delicate coalition of Republicans to pass his top priority. But the House and Senate leaders aren't getting along.

October 9, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Zach Despart | Section: News | 1353 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Passing school vouchers, the top legislative priority of Gov. Greg Abbott in the new special session, was always going to require a delicately assembled coalition of Republicans.

It would need to include compromise between the more conservative Senate and a faction of rural House members that have long joined with Democrats to block the idea.

But as the special session began Monday, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dade Phelan were at each other's throats, hardly a signal of a productive lawmaking environment. And Phelan indicated his desire that any voucher program be paired with more public school funding, which could prove to be another complicating factor in the negotiations.

Patrick called on Phelan to resign because the speaker demanded he return \$3 million to a major backer, the Defend Texas Liberty PAC, after The Texas Tribune reported its leader had met with a white supremacist and antisemitic activist. Patrick accused Phelan of using this weekend's Hamas attack on Israel for political gain.

"I didn't think even Dade Phelan would stoop this low," Patrick said in a statement. "He has now absolutely hit rock bottom. His latest stunt is disgusting, despicable and disingenuous."

Phelan pushed back, reiterating his claim that the group was responsible for "political rot" within the Texas Republican Party.

"I didn't take \$3 million from a PAC that associates itself with Nazis and Nazi sympathizers. That's not my problem," Phelan said. "My House members... don't take money from this PAC. We don't associate ourselves with sexual deviants, misfits, and people who associate themselves with Holocaust deniers."

Abbott's office did not respond to a request for comment on the Tribune report, and he did not speak out Monday on the Phelan-Patrick fight. He is scheduled to speak at a pro-Israel gathering Monday evening in Austin.

Against that backdrop, the House gavelled in and out in less than half an hour. It unanimously passed a resolution supporting Israel after the country was attacked by Hamas militants over the weekend and adjourned until Thursday.

The Senate also passed a pro-Israel resolution by a unanimous vote but then got down to work. The Senate Finance Committee held a late afternoon hearing where it began considering legislation to pump new money into public schools, an item that is not on Abbott's special session agenda but is an important prerequisite for many lawmakers if they are going to pass school vouchers.

The bill's author, Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, said during the hearing that vouchers are "for a different day" and "not connected" to his school funding bill, which would include teacher pay raises and additional funding for school safety upgrades.

Vouchers have "nothing to do with today," Creighton said. "Our public school funding initiatives are in and of themselves a lift for our public schools and our public school teachers."

"Separate from that," he added, "we have what will be a fraction of a fraction of the budget as a new allocation" for vouchers.

While public school funding is not on Abbott's agenda for the special session, the Senate also got started Monday on a few items that are. The chamber referred bills to committee that would ban COVID-19 vaccine mandates by private employers, increase human smuggling penalties and create a state criminal offense for illegal entry from a foreign country.

Phelan predicted the dispute between Patrick and him would have no impact on the special session. He said the House would pass its priorities and negotiate with the Senate to reconcile differences in legislation, as it always does.

"My members are great people. They're here for the right reasons," Phelan said. "We will be immune to the outside noise, as we always are."

#### Democrats show united front

The Democratic caucuses in both chambers held news conferences Monday vowing to fight voucher proposals, even if it comes at the expense of teacher pay raises and additional public school funding.

"Senate Democrats stand united in our opposition to any [voucher] legislation, regardless of what it's tied to, including teacher pay raises and allotment," said Sen. Carol Alvarado of Houston, chair of the Senate Democratic Caucus.

Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio, chair of the House Democratic Caucus, told reporters his group is "very clear: no vouchers and no deals."

"A voucher scam is a poison pill that will end up taking more out of our public schools than it puts in," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin.

Meanwhile, Creighton's \$5.2 billion school funding bill, Senate Bill 2, would help school officials with the rising costs of running a district, provide teacher raises and direct more funding for school safety.

"The future of Texas begins in the classroom, and it is incumbent on lawmakers to unleash the potential of education for the 6 million students we serve," Creighton said in a statement.

For now, it is unclear whether the bill could pass this special session as Abbott did not include public school funding or teacher raises on the agenda. His call only included passing education savings accounts, a school voucher program that would give families access to state funds to pay for their children's private schooling. The state constitution says lawmakers can only pass bills related to the governor's agenda items during special sessions. The governor can at any time modify the agenda.

Creighton said he intends to file a school voucher program Monday evening.

#### New school funding proposal

SB 2 would raise the basic allotment — the base amount of money schools get per student — from \$6,160 to \$6,235. This money is used to pay for the day-to-day operations of a district and can be used to increase teacher salaries.

The bill also includes a one-time pay bonus for teachers. Those in districts with less than 5,000 students would receive a \$10,000 payment while those in districts with more than 5,000 students would receive a \$3,000 payment.

This provision is similar to legislation that Creighton tried to pass during the regular session. Creighton said he

wanted to give teachers in small districts more because they are usually paid less.

A Texas Tribune analysis shows that teachers in major suburban and urban school districts get paid an average of about \$61,432, almost \$10,000 more than those teaching in rural areas.

However, teachers and unions have criticized the use of districts' student enrollment to decide which educators get the bigger bonus, saying it's a less-than-ideal way to determine who needs the money the most. Costs of living are usually higher in larger metropolitan areas.

SB 2 would also expand and increase funding to the Teacher Incentive Allotment, a program that promises to pay teachers up to six-figure salaries if they meet certain performance requirements. About 13,000 teachers, or about 4% of the state's educators, are currently part of the program.

And finally, the bill increases funding that goes to school for safety upgrades. Under House Bill 3, the flagship school safety law passed in May, schools received \$15,000 per campus for security upgrades and an additional \$10 per student attendance. SB 2 would amend those amounts and instead give schools \$30,000 per campus and \$20 per student attendance.

Monty Exter, governmental relations director for the Association of Texas Professional Educators, said Texas needs a "sensible, adequate, transparent and stable" approach to teacher raises and not just one-time bonuses, adding that his group would be opposed to the bill if it is contingent on passing school vouchers.

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, said Senate Democrats will not support the bill if it means that school vouchers will pass and are ready to give up funding for teacher raises and other public school funding to put a stop to vouchers this session.

Maia Pandey contributed to this story.

Disclosure: Association of Texas Professional Educators has been a financial supporter of The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit, nonpartisan news organization that is funded in part by donations from members, foundations and corporate sponsors. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism. Find a complete list of them here.

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## **The Texas House's new priority education bill offers the most concessions yet to sway voucher skeptics - The revised bill promises a significant funding increase for public schools and academic accountability measures for students participating in the proposed voucher program, two of the biggest requests from voucher opponents.**

November 3, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)

Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 989 Words

[OpenURL Link](#)

A revised education bill hoping to introduce school vouchers in Texas would offer more money to schools and create academic accountability measures for students in the program, representing the most significant concessions voucher supporters have offered so far to sway skeptics.

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, released Friday the reworked House Bill 1, which includes a plethora of increases to public school funding. Most notably, the basic allotment, which is the base amount of money the state gives a district for each student it's educating, will increase from \$6,160 to \$6,700 and would be adjusted for inflation starting in 2026-2027.

With lawmakers unlikely to pass a voucher program in the few remaining days of the ongoing special legislative session, Buckley said he would file his new bill in an upcoming special session, which Gov. Greg Abbott is widely expected to announce soon.

The Texas House and Abbott have been at odds over what sort of public school finance and vouchers bill to present. Buckley's earlier version of HB 1 proposed modest increases to the basic allotment and a school voucher program that would've been open to only certain groups of students. Abbott has been adamant he wants a program that would be open to all students with no enrollment caps.

Meanwhile, the Senate promptly passed its own school voucher proposal in early October. The program described in Senate Bill 1 would be open to all Texas students but give priority access to low-income students and students with disabilities if there were more applications than funds available. The House has not moved on that bill and it has been stuck without a House committee hearing.

Buckley said his new legislation was crafted after receiving input from House colleagues, the governor's office and education stakeholders. The resulting revisions represent the most aggressive effort to address the concerns of voucher opponents in the House.

Abbott's office did not immediately respond to a request for comments on the new bill.

The new version of HB 1 also revolves around education savings accounts, a voucher-like instrument in the form of state-controlled accounts that would give parents access to taxpayer money to pay for private school and other educational expenses.

Under Buckley's previous version of HB 1, only 25,000 Texas students would've been able to participate in the program during the 2024-25 school year. Now, every Texas student would be eligible to apply and there would be no enrollment cap. The bill has a system that would prioritize students with disabilities and low income families.

"This one goes full universal from the jump," said Jaime Puente, director of economic opportunity for Every Texan. "The only limitation for the voucher program under the new version is the appropriation limit."

Under current budget proposals, the program would initially have about \$500 million at its disposal. Each child in the program would receive about \$10,500 a year, meaning that more than 40,000 students would be able to participate. Homeschoolers accepted into the program would receive \$1,000.

Notably, the bill also includes accountability provisions to sway skeptical House members who have argued that private schools that receive state funds through the program should be held to the same academic standards as public schools. Under the new HB 1, children accepted into the program must take a standardized test; if they have failing grades for two years in a row, they would be kicked out of the program.

Both the Senate and some private school advocates have vehemently opposed giving any sort of assessment to students who participate in a voucher program, saying it takes away from private schools' autonomy and amounts to state government interference. Accountability should be left with the parents, they argue.

Paige Williams, legislative director for the Texas Classroom Teachers Association, said the accountability measures are a "step in the right direction" that she hasn't seen in other states' voucher programs. But, she said, education advocates would like to see a basic allotment increase closer to \$1,000 to account for inflation spikes since 2019.

"We recognize that that's a big difference from the previous bill," she said of the basic allotment increase in HB 1. "But we are certainly not looking at any of the parts of the bill as changing our position opposing vouchers."

School districts have been asking lawmakers to increase the basic allotment as inflation has diluted their buying power. Under state law, districts must use a portion of the new basic allotment funds for teacher and staff compensation increases.

The bill also includes a \$4,000 one-time bonus for full-time teachers, counselors, nurses and librarians. That figure goes down to \$2,000 if those employees are working part time. The bill includes increased special education funding and several grants related to it.

It also calls for measures to help keep teachers in the profession as Texas grapples with teacher shortages. These include funding to help school districts pay for more teacher residencies and programs that place would-be teachers in classrooms with mentors for about a year, teaching them how to do the job before hiring them as full-time educators the following year.

Free pre-K for children of teachers and increases to the Teacher Incentive Allotment, a program that promises to pay teachers up to six-figure salaries if they meet certain performance requirements, are also included. About 13,000 teachers, or about 4% of the state's educators, are currently part of the program.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, a key member of the House Democratic Caucus, said a voucher program is not negotiable alongside public school funding.

"Our position remains the same: no vouchers, no bribes, no deals," he said.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Lopez, B. (2023, November 3). The Texas House's new priority education bill offers the most concessions yet to sway voucher skeptics - The revised bill promises a significant funding increase for public schools and academic accountability measures for students participating in the proposed voucher program, two of the biggest requests from voucher opponents.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1951889A8B9B40A0>.

## **The Texas House's new priority education bill offers concessions to sway voucher skeptics - The revised bill promises a significant funding increase for public schools and academic accountability measures for students participating in the proposed voucher program, two of the biggest requests from voucher opponents.**

November 3, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Brian Lopez | Section: News | 1113 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

A revised education bill hoping to introduce school vouchers in Texas would offer more money to schools and create academic accountability measures for students in the program, representing voucher supporters' latest attempt to offer concessions to sway skeptics.

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, released Friday the reworked House Bill 1, which includes a plethora of increases to public school funding. Most notably, the basic allotment, which is the base amount of money the state gives a district for each student it's educating, will increase from \$6,160 to \$6,700 and would be adjusted for inflation starting in 2026-2027.

However, the bill doesn't raise the portion of the basic allotment that has to be devoted to teacher pay, like its previous version did. It also doesn't include additional funds for school safety like a standalone public education funding bill proposed by the Texas Senate last month. School officials have said funds the Texas Legislature allocated during the regular lawmaking session for school safety upgrades aren't enough to pay for the new requirements.

With lawmakers unlikely to pass a voucher program before the end of the ongoing special legislative session, Buckley said he would file his new bill in an upcoming special session, which Gov. Greg Abbott is widely expected to announce soon.

The Texas House and Abbott have been at odds over what sort of public school finance and vouchers bill to present. Buckley's earlier version of HB 1 proposed modest increases to the basic allotment and a school voucher program that would've been open to only certain groups of students. Abbott has been adamant he wants a program that would be open to all students with no enrollment caps.

Meanwhile, the Senate promptly passed its own school voucher proposal in early October. The program described in Senate Bill 1 would be open to all Texas students but give priority access to low-income students and students with disabilities if there were more applications than funds available. The House has not moved on that bill and it has been stuck without a House committee hearing.

Buckley said his new legislation was crafted after receiving input from House colleagues, the governor's office and education stakeholders. Abbott's office did not immediately respond to a request for comments on the new bill.

The new version of HB 1 also revolves around education savings accounts, a voucher-like instrument in the form of state-controlled accounts that would give parents access to taxpayer money to pay for private school and other educational expenses.

The new bill proposes a more expanded version of the program. Under Buckley's previous version of HB 1, only 25,000 Texas students would've been able to participate in the program during the 2024-25 school year. Now, every Texas student would be eligible to apply and there would be no enrollment cap. The bill has a system that would prioritize students with disabilities and low income families.

"This one goes full universal from the jump," said Jaime Puente, director of economic opportunity for Every Texan. "The only limitation for the voucher program under the new version is the appropriation limit."

Under current budget proposals, the program would initially have about \$500 million at its disposal. Each child in the program would receive about \$10,500 a year, meaning that more than 40,000 students would be able to participate. Homeschoolers accepted into the program would receive \$1,000.

The bill also includes accountability provisions to sway skeptical House members who have argued that private schools that receive state funds through the program should be held to the same academic standards as public schools. Under the new HB 1, children accepted into the program must take a standardized test; if they have failing grades for two years in a row, they would be kicked out of the program.

But Monty Exter, director of governmental relations for the Association of Texas Professional Educators, said the accountability requirements in the new bill are a downgrade from its previous version, which would've required voucher program participants to take the same tests as public school students and allowed comparisons between the academic performance of both.

"The new version lets them take, effectively, whatever test they want to," he said.

Both the Senate and some private school advocates have vehemently opposed giving any sort of assessment to students who participate in a voucher program, saying it takes away from private schools' autonomy and amounts to state government interference. Accountability should be left with the parents, they argue.

Paige Williams, legislative director for the Texas Classroom Teachers Association, said the accountability measures are a "step in the right direction" that she hasn't seen in other states' voucher programs. But, she said, education advocates would like to see a basic allotment increase closer to \$1,000 to account for inflation spikes since 2019.

"We recognize that that's a big difference from the previous bill," she said of the basic allotment increase in HB 1. "But we are certainly not looking at any of the parts of the bill as changing our position opposing vouchers."

School districts have been asking lawmakers to increase the basic allotment as inflation has diluted their buying power. Under state law, districts must use a portion of the new basic allotment funds for teacher and staff compensation increases.

The bill also includes a \$4,000 one-time bonus for full-time teachers, counselors, nurses and librarians. That figure goes down to \$2,000 if those employees are working part time. The bill includes increased special education funding and several grants related to it.

It also calls for measures to help keep teachers in the profession as Texas grapples with teacher shortages. These include funding to help school districts pay for more teacher residencies and programs that place would-be teachers in classrooms with mentors for about a year, teaching them how to do the job before hiring them as full-time educators the following year.

Free pre-K for children of teachers and increases to the Teacher Incentive Allotment, a program that promises to pay teachers up to six-figure salaries if they meet certain performance requirements, are also included. About 13,000 teachers, or about 4% of the state's educators, are currently part of the program.

Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, a key member of the House Democratic Caucus, said a voucher program is not negotiable alongside public school funding.

"Our position remains the same: no vouchers, no bribes, no deals," he said.

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## **Abbott calls lawmakers back for fourth time to try again on school vouchers and border security - The governor announced the fourth special session would start an hour after the previous session adjourned.**

November 7, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Zach Despart | Section: News | 1103 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

The third special legislative session ended with a whimper Tuesday morning without a deal on school vouchers — Gov. Greg Abbott's top priority — as well as several border security bills he had asked for.

The governor, undeterred, called lawmakers back for a fourth special session beginning the same day.

"There is more work to be done," Abbott said in a statement. "I am immediately calling lawmakers back... to complete their critical work to empower Texas parents to choose the best education pathway for their child while providing billions more in funding for Texas public schools and continuing to boost safety measures in schools."

Abbott's agenda for the new session includes four items: boosting funding for schools, including through the creation of a voucher program; school safety measures; legislation to create criminal offenses for crossing the Texas-Mexico border illegally; and funding for border walls and border security operations, including more police for the Liberty County community of Colony Ridge.

All are left over from the third special session.

Over 30 days of largely unproductive lawmaking, plagued by bitter Republican infighting between Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and House Speaker Dade Phelan, the Legislature passed just two of the five items on the governor's initial agenda from Oct. 5, and none of the five items he later added.

Never in the Legislature's 176-year history have lawmakers met for more than three special sessions in a year with a regular session. With the nominally part-time lawmakers away from their families and principal jobs for more than half of 2023, the mood inside the Capitol is dour.

The Legislature granted Abbott's request for a ban on employer COVID-19 vaccination mandates. The bill, shepherded by Sen. Mayes Middleton, R-Galveston and Rep. Jeff Leach, R-Plano, passed through the Republican-dominated chambers with ease.

The biggest point of contention was Abbott's request for a voucher bill that would allow parents to use taxpayer dollars to send their children to private and religious schools. An effort to do so in the regular session in the spring was defeated by a coalition of Democrats and rural Republicans.

There's been no public signaling that a majority of the two-dozen Republican holdouts have changed their minds, despite Abbott's declaration on Oct. 31 that he had struck a deal with Phelan's negotiating team.

While the Senate passed its voucher bill on the sixth day of the session, the House never held a hearing on any voucher bill, let alone advance legislation to the floor for a vote.

The House inaction further soured the relationship between Patrick and Phelan, who began sparring in the spring over property taxes and later over the House impeachment of Attorney General Ken Paxton. Patrick accused Phelan of caving to the Democrats and anti-voucher Republicans to preserve his speakership.

"Speaker Dade Phelan and the Texas House have just wasted another special session with no action on the legislative priorities of the governor, the Senate, and the majority of Texas voters," Patrick said on social media on

Nov. 2.

The spat had collateral damage: several border security bills Abbott wanted that Republicans agreed on in principle. Senate Bill 6, which would have appropriated \$1.5 billion for the state to continue building a wall along its border with Mexico, died in the House.

The chambers passed different versions of a bill that would allow police officers to arrest migrants who cross the border illegally, but never agreed on a compromise between them. Phelan called the Senate plan "pro-illegal immigration" while Patrick derided the House plan as a "Texas-sized catch-and-release bill."

Abbott's vague request for a bill related to Colony Ridge met a similar fate. The Liberty County subdivision over the summer became a fascination of right-wing media, with accusations that it was a colonia providing a base for organized crime and illegal immigrants, prompting Abbott's ask. But two legislative hearings featured Abbott's own appointees testifying that Colony Ridge was not overrun with criminals and squalor, prompting some Republican legislators to wonder aloud if the governor was wasting their time.

The Senate approved \$40 million for additional law enforcement in Colony Ridge, though it was attached to the border barrier bill that died in the House.

Abbott made vouchers his top legislative priority last year, a choice that surprised some at the Capitol because his 2017 push for school choice legislation, during his first term, was rejected by the House.

After the 2023 regular session ended with a lot of unfinished business, the first two special sessions featured a singular focus: property tax cuts.

Abbott's agenda for the third special session, by including border security and Colony Ridge, created an opportunity for the governor to walk away with some victories in case the voucher effort failed again.

But because most of the bills on those topics failed to pass as well, Abbott now faces the prospect of a fourth special session where lawmakers spend valuable time on issues other than his top priority. By law, special sessions can last no longer than 30 days.

There may be a glimmer of hope, however. Last week Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, the chairman of the House public education bill, unveiled a new voucher bill with more concessions than ever to the Republican holdouts. Most significantly, it increases the amount of money each public school district receives per student.

"This is a bill rural legislators can get behind," Rep. Stan Kitzman, R-Pattison, said in a statement. Kitzman, however, didn't necessarily need to be won over. He signaled support for vouchers earlier this year when he voted against a budget amendment that would have banned them.

Rep. James Frank, R-Wichita Falls, predicted that the House and Senate leaders could move past their squabbling to pass vouchers in the coming weeks.

"I don't have any parents in my district not wanting choice; every single parent wants options for their kids," Frank said. "The only pushback I get is from (public) schools. Ultimately, we're just kind of being held hostage by the schools."

The House Democratic Caucus, meanwhile, believes that the anti-voucher camp will hold together no matter what concessions the bill's backers may offer.

"We just got off the floor this morning — our bipartisan majority for public schools is strong and united heading into the next special session," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin. "We have defeated vouchers every time they have been proposed."

Phelan said the House plans to get right to work, beginning at 5 p.m. Tuesday afternoon.

Buckley declined to telegraph his plans for how he'll shepherd his new proposal through to passage.

"We'll file the bill at the appropriate time," he said as reporters pursued him out of the chamber.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

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## **School voucher critics remain largely unswayed during Texas House hearing - House Bill 1, which stagnated during the previous special session, finally received a hearing in the lower chamber, a crucial step that will decide whether the proposal gets a full vote.**

November 9, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Maia Pandey | Section: News | 891 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

In the first Texas House hearing on school vouchers since May, opponents in the lower chamber remained critical of Gov. Greg Abbott's top legislative priority — and ultimately expressed frustration with the governor's insistence to tie public education funding with a voucher program, which has brought lawmakers back to Austin for a rare fourth special session this year.

While the Senate gave final approval to its priority voucher bill within the first week of last month's special session, the House's counterproposal — authored by Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen — stagnated without a committee hearing throughout the third special session. A coalition of Democrats and rural Republicans in the House have long blocked efforts to advance a voucher proposal. No voucher-related bills have made it to the House floor for a full vote in recent history.

Buckley's revised bill, which the House Select Committee on Educational Opportunity & Enrichment took up Thursday, included several concessions to try to sway voucher skeptics in the House, particularly increased public school funding and accountability measures that would require voucher recipients to take standardized tests to keep their spots in the program. Buckley did not move to vote on the bill Thursday night, but left it pending and said the committee would take up pending bills Friday.

"I know why I'm here and that's to make certain that every kid in Texas gets an opportunity and that parents remain at the forefront of having the most influence and control over the education of their kids," he said. "That's what this bill does."

Still, the committee's Democratic and Republican voucher opponents alike seemed unconvinced by the new House Bill 1, which would create education savings accounts, a voucher-type program that would give families taxpayer dollars to help pay for private school tuition and other educational expenses.

Rep. Ken King, R-Canadian, whose public education funding bill in the regular session fizzled amid the political faceoff over vouchers, said Abbott has made "school finance, safety, everything tied to a voucher" in his special session agenda.

"Republicans say unless you're for vouchers, you can't be Republican... I don't believe that the people of House District 88 want [vouchers] because there's no chance in hell any voucher helps one student in House District 88," King said of his home district.

If vouchers don't pass after this special session, Abbott has promised to launch primary campaigns against the two dozen Republicans leaning against vouchers, including King.

Though Abbott initially said he would not add public education funding to his special session call until vouchers passed, he expanded the agenda last month and announced a voucher deal had been reached with House leaders. However, they declined to confirm that a deal was made.

Some lawmakers expressed frustration Thursday at returning for a second consecutive special session to relitigate an issue that failed to pass during the regular legislative session earlier this year.

Rep. Keith Bell, R-Forney, another Republican holdout on school vouchers, said he was frustrated by voucher

negotiations holding public education funding "hostage."

Bell didn't indicate how he planned to vote on education savings accounts, but he said his vote will ultimately be "in the best interest" of his home district and its students.

Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, said even if vouchers pass, the state will still need to improve its public education system. Though he said he did not agree with creating any kind of voucher program in August, Dutton has broken from his party in the past, most recently as the only Democrat to abstain from voting in Attorney General Ken Paxton's impeachment trial.

"I struggle with this because...this has gotten really political," Dutton said of vouchers. "It's not about students, it's not about parents, it's not about school districts — it's about Abbott. It's about the governor, so that's a failing proposition as far as I'm concerned."

Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins, D-San Antonio, who has previously indicated she's open to a voucher compromise that includes public school funding, did not state a position on the bill Thursday but stressed the need for increased public education support.

"What do I say to that rural teacher making \$35,000 who can't pay their rent or pay their bills? ... How do I deal with our African American children who are doing worse in public schools?" Gervin-Hawkins said. "I believe we're at a pivotal time as it relates to education. What can we do to turn this thing around and truly reimagine education as a whole?"

Gervin-Hawkins, who cofounded a San Antonio charter school, also acknowledged concerns that a voucher program may lead to underfunding and eventual closure of public schools. She said she was interested in learning more about why students leave public schools for charter, private and home schools. HB 1 includes an increase from \$60 million to \$108 million in funding for charter schools facilities starting in the 2025-26 school year.

Unlike Gervin-Hawkins, her fellow Democrats James Talarico and Gina Hinojosa, both from Austin, made clear they are not open to a compromise on a voucher bill, even if it includes public education funding.

"As a former Texas educator, I think I speak for thousands of Texas teachers, Texas parents, Texas students that I would rather slowly starve than be complicit in the death of public education in the state," Talarico said.

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- **Citation (apa Style)**

Pandey, M. (2023, November 9). School voucher critics remain largely unswayed during Texas House hearing - House Bill 1, which stagnated during the previous special session, finally received a hearing in the lower chamber, a crucial step that will decide whether the proposal gets a full vote.. *Texas Tribune, The (TX)*. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/195383E477506A68>.

## **How Gov. Greg Abbott lost a yearlong fight to create school vouchers - The governor projected confidence throughout 2023 that vouchers would pass. But his insistence on universal eligibility ensured his failure to convince 21 House Republican holdouts.**

December 22, 2023 | Texas Tribune, The (TX)  
Author: Patrick Svitek | Section: News | 4063 Words  
[OpenURL Link](#)

Sharing the stage at the Brazos Christian School gymnasium in Bryan, Rep. John Raney rose from his seat next to Gov. Greg Abbott during a pro-school voucher rally and lavished praise on the governor's education agenda.

"Gov. Abbott understands the value of a good education and the importance of giving parents control over their children's education," Raney said at the March event, adding that the governor "spent nearly every night" helping his daughter do her homework and that the first lady is a former teacher and principal.

Then, Abbott took to his lectern and reciprocated his admiration for Raney, saying the College Station Republican "represents Brazos County extraordinarily well."

It seemed like a good sign for Abbott, who was in the midst of barnstorming the state to rally support for school vouchers in Texas. In previous legislative sessions, Raney had signaled in test votes that he was against any measure to use public dollars for students to attend private schools — like the one he was speaking at that night.

But 254 days — and four excruciating special sessions — later, Raney would lead the effort on the House floor to defeat the very proposal that brought the men together that evening. The so-called "Raney amendment" to strike vouchers out of an education omnibus bill in November was the final knell for Abbott's 18-month crusade for school vouchers.

It also meant that public schools would not receive the \$7.6 billion boost that Abbott had made conditional on the approval of vouchers.

The typically cautious governor has poured more political capital into vouchers than anything else in his eight years in office. He campaigned for reelection last year on the proposal, declared it a top legislative priority and played hardball — using teacher raises and public school funding increases as negotiating chips, vetoing bills by the GOP holdouts and threatening primary challenges to get his way.

He picked an ambitious fight, given the House's historic resistance to school vouchers, but he thought the ground was ripe for a breakthrough.

Yet after a year of negotiations, threats and politicking, Abbott ended 2023 vexed by a bloc of 21 Republican holdouts who prevented a bill from reaching his desk. It wasn't particularly close for Abbott, despite the fact that he routinely projected false optimism throughout the year.

Raney later said he introduced Abbott at the pro-voucher event because it is customary when the governor visits a lawmaker's district. But the perceived betrayal by Raney — and other House Republicans who joined with Democrats to kill the education subsidy — has set Abbott on a warpath in the March primary, determined to install more lawmakers who will vote his way.

The Texas Tribune interviewed more than a dozen people, including lawmakers, staffers, lobbyists and others involved in voucher negotiations this year. Almost all of them declined to speak on the record because they were not authorized to discuss the private negotiations or because they feared political consequences.

According to their accounts, Abbott primarily failed because of his refusal to compromise on a universal program,

open to every Texas student — instead of a more pared-down program for disadvantaged students. That was a line that the rural GOP holdouts could not be convinced to cross. Abbott also underestimated just how much those opponents considered their voucher opposition as a political article of faith, hardened by years of campaigning on it. And as his negotiating tactics grew more heavy-handed, he ossified some of the intraparty opposition.

"This is an issue, for the people who voted against a voucher, they are going to be against a voucher no matter what you do to it," said Will Holleman, senior director of government relations at Raise Your Hand Texas, a pro-public education advocacy group. These members, Holleman added, have a "muscle memory you're not going to get away from."

One House Republican close to the negotiations said Abbott was "a little overly optimistic."

"A lot of House members — certainly rural Republican House members — would have suggested that he miscalculated," the member said.

### A hopeful spring

Abbott had been something of a fair-weather school voucher proponent before 2022, but as he ran for a third term, he saw the ground shifting. The COVID-19 pandemic had soured parents on public schools, and Republicans nationwide were seizing opportunities to become the party of "parental rights" after decades of Democrats owning education as an issue.

Abbott himself was also eyeing a larger national profile — potentially a 2024 presidential run — and was routinely being compared to Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, where school vouchers with universal eligibility became law in March.

In Texas, the Senate, which had passed a voucher bill in 2017, could be relied on to deliver again. But Abbott knew he had his work cut out for him in the House, since a large majority of House Republicans in 2021 opposed vouchers in a symbolic vote. Many of those voucher opponents represented rural districts and were otherwise considered allies whom he had previously endorsed.

Abbott knew he needed to show them that their constituents also wanted vouchers.

"I think he went into this completely eyes wide open, completely aware of the battle," said Mandy Drogin, a veteran voucher activist who works at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, the influential conservative think tank in Austin.

Starting in late January, Abbott and Drogin crisscrossed the state hosting nearly a dozen "Parent Empowerment Nights" at private schools in lawmakers' backyards, pitching vouchers in the form of education savings accounts for every child in Texas. The state would deposit taxpayer funds in the accounts, and parents could use the money to cover private school costs, including tuition and books.

Drogin was impressed by Abbott's persistence at the events. At Grace Community School in Tyler, a storm was moving in and they were told they had to end their rally early, Drogin said, but Abbott refused.

"He was not worried about getting home that night," she said, "and he stayed in that gym and met every single parent to hear their story."

Abbott invited the anti-voucher Republicans to join him at events in their districts. That put those members in a tough position. Do they attend and be seen as supportive of Abbott's crusade, or do they snub the governor entirely?

Rep. Hugh Shine, R-Temple, appeared at one of Abbott's earliest Parent Empowerment Nights, and like Raney, ultimately voted to thwart the governor's priority.

Back at the Capitol, Abbott met individually with over 50 House Republicans during the regular session and discussed school vouchers. His schedule shows it was a wide range of members, from the pro-voucher faithful to at least 10 of the 21 Republicans who ultimately voted for the voucher-killing amendment, like Raney and Shine.

In those meetings, Abbott made clear how important the issue was to him personally.

Rep. Cody Harris, a Palestine Republican who had run for election as an anti-voucher Republican, told Abbott he remained "extremely skeptical" of vouchers in their meeting, even after introducing Abbott at a Parent Empowerment Night in his district. He would later flip in support of vouchers.

The first major gauge of Abbott's influence arrived in April as the House considered the budget. It had become a biennial tradition for Rep. Abel Herrero, D-Robstown, to propose an amendment that prohibited any funding for voucher programs. It was seen as a symbolic vote because the amendment did not make it into the final budget, but this time, it took on new meaning amid Abbott's push.

Abbott's chief of staff, Gardner Pate, and legislative affairs director, Shayne Woodard, spent the days before that vote feeling out House Republicans. Abbott himself paid a rare visit to the House floor two days before. If you're still undecided on the policy, they told members, vote present.

Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, chair of the House Public Education Committee, delivered a similar plea on the floor. The amendment to ban vouchers passed 86-52, with 11 members registered as "present not voting," including Harris.

Abbott's staff was pleased. It was progress. In 2021, the amendment passed 115-29, with 49 Republicans voting to ban vouchers in the test vote. This time, only 24 Republicans took that same stand.

Anti-voucher advocates had mixed emotions. They won, but the governor's lobbying blitz and the shifting numbers suggested the amendment would not be the usual nail in the coffin.

A voucher bill never reached the House floor during the regular session, but in its final weeks there was some hope.

In early May, key negotiators were closing in on a bill that had Abbott's blessing. Buckley, a convert who opposed vouchers in 2021, tried to call a snap committee meeting to advance legislation, but state Rep. Ernest Bailes, a Republican from Shepherd and outspoken voucher opponent, stood up and rallied the House to deny the panel permission to meet.

The procedural attack worked, and it showed perhaps for the first time that the anti-voucher GOP faction was unafraid to fight back against Abbott.

In response, Buckley devised a scaled-back bill, but Abbott threatened to veto it on the eve of a committee hearing. The problem? It limited eligibility to students with disabilities or those who attended an F-rated campus.

It was far short of the governor's demand for a universal program, a sticking point that would only intensify in the coming months.

The summer slump

By the end of the regular session, Abbott's voucher push was overshadowed by the House's impeachment of Attorney General Ken Paxton. Vouchers fell to the back burner again as Abbott called a first — and then second — special session to address property tax relief.

From Abbott's perspective, the voucher battle would resume in late fall.

Abbott continued to remind lawmakers he was serious. As he went on a bill-vetoing spree to try to force a property-

tax deal out of the two chambers, he also vetoed at least a dozen bills with the reasoning that they could wait until "after education freedom is passed."

Anti-voucher Rep. Travis Clardy, R-Nacogdoches, was among those who had a bill vetoed, but he only dug in. He told a Republican group back home that he would continue voting against vouchers, and while he was willing to listen to Abbott's pitch, he did not take kindly to threats.

Pressure was also increasing on House Speaker Dade Phelan, himself a Republican from a rural district, who had kept his distance from Abbott's voucher push. Going into 2023, he knew the votes probably were not there, and saw little incentive to take the lead on a proposal that fractured his GOP majority.

That is not to say he was uninterested in ending the yearlong standoff. When he had a rare meeting with Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick in the final days of the regular session, he suggested the Senate add vouchers to a public school funding bill that was still pending in the upper chamber. The Senate obliged, but the bill died in final inter-chamber negotiations.

Phelan tried something new when members were called back for the first special session, appointing a select committee to consider vouchers and other education issues. Its 15 members included some of the most firm opponents of vouchers in either party, leaving the impression that if a proposal could make it through the committee, it could pass the full House.

Asked about the prospects of vouchers in August, Phelan continued to hedge, saying it would come down to "members voting their districts."

"There's always hope," he said, "but no guarantee."

Vouchers get a vote

During a call with pastors previewing the third special session — when vouchers were set to take the center stage — Abbott shared a glimpse of optimism: "The votes seem to be lining up."

But he also offered a warning for House Republicans: They could choose "the easy way" — getting a bill to his desk — or "the hard way" — facing his wrath in the primaries.

Behind the scenes, Abbott's office was attempting a reset with the House. Who did they need to negotiate with to get a deal? Phelan's office pointed them to Buckley and two of the speaker's lieutenants — Reps. Will Metcalf and Greg Bonnen — plus Rep. Ken King of Canadian.

Metcalf and Bonnen had previously signaled support for vouchers in test votes, but King stood out. About a year earlier, he vowed voucher bills would be "dead on arrival."

Despite his past rhetoric, King was seen as open to a compromise on vouchers, in exchange for more money for schools. But he eventually voted for the Raney amendment.

Those members relayed their discussions with the governor's office to another group of House Republicans that included additional holdouts.

Amid the negotiations, Abbott's office held firm on a few aspects of the proposal. They wanted to cap enrollment in the program based on available funding, not number of students, and they balked at requests to add a sunset, which would have required legislative approval to renew it periodically. Either idea would just mean more high-stakes wrangling with lawmakers in the coming years.

As talks continued, Abbott kept up his statewide tour, telling parents in San Antonio that "too many" House Republicans were claiming they were not hearing from their voters about the issue.

Rep. Glenn Rogers, R-Graford, was firmly opposed throughout the year but nonetheless asked his staff to analyze constituent correspondence during the third and fourth special sessions. Eighty-eight percent were against vouchers, he said.

Abbott, meanwhile, was exuding increasing confidence that a deal was nigh. Three days into the third special session, he declared at a pro-voucher conference in Austin that the House was "on the 1-yard-line." But when Buckley filed his legislation a week later, Abbott rejected it, saying it was inconsistent with their negotiations. Abbott called Phelan and told him as much in a blunt call.

The negotiators went back to the drawing board and came up with a proposal Abbott could support. It paired vouchers with even more money for public schools.

But there was a problem. Abbott had pledged to consider items like teacher bonuses only after the Legislature approved vouchers. School funding and raises were not included on the special session call so legislators were prohibited from considering them.

Then, as the end of the third special session was nearing, Abbott curiously declared victory, issuing a statement saying he had "reached an agreement" with Phelan on school choice for Texas families. The statement surprised Phelan, who considered the only deal to be to expand the call, according to a source familiar with his thinking. He knew it was the only way for vouchers to have even a fighting chance at that point.

The issue was left dangling as the third session ended.

By the start of the fourth special session, House leadership knew it needed to get a bill to the floor, no matter its chances. It would be a tough vote for some members, but the alternative was endless special sessions — potentially closer to the primary — and the House was already struggling to maintain quorum.

Buckley introduced a voucher bill paired with bonuses for teachers and increased per-student spending on public schools, a \$7.6 billion sweetener intended to entice the holdouts. It was sent to the House select committee, which held a hearing and voted it out along party lines, including with anti-voucher Republicans voting for it.

For the first time in recent history, a voucher bill was headed to the House floor.

It was not long after the committee vote that any momentum was dampened. The anti-voucher Republicans had only voted for it in committee because they wanted to get it to the floor, and they knew there would be an amendment to remove the voucher program.

Abbott promised to veto the bill and keep calling special sessions if that happened. But after months of roller coaster negotiations and increasing political threats, the anti-voucher Republicans were ready to call his bluff.

By this point, some involved in the debate questioned whether Abbott still believed he could get a bill to his desk — or if he was just looking for a floor vote that could crystallize battle lines for the primary. The day before the bill was set to reach the floor, Abbott's top political adviser, Dave Carney, sent out a playful tweet asking if others had noticed that the "quality of new candidates in TX [is] higher than normal?"

To carry the voucher-killing amendment, GOP holdouts settled on Raney, who had already announced he was not seeking reelection. Knowing he had to give his fellow Republicans a case they could make to primary voters, he told them he believed in his heart that "using taxpayer dollars to fund an entitlement program is not conservative."

The amendment passed 84-63, with 21 Republicans in favor — almost the same bloc of opposition that existed earlier in the year (75 votes was the threshold for passage).

The House went into recess and dozens of members piled into the back hall to debate their next steps. Should they

still pass the bill without the voucher program? Billions of dollars in public education funding were still at stake, after all. After a somewhat chaotic debate, they decided not to, realizing that sending Abbott a bill he had already threatened to veto would only inflame the situation further.

About an hour after the House adjourned that day, Abbott gathered in his office with roughly a dozen pro-voucher House Republicans, including members of House leadership. The mood was somber, and a frustrated Abbott wanted to know what the game plan was. Buckley and others in attendance promised to work around the clock to salvage the bill in the coming days.

But what was clear to most everyone in the room was that the 21 holdouts were not moving. It was time to go home and let primary voters weigh in.

Abbott's dealbreaker

The ending was somewhat surprising to voucher supporters. Some expected the House to pass the bill with vouchers stripped out, sending it to the Senate, which would have added it back in. Then both chambers would have hashed out a final compromise which may have included some version of vouchers.

"What we had been told was that, look, 'These guys need to show that they're fighting,'" said Rep. Steve Toth, R-The Woodlands.

But for the rural Republicans at the frontlines of the voucher battle, Abbott's insistence on universal eligibility doomed the effort from the start.

"It was just a bridge too far," said one House Republican close to the negotiations.

Abbott had repeatedly said in public that he wanted to give "every parent" the opportunity to find the best education for their child. Some Republicans thought it was just a bargaining position.

They were wrong. Abbott and other school choice advocates considered the concept of "parental rights" to be absolute — subject to "no imaginary boundary," as Drogin put it in an interview.

Furthermore, they were confident they could successfully push for it in this political environment. That was crystallized during one committee hearing when Rep. Harold Dutton, D-Houston, asked Scott Jensen, a national pro-voucher lobbyist, if he could support a program whose eligibility was limited to "only poor kids."

"We used to, in states all across the country, when that was the best we could do for kids in the state," Jensen replied. "But now we have found there is building public support all across the country for these programs to be broad-based."

When it came to the politics of vouchers, the holdouts also had a lot to think about. Many of them previously campaigned against vouchers — proudly so in some cases — and it was hard to consider reversing themselves.

Abbott's campaign commissioned polling in 21 Republican districts and presented it to members, trying to emphasize how popular the policy was back home. Abbott himself constantly cited how nearly 90% of primary voters statewide approved a pro-voucher ballot proposition in 2022.

Holdouts were skeptical of the polling language and found their personal experience with constituents more convincing.

Abbott got at least one House Republican to square his past opposition with the new political landscape. Harris, the Palestine Republican, acknowledged in a statement after the Raney amendment vote that he was first elected in 2018 as "the anti-voucher candidate." But he ultimately became moved by the stories he heard in the House Public Education Committee of parents desperate for new schooling options for their kids.

"For those who say that you cannot support both public education and school choice, we will have to agree to disagree," Harris wrote. "I hope you will continue to vote for me, but if you don't, that's OK."

Despite such conversions, voucher opponents never felt a sea change between the regular session and the final vote. But they knew Abbott was pulling out all the stops, so they remained vigilant.

Every Democrat present eventually voted for the Raney amendment, but that was not always guaranteed.

Rumors were spreading that Abbott was courting several Democrats — perhaps as a negotiating tactic to build pressure on GOP holdouts — and the House Democratic Caucus was especially watchful of at least a couple of its members. Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins of San Antonio, the founder of a San Antonio charter school, had publicly urged fellow Democrats to be open to compromise if vouchers were inevitable.

The Democratic caucus chair, Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer of San Antonio, had tapped two colleagues from Austin, Reps. Gina Hinojosa — his former rival for caucus chair — and James Talarico, to help lead their voucher opposition.

The caucus went all-out to consistently message against vouchers, but when it came time for the Raney amendment, they laid low. In a memo the day before the vote, caucus leaders asked members to "allow our Republican colleagues to conduct this debate amongst themselves."

The rural Republicans were staring down a tough vote, the caucus reasoned, and the best path to defeating vouchers was avoiding the appearance of a Democratic-led fight.

#### Primary season

While Abbott has held open the possibility he could call a fifth special session to push through vouchers, he has more recently turned his attention to replacing the holdouts. As of Thursday, he had endorsed six primary challengers to House Republicans who voted for the voucher-killing amendment.

Abbott has zeroed in on the voucher issue so much that he is backing primary challengers who have politically opposed him in the past. For example, he has backed Rogers' opponent, Mike Olcott, who donated nearly \$30,000 to multiple Abbott primary challengers in 2022.

"I've supported the governor on every single legislative priority ... except this one," Rogers said. "He's always supported me until this came along, and all of a sudden he's supporting somebody who is an enemy. It doesn't make any sense."

Abbott faces several political headwinds. House Republicans are mindful that the last time he significantly meddled in their primaries in 2018, only one out of the three Abbott-backed challengers prevailed. And this time, he has to contend with sometimes dueling endorsements from Paxton, who cares much more about unseating the Republicans who voted to impeach him.

"I am just gonna say it," Michelle Smith, Paxton's longtime political aide, posted recently on social media. "I support school choice, but in this primary season, the only issue for me, is did you vote to illegally impeach [Paxton]?"

Republicans involved in the primaries acknowledge that vouchers may poll well but say the support lacks intensity. A poll released Tuesday by the University of Texas at Austin found Republicans overwhelmingly supported voucher programs but ranked "border security" or "immigration" as the top issues facing Texas by a wide margin.

But Abbott and his allies believe they are in a new political moment — and holdouts are whistling past the graveyard. They have looked to Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, who helped unseat several anti-voucher Republicans last year to make way for the state's new voucher program.

As for Raney, Abbott will not get a chance to unseat the retiring lawmaker. But he has already endorsed the GOP frontrunner to replace Raney, Paul Dyson, saying he is confident Dyson will "expand school choice for all Texas families once and for all."

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