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Religious Democrats See Good Reason to Be Open About Their Faith: [National Desk]

Glueck, Katie . Glueck, Katie.

FULL TEXT

In a party that has grown less religious, some prominent Democrats say discussing their deepest beliefs can be a way to connect -- when it's authentic.

As the Democratic Party wanders in the post-election wilderness after the bruising defeats of 2024, some of its newer leaders are tapping into an ancient form of connection: religion.

In Texas, a young lawmaker who could run statewide is urging his fellow white progressives to embrace discussions of faith in politics.

In Georgia, a Black pastor and U.S. senator is reclaiming religious language from those on the right who, he suggests, have twisted it to their own ends.

And in Pennsylvania, the Jewish governor's faith is a central part of his public identity, evident in his campaign advertising and his major speeches -- and even at a recent Christmas tree lighting.

"If y'all have not seen 'National Lampoon Christmas Vacation,' take it from this Jewish guy," Gov. Josh Shapiro said as he addressed a holiday celebration in Harrisburg, Pa., this month. "You better go and rent that movie."

While President Biden is a practicing Catholic who has often carried a rosary and playfully crossed himself, he long stood out in an increasingly secular Democratic Party.

But with his exit from public life nearing, a small but prominent cast of Scripture-quoting, religiously observant Democratic politicians -- many of them poised to command national attention over the next four years -- is signaling that he is no longer the exception to the rule.

As a Democratic Party defined for years by its opposition to President-elect Donald J. Trump grapples with what it stands for now, these officials see discussion of faith as a way to introduce themselves, explain their values and find common ground.

Many are also battling the idea that religion has a political party, echoing other Democratic challenges to Republican claims on patriotism and support for the troops.

"It's unfortunate that in American politics, faith rhetoric has become one more tool in the politics of 'us and them,"' said Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia, who leads the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, saying that the major faith traditions emphasize seeing others as "neighbors."

"I'm trying to reclaim that, in the noisy conversation that we in the American family have about who we are," he added.

Vice President Kamala Harris visited churches during the campaign and occasionally mentioned her pastor -- but she rarely discussed her Christian faith in personal terms.

Mayor John Giles of Mesa, Ariz., who was involved in Republicans for Harris efforts, saw that as a missed opportunity.

"I don't know if it was because we didn't have enough time, or because the people that were doing messaging for the campaign for some reason didn't think that was an important message," he said. "In hindsight, I think it would have helped."

State Representative James Talarico of Texas, a Democrat who is studying to become a minister, was more blunt, describing "a hesitancy, even among deeply religious Democrats," to discuss the subject.

"Progressives have got to understand that the separation of church and state is not the separation of faith and politics," said Mr. Talarico, who is weighing a statewide run. "Unless we do, we're going to keep losing elections."

'Being open about your faith actually allows you to get closer to people'

In October, Mr. Warnock hosted Mr. Shapiro at his church. The Pennsylvanian immediately introduced himself as a fellow person of faith.

"Good morning, church," Mr. Shapiro said that Sunday. As the room greeted him, he replied, "Shabbat shalom to you as well."

Mr. Shapiro highlights his observant Jewish identity to a degree rarely seen in American politics, citing his faith to explain his interest in public service.

"It is important for the community to understand, wherever you are, what motivates you," he said in an interview. "That's important for people to know before you start talking to them about bills and policies and proposals."

Mr. Shapiro said that when he talks about his faith, it can encourage people of other backgrounds to open up. During his 2022 governor's race, he ran an ad featuring his family's weekly Sabbath dinner. Voters who were not Jewish, he said, would mention it to him.

"People would come over to me and say, 'Hey, I saw your ad. That was really neat,' and then they'd tell me about what Sunday lunch is like after church," he said. "Being open about your faith actually allows you to get closer to people in a much deeper way."

At a time of rising antisemitism -- and debates over what constitutes antisemitism -- that approach is not without complications. That was evident during Ms. Harris's vice-presidential search, when Mr. Shapiro's identity, alongside his condemnations of what he saw as antisemitism at colleges, drew attention from supporters and critics alike.

Mr. Shapiro and Mr. Warnock campaigned together during the presidential race. Mr. Shapiro said they discussed subjects including how to strengthen fraying bonds between the Jewish and Black communities.

Both are often mentioned as potential presidential candidates.

First, though, Mr. Shapiro will be up for re-election in 2026. ("I love what I'm doing. I hope to do it for a good long while," he said, all but confirming another run.) Mr. Warnock is up in 2028. ("I remain focused on my work serving the people of Georgia," he said in an interview when asked about a White House bid.)

Several Democratic officials said Mr. Warnock offered a model for how to talk about faith and politics.

Mr. Warnock said his "faith is not a weapon, it's a bridge." His faith's teachings have informed his views on issues including health care and immigration.

He also said he wanted to offer a "countervailing narrative" to those who use religion as a cudgel.

"Too often," he said, "faith has been the voice and face of what is mean in our politics."

'I don't think that Republicans have religion on lock'

For years, the Republican narrative has held far greater appeal for many religious Americans -- white evangelical Christians most prominently.

But a Pew Research Center report this year showed signs of weakening Democratic support among other religious groups, including Hispanic Catholics. Democratic challenges with voters of faith were also unmistakable in post-election exit polls.

While 2020 exit polls showed Mr. Biden narrowly winning Catholic voters, exit polling this year showed Mr. Trump capturing Catholic voters and holding his ground with Protestants and other Christians, who embraced him despite his long record of crude behavior and his felony conviction for falsifying records to cover up a sex scandal.

Ms. Harris dominated with voters of no religious affiliation, who made up about a quarter of the electorate in exit polls.

Mallory McMorrow, a Michigan state senator who won Democratic acclaim defending liberal values while identifying herself as a "straight, white, Christian, married suburban mom," said many Americans, including herself, had complex relationships with religion.

That, too, can present opportunities for connection, she said -- especially when, fairly or not, "people perceive Donald Trump as authentic."

"If it is part of your experience in an authentic way, no matter how messy or complicated it is, talk about it, because there are countless people who have that same experience who want to feel seen," said Ms. McMorrow, who is considering options for a 2026 statewide run. "I don't think that Republicans have religion on lock."

Santa and Chinese food for the holidays

When Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg ran for president in 2020, he cited Scripture and argued that Mr. Trump's conduct and policies were starkly at odds with Christian teachings.

But he said in an interview that discussing religious identity as a candidate is not always easy, especially for Democrats who care deeply about the separation of church and state.

"While faith can connect you to others, obviously there are so many ways in which faith, through all of human history, has been a source of division," said Mr. Buttigieg, who is gay and has been attacked by some conservative Christians over his sexual orientation.

Many people -- himself included -- tend to see religion as a private matter, he said.

But for him, Mr. Buttigieg said, "it's still appropriate to talk about it in order to give an honest accounting of why you believe what you believe."

Mr. Buttigieg, who grew up in Indiana and became a Michigan resident in 2022, will have another chance to do that if he enters the 2026 Michigan governor's race, though he has said he has made no decisions about his future.

Asked if he believed he knew his adopted state well enough to run, he replied, "I have a lot of humility about having only moved to Michigan a few years ago, although, of course, I did grow up in the neighborhood."

But first, there are the holidays.

Mr. Buttigieg said he would be celebrating in Michigan with his young family, including his 3-year-old twins who have "a lot of expectations for Santa."

In Pennsylvania, Mr. Shapiro plans to partake in a beloved Jewish American tradition on Christmas Day.

"Hopefully, I'll be in sweatpants with my family eating Chinese food," he said.

Photograph

State Representative James Talarico of Texas said Democrats need to understand faith's role. "Unless we do, we're going to keep losing elections." (PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC GAY/ASSOCIATED PRESS); Senator Raphael Warnock of Georgia, who leads the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, is trying to reclaim religious language from the right. *(PHOTOGRAPH BY KENNY HOLSTON/THE NEW YORK TIMES); Gov. Josh Shapiro of Pennsylvania highlights his observant Jewish identity, saying such talk "allows you to get closer to people in a much deeper way." (PHOTOGRAPH BY HIROKO MASUIKE/THE NEW YORK TIMES) This article appeared in print on page A11.

DETAILS

Subject:	State elections; Religion; Presidential elections; Scandals
Location:	Pennsylvania; Texas; United States--US; Michigan; Georgia
People:	Trump, Donald J
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These Spiritual Democrats Urge Their Party to Take a Leap of Faith

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This article originally appeared in The New York Times.

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DETAILS

Subject:	Christianity; Political parties; Antisemitism; Church &state; Political campaigns; Religion; Holidays &special occasions; Governors; Presidential elections; Christians; Scandals; Voters; Political advertising
Location:	Texas; United States--US; Georgia; Pennsylvania; Michigan
People:	Harris, Kamala; Trump, Donald J
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Texas Education Board Backs Curriculum With Lessons Drawn From Bible: [National Desk]

Closson, Troy . Closson, Troy.

FULL TEXT

School districts serving more than two million elementary-school children would be able to adopt a curriculum that draws on the Bible.

Texas education officials backed on Tuesday a new elementary school curriculum that infuses material drawn from the Bible into reading and language arts lessons, a contentious move that would test the limits of religion's presence in public education.

The curriculum, which will be optional, has already drawn protests in Texas, which has emerged as a leader in the ascendant but highly contested push to expand the role of religion in public schools. The new curriculum could become a model for other states.

The vote was preliminary. The board typically takes an initial vote on issues in smaller committees. But all of its 15 members were present on Tuesday and the final vote is expected to take place later in the week, with the same outcome.

With the administration of President-elect Donald J. Trump promising to champion the conservative Christian movement in his second presidential term, the lessons may also offer a playbook for the White House.

Advocates of religious freedom say the new curriculum is the latest major effort by conservatives to explicitly tie the nation's history and politics to Christian values. Texas was the first state to allow public schools to hire religious chaplains as school counselors, and the Republican-controlled legislature is expected to try once again to require public-school classrooms to display the Ten Commandments.

Schools have emerged as a focus for clashes over the role of Christian values in public life. In Oklahoma, the state superintendent has begun buying Bibles for classroom use, and sent a video to schools last week inviting students to pray for Mr. Trump. Louisiana is fighting in court over a new state mandate that all classrooms there post the Ten Commandments.

Supporters of the Texas curriculum say that the Bible is a fundamental part of American history and is crucial to students' knowledge of the world. They argue that children's literacy skills would suffer without a robust understanding of Bible references because Christian themes are pervasive in American culture.

Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, said in a statement that the lessons would "allow our students to better understand

the connection of history, art, community, literature and religion on pivotal events like the signing of the U.S. Constitution, the Civil Rights Movement and the American Revolution."

The Texas State Board of Education, which is led by Republicans, sets standards for what students must be taught and approves a selection of curriculums, and individual schools and districts choose which ones they will teach.

On Tuesday, an effort to reject the curriculum failed in a narrow 7-to-8 vote, with three Republicans joining the board's four Democrats to oppose it. The other members approved the lessons, as part of a review of a raft of curriculum options for several subjects.

The curriculum, which covers kindergarten through fifth grade, would be optional. But the state's school districts, which serve about 2.3 million public-school students in kindergarten through fifth grade, would be offered a financial incentive to adopt it. It would be available for districts to start using in August 2025.

Religion makes up a relatively small portion of the curriculum's overall content. The lessons delve into Christianity far more often and in more depth than they do into other faiths, according to religious scholars and a review of the materials by The New York Times.

A kindergarten lesson on the Golden Rule introduces students to Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount, for example. And a fifth-grade lesson on Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper" includes an account of the final meal shared by Jesus and his 12 disciples, as well as several verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

At the Texas State Board of Education meeting on Monday, many parents, including several who said they were reverent Christians, argued that it was their right, not the state's, to choose how their children learned about religion. Others argued that Christianity was inseparable from the American story and central to understanding figures like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Speakers pointed out that the Bible is often called the most-read book in the world.

Renate Sims, a Texas mother and substitute teacher, said at the meeting that the incarnation of Jesus "is and always will be the hinge of all of history."

"How would the canceling of such fundamental facts serve the education of our children or contribute to shape them morally?" she said.

The Texas Education Agency, which oversees public education in the state, released the new curriculum in the spring, after the state enacted a law directing the agency to develop its own free textbooks. The law was aimed at providing high-quality teaching materials to educators who often spend long hours searching for them, lawmakers said.

The move provoked immediate controversy, upsetting the state's largest teachers' union and some parents, including practicing Christians, who expressed worry that the lessons blur the line between instruction and evangelizing. A top curriculum publisher took issue with a state request to add more biblical content to its materials, the education news outlet The 74 reported.

When a panel was convened to vet the new curriculum for bias, opponents complained that the panel included several people who were known for religious advocacy, including Ben Carson, the former federal housing secretary, to rubber-stamp the lessons.

"They're using Texas as a testing ground for these extreme ideas," said State Representative James Talarico, a Christian and a Democrat who is also a student at a Presbyterian seminary in Austin.

The Texas State Board of Education convened on Monday to consider the new curriculum. After more than seven hours of public comments, the meeting was adjourned until Tuesday morning.

Several Texans of other faiths said at the meeting that the lessons are inappropriate for a public school classroom and lack balance. Barbara Baruch, a San Antonio-area grandmother who is Jewish, asked the education board to leave religious instruction to parents and their houses of worship.

"I believe my grandkids should share our family's religion," Ms. Baruch said. "I need help stopping the government from teaching them to be Christians."

Some board members also questioned whether the curriculum would violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause, which bars the government from making laws "respecting an establishment of religion."

Jonathan Covey, the director of policy for Texas Values, a nonprofit that promotes Judeo-Christian values, argued that the curriculum would not face a successful legal challenge, describing the material as "high quality" lessons with

"contextually relevant religious topics."

He pointed to the Supreme Court's ruling two years ago that a high school football coach had a constitutional right to pray on the field after his team's games, and said the decision showed that a "strict governmental neutrality toward religion" was not required.

"It has always been understood that religion has a place in American civic society," Mr. Covey told board members, adding that "there's no rule that says 'If you have 25 references to the Bible, you must have 25 references to every other religion."'

Some critics of the curriculum say that besides a lack of balance, some of its lessons simply are not very good.

Amanda Tyler, the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said at a news conference on Monday that the curriculum was "neither instructionally sound, nor factually accurate," and would teach "misleading" content to children as young as 5.

David R. Brockman, a Christian theologian and religious studies scholar who reviewed the curriculum, said he believed deeply in the value of teaching about religion in public schools. But he also said lessons must be balanced, accurate and not promote one faith over others.

The Texas curriculum, he said, does not clear the bar.

In a fifth-grade unit on racial justice, students would be taught that Abraham Lincoln and abolitionists relied in part "on a deep Christian faith" to "guide their certainty of the injustice of slavery." But they would not be taught that other Christians leaned on the same religion to defend slavery and segregation.

It was one example, Mr. Brockman said, of what he called a "whitewashing of the negative details of Christian history" that "helps to promote Christianity as an inherently 'good' religion."

Photograph

The new elementary school curriculum would be optional, but school districts would receive a financial incentive to adopt it. (PHOTOGRAPH BY SARA DIGGINS/AMERICAN-STATESMAN, VIA USA TODAY NETWORK) This article appeared in print on page A19.

DETAILS

Subject:	Teaching; Bible; Students; Christianity
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The vote was preliminary. The board typically takes an initial vote on issues in smaller committees. But all of its 15 members were present Tuesday and the final vote is expected to take place later in the week, with the same outcome.

With the administration of President-elect Donald Trump promising to champion the conservative Christian movement in his second presidential term, the lessons may also offer a playbook for the White House.

Advocates of religious freedom say the new curriculum is the latest major effort by conservatives to explicitly tie the nation’s history and politics to Christian values. Texas was the first state to allow public schools to hire religious chaplains as school counselors, and the Republican-controlled Legislature is expected to try once again to require public-school classrooms to display the Ten Commandments.

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At the Board of Education meeting on Monday, many parents, including several who said they were reverent Christians, argued that it was their right, not the state's, to choose how their children learned about religion.

Others argued that Christianity was inseparable from the American story and central to understanding figures like the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Speakers pointed out that the Bible is often called the most-read book in the world.

Renate Sims, a Texas mother and substitute teacher, said at the meeting that the incarnation of Jesus "is and always will be the hinge of all of history."

"How would the canceling of such fundamental facts serve the education of our children or contribute to shape them morally?" she said.

The Texas Education Agency, which oversees public education in the state, released the new curriculum in the spring, after the state enacted a law directing the agency to develop its own free textbooks. The law was aimed at providing high-quality teaching materials to educators who often spend long hours searching for them, lawmakers said.

The move provoked immediate controversy, upsetting the state's largest teachers' union and some parents, including practicing Christians, who expressed worry that the lessons blur the line between instruction and evangelizing. A top curriculum publisher took issue with a state request to add more biblical content to its materials, the education news outlet The 74 reported.

When a panel was convened to vet the new curriculum for bias, opponents complained that the panel included several people who were known for religious advocacy, including Ben Carson, the former federal housing secretary, to rubber-stamp the lessons.

"They're using Texas as a testing ground for these extreme ideas," said state Rep. James Talarico, a Christian and a Democrat who is also a student at a Presbyterian seminary in Austin.

The Board of Education convened on Monday to consider the new curriculum. After more than seven hours of public comments, the meeting was adjourned until Tuesday morning.

Several Texans of other faiths said at the meeting that the lessons are inappropriate for a public school classroom

and lack balance. Barbara Baruch, a San Antonio-area grandmother who is Jewish, asked the education board to leave religious instruction to parents and their houses of worship.

“I believe my grandkids should share our family’s religion,” Baruch said. “I need help stopping the government from teaching them to be Christians.”

Some board members also questioned whether the curriculum would violate the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, which bars the government from making laws “respecting an establishment of religion.”

Jonathan Covey, the director of policy for Texas Values, a nonprofit that promotes Judeo-Christian values, argued that the curriculum would not face a successful legal challenge, describing the material as “high quality” lessons with “contextually relevant religious topics.”

He pointed to the Supreme Court’s ruling two years ago that a high school football coach had a constitutional right to pray on the field after his team’s games, and said the decision showed that a “strict governmental neutrality toward religion” was not required.

“It has always been understood that religion has a place in American civic society,” Covey told board members, adding that “there’s no rule that says ‘If you have 25 references to the Bible, you must have 25 references to every other religion.’”

Some critics of the curriculum say that besides a lack of balance, some of its lessons simply are not very good.

Amanda Tyler, the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, said at a news conference Monday that the curriculum was “neither instructionally sound, nor factually accurate,” and would teach “misleading” content to children as young as 5.

David R. Brockman, a Christian theologian and religious studies scholar who reviewed the curriculum, said he believed deeply in the value of teaching about religion in public schools. But he also said lessons must be balanced, accurate and not promote one faith over others.

The Texas curriculum, he said, does not clear the bar.

In a fifth-grade unit on racial justice, students would be taught that Abraham Lincoln and abolitionists relied in part “on a deep Christian faith” to “guide their certainty of the injustice of slavery.” But they would not be taught that other Christians leaned on the same religion to defend slavery and segregation.

It was one example, Brockman said, of what he called a “whitewashing of the negative details of Christian history” that “helps to promote Christianity as an inherently ‘good’ religion.”

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Latest battle in culture wars: Putting chaplains in schools

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

FULL TEXT

Lawmakers in mostly conservative states are pushing a coordinated effort to bring chaplains into public schools, aided by a new, legislation-crafting network that aims to address policy issues "from a biblical world view" and by a consortium whose promotional materials say chaplains are a way to convert millions to Christianity.

The bills have been introduced this legislative season in 14 states, inspired by Texas, which passed a law last year allowing school districts to hire chaplains or use them as volunteers for whatever role the local school board sees fit, including replacing trained counselors. Chaplain bills were approved by one legislative chamber in three states - Utah, Indiana and Louisiana - but died in Utah and Indiana. Bills are pending in nine states. One passed both houses of Florida's legislature and is awaiting the governor's signature.

The bills are mushrooming in an era when the U.S. Supreme Court has expanded the rights of religious people and groups in the public square and weakened historical protections meant to keep the government from endorsing religion.

In a 2022 case, Justice Neil M. Gorsuch referred to the "so-called separation of church and state."

Former president Donald Trump has edged close to a government-sanctioned religion by asserting in his campaign that immigrants who "don't like our religion - which a lot of them don't" would be barred from the country in a second term.

"We are reclaiming religious freedom in this country," said Jason Rapert, a former Arkansas state senator and the president of the National Association of Christian Lawmakers, which he founded in 2019 to craft model legislation, according to the group's site. Its mission is "to bring federal, state and local lawmakers together in support of clear biblical principles ⋯to address major policy concerns from a biblical world view," the site says.

The group hosted House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) late last year at its gala at the Museum of the Bible in Washington. The chaplain bills, Rapert said, are part of an effort to empower "the values and principles of the Founding Fathers." Critics who compare such efforts to theocracy, he said, are creating "a false flag, a boogeyman by the radical left to demonize everyone of faith."

Rapert said he'll push in the next round of chaplain bills to make the positions mandatory.

Heather Weaver, senior staff attorney at the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief, called allowing chaplains into public schools "a constitutional time bomb."

"It definitely would be a much more direct route to promoting religion to students and evangelizing them than we've seen in the past," she said.

Despite its popularity among some legislators, the campaign has drawn objections in some places where efforts to incorporate religion - Christianity in particular - into public life are normally welcomed. Texas's law required all school districts to vote by March 1 on whether to accept chaplains, and the state's biggest districts, in both red and blue areas, rejected the creation of a chaplain position. Those districts enroll more than half of the state's public school students.

Some experts on church-state relations say the pushback may reflect Americans' complex and inconsistent relationship with the role Christianity should play in a pluralistic country. Polls show a majority of Americans say that the government should enforce church-state separation and oppose the government ever declaring an official U.S.

religion. Yet, in a 2022 Pew Research poll, a strong minority, 45 percent, said the country "should be a Christian nation."

"This shows there's a difference between having some of these loose ideas or inclinations about what the relationship should be between religion and government - especially Christianity and the government - and looking at what it looks like in a policy that impacts our kids," said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a group defending the separation of church and state. "Most people are in the middle."

Some opponents also said the bills lack specifics and at times alarmed even the religious because parents value trained, educated counselors for mental health and college preparation.

A Texas campaign

The Texas chaplain bill came amid a cluster of legislative efforts there to weave religion explicitly into public schools. In 2021, the legislature passed a law ordering schools to hang "in a conspicuous place" any donated signs reading "In God We Trust." In 2023 the state Senate passed bills requiring the Ten Commandments be hung in every classroom in the state, although the effort was shelved in the House.

Democratic lawmakers filed amendments to the chaplain bill but the GOP majority rejected almost all of them, including one requiring parental consent to talk with a chaplain, one barring proselytizing and another requiring chaplains to serve students of all faiths. The bill as passed had no educational or accreditation requirements for chaplains, nor specifics about what they would do.

Supporters of the chaplains offered a mix of pragmatic and religious arguments.

Texas ranks 17th in the nation in the ratio of counselors to students with 1 for every 389 children. (The American School Counselor Association recommends 1 for every 250 students.) Advocates said chaplains could help with kids' mental health challenges and would infuse a sense of reverence, morality and respect into the schools.

Texas state Sen. Mayes Middleton, one of the bill's Republican sponsors, said Trump's U.S. Supreme Court appointments were making "it possible for us to go win some of these fights and put God back in government so people can freely exercise their religious beliefs in government and in schools."

Lawmakers in Texas and in other states advocating for chaplains said they have worked with the Oklahoma-based National School Chaplain Association, whose annual report says it has served 27 million students in two dozen countries. The association's site focuses on the need to supplement the shortage of guidance counselors. Not publicized is that the association is a subsidiary of a group called Mission Generation, which has said its goal is to use public school chaplains to convert millions to Christianity.

"The key is schools, the largest network of children on the planet. There is a fantastic opportunity to bring God's word to millions of children through public and private schools," says a voice-over on a Mission Generation publicity video. Officials with the chaplain association initially agreed to answer questions from The Washington Post, but then declined to comment.

Many Texas districts saw local clergy and chaplains of various faiths testify against the new positions, saying that students need professional counselors and that they were concerned about the lack of mandate for religious diversity. The leader of the legislative opposition was state Rep. James Talarico (D), a Presbyterian seminarian. He said that without sufficient guardrails, chaplains would wind up a vehicle for Christian power, which he sees as countering the Gospel.

"It is the worship of power," Talarico said during a recent news conference about the chaplain law. "Jesus never asked us to establish a Christian theocracy. All he asked was that we love thy neighbor."

A national change

Recent Supreme Court rulings have strengthened the role of publicly funded schools as the vanguard for breaching the traditional divide between church and state. The court has ruled that state-run voucher programs must fund religious schools and that public grant programs can't exclude religious institutions.

Advocates of school chaplains often cite a 2022 Supreme Court ruling involving a public school football coach in Washington state who had been suspended by the school district for praying on the field after games. The court said Joe Kennedy shouldn't have been suspended for what Gorsuch called a "brief, quiet, personal prayer," although

opponents noted the prayers often drew the media and players, among others. The ruling did not, however, endorse staff-led prayer in public schools.

Some states that are proposing chaplains in schools had taken earlier steps to merge religion and public education. Since 2018, seven states have passed mandates similar to Texas's offering a dominant display of "In God We Trust" signs. Governors in Idaho and Kentucky recently signed measures that could allow on-duty teachers and public school employees to pray in front of and with students. Advocates for church-state separation say the number of bills seeking to fund and empower conservative religious beliefs has increased, to 1,200 filed this year.

Counselors and those representing them, meanwhile, say that even as legislators try to push chaplains into schools, they are not sufficiently funding the hiring of trained, secular counselors.

"We underfund and then look for Band-Aids," said Jill Adams, president of the Texas School Counselor Association. "We look for fixes. I feel the chaplain bill is a Band-Aid."

Emotional debate

The Texas chaplain law did not require districts to report whether they had accepted or rejected their role, so there is no official accounting of what districts and which students may be affected.

Texas Impact, an advocacy arm of Muslim, Jewish and mainline Christian groups, listed 104 large districts that rejected the creation of a chaplain position. Those 104 districts serve 2.7 million students, Director Josh Houston said.

The Texas Association of School Boards said it wasn't tracking votes, but anecdotally found most districts leaning toward affirming that chaplains were welcome as volunteers just as any other citizen would be, a spokesperson for the group wrote in a statement to The Post.

The ACLU said three districts approved accepting chaplains as guidance counselors, and five districts approved accepting chaplains as support staff.

The debate reached Conroe, outside Houston, one snowy night in January. School board president Skeeter Hubert led the room in an opening prayer for the safety of people traveling around the district, and for everyone to make good decisions.

"We ask for these things in the name of our savior, Jesus Christ," he said.

"Amen," the room answered.

Hubert had initially been "100 percent open" to the idea of chaplains, he told The Post.

"There are a lot of fiery darts being thrown at our youth. Single-parent homes, inappropriateness in media, bullying, cliques - all kinds of things," he said. "I believe our youth will be able to get through this by following the Gospel."

But as a "policy and procedure guy," Hubert's key questions were: How do we make this work? What exactly would chaplains do? Would it require taking funding from the school budget?

Pushing for a no vote was Datren Williams, a board member for 12 years. Williams's identity, he told The Post, has been shaped both by experiencing being in the majority, as a Southern Baptist growing up in Tennessee, and being in the minority, as a Black man. The push for chaplains who would most likely be Christian was an affront to his faith, which he said calls for the strong to support the weaker.

"When you get an LGBT chaplain showing up in school, you all will be up here in outrage!" he said in the hearing.

Stacey Chase, another board member, said she found unlicensed chaplains in schools "terrifying" and felt if more counselors were needed, more should be hired.

"They aren't counselors," school board member Tiffany Nelson said of chaplains. "And if it saves one life it's worth it."

Nelson cited the Coach Kennedy case, saying incorrectly that it had approved prayer in school.

The meeting went on for two hours and 41 minutes, with board members interrupting and insulting one another and raising their voices to the point that the board vice president had to bang a gavel to stop the arguing. Three citizens, including a pastor, spoke against school chaplains. One woman rose simply to say she opposed letting students pick pronouns, and to read a bit of scripture.

Then the board voted, and the measure to adopt chaplains failed, 4-3.

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13 faith trailblazers who made a big difference this year

Shimron, Yonat . Shimron, Yonat.

FULL TEXT

The events of 2023 catapulted a variety of people of faith into the public eye.

Religion News Service selected 13 who made their mark this year, speaking out on a range of contentious issues and challenging the nation to live up to its values.

Some railed against embedding Christian teachings in Texas public schools or took on a hunger strike in support of legislation that would add caste as a protected class. Others came on the scene in response to the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel and still more to Israel's retaliation in the Gaza Strip. Some broke glass ceilings - one became the first Muslim woman to sit on the federal bench, another the first drag queen to top a Christian music chart.

Here are 13 emerging leaders, beginning with a pair who came to be known by their first name. *(*Inclusion on this list does not equal endorsement or agreement from RNS.*)*

The Justins

Justin Jones and Justin Pearson, two Black Democratic lawmakers in the Tennessee legislature, were expelled by the Republican-dominated General Assembly after staging a protest in support of gun control on the House floor. Their triumphant, but interim, reinstatement in mid-April captured national attention and brought a spotlight to a conversation on gun violence, race and democracy. Both Justins cut their teeth in old-fashioned, faith-led civil rights advocacy, appealing to God and Scripture as a powerful tactic in their activist arsenal. Pearson even compared his removal from the chamber to the crucifixion of Jesus. Jones is a graduate of Vanderbilt Divinity School; Pearson is the son of a pastor. The two easily won reelection to their districts in August and have become icons of a kind of Black liberation politics that is both inspired by faith and progressive.

Rachel Goldberg

The American Israeli mother of Gaza hostage Hersh Goldberg-Polin has emerged as one of the most prominent spokespeople for the hostages taken by Hamas militants during their Oct. 7 raid in Israel. The Chicago native has addressed the United Nations in New York and the March for Israel in Washington. She has met with President Biden and with billionaire Elon Musk. She has been featured by every major news organization and, with her team of public relations volunteers, has developed a ubiquitous social media presence, especially on Instagram, where she always appears with a white sticker on her shirt marking the number of days since her son was taken. Goldberg and her husband, Jonathan Polin, are observant Jews who moved to Israel in 2008 to pursue their dream of living there. Hersh, their eldest child, was born in Berkeley, Calif. He was attending a music festival when he was taken hostage, one of 10 American hostages.

Esau McCaulley

A New York Times contributor and New Testament professor at Wheaton College, McCaulley published a widely acclaimed memoir this year. In "How Far to the Promised Land," he tells of growing up poor in Huntsville, Ala., with an abusive and drug-addicted father and how as a Christian he overcame his hatred of him. McCaulley, a Black evangelical, refuses to let stereotypes define his story or the story of the community he came from. "I felt trapped by the story that people were telling about me - this kid who escaped poverty and made it to the middle class," he told RNS. "That was the story people wanted to hear. But I felt like that wasn't true. Because it made it seem like the only people who mattered were the people who succeeded." He added: "What I really wanted to say is, 'No, you need to see my family. And by seeing them, you can see America.'"

Kerry Alys Robinson

In June, Catholic Charities USA appointed a woman and a layperson to guide the domestic humanitarian work of the Catholic Church in the United States. Robinson, who comes from the world of philanthropy, has been an adviser to and trustee of more than 25 grantmaking foundations and charities. Most recently she worked at the Leadership Roundtable, a group of lay business people who advise the church in management practices. In her new role, she oversees Catholic Charities' 168 member agencies, which serve more than 15 million people in need across the country. Robinson has also advocated for the role of women in the church, calling it a matter of moral urgency. "We are impoverished without the contribution of so many well-educated, theologically astute, pastorally sensitive women," she said on a podcast for National Catholic Reporter.

James Talarico

The Democratic state lawmaker has given impassioned speeches this year criticizing his Republican colleagues in the Texas legislature on a host of issues, but never more so than on the topic of religion. He was incensed with a trio of religion-related education bills. One that passed and became law allows public schools to hire chaplains. Another bill mandating that Texas classrooms hang a donated version of the Ten Commandments ultimately failed this session, perhaps in part a result of a viral TikTok video in which Talarico explained why as a Christian he felt the bill was unconstitutional, un-American and un-Christian. "A religion that has to force people to put up a poster to prove its legitimacy is a dead religion," Talarico intoned. The 34-year-old lawmaker is a former middle school teacher and now also a Presbyterian seminarian.

Rami Nashashibi

A Palestinian American activist and community organizer, Nashashibi was among a group of U.S. Muslims who met with President Biden in late October as Israel launched a full-scale ground invasion in the Gaza Strip in response to the Hamas incursion into Israel on Oct. 7. Nashashibi spoke after the meeting, in which he said the group asked for a cease-fire and more sympathy for civilians dying in the conflict. "We need anybody of good conscience to realize that - when we have escalated to the point where a child is dying every 10 minutes in Gaza, where water, electricity, fuel, generators are being shut off, people are dying in hospitals - that whatever you want to call it at this moment, it can't just be a temporary pause." Nashashibi, who was born in Jordan and educated at the University of Chicago, is the founder of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, a social justice organization. He won a MacArthur Fellowship in 2017.

Mike Johnson

If there was one bright moment for conservative White evangelicals in 2023, it was the surprising ascent of Johnson to speaker of the House, a man who has put faith at the center of his career. The Louisiana congressman wasted no time suggesting immediately after the vote that he was ordained by God for this role. Johnson, a Southern Baptist, is a former lawyer and communications staffer with the Alliance Defense Fund, now known as Alliance Defending Freedom, a conservative Christian legal firm. He rejects many broadly held interpretations of the separation of church and state and is an ally of self-styled historian David Barton. In Congress, Johnson played a central role in attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election. As the most powerful Republican in Washington, he is in a position to put his brand of evangelical Christianity at the center of American policy and lawmaking.

Flamy Grant

The first drag queen to top iTunes' Christian music chart, Grant is a queer singer-songwriter with the offstage name of Matthew Blake Lovegood. A North Carolina native, Grant had been writing and releasing contemporary Christian music for years, most recently as a worship leader at a progressive church in San Diego. Her hit song, "Good Day," is a hymn to a church that rejects queer people. "God made me good in every way," the song goes, "so I'll raise my voice to celebrate a good day." On July 27, "Good Day" hit No. 1 on the Christian songs and albums charts. Since discovering drag, Grant has found a career and stage name, a nod to lifelong music idol Amy Grant. Flamy Grant no longer attends church but still sees herself as part of the Christian music genre. "I want to push back, and be more of a prophetic voice, in the biblical sense - a member of the community who is speaking out about the ills and the wrongs of the community, and asking us to consider, and change, and love bigger, love harder, love more," Grant told RNS.

Simone Zimmerman

Zimmerman is co-founder of IfNotNow, a Jewish American organization that gained widespread media attention this year for its protests calling for an immediate cease-fire in Israel's war in Gaza. The group is committed to ending what it says is Israel's apartheid system. But Zimmerman was also a central figure in the 2023 documentary "Israelism," which features the 32-year-old as one of two young American Jews raised to love and support Israel until she begins to learn about Israel's long-standing occupation of Palestinian territories and related policies she comes to see as oppressive. Zimmerman, as the documentary shows, is a product of the Jewish American educational system. She attended Jewish day schools in Los Angeles and graduated from the University of California at Los Angeles. "Israelism" received added attention after the Hamas attack on Oct. 7, when several universities attempted to cancel screenings for fear it might spur more protests or violence.

Rhonda Thomas

After a Florida law passed this year that limited classroom discussion of race, Thomas decided to mobilize faith leaders to teach "raw and real" African American history from their pulpits. As the executive director of Faith in Florida, Thomas created an online tool kit on Black history, and soon it was adopted not only by Black churches but White ones. The online list includes books on slavery and narratives of the enslaved; articles on the Civil War; and documentaries, from "Eyes on the Prize" to "Trayvon Martin: 10 Years Later." Thomas is co-pastor of New Generation Missionary Baptist Church in Opa-locka. Florida legislators, she said, didn't want Black history taught because they feared it would offend White children. "If they wanted to really look at who's been offended, it has been Black children (who) have been offended - and I use myself - all my life," she told RNS.

Thenmozhi Soundararajan

Soundararajan is a Dalit American activist and community organizer committed to fighting against caste discrimination. The founder of Equality Labs, based in California, Soundararajan is fighting for caste liberation. She supported the historic Seattle bill to end caste discrimination, which passed in February, as well as a similar bill that passed in the city of Fresno, Calif. She and her group led a hunger strike in the hopes that California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) would sign a bill adding caste as a protected category in the state. He vetoed it in September. While caste discrimination is most prominent in South Asia, the bills argue it is on the rise in the United States, too - on college campuses and in the tech industry, where large numbers of South Asians mingle. "The issue is not whether or not caste exists in the U.S.," wrote Soundararajan, "but rather how we should address the liability created by such severe discrimination."

Nusrat Choudhury

In June, Choudhury was the first Muslim woman confirmed by the U.S. Senate as a federal judge. A Bangladeshi American, she was nominated by President Biden in 2022 to expand diversity in the nation's courts. She follows Zahid Quraishi, who in 2021 became the first Muslim man to be confirmed as a federal judge. Choudhury served as a legal director for the Illinois chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union before her appointment. Before that she worked in the ACLU's New York headquarters, where she filed a lawsuit challenging the New York Police Department's surveillance of Muslims. It resulted in a court-ordered settlement. She serves on the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of New York, an area that is home to some of the largest Muslim and Bangladeshi communities in the country.

- *Religion News Service*

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Scores of chaplains urge Tex. schools to forgo chaplains

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

FULL TEXT

Critics fear law enables Christian proselytization; others seek that outcome

More than 100 chaplains signed a letter urging local Texas school boards to vote against putting chaplains in public schools, calling efforts to enlist religious counselors in public classrooms "harmful" to students and families.

The letter was issued just days before a bill allowing public schools to hire school chaplains becomes law in Texas, the first state in the country to pass such a measure. The legislation, which had been pushed by activists associated with Christian nationalism, gives the state's nearly 1,200 school boards until March 1 of next year to vote on whether to employ chaplains.

The letter was organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Interfaith Alliance as well as the local advocacy group Texas Impact.

The chaplains who signed the letter, released Tuesday, bemoaned the lack of standards for potential school chaplains aside from background checks, contrasting it with the extensive training required for health-care and military chaplains.

"Because of our training and experience, we know that chaplains are not a replacement for school counselors or safety measures in our public schools, and we urge you to reject this flawed policy option: It is harmful to our public schools and the students and families they serve," the letter reads.

Although chaplains who operate in multifaith environments are generally barred from proselytizing, the Texas bill, S.B. 763, outlined no such restriction, leaving each school district to answer the question on its own.

"There is no requirement in this law that the chaplains refrain from proselytizing while at schools or that they serve students from different religious backgrounds," the letter reads.

Signers of the letter are members of an array of Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, Disciples of Christ and Seventh-day Adventist. Some are part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Several other signers identified as Jewish, Buddhist or Unitarian Universalist.

"Texas Impact's member faith traditions recognize the unique value of chaplains in some of life's most challenging situations, and that's why they insist on rigorous training and oversight of chaplains under their commission," the Rev. Franz Schemmel, Texas Impact board president and pastor at Messiah Lutheran Church in Weatherford, said in a news release.

In June, another letter sent to school boards by the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Texas, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation raised similar concerns about the bill, which they called unconstitutional.

Besides leading to "religious proselytization and coercion of students," the June letter charged, chaplains "are generally affiliated with specific religious denominations and traditions. In deciding which chaplains to hire or accept as volunteers, schools will inherently give preference to particular denominations, violating the 'clearest command' of the Establishment Clause: '(O)ne religious denomination cannot be officially preferred over another.'"

As S.B. 763 made its way through the Texas legislature in May, state Rep. James Talarico, a Presbyterian minister in training, repeatedly challenged the bill and linked it to Christian nationalism. He also expressed concern about the bill's champions: the National School Chaplain Association, an arm of a Christian missionary organization that previously has expressed a desire to convert students and school officials to Christianity.

Julie Pickren, a member of the NSCA's board who was elected to the Texas State Board of Education in November, appeared in a since-deleted video on social media in which she celebrated the idea of chaplains proselytizing to schoolchildren.

"There are children who need chaplains. For the pastors in here, you already know: We have a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church," Pickren said in the video.

- Religion News Service

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Activists pressed Texas bill to put chaplains in schools

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

FULL TEXT

On Wednesday afternoon, Texas state Rep. James Talarico (D) approached the microphone on the House floor with a stack of papers in hand. It was time for the final vote on a bill that would allow public schools in the state to hire their own unlicensed chaplains.

It was largely ceremonial, but Talarico, a vocal critic of the bill, still had a few questions.

Looking down at his notes, he asked Rep. Cole Hefner (R), the chief champion of the House bill, if the head of the National School Chaplain Association had worked on the proposal that has drawn controversy and national attention.

"They provided some input," Hefner offered.

It was an understated acknowledgment of a coalition that shepherded the chaplains bill through the Texas legislature. Whereas two other bills introduced this session that involved religion and public schools - one that dealt with school prayer and another requiring classrooms to hang donated Ten Commandments signs - never made it across the finish line, the chaplains bill was carried by an alliance of right-wing activists, Christian groups and conservative lawmakers who have aided each other's rise while championing forms of Christian nationalism.

Their victory points to the ascendant power of the ideology in red states, where legislators are lining up behind bills involving religion, including opposition to LGBTQ rights, that critics say only reflect a specific Christian vision for society.

The lawmaker most associated with the Texas chaplains bill is Sen. Mayes Middleton (R), a former Texas House member serving his first term in the state Senate in a district that includes Galveston. As head of the Freedom Caucus during his time in the Texas House, Middleton was a vocal supporter of U.S. lawmakers from Texas who attempted to halt the certification of the 2020 presidential election on Jan. 6, 2021.

He has also articulated support for Christian nationalist ideas, such as insisting that the separation of church and state is "not a real doctrine" during debate over the chaplains bill. And in a recent interview with The Washington Post, he declared "there is absolutely no separation of God and government, and that's what these bills are about," referring to the chaplains bill as well as the Ten Commandments bill, which he also authored.

As head of his own oil company, Middleton has been an influential political donor in Texas, including providing a $5,000 donation to Julie Pickren, who successfully ran for the state board of education last year in a district that includes Galveston.

Pickren was a controversial choice: An ardent supporter of Donald Trump, she sparked outcry in March 2021 when it was revealed she was in Washington on Jan. 6 to attend the Trump rally that preceded the attack on the U.S. Capitol. Although Pickren, then a local school board member, did not appear to enter the Capitol, her presence nearby was criticized by area NAACP representatives, as were her false claims that the Capitol attack was led by "antifa" members instead of Trump supporters.

Pickren lost her local school board seat two months later but remained a rising star in the Texas Republican Party. She appeared on an education-focused panel at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2022 and has also developed connections with the prominent state-level activist group Texas Values, which champions "faith, family

and freedom" and played a role in authoring the state's controversial "heartbeat" abortion bill.
During a September 2021 appearance on the Right Side Broadcasting Network, a host asked Pickren about the Texas heartbeat bill. Instead of responding, she simply turned her camera slightly as Jonathan M. Saenz, head of Texas Values, leaned in to speak next to her.
The following year, the political arm of Saenz's group, Texas Values Action, formally endorsed Pickren's campaign for the state board of education.
Also among Pickren's supporters: activist and self-declared prophet Lance Wallnau, who identifies as a Christian nationalist. Wallnau promoted Pickren during CPAC in 2021, seeking her out on the conference floor and recording a video with her while encouraging viewers to support her.
Pickren, for her part, has called on voters to elect Christians.
"It's so important to elect conservatives and Christians to our local school board races so that they can pass policy that will protect [the] children in each school district," she said in an interview conducted earlier this month on the far-right Brighteon network.
In that same interview, Pickren noted that during her time as a local school board trustee, she created a "Superintendent's Pastoral Team" that invited pastors and youth pastors to volunteer at schools, which she insisted lessened violence and drug use. When she began running for the state board of education, she said, she prayed for a way to replicate the local program at the state level.
According to Pickren, the answer to those prayers came via a call from a staffer who worked for Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Tex.): The staffer put her in touch with the leaders of Mission Generation, a Christian mission organization specializing in placing school chaplains around the world.
Pickren would go on to serve on the board of the National School Chaplain Association, a project of Mission Generation. The group - which, according to the Texas Tribune, is run by Rocky Malloy, a self-described former drug-smuggling pirate - has openly expressed a desire to "influence those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him."
Pickren, too, has spoken of the group's religious intentions during a Mission Generation event last year. In a video posted to the group's Instagram page, she encouraged attendees to donate to Mission Generation because "there are children who need chaplains," explaining that there is "a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church."
Six months later, when Middleton introduced the chaplains bill to the state Senate, Malloy of Mission Generation was among those who testified in support. So, too, was Pickren, who appeared to indicate personal involvement in authoring the chaplains bill: When discussing funding aspects of the proposal, she said it drew from a subset of government funds "because I did not feel, in talking with Sen. Middleton, that we needed to affect academic counseling budget."
Two days earlier, Pickren had tweeted a photo of herself and Malloy with Pastor Rafael Cruz, Sen. Cruz's father, saying the trio were "discussing the importance of school chaplains." But neither Malloy nor Pickren mentioned their group's evangelism-minded goals during their testimonies before the Senate committee, with Malloy insisting that chaplains "are not working to convert people to religion."
As the bill - which was also supported by Texas Values - progressed through the House, Mission Generation's website vanished, with its URL redirecting to the National School Chaplain Association website. When the Texas Tribune reached out about the Instagram video of Pickren's comments unearthed by Religion News Service, it promptly disappeared from Mission Generation's account.
As the bill came before the Texas House of Representatives, Democrats attached a provision introduced by Talarico that required school chaplains be endorsed by an organization recognized by the U.S. Department of Defense, the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the Texas Department of Criminal Justice. The amendment potentially imperiled the ability of NSCA chaplains to serve in Texas schools, as the group is not recognized by the Defense Department.
But as noted in an article by The Washington Post, the amendment was stripped from the legislation after passage, likely clearing a path for NSCA chaplains to begin working in the Lone Star State.

While the bill will become law, its future remains uncertain. David Donatti of the Texas American Civil Liberties Union told RNS that his group is considering a legal challenge.

"It is truly a real-time experiment on our children," Donatti said of the proposal, arguing that it could end up "eroding our fundamental freedom of religion and belief."

- Religion News Service

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In Texas, lines between church, state are blurring

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

FULL TEXT

AUSTIN - Texas lawmakers were scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to require that the Ten Commandments be posted in every classroom in the state, part of a newly energized national effort to insert religion into public life. Supporters say they believe that the Supreme Court's ruling last summer in favor of a high school football coach who prayed with players essentially removed any guardrails between religion and government.

The bill, which was scheduled Tuesday for the House floor, is one of about a half-dozen religion bills approved this session by the Texas Senate, including one that would allow uncertified chaplains to replace trained, professional counselors in K-12 schools.

Texas's biennial legislative session is short, chaotic and packed, and it was not certain Tuesday evening whether the Ten Commandments bill would definitely get a vote by midnight. But groups that watch church-state issues say efforts nationwide to fund and empower religion - and, more specifically, a particular type of Christianity - are more plentiful and aggressive than they have been in years. Americans United for Separation of Church and State says it is watching 1,600 bills around the country in states such as Louisiana and Missouri. Earlier this year, Idaho and Kentucky signed into law measures that could allow teachers and public school employees to pray in front of and with students while on duty.

Many legislators cite the Supreme Court's June ruling in favor of Coach Joe Kennedy of Bremerton, Wash., who prayed with his players on the 50-yard line. They see the Supreme Court as righting the American ship after a half-century of wrongly separating church and state.

"There is absolutely no separation of God and government, and that's what these bills are about. That has been confused; it's not real," said Texas state Sen. Mayes Middleton (R), who co-sponsored or authored three of the religion bills. "When prayer was taken out of schools, things went downhill - discipline, mental health. It's something I heard a lot on porches when I was campaigning. It's something I've thought about for a long time."

Those who object to the bills say they reflect a country that is tipping into a new, dangerous phase in its church-state balance, with people in power who want to assert a version of Christian dominance.

Josh Houston, who has advocated at the Capitol for progressive and minority religious groups since 2005, said the kinds of bills passing chambers this year would have gone nowhere in the past in Texas. Even though religious expressions in public places in Texas are common, he said, there was an understanding that public employees represent the government and that legally the government shouldn't impose religion. People have forgotten violent episodes in the United States' past over religion, he said, such as when dozens of people were killed or injured in the mid-1800s when Catholics and Protestants fought about the use of specific Bibles in public schools.

"We're entering a new space," Houston said last week. "We got this right for most of the 20th century, but now people are forgetting the past. We're at the point now where bills preference one faith over others. You point that out, and

there is no interest in negotiation."

Opponents and 'accommodators'

Citizens and advocates have signed up to testify by the dozens against the Texas religion bills this session. They have noted that the bills followed a 2021 Texas law that requires school districts to post "In God We Trust" signs in public schools if someone donates them. Thousands of signs have since been donated and hung. The measures have pushed some Texans into activism and others to decide to leave the state.

Zach Freeman, a stay-at-home dad of three in Colleyville, Tex., has gotten at least 300,000 views on two TikToks he made in the past week against two of the Texas religion bills. He is worried that an organized and well-funded minority of activists on the right are damaging public education.

A sixth-generation Texan, Freeman grew up in a religiously conservative part of the state where prayers were common at public school events. "I don't have a problem with anyone's private expression, but Jesus said, 'Go in a room and pray privately.' That's what these bills are, false Christianity, presenting an exterior that doesn't match the interior. It's presented as though it's to include Christians, and what it does is exclude everyone else."

After 23 years in Texas, Sravan Krishna plans to move his family out of the state before his two young children start school in the fall. A practicing Hindu who attended Christian schools as a boy, Krishna said the departure will bring a "lot of pain" in the short term. But an accumulation of things - from growing opposition to diversity and anti-racism education, as well as book bans and what he calls "Christian nationalism" - forced his hand, he said.

"In the beginning, I thought: 'How can a place like this, one of the wealthiest Zip codes in the state, be so backward?'" Krishna said. "I thought: 'Oh, they're just misinformed,' but from there it never changed. There isn't much of an uproar, and it's even welcomed, this forcing of a particular religious view."

Andrew Whitehead, an expert on religious nationalism at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, said his research shows that Americans have complex and even contradictory impulses around church-and-state relations.

His research shows that a decreasing percentage of Americans agree with statements such as "being a Christian is very important to being an American" and the government "should declare America a Christian nation." However, he said, many Americans still identify as Christian, even if nominally.

In the often-cited research Whitehead has done with University of Oklahoma sociologist Sam Perry, they found that when it comes to ranking and measuring Americans' support for merging Christianity and nationalism, the biggest group is what the men call "accommodators."

"When they see the Ten Commandments, they think Christianity is a net good in society. They think, 'Yeah, this country has always been kind of Christian.' So they mostly stay quiet," Whitehead said. "They think, 'These things don't affect me.'"

A key ruling

The Supreme Court has been strengthening the free exercise of religion for the past decade, said Washington University professor of religion and law John Inazu. But the court, in the case of the football coach - known as *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* - not only upheld his right to pray, on the field, in front of and with players, but also set aside 52-year-old rules that courts have used to decide whether something violates the U.S. Constitution's ban on the government "establishing" religion. Those rules say a practice must have a secular purpose and not create an excessive "entanglement" with religion.

In the *Bremerton* decision, Justice Neil M. Gorsuch wrote that instead of those rules, courts should look to "historical practices," traditions and the understandings of the Founding Fathers.

To some legal experts, the court in *Bremerton* created a vague, large hole where an existing balance between church and state had been.

About the Ten Commandments bill, Harvard Law School constitutional law scholar and Bloomberg columnist Noah Feldman wrote last month that before *Bremerton*, "the Texas bill would've been an obviously unconstitutional establishment of religion, something prohibited by the First Amendment of the Constitution. Now, however, it comes under the disturbing category of 'Who knows?'"

"History and tradition," Feldman wrote, could be used to both uphold and strike down the Texas bill. "Into the 20th century, many public schools started the day with Bible-reading and prayer. These practices, ruled unconstitutional in the 1960s and '70s, are part of the American history and tradition," as is that of the courts striking them down, Feldman wrote.

Chaplains and commandments

David Donatti of the Texas ACLU said that right now there is a "particular aggressiveness that's unique" among conservatives pushing Christianity into public places. It's fed, he said, "by the perception that the courts will allow this right-wing Christian nationalism to take root, that, now the doors are wide open."

About a half-dozen religion-related bills have drawn attention this session in Texas.

One is the Ten Commandments bill, which is novel in that it mandates a specific religious text be hung everywhere. Its text - from a Protestant version of the commandments - is a copy of what's on a monument outside, on the Capitol grounds. That monument was put up in 1961, and challenged at the Supreme Court in 2005. The same day the court ruled the Texas statue could stay up because it had been there for a while and was more "passive" and historical than religious, it also ruled against framed copies of the Ten Commandments in two Kentucky courthouses, which were newer and ruled to be motivated by religion.

Introducing the House version of the Ten Commandments bill in early May, state Rep. Candy Noble (R) told the Public Education Committee that this version of the decalogue is "foundational" to America's legal and educational systems, and that it was once common for the commandments to be displayed in public buildings.

"The problem is that for the last few decades, the expression of that historical heritage has been restricted," she said. "Restore those liberties that were lost and that remind students of the fundamental foundation of American and Texas law."

Then committee member Rep. James Talarico (D) spoke. A seminarian, former schoolteacher and grandson of a Baptist preacher, Talarico started by acknowledging that he, Noble and others on the dais are Christians who try to obey the Ten Commandments.

"It says, 'Thou shall not create idols.' The idea that some people would try to make an object, like two tablets, to worship, rather than God - are you worried this bill is idolatrous?" he asked.

Noble replied: "No, this bill is reflective of the principles we need in our classrooms. I get where you're going, but this is historical and it is foundational."

Said Talarico: "Representative Noble, you are devout, and so am I. This bill to me is not only unconstitutional, not only un-American, I think it is also deeply un-Christian."

The Texas Senate this session also passed a bill to allow districts to require schools to set aside time for staff and students to pray and read religious texts, and a second bill to allow public employees to "engage in religious prayer and speech" - modeled after the coach ruling. Those two bills had not made it out of House committees by Monday.

Another bill would have authorized the state to approve the building of a sculpture on the Capitol grounds of a pregnant woman with a see-through belly and fetus inside. It passed the Senate, but the deadline for it to get to a House committee passed.

A few weeks later, state Rep. Cole Hefner (R), the House sponsor of the chaplain bill, said the legislation wasn't about pressing religion.

"We have to give schools all the tools; with all we're experiencing, with mental health problems, other crises, this is just another tool," he said.

Then he rejected a half-dozen amendments.

Talarico proposed requiring parental consent. Hefner and the majority rejected it. Another lawmaker proposed adding that chaplains must serve students of all faiths and not proselytize. Rejected. Another proposed striking the bill's requirement that every school district in Texas, within six months, vote up or down whether to have chaplains.

State Rep. Erin Zwiener (D) asked whether it would be better to not force culture war "fuel" on the districts with a public vote. School board members are getting death threats, she said, questioning the value of asking every school board to vote on this.

"I don't think it's a problem to know where they stand on this," Hefner said before he and the majority rejected it.
"You and I have engaged in good faith thoughtful conversations about this legislation. I consider you a friend," Talarico told Hefner, "I'm not trying to undermine or gut this bill, just to put common-sense guard rails."
Hefner eventually accepted Talarico's amendment requiring chaplains to be accredited by a professional association, like chaplains in the military or hospitals. But when Hefner took the amended bill to the Senate author, Talarico's proposal was stripped.
State Rep. Gene Wu (D), one of the lawmakers whose amendments Hefner rejected, said later in his office that he believes bills this session are part of the reason Christianity is declining in the United States.
"We constantly kick the poor in the teeth, tell the sick to go just die and never take care of prisoners. The hypocrisy is not a bug, it's a feature."

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COLUMN ONE; Ban books? Not without a fight; In Florida, opponents of censorship clash with conservative groups over what kids should be reading.

Fleishman, Jeffrey . Fleishman, Jeffrey.

FULL TEXT

The tattoos on Jen Cousins' arms speak to literacy and how books can take us on trips across strange and extraordinary universes: an owl for wisdom, a drawing from the novel "Wonder," multicolored glasses from Harry Potter and a saying from one of her children: "The world is only what you shape it to be."

But as any Hogwarts wizard knows, and as Cousins, a mother with a defiant streak, was quick to discover, many forces are conspiring to shape the world.

At a school board meeting here two years ago, her ideas clashed with those of conservative parents and a Proud Boys member who called for "Gender Queer," a graphic memoir by Maia Kobabe about sexual identity, to be pulled from library shelves.

"This is the 21st century. We don't ban books, right?" said Cousins, recalling that day when school board members "freaked out" over the memoir's depictions of sexual acts that she said were taken out of context. "It was even more personal to me because my child, who was 12 at the time, had just come out as nonbinary. I gave them 'Gender Queer' after that so they could find acceptance and confirmation and know they were not alone."

Cousins said she grew incensed at the encounter, the way she did when she was 10, watching the first Gulf War on CNN.

"We were latchkey kids," she said. "My mom worked nights at a drugstore, and I'd call her and say, 'I can't believe this war is happening. We shouldn't be there. Stop it.' "

The mother of four is still at the center of an inflamed culture war that has pitted teachers, librarians and parents against conservative parental rights groups and powerful politicians, including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who are pressing school boards to remove hundreds of books on gender identity, race, sex education and LGBTQ+ issues.

Cousins was back in front of her Orange County, Fla., school board last month, protesting against censorship.

In 2022, a record 1,269 demands were made to forbid books and other materials in schools and libraries nationwide, according to the American Library Assn., up from 156 in 2020. But the book-banning opponents are gaining momentum.

Red Wine &Blue, a national, politically active "sisterhood" founded in Ohio, helps people speak out against censorship at public meetings. A librarian who was threatened and harassed for condemning book bans started Louisiana

Citizens Against Censorship.
Texas teacher Frank Strong publishes the "Book-Loving Texan's Guide," a report on state school board races that rates candidates with a color chart.
"These conservative groups show up like clockwork to school board meetings," said Strong, a high school English teacher in Austin. "It's clear to me that if you want to combat them, you have to organize, get out early and be disciplined."
He said resistance to book bans was significant in November, when only eight of the 38 "pro-censorship" school board candidates he tracked were elected.
"Anti-censorship people are building a network in Texas," he said. "They're savvier and more aware now of what the other side is doing."
Texas state Rep. James Talarico challenged conservatives' literary tastes in March, saying proposed restrictions could mean censoring "Lonesome Dove" by Larry McMurtry. The book, beloved by liberal and conservative Texans alike, contains sex scenes, including rape. A Democrat and former teacher, Talarico told a committee meeting that it would be a "travesty" to ban "the greatest novel, I think, in Texas history."
The passion around book banning in public schools underscores the dangerous rancor in the nation's politics. Many of the debate's most potent issues -- parental rights, gender identity, race and the future of schools -- are emerging as campaign themes in next year's presidential election.
DeSantis, a likely Republican candidate for president, has drawn praise from conservatives and parental rights groups for leading one of the most aggressive states in policing library shelves and the teaching of racial history.
"It blows my mind," said Cousins, who tucks her disdain into a half-smile and travels across Florida rallying against what she sees as an attempt to narrow the minds of children. "This goes hand in hand with right-wing groups wanting to destroy public education."
The political action committee EveryLibrary is tracking more than 100 proposed bills nationwide that would limit what people can read and, in some states, could lead to criminal charges against educators. Teachers have been vilified as groomers, librarians have been cursed, and school administrators have been harassed to get rid of "evil" and "pornographic" books.
"I never thought I'd be a president who is fighting against elected officials trying to ban and banning books," President Biden told a gathering of teachers April 24 at the White House. "I've never met a parent who wants a politician dictating what their kid can learn and what they can think or who they can be."
"Book banning is being weaponized to harm LGBTQ+ students and students of color," said Will Larkins, a senior at Winter Park High School in Florida, who was draped in a Pride flag while protesting alongside Cousins at the Orange County school board meeting. He said DeSantis and Florida legislators "know that Gen Z is on the side of freedom. They're afraid, and they know in a few years they won't have any power."
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Wearing green-tinted glasses and carrying a water bottle, Cousins, who has an art history degree, walked the lines of the protest. LGBTQ+ students handed out fliers and rainbow flags as older couples held umbrellas against the sun. A girl with peace-sign earrings danced not far from a man wearing an "Ask me about Jesus" T-shirt.
A New Jersey native who studied for a time in England, Cousins said she is alarmed at what is happening in her adopted state. A charter school principal in Tallahassee resigned in March under pressure for not informing parents of sixth-graders that a picture of Michelangelo's nude statue "David" would be shown in class.
Talk of such cultural skirmishes was in the air as Cousins, with about 300 others, filed past metal detectors and into the board meeting. She watched as emotionally charged students and parents took to the microphone. One mother said she didn't want books in school exposing children to "anal sex" and LGBTQ+ themes: "We want math, biology and education."
"I'm hated for existing," said an LGBTQ+ student, noting that she lives near Pulse, a gay nightclub in Orlando, where a gunman killed 49 people in 2016.
Cousins listened and shook her head.

"We vacationed in Florida and liked the people and the weather," she said after the meeting.
When she and her husband, a software architect, decided to move here from Pennsylvania in 2014, "it was still the Florida of 'Florida Man' and alligators in hurricanes. Just weird stuff," she said. "But now it's a fascist hellscape. With all the laws they're passing, my family essentially isn't safe here anymore. It's a nonstop attack on human rights. We are considering moving."
Cousins and Stephana Ferrell founded the Florida Freedom to Read Project after meeting at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to support mask-wearing in schools.
They confronted conservative parental rights groups, including Moms for Liberty, that opposed COVID-19 restrictions and would later challenge "liberal indoctrination" on the teaching of racial equality and gender. Those protests have resulted in attempts to remove more than 1,100 titles from Florida school libraries, including "The Bluest Eye" by Toni Morrison, "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini, "The Handmaid's Tale" by Margaret Atwood and 20 books by Jodi Picoult.
"I didn't know it would lead to any of this when I was sitting in a school board meeting two years ago," said Ferrell, a mother of two elementary students who shut down her photography business to concentrate on fighting censorship. "We chose public schools because of diversity. But diversity is under attack. They're targeting minority communities whose stories are only just getting out there on the shelves."
Cousins and Ferrell track school board votes and the fates of books across the state's 67 districts. They file public records requests, travel to Tallahassee to appear before the Legislature (Ferrell was once given 15 seconds to speak), enlist volunteers and try to find wins in a state firmly in the hands of a conservative Republican Party.
"This is seven days a week," said Ferrell. "I feel guilty at spending less time with my family. But I'd feel completely lost as a parent if I wasn't doing this work. Someone has to push against the pendulum. It's exhausting and empowering." She added: "It's a David-and-Goliath situation. But we are having wins. A school district [in Pinellas County] recently reinstated 'The Bluest Eye' to its shelves."
With its 2,000 members, the Florida Freedom to Read Project is outnumbered by Moms for Liberty, which claims 115,000 members across 280 chapters in 45 states. Last year, Moms for Liberty endorsed 500 candidates in school board elections nationwide, and 275 of them won.
The group has grown into a political force. DeSantis spoke at the organization's conference last summer in Tampa, which was also attended by Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) and Betsy DeVos, who was Education secretary in the Trump administration.
Moms for Liberty criticizes what it regards as an agenda-driven education system that emphasizes race, gender and diversity at the expense of core subjects. The group notes that millions of U.S. children cannot read at grade level.
"American parents should not be villainized for asking any questions about their children's education," said Tiffany Justice, a former school board member and co-founder of Moms for Liberty. "But that is what's happening."
Justice said she wants to reform an "education system that is failing and an educational industrial complex that is working to hide that failure."
Sonia Ledger, an Orange County high school resource teacher who works with families to prevent students from dropping out, stood near Cousins at the protest. "Public education," she said, "has been under attack for so long, and now they've found something they can use to get rid of public schools."
Ledger added: "My biggest concern is that students will not have access to books that represent everyone. We're going to send these kids out into the world, and they'll be competing against students in other states that have not banned books. They're going to sound ignorant."
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Conservative fervor around book removal stems largely from stories about racial inequality and graphic novels, memoirs and sex education books aimed at LGBTQ+ students, including "Gender Queer," "Flamer" and "This Book Is Gay." Members of Moms for Liberty and other groups have held up explicit illustrations -- depictions of sex and nudity -- from these books at school board meetings.
A PEN America study found 1,477 individual book bans affecting 874 unique titles during the first half of the 2022-23

school year. Of those titles, 30% dealt with racial themes or characters, and 26% featured LGBTQ+ story lines.
"I think books need to be regulated more," said Rick Johnson, who wore the "Ask me about Jesus" T-shirt at the school board protest. "We as a community have dropped the ball by not paying attention to what's being brought into our schools."
He couldn't name the books he wanted taken off shelves but said "they're of extreme sexual content. Some of the things even at an adult level are extreme, crude, ugly and pornographic in nature."
While Johnson spoke, Cousins carried a bag of banned books, handed out flags and talked to students and a few adults wearing T-shirts that read "Moms demand action for gun sense in America."
Cousins has been an activist for years, canvassing for candidates and tracking issues, particularly those pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community. She recently attended a drag queens march in Tallahassee and believes Florida's book restrictions are part of a broader effort to discriminate against nonbinary and gay children like hers.
The Florida Board of Education recently expanded the state's "Don't Say Gay" law by forbidding the teaching of gender identity and sexual orientation in any grade.
"My kids know exactly what's happening," said Cousins, who scrolled to a picture on her phone of her 9-year-old son marching in a Pride parade. "I want them to be aware that their rights are being attacked. They definitely feel it. This state is trying to put these kids in a bubble and force everyone else who isn't white or straight out of it."
One of her favorite books is George Orwell's dystopian novel "1984," which she noted is eerily relevant to the times. Her encounters with conservatives often border on the surreal: "One guy yelled at me for my 'gay' shoes because I had rainbow strings in them. He was up in my face, mad about my 'gay' shoes. It's insane."
When the protest was over, Cousins praised the students and headed home to her flags and banned books. She had to make phone calls and post on social media. Another trip to the state capital was in the works.
Caption: PHOTO: J. MARIE BAILEY, left, a former Orange County, Fla., teacher, and Will Larkins, a high school senior, protest outside a school board meeting in Orlando. "Book banning is being weaponized to harm LGBTQ+ students and students of color," Larkins said.
PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times
PHOTO:BOOK BANS are on the agenda at the Orange County school board meeting. A PEN America study found 1,477 bans affecting 874 unique titles during the first half of the 2022-23 school year.
PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times
PHOTO:RICK JOHNSON, center, wants "extreme sexual content" removed from school shelves.
PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times
PHOTO:JEN COUSINS, center, co-founded the anti-censorship Florida Freedom to Read Project.
PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times

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Texas legislature votes to allow chaplains in public schools

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

FULL TEXT

The Texas legislature has passed a bill that would allow schools to employ chaplains in addition to school counselors, with Republicans overriding objections by Democrats to send the legislation to the governor's desk.

The bill would permit school districts to hire chaplains who, unlike school counselors, are not required to be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification. A version of the bill already sailed through the state Senate last month, and the Texas House passed an amended version Tuesday evening in a vote that appeared to fall largely along party lines, with 89 voting in favor and 58 opposed.

Conservative groups such as Texas Values Action have voiced support for the bill, and the National School Chaplain Association, an arm of the Christian group Mission Generation, testified in support during committee meetings last month.

Rocky Malloy, head of the NSCA, argued during his testimony that the bill would increase school safety and not infringe on the religious beliefs of students, saying, "Chaplains operate within an individual's belief and convictions - they are not working to convert people to religion."

But Malloy's organization has suggested otherwise in the past, and critics of the bill argue that it could lead to proselytization and erode the separation of church and state.

"I worry that this bill will lead to Christian nationalists infiltrating our public schools and indoctrinating our students," Democratic Rep. James Talarico, a Presbyterian seminarian, told Religion News Service in a phone interview from the state House floor Tuesday.

Texas Senate Democrats made similar arguments during debate over the bill last month, and multiple Democratic House members made efforts to amend it - with mixed results. Talarico sought to bar chaplains from proselytizing and require parental consent before chaplains meet with students, and Rep. Toni Rose sought to limit the bill to schools in counties with populations under 150,000. Separately, Rep. Gene Wu attempted to bar the use of public funds and require schools to provide a religious leader of a different faith for students who request one.

All of those efforts failed, although lawmakers did amend the bill to prohibit registered sex offenders from serving as chaplains, to institute background checks, and to require those serving in the role to be endorsed by an organization recognized by the U.S. Defense Department, the Federal Bureau of Prisons or the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

Imelda Mejia, a spokesperson for the Texas Freedom Network, which has been critical of the bill, expressed concern about the influence of the NSCA. The website for the group's parent organization, Mission Generation, recently began redirecting to the NSCA's website, but archived versions from last year listed a desire to "influence those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him."

In another archived version of the website, Mission Generation boasts it has "developed a viable approach of reaching the largest unreached people group inside of the public schools around the world. ⋯Where many have declared it impossible to deliver the Good News, many attempts to do so have failed, and very few organizations are trying; Mission Generation, with God's help, has made record-breaking progress."

Mission Generation appears to have allies in the Texas government: In a video posted to the group's Instagram account in October, Julie Pickren, who sits on the NSCA's board, is seen giving a speech in which she appears to celebrate the idea of chaplains proselytizing to children.

"There are children who need chaplains. For the pastors in here, you already know: We have a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church," said Pickren, who went on to be elected to the State Board of Education in November.

The NSCA came up during debate over the bill Tuesday. After Rep. Gina Hinojosa (D) pressed the chief sponsor of the bill in the House, Rep. Cole Hefner (R), about his refusal to amend the bill to bar proselytizing, Talarico noted the NSCA's support and asked his Republican colleague if he shared the group's goals.

In responses to both lawmakers, Hefner resisted efforts to ban proselytizing, arguing that chaplains are already

trained to avoid such practices. He also noted that people of any faith can become chaplains and insisted he did not want people "forcing their religion" on others - including his own children.

"This is just to help supplement and complement our counselors in doing the job that [are] working really hard," Hefner said.

However, Mejia noted there have been several bills introduced since 2013 that could increase the number of state counselors or offer them additional support. At least three bills related to school counselors are languishing in committee.

"You can see where their desires lay, and I don't think it was giving our students what they needed," she said.

Hefner and Sen. Mayes Middleton (R), who wrote the original Senate version of the bill, did not respond to requests for comment about the bill or its passage.

The bill would require school boards to vote on whether to hire chaplains, but critics argue that such votes would only invite the kind of political controversy seen at school board meetings across the country over the past year. Pickren appeared to reference such activism in her October speech while encouraging people to pressure local education officials.

"We have seen this all over America, that moms and dads showing up to school board meetings are shifting the course of education in America," she said. "Go to your school board meetings, ask your school boards to put chaplains in their schools. Ask them to put a chaplain on every campus. Email your school board members, email your superintendent, email and call your local elected officials."

The bill is one of a trio of proposals making their way through the Texas legislature that focus on religion and public schools. Critics have argued that some of the bills, which include requiring schools to hang a version of the Ten Commandments, privilege a specific form of conservative Christianity.

"I see this as part of a troubling trend across the country of Christian nationalists attempting to take over our democracy and attempting to take over my religion - both of which I find deeply offensive," Talarico said.

- Religion News Service

DETAILS

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Want rights, parents? Accept the responsibility.

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

FULL TEXT

The current "parental rights" movement has a dirty little secret: It depicts parents as victims of teachers and librarians. Yet many of the movement's proposed solutions fob off parental *responsibilities* onto those public servants.

Listen to enough debates about what books belong in public and school libraries, or about sex education, and a theme emerges: Even as they demand more rights, advocates of book bans and curriculum-dodging appear to wish they could do *less* parenting.

Take the group of Alaska parents who recently asked their local library to remove books "which are intended to indoctrinate children in LGBTQ+ ideologies" from the children's section, or put them on a restricted shelf. "Parents who do not wish for their children to stumble across ... confusing ideas," they complained, can't let their kids browse without close supervision.

Or take this move. Texas state Rep. Jared Patterson introduced a bill requiring vendors who want to sell books in Texas to rate their offerings as "sexually explicit" or "sexually relevant," based on whether the books are "patently offensive," "pervasively vulgar," "obscene" or "educationally unsuitable." Apparently, it's not enough for parents to

keep an eye on what their children are checking out. Instead, librarians must read the minds of every adult in town, anticipate what each one might find objectionable and pre-censor their shelves accordingly.

Such proposals actually give publishers, librarians and school administrators *more* power to make moral judgments on behalf of parents, not less.

Instead, parents should explain to their kids what they're forbidden to check out and why. And let their kids' librarians know. When she was a school librarian, says Andrea Jamison, Illinois State University College of Education professor, she would enforce parents' rules. But she insisted they explain their reasoning to their children themselves. Stepping in to impart those values on their behalf would usurp parents' rights.

In dodging these conversations, parents are also transferring their anxiety about how their children are growing up onto teachers and librarians.

It can't be that young people express authentic interest in gender, sexuality or current events - or even that they crave junky thrillers and bathroom humor. It must be nefarious librarians pushing guides to puberty such as "It's Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health," and trash classics such as V.C. Andrews's "Flowers in the Attic." As Texas state Rep. Gina Hinojosa (D) put it in March with an air of resignation, "I wish they would pick up Shakespeare." But it's Captain Underpants and the Fart Quest series that got her son into books.

And it couldn't be that kids are naturally curious about racism or climate change. Instead, it's teachers and librarians who are scattering dangerous ideas through their shelves like so many intellectual improvised explosive devices.

In reality it is the very books adults are trying to protect students from that they find most vital. That's what kids tell Deborah Caldwell-Stone, who runs the American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom. "Students experience violence, they experience racism, they experience poverty," agrees Texas state Rep. James Talarico (D), a former middle school English teacher. "If you're old enough to experience these things, you're old enough to read about these things."

More ducking of parental duty shows up in the furor around sex education and other curriculums. Many school districts require parents to actively opt out their children from lessons that run counter to their values. Instead, some parents want to require that families opt in.

These advocates suggest that children shouldn't be exposed to the social consequences of feeling singled out. For instance, at a 2022 hearing on a proposed sex-ed curriculum, Daniel Gallic, who chairs the Warren Township, N.J., planning board, complained: "An opt-out of the program makes the children subject to harassment and intimidation." In 2017, a Palo Alto, Calif., parent protested her daughter hadn't felt comfortable filling a form to skip a sex-ed class because "she would have been the only student in the class to do so and didn't want to feel left out."

Certainly, schools should protect students from bullying or discrimination based on their beliefs. But giving middle and high school students practice at explaining their family's values seems like a form of education everyone should get behind.

"We do not want to raise snowflakes who are not able to take the realities of the real world," was how Talarico put it in a March 21 Texas House committee hearing on Patterson's books bill, flipping conservative rhetoric on its head. "We want to prepare our kids, especially our teens in high school, for what they're going to face when they're outside our school laws."

That preparation takes work. Parents who want to assert their rights ought to be ready to take on their responsibilities.

DETAILS

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How to fight book bans - and win

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

FULL TEXT

A rising tide of censorship threatens to dash everything from lesbian dragons to Amelia Earhart picture books off the shelves of school and public libraries.

Book lovers should take heart. The censors can be beaten. And longtime library advocates have mustered an arsenal of statistics, talking points and legal strategies to keep shelves full and fascinating.

The most powerful fact: Censorship isn't popular. Fifty-six percent of respondents to an August 2022 survey disagreed with the statement: "If any parent objects to a book in the public school library, that book should be removed, even if other parents like the book." A poll published in March 2023 by Wall Street Journal-NORC found 61 percent were more concerned that "some schools may ban books and censor topics that are educationally important" than by the prospect that instructional materials might offend students or parents. That skepticism isn't partisan, either.

Because library and school policies are made locally, library advocates must tailor their campaigns to their communities.

In a red state or town, that might mean public testimony shouldn't emphasize that books by or about LGBTQ people or people of color are disproportionately challenged. It could backfire, explains Peter Bromberg, associate director of EveryLibrary. A lawmaker who thinks homosexuality is wrong or anti-racism is a menace will be more likely to excise books if he thinks doing so will further his crusades.

Instead, library supporters can point out that censorship has costs and wastes public resources. Libraries have been sued for removing books or restricting access to them on the grounds that it is illegal for public facilities to favor one political viewpoint over another. Towns can't ban books because they're Marxist, or use internet filters that restrict access to gay rights websites while letting users browse conversion therapy ministries. Even if a library or school system wins a case, defending it costs money, and damages can be substantial. Recently, reminders of the risks of litigation helped library advocates temper a censorship policy in League City, Tex.

In the Texas state legislature, Rep. James Talarico is pushing to add language preventing viewpoint discrimination to a pending bill aiming to keep "explicit" and "vulgar" books out of schools. "If they don't accept that, I think that will tell us a lot about the true motivations for this legislation," he says, and could expose it to legal challenge should it pass.

Another fiscal danger spot advocates can spotlight: Bills that make librarians who are public employees legally liable for distributing certain material could result in higher municipal insurance costs.

And library lovers can offer evidence that censorship efforts can backfire in costly ways: Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry's tip line for complaints about librarians and teachers was flooded with witty anti-censorship spam. While the campaign wasted public resources, it stung given that Landry had previously cited a lack of funds as a reason not to set up a tip line for reports of clerical sex abuse.

Some anti-censorship arguments resonate nationally.

Advocates can point out the books that could be caught in legislative dragnets. One puckish censorship opponent in Utah challenged the Bible on the grounds that it contains "incest, onanism, bestiality, prostitution, genital mutilation, fellatio, dildos, rape, and even infanticide." Talarico recently lamented that the Texas books bill could evict Larry McMurtry's "Lonesome Dove" from schools, denying students access to one of the masterworks of Texas literature.

Another tactic is to illustrate that parents' rights cut both ways. Removing books from shelves entirely circumvents parents' decision-making authority, notes Andrea Jamison, a former elementary school teacher and librarian, now a professor of school librarianship at Illinois State University's College of Education. As a librarian, she wouldn't check out books for children that their parents disapproved of. That's a better way, she says, to show respect without limiting others' choices.

Organizations such as the American Library Association and EveryLibrary have resources to offer anti-censorship campaigners. EveryLibrary will fund efforts to signal-boost local petitions against book bans. The ALA and PEN America have major databases of challenged books. Reporting local censorship efforts can help those organizations identify patterns and coordinated campaigns. And organizations such as the ACLU can bring to bear powerful legal

expertise and resources.

And a simple lesson applies in book ban fights everywhere: Showing up matters. That strategy paid off in St. Tammany Parish in Louisiana. A local woman challenged several books as being "harmful to minors." She didn't come to a crucial meeting about the volumes. People who believed the books were important did. The library control board voted to keep some of the targeted texts on shelves.

But the ideal time to stand up for libraries is before a book is challenged. Volunteer for a local library board. Stage a public read-in to affirm the joy of books. Get local officials on the record in support of free speech and libraries that serve the needs of everyone in the community. Make sure censors know that if they come for books and librarians, they'll be playing defense.

DETAILS

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Texas Turmoil Jolts the Race For Governor: [National Desk]

Goodman, J David . Goodman, J David.

FULL TEXT

A series of tragedies and challenges have soured the mood of Texans and made the governor's race perhaps the most competitive since the 1990s.

SUGAR LAND, Texas -- One of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. The revival of a 1920s ban on abortion. The country's worst episode of migrant death in recent memory. And an electrical grid, which failed during bitter cold, now straining under soaring heat.

The unrelenting succession of death and difficulty facing Texans over the last two months has soured them on the direction of the state, hurting Gov. Greg Abbott and making the race for governor perhaps the most competitive since Democrats last held that office in the 1990s.

Polls have shown a tightening, single-digit contest between Mr. Abbott, the two-term incumbent, and his ubiquitous Democratic challenger, the former congressman Beto O'Rourke. Mr. O'Rourke is now raising more campaign cash than Mr. Abbott -- $27.6 million to $24.9 million in the last filing -- in a race that is likely to be among the most expensive of 2022.

Suddenly, improbably, perhaps unwisely, Texas Democrats are again daring to think -- as they have in many recent election years -- that maybe this could be the year.

"It seems like some of the worst things that are happening in this country have their roots in Texas," said James Talarico, a Democratic state representative from north of Austin. "We're seeing a renewed fighting spirit."

At the same time, the winds of national discontent are whipping hard in the other direction, against Democrats. Texans, like many Americans, have felt the strain of rising inflation and have a low opinion of President Biden. Unlike four years ago, when Mr. O'Rourke challenged Senator Ted Cruz and nearly won during a midterm referendum on President Donald J. Trump that lifted Democrats, now it is Republicans who are animated by animus toward the White House and poised to make gains in state races.

But in recent weeks there has been a perceptible shift in Texas, as registered in several public polls and some internal campaign surveys, after the school shooting in Uvalde that killed 19 children and two teachers and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on abortion, Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, that brought back into force a 1925 law banning all abortions except when the woman's life is at risk.

"Dobbs at the margins has hurt Republicans in Texas. Uvalde at the margins has hurt Republicans in Texas. The grid has hurt Republicans in Texas," said Mark P. Jones, a professor of political science at Rice University who helped conduct one recent poll. "Biden and inflation have been their saving grace."

Most voters polled did not rank guns or abortion among their top issues in the recent survey, by the University of

Houston's Hobby School of Public Affairs, but many of Mr. O'Rourke's supporters did, suggesting the issues could help to energize his voters, Mr. Jones said.

And the issue of gun control was a top concern among another group that Republicans have been fighting hard to win away from Democrats: Hispanic women.

A separate poll, conducted by the University of Texas at Austin and released this month, showed 59 percent of respondents thought Texas was on the "wrong track," the highest number in more than a decade of asking that question. Another, from Quinnipiac University, found Mr. O'Rourke within 5 percentage points of the governor.

As the new polls showed Mr. O'Rourke's numbers improving, Mr. Abbott's campaign convened a conference call with reporters this month.

"We're straight on track, where we want to be," said Dave Carney, the governor's campaign strategist, adding that their strategy still involved tying Mr. O'Rourke to Mr. Biden and reminding voters of Mr. O'Rourke's positions on gun control, police reform and the oil industry during his unsuccessful run in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary.

"He's going to be reliving the spectacular disaster of running for president and all the things he said," Mr. Carney said. "Believe me, he liked to talk and it's all on video and it's all contrary to what are the values and what the vast majority of Texans believe."

That approach has been part of Mr. Abbott's message from the beginning, particularly on the issue of guns. In one of the first attacks on Mr. O'Rourke, the Abbott campaign highlighted his vow during the presidential campaign to take away AR-15 rifles.

Those comments came during a Democratic primary debate in 2019 that occurred soon after a deadly mass shooting at a Walmart in El Paso, Mr. O'Rourke's hometown and where he served as a U.S. congressman.

After the elementary school massacre in Uvalde in May, Mr. O'Rourke responded with a similarly risky political gambit: interrupting a news conference held in Uvalde the day after the shooting to directly challenge Mr. Abbott over his record on guns. "This is on you," Mr. O'Rourke said.

The moment, which infuriated many Republicans, appeared at the same time to have energized Democrats who, like Mr. Talarico, have been eager to see an aggressive statewide standard-bearer. "He was showing all of us who believe in democracy in the broad sense of the term how to respond," Mr. Talarico said.

In Uvalde, a Hispanic majority city where hunting is a common pastime, the political mood has been shifting since the massacre at Robb Elementary. Many now support stricter gun laws. "Everybody has guns here," said Vincent Salazar, who lost a granddaughter in the shooting. "But this is different. Nobody needs AR-15s. We need to ban them."

At a march organized by victims' families this month, Mr. O'Rourke addressed the gathering and appeared to be greeted warmly. "Vote them out!" some in the crowd chanted.

Mr. Carney, in his call with reporters, conceded that the school shooting and the state's new restrictions on abortion had helped Mr. O'Rourke. "Quite honestly the advantage to all this for Beto has been in online fund-raising," he said.

Mr. O'Rourke has eclipsed Mr. Abbott in small-dollar donations, raising more than three times as much cash in donations of $200 or less, according to an analysis by the Texas Tribune. And he has begun taking in large checks as well: $1 million from the billionaire George Soros, the perennial backer of Democratic candidates, and $2 million from Simone and Tench Coxe, recent transplants to Austin from California.

Still, Mr. Abbott, a prolific fund-raiser, has more campaign cash in the bank -- nearly $46 million compared with about $24 million for Mr. O'Rourke -- and the ability to quickly draw on a large network of wealthy donors. Mr. Abbott took in 62 donations of $100,000 or more during the latest fund-raising period, compared with six for Mr. O'Rourke.

Among the governor's largest donors have been energy executives like Javaid Anwar of Midland Energy (about $1.4 million), Kelcy Warren of Energy Transfer ($1 million) and Gary Martin of Falcon Bay Energy, who has provided Mr. Abbott with $680,000 worth of plane trips.

Mr. Abbott's campaign has already reserved $20 million in advertising spending for the fall, which Mr. Carney said would be aggressively targeted at the governor's voters to keep them engaged and turn them out.

"We're narrowcasting to less than 10 percent of the voters," he said. He also predicted that Mr. Abbott would win among Hispanic Texans.

Adryana Aldeen, a public policy consultant who has worked with the Republican Party of Texas in the past, said that both candidates have connections to the Hispanic community, pointing out Mr. O'Rourke's fluency in Spanish and upbringing in Hispanic-majority El Paso and Mr. Abbott's wife, whose family immigrated from Mexico.

"It is very clear that Latinos are very conservative in their values," she said, but with room for moderation. On guns, she cited her own view that the state's permitless carry law, passed in 2021 and signed by Mr. Abbott, may have gone too far in the direction of removing restrictions.

"I personally have a gun. I have a license to carry that gun. I had a background check. I do believe that it's OK to have those things," she said. "I know that many of my fellow Republicans do not agree."

Looking to capitalize on what his advisers see as momentum, Mr. O'Rourke has returned to the road, his political comfort zone, with a 49-day drive to events around Texas.

"If you just look at from April to July, the race changed 5 points," said Chris Evans, a spokesman for the campaign. "People are not happy with the direction the state is going and we're going right to them and offering them the alternative."

But it's not clear how long the effect of recent events on the Texas electorate will last.

Rising consumer costs were front of mind for Sophia Graves, 50, on a recent afternoon at the First Colony Mall in Sugar Land, a fast-growing community outside of Houston that is among the nation's most diverse.

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Edgar Sandoval contributed reporting.

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Photograph

Beto O'Rourke, the Democrat challenging Gov. Greg Abbott of Texas, is now raising more money in a race that is likely to be among the most expensive of 2022. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ELI HARTMAN/ODESSA AMERICAN, VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS); Polls have shown a tightening, single-digit contest between Mr. Abbott, the two-term incumbent, above, and Mr. O'Rourke. (PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLISON DINNER/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE -- GETTY IMAGES) (A16)

DETAILS

Subject:	Hispanic Americans; Polls &surveys; Womens health; Politics; School violence; State elections; Governors; Mass murders; Abortion; Firearm laws &regulations; Political finance; Political campaigns; Political advertising
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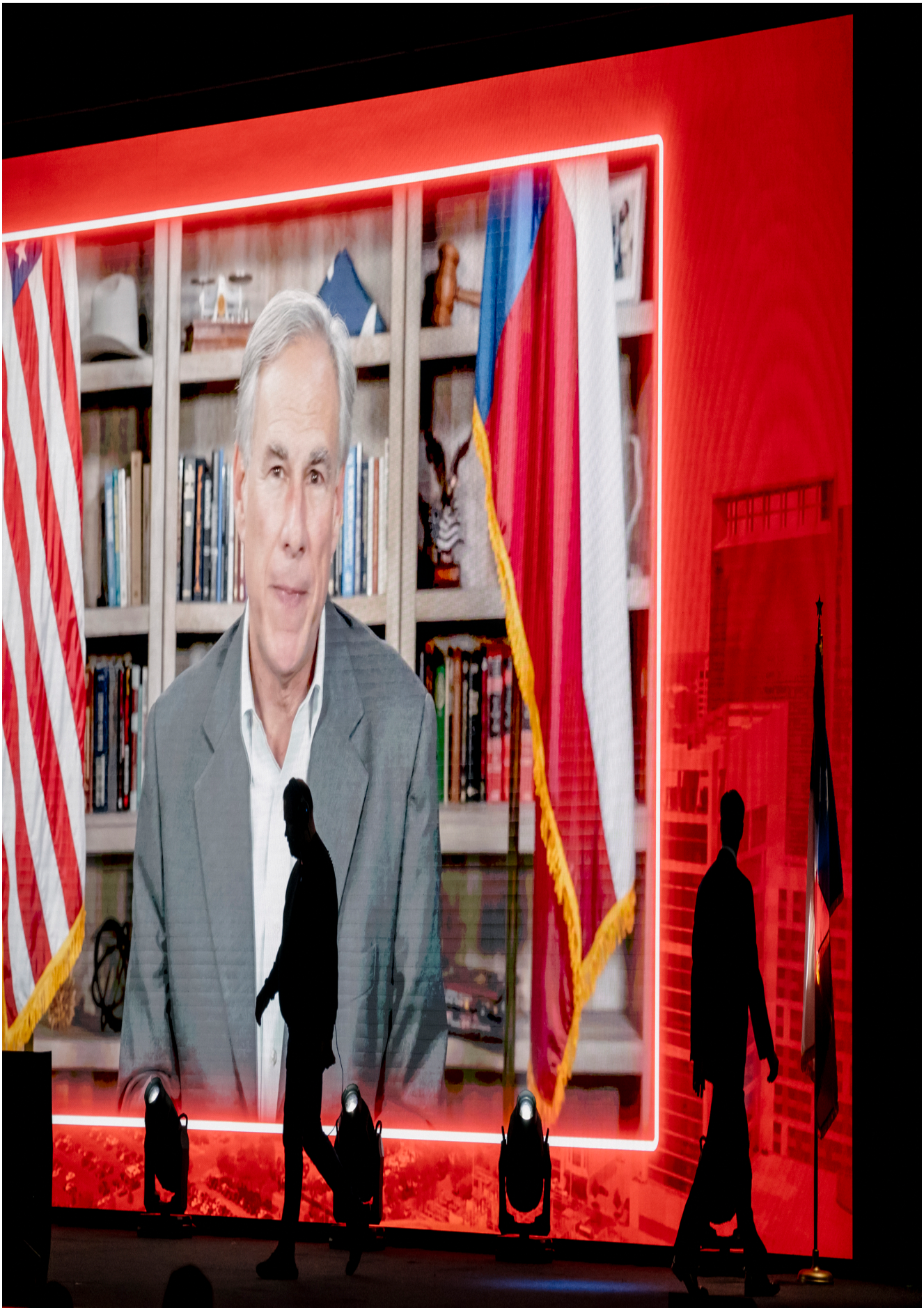
After Recent Turmoil, the Race for Texas Governor Is Tightening

Goodman, J David . Goodman, J David.

FULL TEXT



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SUGAR LAND, Texas —One of the deadliest school shootings in U.S. history. The revival of a 1920s ban on abortion. The country's worst episode of migrant death in recent memory. And an electrical grid, which failed during bitter cold, now straining under soaring heat.

The unrelenting succession of death and difficulty facing Texans over the past two months has soured them on the direction of the state, hurting Gov. Greg Abbott and making the race for governor perhaps the most competitive since Democrats last held that office in the 1990s.

Polls have shown a tightening, single-digit contest between Abbott, the two-term incumbent, and his ubiquitous Democratic challenger, former congressman Beto O'Rourke. O'Rourke is now raising more campaign cash than Abbott —$27.6 million to $24.9 million in the last filing —in a race that is likely to be among the most expensive of 2022.

Suddenly, improbably, perhaps unwisely, Texas Democrats are again daring to think —as they have in many recent election years —that maybe this could be the year.

"It seems like some the worst things that are happening in this country have their roots in Texas," said James Talarico, a Democratic state representative from north of Austin. "We're seeing a renewed fighting spirit."

At the same time, the winds of national discontent are whipping hard in the other direction, against Democrats. Texans, like many Americans, have felt the strain of rising inflation and have a low opinion of President Joe Biden. Unlike four years ago, when O'Rourke challenged Sen. Ted Cruz and nearly won during a midterm referendum on President Donald Trump that lifted Democrats, now it is Republicans who are animated by animus toward the White House and poised to make gains in state races.

But in recent weeks there has been a perceptible shift in Texas, as registered in several public polls and some internal campaign surveys, after the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, that killed 19 children and two teachers and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on abortion, Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, that brought back into force a 1925 law banning all abortions except when the woman's life is at risk.

"Dobbs at the margins has hurt Republicans in Texas. Uvalde at the margins has hurt Republicans in Texas. The grid has hurt Republicans in Texas," said Mark P. Jones, a professor of political science at Rice University who helped conduct one recent poll. "Biden and inflation have been their saving grace."

Most voters polled did not rank guns or abortion among their top issues in the recent survey, by the University of Houston's Hobby School of Public Affairs, but many of O'Rourke's supporters did, suggesting the issues could help to energize his voters, Jones said.

And the issue of gun control was a top concern among another group that Republicans have been fighting hard to win away from Democrats: Hispanic women.

A separate poll, conducted by the University of Texas at Austin and released this month, showed 59% of respondents thought Texas was on the "wrong track," the highest number in more than a decade of asking that question. Another, from Quinnipiac University, found O'Rourke within 5 percentage points of the governor.

As the new polls showed O'Rourke's numbers improving, Abbott's campaign convened a conference call with reporters this month.

"We're straight on track, where we want to be," said Dave Carney, the governor's campaign strategist, adding that their strategy still involved tying O'Rourke to Biden and reminding voters of O'Rourke's positions on gun control, police reform and the oil industry during his unsuccessful run in the 2020 Democratic presidential primary.

"He's going to be reliving the spectacular disaster of running for president and all the things he said," Carney said. "Believe me, he liked to talk, and it's all on video, and it's all contrary to what are the values and what the vast majority of Texans believe."

That approach has been part of Abbott's message from the beginning, particularly on the issue of guns. In one of the first attacks on O'Rourke, the Abbott campaign highlighted his vow during the presidential campaign to take away AR-15 rifles.

Those comments came during a Democratic primary debate in 2019 that occurred soon after a deadly mass shooting

at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, O’ Rourke’ s hometown and where he served as a U.S. congressman.
After the elementary school massacre in Uvalde in May, O’ Rourke responded with a similarly risky political gambit: interrupting a news conference held in Uvalde the day after the shooting to directly challenge Abbott over his record on guns. “This is on you,” O’ Rourke said.
The moment, which infuriated many Republicans, appeared at the same time to have energized Democrats who, like Talarico, have been eager to see an aggressive statewide standard-bearer. “He was showing all of us who believe in democracy in the broad sense of the term how to respond,” Talarico said.
In Uvalde, a Hispanic majority city where hunting is a common pastime, the political mood has been shifting since the massacre at Robb Elementary. Many now support stricter gun laws. “Everybody has guns here,” said Vincent Salazar, who lost a granddaughter in the shooting. “But this is different. Nobody needs AR-15s. We need to ban them.”
At a march organized by victims’ families this month, O’ Rourke addressed the gathering and appeared to be greeted warmly. “Vote them out!” some in the crowd chanted.
Carney, in his call with reporters, conceded that the school shooting and the state’ s new restrictions on abortion had helped O’ Rourke. “Quite honestly the advantage to all this for Beto has been in online fundraising,” he said.
O’ Rourke has eclipsed Abbott in small-dollar donations, raising more than three times as much cash in donations of $200 or less, according to an analysis by the Texas Tribune. And he has begun taking in large checks as well: $1 million from billionaire George Soros, the perennial backer of Democratic candidates, and $2 million from Simone and Tench Coxe, recent transplants to Austin, Texas, from California.
Still, Abbott, a prolific fundraiser, has more campaign cash in the bank —nearly $46 million compared with about $24 million for O’ Rourke —and the ability to quickly draw on a large network of wealthy donors. Abbott took in 62 donations of $100,000 or more during the latest fundraising period, compared with six for O’ Rourke.
Among the governor’ s largest donors have been energy executives like Javaid Anwar of Midland Energy (about $1.4 million), Kelcy Warren of Energy Transfer ($1 million) and Gary Martin of Falcon Bay Energy, who has provided Abbott with $680,000 worth of plane trips.
Abbott’ s campaign has already reserved $20 million in advertising spending for the fall, which Carney said would be aggressively targeted at the governor’ s voters to keep them engaged and turn them out.
“We’ re narrowcasting to less than 10% of the voters,” he said. He also predicted that Abbott would win among Hispanic Texans.
Adryana Aldeen, a public policy consultant who has worked with the Republican Party of Texas in the past, said that both candidates have connections to the Hispanic community, pointing out O’ Rourke’ s fluency in Spanish and upbringing in Hispanic-majority El Paso and Abbott’ s wife, whose family immigrated from Mexico.
“It is very clear that Latinos are very conservative in their values,” she said, but with room for moderation. On guns, she cited her own view that the state’ s permitless carry law, passed in 2021 and signed by Abbott, may have gone too far in the direction of removing restrictions.
“I personally have a gun. I have a license to carry that gun. I had a background check. I do believe that it’ s OK to have those things,” she said. “I know that many of my fellow Republicans do not agree.”
Looking to capitalize on what his advisers see as momentum, O’ Rourke has returned to the road, his political comfort zone, with a 49-day drive to events around Texas.
“If you just look at from April to July, the race changed 5 points,” said Chris Evans, a spokesperson for the campaign. “People are not happy with the direction the state is going, and we’ re going right to them and offering them the alternative.”
But it’ s not clear how long the effect of recent events will last on the Texas electorate.
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Enlarge this image.

DETAILS

Subject:	Hispanic Americans; Polls &surveys; School violence; Governors; Mass murders; Presidential elections; Abortion; Firearm laws &regulations; Politics; Political advertising
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Identifier / keyword:	University Of Texas At Austin; Goodman, J David; Soros, George; Texas Tribune; Afghanistan; Houston (Tex); El Paso (Tex); Mexico; Texas; California; Walmart Stores Inc; Supreme Court (Us); United States; Quinnipiac University; Rice University; University Of Houston; Austin (Tex); Uvalde (Tex); Sugar Land (Tex); Midland (Tex); Republican Party; Trump, Donald J; O'rourke, Beto; Abbott, Gregory W (1957); Robb Elementary School (Uvalde, Tex); Biden, Joseph R Jr; Democratic Party; Cruz, Ted; Decisions And Verdicts; Philanthropy; Legislatures And Parliaments; Hispanic Americans; Automobiles; Buses; Referendums; Debates (Political); Nineteen Hundred Twenties; Political Advertising; Education; Inflation (Economics); Labor And Jobs; Murders, Attempted Murders And Homicides; Women And Girls; Regulation And Deregulation Of Industry; Colleges And Universities; United States Economy; United States Politics And Government; Airlines And Airplanes; Cold And Cold Spells; Elections, Governors; Gun Control; Demonstrations, Protests And Riots; Presidential Election Of 2020; Law And Legislation; Abortion; Politics And Government; Mass Shootings; Education (K 12); Immigration And Emigration; Governors (Us); El Paso, Tex, Shooting (2019); School Shootings And Armed Attacks; Uvalde, Tex, Shooting (May 24, 2022); States (Us); Polls And Public Opinion; Elections; Campaign Finance
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On voting rights, Democrats make headlines.That's it.

Balz, Dan . Balz, Dan.

FULL TEXT

Democrats have produced the biggest headlines recently on the charged issue of voting rights. What they've yet to produce is an effective strategy to counteract the work Republican state legislators are doing to limit access and inject partisanship into the election process. More and more for Democrats, it looks like a long battle ahead.

On Wednesday, addressing voting rights, President Biden gave the most passionate speech of his presidency, and one of the most impassioned of his long career. He forcefully condemned former president Donald Trump's relentless and baseless assault on the validity of the 2020 election, saying, "The 'big lie' is just that, a big lie."

He characterized Trump's continuing claims of fraud rather than accepting the results as an example of "human nature at its worst, something darker and more sinister." He connected the dots in Trump's assault on the election, the attack on the Capitol on Jan. 6 and the new laws enacted in Republican-controlled legislatures.

He described the legislation proposed and enacted in Republican-led states as "the most dangerous threat to voting and integrity of free and fair elections in our history." He added: "They want the ability to reject the final count and ignore the will of the people if their preferred candidate loses." He called it "unconscionable."

His bottom line was a stark warning: "We are facing," he said, "the most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War."

There was much more in Biden's speech, quote after quote sounding the alarm. What was missing, as many in his party and leaders of civil rights and voting rights groups that have been pushing the administration and Democrats in Congress were quick to note, was any mention of the obstacle that prevents them from acting.

At no point did he even say the word "filibuster" and how he proposes to defend voting rights without getting around it, save for efforts by the Justice Department to challenge new laws in court. But until Sens. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) and Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) agree to change the filibuster rules, Democrats are stuck, and the president's rhetoric is mostly that, a call to action without the prospect of immediate action.

As Biden was in Philadelphia, Democrats from Texas were in the nation's capital. These elected representatives had fled the state rather than show up for a special session called by Gov. Greg Abbott (R) to consider a restrictive voting

bill that these same Democrats had blocked at the end of the legislature's regular session. Their escape from Texas denied Republicans a quorum in the state House needed to conduct business.

They were welcomed by Vice President Harris and congressional Democrats, and they spread themselves across cable television in an effort to amplify their message. They were in Washington, they said, to help bring attention not only to the action back in Texas but also to the broader national issue of voting rights, with the hope of prodding congressional Democrats and the president to act.

State Rep. James Talarico has been part of the group pleading for national help. Blacks and Hispanics make up at least 40 percent of his district in Williamson County, north of Austin. "My constituents are out of time," he said. "Their constitutional rights at the ballot box are being undermined as we speak. . . . It's very real for us. People I swore an oath to represent need help now."

The Texas Democrats were being realistic about the situation back home. In politics, values and convictions and persistence count for much, but numbers often matter more. In the Texas legislature, Republicans have the numbers - majorities in both houses and control of the governor's office.

Those who fled the state know they ultimately have little chance of stopping Republicans from passing the legislation. These Democrats have jobs and families and obligations that will require enough of them to return to Texas and, eventually, to the House chamber, to allow Republicans to do business. The Democrats who broke quorum say they are committed to staying out of Texas until the special session ends on Aug. 7.

"We can't do this forever, nor are we suggesting that we would," said state Rep. Chris Turner, chair of the Texas House Democratic Caucus. "We feel like we bought some time at the end of our regular session and feel like we're buying some additional time for a few weeks. But it's a finite window of time."

Abbott, who has a primary challenge from the right for his 2022 reelection campaign and who Democrats believe has national ambitions beyond that, has made clear he will continue to call special sessions as long as necessary to get the bill passed. Talarico said he sees no way that Abbott will ever yield to Texas Democrats in his push to enact a restrictive voting law. "There is no Texas option," he said. "The only play is a federal play. That's the only option for us at this point."

But what are those options?

A small group of the Texas delegation met with Manchin on Thursday. They came away with at least some sense of optimism that, despite his firm position opposing any change in the filibuster rules, Manchin wants to be seen as a strong advocate of voting rights and is looking for ways to show it.

Earlier in the summer, Manchin proposed an alternative to H.R. 1, but any consideration of it was blocked when Senate Republicans refused to allow debate to begin on voting rights. Texas Democrats said Manchin told the group on Thursday that the better option for action at the federal level would be through the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act.

But passage of that bill, still in the drafting stages and absent a change in the filibuster, would require 10 Republican votes in the Senate. Manchin promotes bipartisanship and has helped produce a cross-party infrastructure bill, but nothing about the national or state debates around voting rights has had even a smidgen of bipartisanship.

Turner, who met with Manchin in June but not on Thursday, said that he too came away with positive feelings from that meeting. He described what he saw as Manchin's trajectory over the past weeks as positive, from the senator's op-ed in The Washington Post declaring firm opposition to changing the filibuster to his compromise proposal to H.R. 1 to his willingness to meet again with a delegation of Texans. "We need to continue to stay engaged with him," he said.

All this may be wishful thinking on the part of the Texans. There is nothing now to suggest real progress at the national level or even a path to be followed, short of filibuster reform. That has prompted some Democrats to suggest other ways to counter Republican efforts in the states.

Among them is Rahm Emanuel, the former Chicago mayor, congressman and Obama chief of staff, who said Democrats need to think about this battle as one that will go beyond the next election cycle or two. They should act accordingly, he said. One of his ideas is to use ballot initiatives in states that allow them to put the issue of voting

rights directly to the voters.

"This is not the solution but it's an open door if you want to try it," Emanuel said. "If you're stymied in the state capitals and there doesn't seem to be movement in Washington, open up another line of attack. Florida showed us the way to do it just a few years ago."

He was referring to the 2018 ballot initiative in Florida that called for restoring voting rights for felons. The measure was approved with more than 60 percent of the vote, though elected Republicans, including Gov. Ron DeSantis (R), later sought to undermine it.

From the president to the vice president to the Texas quorum breakers, Democrats are relying on rhetoric and visibility to make their case to expand and defend voting rights. Meanwhile, Republicans are applying the muscle they enjoy in state capitals to change laws. For now, this is a formula that gives Republicans the upper hand.

dan.balz@washpost.com

DETAILS

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Biden Portrays A Right to Vote As Under Siege: [National Desk]

Rogers, Katie . Rogers, Katie.

FULL TEXT

The president tried to reinvigorate the fight for voting rights, but he made no mention of rolling back the filibuster, which some see as the only way to beat back Republican-led efforts to restrict ballot access.

WASHINGTON -- President Biden said on Tuesday that the fight against restrictive voting laws was the "most significant test of our democracy since the Civil War" and called Donald J. Trump's efforts to overturn the 2020 election "a big lie."

In an impassioned speech in Philadelphia, Mr. Biden tried to reinvigorate the stalled Democratic effort to pass federal voting rights legislation and called on Republicans "in Congress and states and cities and counties to stand up, for God's sake."

"Help prevent this concerted effort to undermine our election and the sacred right to vote," the president said in remarks at the National Constitution Center. "Have you no shame?"

But his words collided with reality: Even as Republican-led bills meant to restrict voting access make their way through statehouses across the country, two bills aiming to expand voting rights nationwide are languishing in Congress. And Mr. Biden has bucked increasing pressure from Democrats to support pushing the legislation through the Senate by eliminating the filibuster, no matter the political cost.

In fact, the president seemed to acknowledge that the legislation had little hope of passing as he shifted his focus to the midterm elections.

"We're going to face another test in 2022," Mr. Biden said. "A new wave of unprecedented voter suppression, and raw and sustained election subversion. We have to prepare now."

He said he would start an effort "to educate voters about the changing laws, register them to vote and then get the vote out."

The partisan fight over voting rights was playing out even as the president spoke, with a group of Texas Democrats fleeing their state to deny Republicans the quorum they need to pass new voting restrictions there.

In his speech, Mr. Biden characterized the conspiracy theories about the 2020 election -- hatched and spread by his predecessor, Mr. Trump -- as a "darker and more sinister" underbelly of American politics. He did not mention Mr. Trump by name but warned that "bullies and merchants of fear" had posed an existential threat to democracy.

"No other election has ever been held under such scrutiny, such high standards," Mr. Biden said. "The big lie is just that: a big lie."

About a dozen Republican-controlled states passed laws this spring to restrict voting or significantly change election rules, in part because of Mr. Trump's efforts to sow doubt about the 2020 results.

Republicans, who have called Democrats' warnings about democracy hyperbolic, argue that laws are needed to tamp down on voter fraud, despite evidence that it is not a widespread problem. They have mounted an aggressive campaign to portray Mr. Biden's voting-rights efforts as self-serving federalization of elections to benefit Democrats.

The president's speech, delivered against the backdrop of the birthplace of American democracy, was intended to present the right to vote as a shared ideal, despite the realities of a deeply fractured political landscape.

Democratic efforts to pass voting rights legislation in Washington have stalled in the evenly divided Senate. Last month, Republicans filibustered the broad elections overhaul known as the For the People Act, and they are expected to do the same if Democrats try to bring up the other measure -- the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, named for a former Georgia congressman and civil rights icon -- which would restore parts of the Voting Rights Act struck down by the Supreme Court in 2013.

In a statement, Danielle Álvarez, the communications director for the Republican National Committee, said that Mr. Biden's speech amounted to "lies and theatrics." Republicans had unanimously rejected the For the People Act as a Democratic attempt to "pass their federal takeover of our elections," she said.

There were also concerns among more moderate members of Mr. Biden's party that the legislation was too partisan. Senators Joe Manchin III of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona have publicly said they would not support rolling back the filibuster to enact it.

But other Democrats see a worrying increase in efforts by Republican-led state legislatures to restrict voting, along with court rulings that would make it harder to fight encroachments on voting rights.

A Supreme Court ruling this month weakened the one enforcement clause of the Voting Rights Act that remained after the court invalidated its major provision in 2013. Mr. Biden said last year that strengthening the act would be one of his first priorities after taking office; but on Tuesday, he sought to shift responsibility to lawmakers.

"The court's decision, as harmful as it is, does not limit the Congress's ability to repair the damage done," the president said. "As soon as Congress passes the For the People Act and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, I will sign it and want the whole world to see it."

His rallying cry only underscored the impossibility of the task: Neither bill currently has a path to his desk.

Activists who had wondered whether Mr. Biden would stake out a public position on the filibuster got their answer on Tuesday: "I'm not filibustering now," the president told reporters who shouted questions after his speech.

"It was strange to hear," Eli Zupnick, a spokesman for the anti-filibuster group Fix Our Senate, said after watching the speech. "He did a great job of laying out the problem, but then stopped short of talking about the actual solution that would be needed to passing legislation to address the problem."

As Mr. Biden spoke in Philadelphia, the group of Texas Democrats had traveled to Washington, where they were trying to delay state lawmakers from taking up restrictive voting measures.

Both measures would ban 24-hour voting and drive-through voting; prohibit election officials from proactively sending absentee ballot applications to voters who had not requested them; add new voter identification requirements for voting by mail; limit the types of assistance that can be provided to voters; and greatly expand the authority and autonomy of partisan poll watchers.

In Austin, Republicans vented their anger at the fleeing group, and Gov. Greg Abbott vowed to call "special session after special session after special session" until an election bill passed. The handful of Democratic lawmakers who did not go to Washington were rounded up and ordered onto the Statehouse floor. Shawn Thierry, a Democratic state representative from Houston, posted to Twitter a video of a Statehouse sergeant-at-arms and a state trooper entering her office to order her to be locked in the House chamber.

"This is not an issue about Democrats or Republicans," Vice President Kamala Harris told the Texas lawmakers when she met with them on Tuesday. "This is about Americans and how Americans are experiencing this issue."

James Talarico, 32, the youngest member of the Texas Legislature, said the group of Democrats had gone to Washington, in part, to pressure Mr. Biden to do more.

"We can't listen to more speeches," Mr. Talarico said. "I'm incredibly proud not only as a Democrat but also an American of what President Biden has accomplished in his first few months in office. But protecting our democracy should have been at the very top of the list, because without it none of these issues matter."

The restrictions in the Texas bills mirror key provisions of a restrictive law passed this year in Georgia, which went even further to assert Republican control over the State Election Board and empower the party to suspend county election officials. In June, the Justice Department sued Georgia over the law, the Biden administration's first significant move to challenge voter restrictions at the state level.

"The 21st-century Jim Crow assault is real," Mr. Biden said as he listed the details of the Texas bills. "It's unrelenting, and we are going to challenge it vigorously."

Zolan Kanno-Youngs, Nick Corasaniti and Reid J. Epstein contributed reporting.

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Photograph

President Biden delivering remarks on voting and election measures on Tuesday at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. (PHOTOGRAPH BY STEFANI REYNOLDS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES) (A13)

DETAILS

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After walkout, calls for action

Gardner, Amy . Gardner, Amy.

FULL TEXT

Texas Democrats prod Congress

Move, as we did, to save voting rights, they urge

Texas Democrats who defeated a Republican effort to pass a suite of new voting restrictions with a dramatic late-night walkout from the state House chamber on Sunday have a message for President Biden and his allies in Congress: If we can protect voting rights, you can, too.

The surprise move by roughly 60 Democratic lawmakers headed off the expected passage of S.B. 7, a voting measure that would have been one of the most stringent in the nation, by denying Republicans a required quorum and forcing them to abruptly adjourn without taking a vote.

The coordinated walkout just after 10:30 p.m. Central time jolted the national debate on voting rights, putting the spotlight on Democratic-backed federal legislation that has been stalled in the Senate all spring, even as state Republicans move to enact new voting rules.

"We knew today, with the eyes of the nation watching action in Austin, that we needed to send a message," state Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer, a San Antonio Democrat, said at a news conference held at a historically Black church in Austin early Monday, shortly after he and other lawmakers left the state Capitol. "And that message is very, very clear: Mr. President, we need a national response to federal voting rights."

Republicans control every branch of Texas government and hold firm majorities in both the House and Senate. While Gov. Greg Abbott (R) vowed late Sunday to bring the voting measure back at a special legislative session for redistricting later this year - and threatened to defund the legislature in a tweet on Monday - the walkout represented an unmistakable and shocking defeat for Republican leaders who had assumed the bill would pass ahead of the

House's midnight deadline to finish its 2021 business.
It failed to do so because Texas Democrats resolved early in the day to use every tool at their disposal to block a bill they say would have made it harder for Texans to vote - particularly Black and Latino voters who embraced early-voting methods that would have been banned under the measure.
The move came at a price, forcing Democrats to walk away from pieces of legislation addressing police force and bail reform, among others, that some had hoped to pass Sunday.
After taking their stand, the state Democrats said they want allies elsewhere in the country to seize the moment and show the same kind of resolve - particularly in Washington, where Democrats control the presidency and both chambers of Congress yet are struggling to pave the way for two major pieces of voting legislation: the For the People Act, a sprawling overhaul of federal elections, ethics and campaign finance law; and the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, which would reauthorize the seminal 1965 Voting Rights Act by giving the federal government fresh power to police jurisdictions with histories of racial discrimination in voting administration.
"We did our part to stop SB 7," tweeted state Rep. Erin Zwiener (D). "Now we need Congress to do their part."
"State lawmakers are holding the line," tweeted state Rep. James Talarico (D). "Federal lawmakers need to get their s--- together and pass the For The People Act."
In an interview, Martinez Fischer said that national leaders need to rise to the occasion.
"Breaking quorum is about the equivalent of crawling on our knees begging the president and the United States Congress to give us the For the People Act and give us the John Lewis Voting Rights Act," he said.
Much of the pressure to secure voting rights nationally falls primarily on two Democratic senators who have publicly expressed reluctance to eliminate their chamber's filibuster, which requires 60 votes to allow legislation to move forward. In the current 50-50 Senate, that means major legislation cannot advance without support from at least 10 Republicans.
While top Democratic leaders did not react publicly Monday to the blocking of the Texas bill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) have continued to push for passage of the For the People Act.
"We cannot fail on key things to our democracy, like [the For the People Act], and everything's on the table, and we're going to continue to discuss it as we move forward," Schumer said Friday.
Republicans have said they oppose national voting standards that would usurp the states' role in administering elections.
It would take a simple majority of every Senate Democrat, plus tiebreaker Vice President Harris, to eliminate the filibuster. Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (D-Ariz.) have led the opposition to taking that step.
Rep. Marc Veasey (D-Tex.), a co-founder of the Congressional Voting Rights Caucus, said in an interview Monday that Congress must find a way to pass federal voting protections in part because Black voters are the Democrats' most reliable constituency - and are under the gravest threat from GOP-proposed restrictions around the country.
"If we don't pass these bills, then shame on us," Veasey said. "And be prepared to see even more of these bills continue to make their way through the states."
Veasey said Republicans have shamelessly broken procedural rules when it suited them, such as when then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) blocked a Supreme Court nominee in President Barack Obama's final months in office - then reversed himself last fall when the appointment fell to President Donald Trump. The alternative to no action, Veasey said, is "keeping our fingers crossed" that an increasingly conservative Supreme Court will strike down some of the new voting restrictions, which he said is not a safe bet.
Biden, for his part, has repeatedly pushed for passage of the For the People Act. The legislation would establish national standards for election administration, reversing many of the restrictions pursued by Republican-controlled legislatures in the wake of the 2020 election under pressure from Trump, who has claimed repeatedly without evidence that his defeat was tainted by widespread fraud.
Biden has also advocated for the restoration of provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that the Supreme Court struck down eight years ago.

The president did not directly address the Texas drama during a Memorial Day address Monday at Arlington National Cemetery. But he described the right to vote as a foundational aspect of America's system of government that soldiers have given their lives defending.

"Democracy thrives when the infrastructure of democracy is strong," Biden said. That includes ensuring "people have the right to vote freely, fairly and conveniently."

On Saturday, the president called the Texas legislation "wrong and un-American," and called on Congress to pass the two federal voting rights bills.

In addition to pressuring Congress, Texas Democrats said other states where voting restrictions are being considered must find new ways to block them. Already, such measures have passed in Georgia, Florida, Iowa and elsewhere, but more measures are still being debated in Arizona and Michigan, among other states.

It was not lost on Texas Democrats that they blocked S.B. 7 using a procedural rule requiring two-thirds of members to be present to vote on legislation - much as the Democratic majority in the U.S. Senate has the power to eliminate the filibuster, a chamber tradition that is not enshrined in any law or judicial decision.

Several Texas lawmakers spoke proudly of causing "good trouble" - a phrase Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), who died last year, famously used to describe his willingness to engage in civil disobedience as a leader in the civil rights movement.

State Democrats said they had no other choice but to invoke the last-ditch legislative tradition of breaking quorum, which dates back to at least the age of President Abraham Lincoln.

"We know how to talk for a long time when we need to," state Rep. Chris Turner, chairman of the Texas House Democrats, said at the news conference early Monday. "We know how to slow things down. We were determined to take that bill off the cliff because the midnight deadline would pass and no more bills could become law."

But then, Turner said, it became clear Republicans were moving to shut off debate. At 10:35 p.m. local time, he sent a text to his fellow Democrats: "Members, take your key and leave the chamber discreetly. Do not go to the gallery. Leave the building."

"They were prepared to cut us off and silence us," he told reporters later. "We were not going to let them do that. That's why Democrats used the last tool available to us. We denied them the quorum that they needed to pass that bill and we killed that bill."

Abbott's promise to revisit the voting bill in Texas means the legislature could take up a similar measure to S.B. 7 later in the year, when he plans to call a special session to redraw political districts with new census data.

But several voting rights advocates said the fact that Abbott, an outspoken Trump supporter and potential 2024 presidential contender, did not call for an immediate special session on voting suggested uncertainty about whether such a move would end well for him given the national attention that Sunday's drama attracted.

State House Speaker Dade Phelan (R) condemned the Democrats' maneuvering Sunday night and said it blocked action on several pieces of bipartisan legislation that would have banned no-knock warrants, reformed the state's bail rules and increased spending on mental health services.

"Texans shouldn't have to pay the consequences of these members' actions - or in this case, inaction," Phelan said in a statement, adding that the majority of Texans support "making our elections stronger and more secure."

Phelan met privately with House Democrats for nearly an hour Sunday afternoon, and he knew a walkout was possible, several lawmakers with knowledge of the meeting told The Washington Post. He also had the power under Texas House rules to bar members from leaving the chamber - and to send the Department of Public Safety out to arrest lawmakers who were absent without an excuse - and did not do so.

The Texas measure was the latest example of how Republican legislators around the country have pushed for new voting restrictions as Trump has kept up a barrage of false attacks on the integrity of the 2020 election.

GOP lawmakers argued that S.B. 7 was necessary to shore up voter trust, even though they struggled to justify the need for stricter rules in the state, where officials said the 2020 election was secure.

State Sen. Bryan Hughes (R), one of the sponsors of the measure, tweeted Saturday that it "is a strong bill that gives accessibility &security to Texas elections."

The bill would have imposed a raft of hurdles on casting ballots by mail and enhanced civil and criminal penalties for election administrators, voters and those seeking to assist them.

The measure would have made it illegal for election officials to send out unsolicited mail ballot applications, empowered partisan poll watchers and banned practices such as drop boxes and drive-through voting that were popularized in the heavily Democratic Harris County last year. It would have barred early voting hours on Sunday mornings, potentially hampering get-out-the-vote programs aimed at Black churchgoers.

amy.gardner@washpost.com

Annie Linskey and Mike DeBonis contributed to this report.

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With new Texas, new expectations for leaders

FosterFrau, Silvia; Wilson, Scott . FosterFrau, Silvia; Wilson, Scott.

FULL TEXT

Old frontier ethic collides with demands of diverse and growing population

ROUND ROCK, Tex. - This town, once a stop for the longhorn cattle drives that helped revive Texas's post-Civil War economy, long embraced the state's trademark character: rural, Western and ruggedly independent.

But Round Rock has less and less in common with its pioneer past as it has attracted blue-state urbanites and a growing number of Latino and Asian families in search of cheaper housing, lower taxes and spacious, small-town living. Instead of the city attracting cowboys seeking to cash in on a recovering nation's beef demand, its coffers are now being fed by a diversifying mix of technology corporations and major retailers.

A cultural shift has taken hold - one that came into stark view this week as Texas's conservative governor proclaimed the state "100% OPEN," and a chorus of Democratic mayors and big-name stores responded by defiantly reasserting their own mask mandates. Just five days before the governor's announcement, the Round Rock City Council had unanimously voted to extend its mask mandate for an additional 60 days, declaring it will remain in place until at least April 29.

And as Texas was brought to its knees last month by a statewide week-long freeze - which left 4 million people without power, 15 million without drinkable or running water, and at least 30 dead - Round Rock said it experienced "no major outages, no boil water notices," a feat that city utilities director Michael Thane attributed to government leaders who "give us the money we need" to maintain local infrastructure.

"A lot of businesses and enterprises and people are attracted to Texas for the low-cost, no income tax environment, and that has fueled the growth engine without a doubt," said Steven Pedigo, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin who studies economic and urban development. "But on the flip side, you get what you pay for."

Texas's promise of modern living on a small-government budget coupled with its growing population of young, minority residents has made it one of the fastest-growing states in recent decades. The spirit of independence and self-determination helped the state weather the Great Recession far better than most, continuing to lure businesses with low tax rates and light regulation while attracting new residents with well-paying jobs and affordable living costs.

That philosophy also is at the heart of Texas's independent power grid, the nation's only one that operates separately from the federal system. But the historic cold snap that blanketed the South last month demonstrated how the frontier ethic that a largely rural Texas brought to the union it joined 176 years ago has abruptly collided with a rapidly urbanizing population, one that thinks government should provide not only a healthy economy but also policies that support public health and fund reliable infrastructure.

Texas's population has jumped 13 percent over the past eight years, and the state is home to nearly 1 in 10

Americans. But its budget, when adjusted for population and inflation, shrank by 0.6 percent over that same period, according to the 2020-21 state House Legislative Budget Summary. A large property tax break that passed recently also means the Texas government, facing some of the most expensive recovery efforts in its history, will have $5 billion a year less to spend.

"The idea of self-reliance and self-determination and a kind of nation-state that can go its own way and handle its own affairs has run smack dab into reality," said Stephen Harrigan, who in 2019 published a history of the state called "Big Wonderful Thing."

"The people who are digging into that notion the deepest - the Texas going-it-alone stance - are also kind of fighting a rearguard action," he said. "When you see somebody like [former Texas governor and U.S. energy secretary] Rick Perry saying that we're happy to freeze for three days, as long as the government's not in our business, well, I don't think that's true of most Texans anymore, particularly the freezing ones."

The Californians

Texas's bootstrap mentality still holds in many quarters. In the midst of the winter storm, one mayor in Central Texas told his residents, as they hunkered in their cold, dark homes, that "only the strong will survive." (He has since resigned.)

The quintessential Texan skepticism of the federal government has endured for more than 160 years, as well. In January, the Texas Republican Party endorsed legislation that would put Texas secession up for a vote.

The state's stand-alone power grid, the only one not integrated with those of neighboring states, has become another symbol of that culture of stubborn self-determination - and the dangers of such a pervasive mentality.

The blackouts caused by winter storm Uri last month were not unprecedented. But change did not occur after the brutal winters of 1989 and 2011, the latter leaving more than 3 million people to endure rolling blackouts amid freezing temperatures.

Optional winterization measures recommended to better protect the electricity grid were largely ignored, and an assessment of the 2011 power failures found that hundreds of the same power generation stations that failed in 1989 failed again more than two decades later.

Texas's fiscal report in 2011 noted that "the state does not have a dedicated funding source for water infrastructure to support the anticipated future rise in public demand." It added that "by 2060 the available water supply will fall short of the state's demands by 8.8 million acre-feet of water per year" - enough to supply about 6 million homes annually.

"As the effects of climate change get worse, as the state continues to grow, taxing an already overburdened infrastructure, you're going to continue to see these kinds of failures unless there is a dramatic change," said former congressman Beto O'Rourke (D-Tex.).

But infrastructure issues are not a symptom of the red-state, small-government approach alone. California, which has been a bastion of Democratic politics for the past decade, could hold lessons for Texas. As that state's population increased amid the dot-com boom, rolling blackouts and surging energy prices in the early 2000s prompted the U.S. Energy Information Administration to warn that "investment in new power generation capacity has not kept pace with the increasing demand for electricity."

Although power retail sales increased by 11 percent between 1990 and 1999, the report noted, power generation capability decreased 2 percent.

"No new generation capacity has been constructed in California for over a decade," it stated.

The state's electricity failures eventually helped cost Gov. Gray Davis (D) his job - California's only successful recall effort to date.

For the first time in its history, California reported a net population loss last year - and many have been moving to Texas. Iconic businesses such as Oracle and Hewlett-Packard have announced plans to decamp the state for Texas, some citing the high taxes and cost of living. Tesla owner Elon Musk also has threatened to move to Texas from California, although recent reports suggest that he has rethought the idea.

Others haven't: Census estimates show that more than half a million people are moving to Texas a year. The new residents are distinct from those of the past, with bedroom communities and rural outskirts that were once the

defining character of the state now increasingly urban. Nine in 10 Texans now live in metropolitan areas.

"I think this new Texas recognizes that government can be a force for good, that government is how we solve problems that we can't solve on our own as individuals," said state Rep. James Talarico (D), who at 31 is the state's youngest current legislator. His district encompasses part of Williamson County, which includes Round Rock.

New Texas, new demands

Four of the country's 15 fastest-growing large cities are now in Texas, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. People from out of state have been migrating here for new jobs, Austin urbanites are relocating for more affordable housing, and native Texans of color, whose voices have long been stifled, are slowly finding places on boards, commissions and in other public offices.

The demographic and economic shifts have been so sudden that surrounding Williamson County flipped blue in the last presidential election for the first time in decades, also electing two Democratic state representatives and a Democratic sheriff, among others.

Round Rock Mayor Craig Morgan, in a nonpartisan office, expects the nearly 120,000-population town to more than double in size by 2050. With that new population has come demand for amenities, jobs and the kind of services that a well-funded local government provides.

For surrounding Williamson County, the February storm "was much longer and much stronger than any of us imagined," County Judge Bill Gravell said. Outages rocked the area as they did statewide, leaving thousands of residents without consistent power for days. Some lost water service; others experienced pipe bursts that cut off their supply.

But Round Rock leaders say that those outcomes were relatively muted here, with customers maintaining consistent service and no boil-water notices.

"The reason why Round Rock utilities made it through this instance was not what we did this week. It goes back 10 years ago when we started planning, making sure our infrastructure was in place, making sure we have backup generators," said Thane, the local utilities director. "When you look at how did a utility get through this versus how did a utility maybe not get through it, that was a huge component - being able to say we had things in place from all the infrastructure, the people, the training, all that we needed to do to be able to withstand something like this."

Government is viewed not only as a vehicle for stability, but also equity. The state's economic disparities were brought to light when the storm hit and disproportionately exacerbated the plight of Texas's poor and marginalized.

The Round Rock City Council is thought to be the most racially diverse in its history, officials said, with two Hispanic members, one African American member and one Asian member on the seven-person council. The schools reflect a particularly diverse future electorate, with a student body that is 37 percent White, 30 percent Hispanic, 18 percent Asian and about 9 percent Black, according to district figures.

In the fall, the district funded a new position: chief equity officer.

The growing diversity is even reflected in street names. One downtown street received a special designation in January as "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way" to commemorate the holiday. Council member Frank Ortega said he plans to push to name a street after Latino civil rights and labor leader César Chávez.

Tina Steiner, a city council candidate whose family has lived in Round Rock for generations, has been delivering food, water and other necessities to vulnerable residents since the winter storm lifted. It's the kind of care she thinks the state and local government should have played a bigger role in, but in its absence, she said she and other volunteers make the rounds to help others.

"I'm proud to be from Texas," Steiner said, adding that it seems as though more people around her are viewing the world as she views it. "They see the struggle" for change in Texas, Steiner said. "They know it's real."

silvia.foster-frau@washpost.com
scott.wilson@washpost.com
Wilson reported from Santa Barbara, Calif.

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Biden's low-key response to Texas devastation carries some political risk

Wootson, Cleve R, Jr; Moravec, Eva Ruth . Wootson, Cleve R, Jr; Moravec, Eva Ruth.

FULL TEXT

Approach could make federal government appear almost absent

AUSTIN - Democratic state Rep. James Talarico says the most he's heard of federal help in his area during the devastating winter storm is a FEMA water truck that apparently got stuck in ice. K.P. George, the top elected official in Fort Bend County, Tex., said federal officials have told him help is on the way - just not fast enough: "We can't wait another 72 hours to get food and blankets and things like that," he said.

And U.S. Rep. Colin Allred (D-Tex.), a congressman from Dallas, said what would help most, beyond an infusion of federal dollars, is a visit from President Biden.

"This has been something like the Dark Ages here in Texas," Allred said. "I mean, people are burning their furniture and their fences for warmth and for heat. They're finding older folks literally frozen to death in their beds. When the president has toured - seen the damage, spoken to the people who were affected - I think that makes it a little bit hard to say, 'Well, I'm sorry, you're going to be on your own.' "

As the Biden administration faces its first natural disaster, the president himself is taking a notably low-key approach. He has not visited the stricken region or delivered prime-time remarks; he did not mention the disaster at a recent town hall; and he is studiously avoiding the controversy over whether wind energy or fossil fuels are to blame for widespread power failures.

It's a marked contrast to former president Donald Trump's habit of making himself the often-hostile center of attention during natural disasters. He famously tossed paper towels to hurricane victims, excoriated Californians for "gross mismanagement" of forests and called Puerto Rican leaders "corrupt and incompetent" for their handling of aid money.

While Biden has won praise for his quieter, more businesslike approach, he is also running the risk that he - and the federal government - can appear almost absent. State and local officials say a big test will come in the months and years ahead, as Texans replace burst pipes in flooded homes, clear out dead crops and livestock and investigate the collapse of an electrical grid that left millions shivering in the dark.

"This is a catastrophic loss across the board," Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller said by phone from Stephenville, where he was tending his cattle. The storms knocked out this year's and next year's citrus crops in three Texas counties, a loss of more than $300 million, and Miller ultimately expects all 254 counties in Texas to be declared federal disaster areas in coming weeks.

"We poured out over 1,600 trailer trucks of milk because we can't pasteurize it," Miller said. "It's affected the poultry farmers, the hatcheries. We've got little chicks that froze to death and incubators that we can't keep warm, so those eggs aren't going to hatch."

The storms have killed at least 48 people in the past week, including 30 in Texas, according to data compiled by The Washington Post. Among the dead were people poisoned by carbon monoxide as they ran car engines to stay warm and a boy who authorities believe froze to death in his bed.

The Texas electrical grid has largely been restored after its failure left 4 million people without power as temperatures bottomed out in the teens and 20s, but other critical services limped into the weekend. On Friday, more than 14.9 million people in Texas didn't have reliable running water.

In the wake of the storm, Biden approved an emergency declaration for Louisiana, Oklahoma and Texas, which

authorized the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide care, shelter and funds for direct federal assistance. He signed a major disaster declaration for 77 Texas counties on Saturday, paving the way for more aid to address longer-term problems.

Initially, the administration talked up relief numbers that paled in comparison to the immense need in a state of more than 29 million people - boasting that it had sent 60,000 blankets and 60 generators for hospitals - but officials later said a better measure is the amount of money provided to the state, which has not been estimated yet.

FEMA is awaiting the confirmation of a director, though its acting director, Bob Fenton, is an experienced career official and a veteran of numerous disasters. Biden has told reporters he has also directed other departments - including Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, and Defense - to help people in Texas.

Biden and others in his administration are debating whether the president should make a trip to the devastated area this week, saying the security concerns that come with a presidential visit can strain badly needed local resources.

"From everything I've seen, they're following the playbook," said Daniel Kaniewski, a former FEMA deputy administrator under Trump. "The president has authorized FEMA to provide those physical resources and financial resources."

Just as important, officials said, is what Biden has not done. Several credited him with not politicizing the disaster, and he has not weighed in on some Texas officials' widely disputed claim that the failure of wind turbines was largely responsible for power failures. The president has also refrained from scolding state leaders for decisions relating to their power grid that might have contributed to the electrical collapse.

Congress is likely to open an investigation into systemic failures in Texas, and the state's legislature is expected to conduct hearings of its own.

The storm first hit on Sunday, Feb. 14, but Biden was silent about it at a nationally televised town hall on CNN on Tuesday, first speaking publicly of the natural disaster on Thursday. He has tweeted that he and first lady Jill Biden were "keeping Texas, Oklahoma, and other impacted states in our prayers" and conferring with state leaders of both parties.

Officials say it is a marked difference from Trump, who often used natural disasters to attack political adversaries. He excoriated the California officials dealing with rampant wildfires, for example, saying their "gross mismanagement" of forest floors had led to the deadly blazes.

He similarly blasted leaders in Puerto Rico for how they managed aid money after Hurricane Maria, while a visit where he tossed paper towels to a crowd has been cited as a study in tone-deafness. At other times, Trump suggested he would withhold aid to states like California because of their political leanings.

The Biden administration has sought to showcase a more professional approach.

"President Biden called Gov. Abbott and said that he put all the resources of the government at his disposal, even though he didn't win the state of Texas - which is not something the previous occupant probably would have done," Allred said. "He didn't blame it on the state, either, or say this was a preventable issue and that the state should have done a better job of regulating our power grid."

Allred, a Democrat, said that when a tornado flattened parts of his district two years ago, he had to strategize about how to get help from the Trump administration. "I have Texas Republicans who surround my district who I knew were closer to Trump and the White House, and I asked them if [they] could try to weigh in," he said.

Still, Allred and others said the biggest test for Biden will be whether the federal government continues to provide help after the deadly storm has stopped dominating headlines. The Insurance Council of Texas said the storm will be the "largest insurance claim event in [Texas] history," and hundreds of thousands of claims are expected.

Recovery is of particular concern as pandemic restrictions stretch into a second year. Biden has said his top priority is helping the nation emerge from the grips of the pandemic. He did not travel to states affected by the storm last week, instead touring a Pfizer vaccine plant in Kalamazoo, Mich.

Officials in Texas say they worry that vaccine sites shuttered by outages, and residents huddled too close together in warming centers, would seed new coronavirus cases.

Talarico, the state legislator, said Texas almost overnight became "a preindustrial country where we lack basic

infrastructure to meet basic needs."

For 48 hours, as temperatures dropped, Talarico, 31, lost power in his freezing home with no cellphone reception and no Internet. He said it was terrifying "being disconnected from the rest of the world while this was happening."

While his power had been restored by Friday, Talarico's water was turned off after a pipe sprung a leak. His grandmother, 90, lives alone in Harper, a small town in the Texas Hill Country, where she was out of power for days.

Things were similarly bad in Fort Bend County, home to more than 800,000 people southwest of Houston. George, whose title is county judge but is the top elected official, said aid was slowed because the county budgets few resources for snow removal, since temperatures in even the coldest winters are usually above freezing.

George said he was sifting through an array of federal and state aid options, mixed with local solutions - whatever could bring relief the fastest.

After talking to a FEMA official on Thursday, George said he believed federal help would be coming, though not swiftly. "They said we have to go through [the Texas Department of Emergency Management]," he recounted. "And I'm saying, 'We need help now, and we don't have time to fill out a million forms. I will do all that stuff, but we need water today. We needed water yesterday.' "

For all the immediate need, the extensive damage from the cold - broken pipes, flooded homes, spoiled livestock - means recovery is likely to take years.

State Sen. Judith Zaffirini, a Democrat from Laredo, on the Mexican border, said she has never seen a weather emergency affect the entire state of Texas at once.

"Everybody's saying that this storm is going to be more costly than Hurricane Harvey, which was $19 billion," Zaffirini said. "Those losses were severe, but only in one concentrated area. This has impacted all 254 counties. Texas has a desperate need for assistance."

Miller, the agriculture commissioner, said he had already lost three head of Angus and figured he'd lose more to pneumonia. On Friday, he shuttled thirsty cows to a well because their usual water sources were frozen solid. Miller said the storm had strained many links in the state's food supply, especially those that depend on natural gas.

"It's covid all over again. Our farmers are going to receive lower prices, the packing plants are shut down, there's going to be a glut on the supply end," he said. "And then consumers are going to be paying record-high prices because the grocery shelves are empty."

cleve.wootson@washpost.com

Wootson reported from Washington. Nick Miroff and Mark Berman in Washington contributed to this report.

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