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

Glueck, Katie . Glueck, Katie.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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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'

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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."

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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.

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This article originally appeared in The New York Times.



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DETAILS

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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.

DETAILS

Subject: Christianity; Political parties; Antisemitism; Church &state; Political campaigns; State elections; Holidays &special occasions; Religion; Governors; Christians; Presidential elections; Scandals; Voters; Political advertising

Location: Texas; United States--US; Georgia; Pennsylvania; Michigan

People: Trump, Donald J

Company / organization:	Name: Democratic Party; NAICS: 813940
Identifier / keyword:	Democratic Party; Religion and Belief; Presidential Election of 2024; Warnock, Raphael G; Shapiro, Josh (1973-); Buttigieg, Pete (1982-); Beshear, Andrew G (1977-); United States Politics and Government
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Document 4 of 48

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."

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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."

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"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.

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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
Location:	Texas; United States--US
URL:	https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/19/us/texas-bible-curriculum-public-schools.html
Publication title:	New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast); New York, N.Y.
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Last updated:	2024-11-20

Document 5 of 48

Texas Education Board Backs Curriculum With Lessons Drawn From Bible

Closson, Troy . Closson, Troy.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Texas education officials on Tuesday backed 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 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.

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 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.

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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.

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

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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.

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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.

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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."

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This article originally appeared in The New York Times.

DETAILS

Subject:	Teaching; Bible; Students; Christianity
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Company / organization:	Name: New York Times Co; NAICS: 513110, 516110, 516120
Identifier / keyword:	Texas Education Agency; United States; Politics And Government; Boards Of Directors; Freedom Of Religion; Law And Legislation; Education (K 12); Private And Sectarian Schools; Civil Rights And Liberties; Austin (Tex); Texas State University; New York Times; Conservatism (Us Politics); King, Martin Luther Jr; Football (College); School Boards; Human Rights And Human Rights Violations; Tests And Examinations; Religion And Belief; Language And Languages; Bible; Carson, Benjamin S; Presidential Election Of 2024; Poetry And Poets; Civil Rights Movement (1954 68); United States Politics And Government; Texas; Religion State Relations; Christians And Christianity; Democratic Party; Slavery (Historical); Reading And Writing Skills (Education); Da Vinci, Leonardo; Republican Party; San Antonio (Tex); Trump, Donald J; Interscholastic Athletics; Supreme Court (Us); University Of Oklahoma; Colleges And Universities; First Amendment (Us Constitution); Jesus Christ; Chaplains; University Of Texas At Austin; Ethics And Official Misconduct; Books And Literature; Louisiana; Abbott, Gregory W (1957)
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Document 6 of 48

Texas Education Board Backs Curriculum With Lessons Drawn From Bible

Closson, Troy . Closson, Troy.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

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DETAILS

Subject:	Teaching; Bible; Students; Christianity
Location:	Texas; United States--US
Identifier / keyword:	Texas; Religion-State Relations; Education (K-12); Bible; Texas Education Agency; Christians and Christianity; Republican Party; Conservatism (US Politics); Politics and Government
Publication title:	New York Times (Online); New York
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Copyright:	Copyright 2024 The New York Times Company
Last updated:	2024-11-20
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

Document 7 of 48

Texas Education Board to Vote on Bible-Infused Lessons in Public Schools

Closson, Troy . Closson, Troy.

[ProQuest document link](https://www.proquest.com/usmajordailies/blogs-podcasts-websites/texas-education-board-backs-curriculum-with/docview/3130131239/sem-2?accountid=46320)

FULL TEXT

A new curriculum would focus on Christianity more than other religions. A kindergarten lesson on the Golden Rule, for example, would teach about Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount.

Texas education officials are expected to vote this week on whether to approve a new elementary-school curriculum that infuses teachings on the Bible into reading and language arts lessons.

The optional curriculum, one of most sweeping efforts in recent years to bring a Christian perspective to more students, would test the limits of religious instruction in public education.

It could also become a model for other states and for the administration of President-elect Donald J. Trump, who has

promised to champion the conservative Christian movement in his second presidential term.

In the ascendant but highly contested push to expand the role of religion in public life, Texas has emerged as a leader. It was the first state to allow public schools to hire religious chaplains as school counselors, and the Republican-controlled legislature is expected to renew its attempts to require public-school classrooms to display the Ten Commandments.

The new curriculum, which covers kindergarten through fifth grade, would be optional, although school districts would receive a financial incentive to adopt it. The Texas State Board of Education sets standards for what students must be taught and approves a selection of curriculums, and individual schools and school districts choose which ones they will teach.

Texas has about 2.3 million public-school students in kindergarten through fifth grade who could be taught the new curriculum.

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

In kindergarten, for example, children would be taught that many religions value the Golden Rule, but the lessons would be focused on the Christian version, and introduce students to Jesus and his Sermon on the Mount.

In a fifth-grade lesson on Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper," students would be taught an account of the final meal shared by Jesus and his 12 disciples, and would read several verses from the Gospel of Matthew.

The Bible has often appeared in American schools throughout the nation's history, and schools are free to teach from religious texts. Even so, the proposed curriculum has ignited an uproar, with parents and teachers—including some Christian Texans—expressing worry that the lessons blur the line between instruction and evangelizing, and present scripture and tenets of the Christian faith as factual truths to young children.

Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, and other supporters of the new program say that the Bible is a fundamental text in American history, and argue that students' knowledge of the world would be incomplete without a classical education and robust understanding of Bible stories.

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. 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 argued that the state included several people on the panel 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.

Similar clashes are erupting in other states, like Oklahoma and Louisiana, where conservative Christian leaders have taken steps to expand the role of religion in public schools. Proponents say Christian themes are pervasive in American culture and that exposing students to them is crucial to their academic development.

"Our language is redolent with concepts, phrases and allusions drawn directly from the Bible and other touchstones of Western thought and culture," Robert Pondiscio, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in a recent column.

"Without complete command of these references, students—particularly poor, minority and immigrant students—will struggle to fully comprehend what they read," Mr. Pondiscio, a former teacher, wrote.

The new curriculum has provoked the anger of Texans of other faiths, who say the lessons lack balance and in some places are even offensive.

Some Jewish families were outraged, for example, over an activity included in a second-grade lesson on the Old Testament story of Esther. In the biblical account, a high-ranking official in the Persian Empire cast lots to decide

when all Jews in the land would be killed, and Esther stopped the planned attack.

The lesson included a game in which teachers would ask students to choose a number and then roll a die to see if their number was called.

“This is shocking, offensive and just plain wrong,” Sharyn Vane, a Jewish parent of two Texas public school graduates, said at a public hearing on the curriculum in September, where the majority of speakers criticized the potential lessons.

“Do we ask elementary students to pretend to be Hitler?” Ms. Vane asked, calling the curriculum “wildly problematic in its depictions of Jews.”

The curriculum developers removed the dice rolling game and made other changes after the hearing.

Thomas K. Lindsay, the higher education policy director at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative group, said that he was “frustrated and very saddened” that critics of the curriculum were focused on its religious content. He argued that the lessons do not proselytize to children.

The Texas Education Agency has said that the proposed curriculum was developed using cognitive science research to improve student outcomes, and Mr. Lindsay said that critics were ignoring its potential to help close reading gaps for children who are behind.

“I understand we’re a polarized country,” said Mr. Lindsay, a member of the state’s curriculum advisory board.

“But we’ve got a chance to do something good for the kids who need it most.”

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

Mark A. Chancey, a professor of religious studies at Southern Methodist University near Dallas, said that the material includes apparent errors. He said the lessons were also often “not age appropriate,” he added, noting that a lesson that describes Genesis to kindergartners could lead them to believe it was fact that God created the world in six days.

David R. Brockman, a Christian theologian and religious studies scholar who reviewed the curriculum, said he has “long been an advocate of teaching about religion in public schools.” But lessons must be balanced, accurate and not promote one religion over others, he said.

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.”

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How Two Billionaire Preachers Remade Texas Politics

Kofman, Ava . Kofman, Ava.

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FULL TEXT

Last December, Sid Miller, the Texas commissioner of agriculture, posted a photo of himself brandishing a double-barrel shotgun on X and invited his followers to join him on a “RINO hunt.” Miller had taken to stumping in the March primary election against incumbents he deemed to be Republicans in Name Only. Not long after that, he

received a text message from one of his targets, a state representative named Glenn Rogers. “You are a bought and paid for, pathetic narcissist,” it began. “If you had any honor, you would challenge me, or any of my Republican colleagues to a duel.”

Rogers, a 68-year-old rancher and grandfather of five, represents a rural district west of Fort Worth. He was proud to serve in a Legislature that, as he told me recently, “couldn’t be more conservative if it tried.” Since entering office in 2021, he co-authored legislation that allowed Texans to carry handguns without a permit, supported the Heartbeat Act that grants citizens the right to sue abortion providers and voted to give the police the power to arrest suspected undocumented migrants in schools and hospitals. In a Statehouse packed with debate-me agitators, he was comparatively soft-spoken—a former professor of veterinary medicine with an aversion to grandstanding. He was not in the habit of firing off salvos, as he had to Miller, that ended with “Kiss My Ass!”

But the viciousness of the primary season had been getting to him. Nearly a year before the March elections, ads began to appear in Rogers’ district castigating him not simply as a RINO but as a closet liberal who supported gun control and Shariah law. (Rogers was especially peeved by an ad that photoshopped his signature white cowboy hat onto a headshot of Joe Biden.) Some of the attacks originated from his challenger’s campaign, while others were sponsored by organizations with grassroots-sounding names, like Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, Texas Gun Rights and Texas Family Project. By the time voters headed to the polls, they could have been forgiven for thinking that Rogers had disappointed a suite of conservative groups.

In reality, Rogers had disappointed two men: Tim Dunn and Farris Wilks, billionaires who have made their fortunes in the oil industry. Over the past decade, the pair have built the most powerful political machine in Texas—a network of think-tanks, media organizations, political-action committees and nonprofits that work in lock step to purge the Legislature of Republicans whose votes they can’t rely on. Cycle after cycle, their relentless maneuvering has pushed the Statehouse so far to the right that consultants like to joke that Karl Rove couldn’t win a local race these days. Brandon Darby, the editor of Breitbart Texas, is one of several conservatives who has compared Dunn and Wilks to Russian oligarchs. “They go into other communities and unseat people unwilling to do their bidding,” he says.

“You kiss the ring or you’re out.”

Like the Koch brothers, the Mercer family and other conservative billionaires, Dunn and Wilks want to slash regulations and taxes. Their endgame, however, is more radical: not just to limit the government but also to steer it toward Christian rule. “It’s hard to think of other megafunders in the country as big on the theocratic end of the spectrum,” says Peter Montgomery, who oversees the Right Wing Watch project at People for the American Way, a progressive advocacy group.

Texas, which has few limits on campaign spending, is home to a formidable army of donors. Lately Dunn has outspent them all. Since 2000, he and his wife have given more than \$29 million to candidates and PACs in Texas. Wilks and his wife, who have donated to many of the same PACs as Dunn, have given \$16 million. Last year, Dunn and his associated entities provided two thirds of the donations to the state Republican Party.

The duo’s ambitions extend beyond Texas. They’ve poured millions into “dark money” groups, which do not have to disclose contributors; conservative-media juggernauts (Wilks provided \$4.7 million in seed capital to The Daily Wire, which hosts “The Ben Shapiro Show”); and federal races. Dunn’s \$5 million gift to the Make America Great Again super PAC in December made him one of Donald Trump’s top supporters this election season, and he has quietly begun to invest in efforts to influence a possible second Trump administration, including several linked to Project 2025.

Rogers believes he provoked the ire of the Dunn and Wilks machine for two reasons. He refused to support a school-voucher bill that would funnel taxpayer dollars to private schools, and he voted to impeach Attorney General Ken Paxton, one of the machine’s most powerful allies. (Paxton, who did not respond to requests for comment, was impeached in part for misusing his office to help a friend under federal investigation.)

Since neither of these issues particularly excited voters, many attacks focused on distorting Rogers’ record on immigration instead. When his wife joined a text group for the spouses of incumbents under siege (they called themselves the Badass Babes), she saw that her husband was not the only opponent of vouchers who had

supposedly given Democrats “control of the Texas border.” The mailers sent across the state were identical, with only the names and faces swapped out.

The onslaught worked. Rogers lost his seat by 27 percentage points, and more than two dozen Statehouse candidates backed by the two billionaires prevailed this spring. These challengers received considerable support from Dunn-and-Wilks-backed allies like Miller, the agricultural commissioner, as well as from G.O.P. heavyweights like Gov. Greg Abbott. “You cannot overstate the absolute earthquake that was the March 5 primary,” says Matt Mackowiak, a political consultant and chairman of the Travis County G.O.P.

The morning after his routing at the polls, Rogers published an editorial in *The Weatherford Democrat*. Commendably short on self-pity, it argued that the real loser in his race was representative democracy. “History will prove,” he wrote, “that our current state government is the most corrupt ever and is ‘bought’ by a few radical dominionist billionaires seeking to destroy public education, privatize our public schools and create a theocracy.”

Dunn and Wilks are often described as Christian Nationalists, supporters of a political movement that seeks to erode, if not eliminate, the distinction between church and state. Dunn and Wilks, however, do not describe themselves as such. (Dunn, for his part, has rejected the term as a “made-up label that conflicts with biblical teaching.”) Instead, like most Christian Nationalists, the two men speak about protecting Judeo-Christian values and promoting a biblical worldview. These vague expressions often serve as a shorthand for the movement’s central mythology: that America, founded as a Christian nation, has lost touch with its religious heritage, which must now be reclaimed. Exactly what this reclamation would look like is up for debate. Some Christian Nationalists advocate for more religious iconography in public life, while others harbor grander visions of Christianizing America’s political institutions. Those on the extreme end of this spectrum are sometimes called Dominionists, after the passage in Genesis in which man is given “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.”

David Brockman, a nonresident scholar at Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy, has extensively reviewed the speeches and donations of Dunn and Wilks and believes the two men to be thoroughgoing Dominionists. Zachary Maxwell, a Republican activist who knows the Wilks family personally and used to work for Texas Scorecard, a media group associated with Dunn and Wilks, agrees. “They want to get Christians in office to change the ordinances, laws, rules and regulations to fit the Bible,” he told me. According to *Texas Monthly*, Dunn once told Joe Straus, the first Jewish speaker of the Texas House since statehood, that only Christians should hold leadership positions. (Dunn has denied the remark.)

Wilks did not respond to detailed lists of questions. In an email, Dunn directed me to his previous public statements. In one of them, he explained that every Christian should avoid the label “Christian Nationalist” because “it makes ‘Christian’ an adjective—in other words, subjugated to something else.” A self-proclaimed proponent of limited government, he has also rejected the way in which the label, a “smear,” suggests that Christians would replace “God as King with earthly kings who claimed God’s authority.”

Unlike most billionaires, Dunn and Wilks are also pastors. Friends and critics alike described the pair as conspicuously down-home and devout. “They love God, they serve God,” said Jerry Maston, an evangelical pastor and Wilks’s brother-in-law. Dunn, who is 68, has served on the “pulpit team” of a nondenominational church in Midland. Wilks, who is four years older, practices a form of Christianity that hews closely to the Old Testament at the Assembly of Yahweh, a church his family founded outside of Cisco, a town in Central Texas. When I saw him preach there earlier this year, he warned his followers that “absorption in bounty makes us forgetful of the giver.” The two men may differ on certain points of doctrine—Wilks doesn’t celebrate Christmas, considering it a pagan holiday—but they share the same vision of a radically transformed America.

Many of their ideas have been shaped by David Barton, a former teacher in Aledo, Texas, and the closest the Christian Nationalist movement has to an in-house intellectual. Barton has been advancing the same revisionist thesis for decades: The founders intended for the barrier between church and state to protect Christianity from the government, not vice versa. “‘Separation of church and state’ currently means almost exactly the opposite of what it originally meant,” explains the website for WallBuilders, Barton’s advocacy group, to which Wilks has

donated more than \$3 million.

This view, dismissed by historians but increasingly common among white evangelicals, has been encouraged by recent Supreme Court decisions reinterpreting the establishment clause and embraced by prominent Republicans, most notably the speaker of the House, Mike Johnson. Johnson lauded Barton at a 2021 WallBuilders event, citing his “profound influence on me and my work and my life and everything I do.” The day after Johnson was elected Speaker, Barton said on a podcast, “We have some tools at our disposal now we haven’t had in a long time.” With its high concentration of movement leaders, conservative pastors and far-right mega-donors, Texas has become the country’s foremost laboratory for Christian Nationalist policy, and many of its experiments have been bankrolled by Dunn and Wilks. Several of the lawmakers they’ve funded have introduced bills linked to Project Blitz, a coalition of religious groups, including Barton’s WallBuilders, that drafted model legislation to advance Christianity’s role in civic life. One bill directs educators to hang posters of the Ten Commandments “in a size and typeface that is legible to a person with average vision from anywhere in the classroom.” Another, now law, requires schools to display “In God We Trust” placards.

“You can look here to see what’s coming to other states soon,” said Amanda Tyler, the executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, a nonprofit legal advocacy group. After Texas passed a law allowing the work of licensed mental-health counselors in public schools to be done by unlicensed chaplains—representatives of “God in government,” one of the bill’s sponsors called them—a dozen other states introduced similar bills. That includes Louisiana, which became the first state to sign a bill into law this June requiring schools to post the Ten Commandments in classrooms. (Trump celebrated on Truth Social: “I LOVE THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS, PRIVATE SCHOOLS, AND MANY OTHER PLACES, FOR THAT MATTER.”)

It is no accident that Dunn and Wilks have concentrated their energies on infusing Christianity into education. Many far-right Christians trace the country’s moral decline to Supreme Court rulings in the 1960s and early 1970s that ended mandated prayer and Bible reading in public schools. Texas recently proposed an overhauled reading curriculum that strongly emphasizes the Bible “in ways that verge on proselytizing,” according to Brockman, the scholar at the Baker Institute; The 74, a nonprofit newsroom, reported that the state’s educational consultants contracted with the Texas Public Policy Foundation, whose board Dunn has served on since 1998. Wilks and his brother, Dan, have given around \$3 million to PragerU, a video platform co-founded by Dennis Prager, the conservative radio host. It is not an accredited university; instead it provides “a free alternative to the dominant left-wing ideology in culture, media and education.” Public-school leaders in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Oklahoma and South Carolina have recently approved PragerU’s teaching materials. One lesson shows an animated Frederick Douglass explaining that slavery was a compromise the founding fathers made to “achieve something great.”

Predictably, these attempts to control what happens in the classroom trigger local culture wars, which, in turn, lead Christian Nationalists to contend that religious values are under siege. “They’re going to be things that people yell at, but they will help move the ball down the court,” Barton said in a 2016 conference call with state legislators that was later made public. The ultimate aim of these skirmishes is to end up with a religious liberty case before an increasingly conservative Supreme Court.

Last year, researchers at the Public Religion Research Institute and the Brookings Institution found that more than half of Republicans support Christian Nationalist beliefs, including that “being a Christian is an important part of being truly American,” that the government should declare the United States a Christian nation and that “God has called Christians to exercise dominion over all areas of American society.” They have also found that Christian nationalists were roughly twice as likely as other Americans to believe that political violence may be justified. Those who stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6 with wooden crosses and Christian flags did not see themselves as insurrectionists overturning democracy but as patriots defending the will of God. They had been spurred on by years of rhetoric that recast political debates as spiritual battles with apocalyptic stakes.

In 2016, Trump received a higher share of the white evangelical vote than any presidential candidate since 2004, but the sociologists Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry have found that Christian Nationalist beliefs were an even

better predictor of support for his candidacy than religious affiliation. The slogan Make America Great Again can be interpreted, not unreasonably, as a dog-whistle to make it Christian Again, too. During the same speech in which he boasted that he could shoot somebody on Fifth Avenue without losing voters, Trump warned that Christianity was “under tremendous siege” and pledged that when he was president, “Christianity will have power.” This June, he promised a Christian coalition “a comeback like just about no other group,” and in July, he encouraged Christians to vote “just this time” because in four years “you won’t have to vote anymore, my beautiful Christians.”

Dunn has placed himself in a favorable position to guide a second Trump administration —and transform the nature of the federal government. He helps fund America First Legal, a conservative law firm headed by the former Trump senior adviser Stephen Miller that represents itself as the MAGA movement’s answer to the A.C.L.U., as well as the Center for Renewing America, a far-right policy group led by the former Trump budget director Russell Vought. According to documents obtained by Politico, the Center for Renewing America has explicitly listed “Christian Nationalism” as one of its top priorities. Both groups have played a role in shaping Project 2025, an extreme policy agenda, published by the Heritage Foundation, that proposes consolidating executive power and remaking the federal bureaucracy, agency by agency.

“Eighty percent of my time is working on the plans of what’s necessary to take control of these bureaucracies,” Vought said in a video captured in August by undercover reporters from the Centre for Climate Reporting. “I want to make sure that we can say we are a Christian nation.” Vought has publicly defended the Christian Nationalist label as “a rather benign and useful description for those who believe in both preserving our country’s Judeo-Christian heritage and making public-policy decisions that are best for this country.”

Since 2021, Dunn has also been a founding board member of the America First Policy Institute, yet another group assembled by Trump loyalists to prepare for his possible return to the White House. One of its papers, “Ten Pillars for Restoring a Nation Under God,” discusses how America was “founded as a self-governing nation on biblical principles” —a favored Dunn talking point. Brooke Rollins, a former domestic policy adviser in the Trump administration who worked with Dunn at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, recruited him to the institute. “We wanted to create a national organization similar to what we built in Texas,” she told The Wall Street Journal. “This is a 100-year play.”

“*I am by nature a tightwad,*” Dunn writes in “Yellow Balloons,” a book he self-published in 2018. His mother once told him that as a child, he needed to be turned upside down to shake a nickel out of his pocket for the church collection basket. The youngest of four boys, Dunn grew up modestly in Big Spring, Texas. In the 1980s, he settled with his wife and six children in Midland, the seat of the Permian Basin, to become the chief financial officer at an oil company before founding his own in 1996. When the British writer Peter Stothard traveled to Midland for The Times of London during the 2004 presidential election, he spoke to Dunn, a “thin-faced, blue-jeaned Bush-backer” who was “convinced that his oil has existed for only 4,000 years, the time decreed by Genesis, not 200 million years as his geologists know.”

CrownQuest Operating, as Dunn’s company is called today, keeps most of its operations within Texas to limit interactions with the federal government. It ranks among the Top 10 biggest oil producers in the state and has made Dunn one of the wealthiest people in Texas. But for many years, when it came time to pick up the check at lunch with colleagues, Dunn writes, he found himself with “alligator arms.” It wasn’t until he came to better understand the parable of the unjust steward, a cryptic story from the Gospel of Luke, that he discovered his charitable side. Its moral, according to Dunn, is that when we get to heaven, “part of our reward will be being invited into people’s homes to reciprocate for things we did for them in this life, and we’re supposed to make that part of our investment calculation.”

In the meantime, many of Dunn’s investments have brought him treasures here on Earth. In 2007, he started his own PAC, Empower Texans, to fight a tax on oil wells financed through investors. Dunn has donated a majority of its funds, lending it the air of a special-interest group of one. Around a decade later, when one of Dunn’s political advisers connected him to Farris Wilks, Empower Texans became an interest group of two.

Wilks was raised in a goat shed on a homestead just south of Cisco, a town of 3,900 people and more than a dozen churches. He went to work at his father's masonry business, and on weekends, he helped his family build their own church, the Assembly of Yahweh. In the 1990s, Wilks and his younger brother, Dan, decided to use their knowledge of stone to prospect for oil in their own backyard. In 2000, the brothers founded Frac Tech, a fracking-services provider, and a decade later they sold their stake for \$3.5 billion. Not long before the deal closed, the brothers established charitable foundations to fund conservative groups, including Focus on the Family and the Heritage Foundation. In 2015, they made their first significant campaign gift —\$15 million to a Ted Cruz super PAC connected to David Barton —and The San Antonio Express-News said they were gaining a reputation as the “Koch brothers of the Christian Right.”

Wary of the media spotlight, Dan Wilks made fewer headline-grabbing campaign donations after that. Farris, however, was only getting started. Though he does not regularly socialize with Dunn, he relies on the same fleet of consultants and synchronizes his donations to many of the same campaigns. By 2018, he'd become the largest donor to Empower Texans, after Dunn.

At first glance, what's most striking about Dunn and Wilks's political giving, apart from its unprecedented scale, is its low rate of return. For more than a decade, their PACs and the lawmakers they supported won a handful of proxy wars —obstructing legislation, forcing retirements, generating scandals —but they were snubbed by the establishment Republicans who controlled the Statehouse. In 2022, according to The Texas Tribune, 18 out of the 19 candidates backed by the group lost their races.

Political strategists have attributed this poor showing to the group's uncompromising approach. Luke Macias, a longtime consultant to Dunn-and-Wilks-backed campaigns, has refused to work with candidates who support exceptions for abortion bans. (Macias did not respond to a request for comment). “My job is to communicate a candidate's beliefs to a broader audience,” a consultant who worked with Macias on an Empower Texans-funded campaign told me. “His job is to find people who believe exactly what *they* believe and try to get them elected. From a financial perspective, Luke is the worst possible investment you can make, because he doesn't seem to make decisions based on the facts, polls or strength of the opposition, but that right there tells you something about the strength of Tim Dunn's ideology: Loyalty and fidelity are more important to him than short-term outcomes like winning.”

Dunn and Wilks, however, are focused on the long-term. Gerrymandering has meant that most Republicans in Texas only fear for their seat if they're challenged in a primary election —the Texas equivalent of term limits, Dunn has said. The tactical brilliance of Empower Texans has been to transform the political climate of Austin into a perpetual primary season. A dark money subsidiary, Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, warns legislators about how upcoming votes will affect their conservative rankings on its index, while a separate media arm, Texas Scorecard, publishes editorials, podcasts and documentaries to hound incumbents it disapproves of out of office. “The irony is that most of the incumbents they attack agree with them on 95 percent of the issues,” Jon Taylor, a political scientist at the University of Texas at San Antonio, said of Dunn and Wilks. “I'm not sure how to explain the purity test they demand, except that it comes down to wanting people they can completely control.”

Some donors might hesitate to back a losing candidate, but Dunn and Wilks's PACs often resurrect their challengers as though they are fighters in an arcade game. “They find candidates with an exceptionally high pain tolerance,” said a Texas House staff member who has worked for an incumbent opposed by Empower Texans. “They might not beat you on the first go, but they slowly chip away at your support and keep you under a microscope by hammering you with the same guy 52 weeks a year.” Shelley Luther, a beautician who was jailed for refusing to close her hair salon in Dallas during the pandemic, won the primary for a House seat this March after two failed campaigns supported by Dunn and Wilks. For Bryan Slaton, a former youth pastor and Empower Texans-backed candidate, the third time was the charm, though he was later unanimously expelled from the House after an internal investigation found that he got a 19-year-old aide drunk and had sex with her.

The political muscle of Christian nationalism is driving a growing share of attacks on Republicans across the country. Since 2010, a historically high number of Republicans have been defeated by primary challengers in the most

evangelical House districts, according to an analysis posted on Substack by Michael Podhorzer, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress. The former Texas governor Rick Perry recently expressed his concerns about the internecine warfare consuming the state party. “If we continue down this path pointing our guns inside the tent,” he told *The Texas Tribune* earlier this year, “that is the definition of suicide.”

David Pepper, the author of “Laboratories of Autocracy: A Wake-Up Call From Behind the Lines” and the former chairman of the Ohio Democratic Party, calls this trend the Texas Lesson. “It’s a tragic case study in how statehouses have flipped from serving the public interest to serving the far-right interests of private donors,” he told me. “These billionaires have been relentless and systematic about punishing moderates —” Pepper paused and corrected himself. “Actually, I wouldn’t even call these lawmakers ‘moderate.’ These are simply officials who maybe, on one occasion, will stand up for the best interest of their district.”

Not long after he arrived in Austin at the start of his first term, Glenn Rogers began to sort his colleagues into categories. There was a close-knit contingent of unabashed loyalists, who took most of their money from Empower Texans and its spinoffs. There were legislators who may or may not have taken some money from Dunn and Wilks, but who followed most of their agenda out of fear of facing a primary challenger. And there were representatives who reliably voted for the interests of their district, though this last category, Rogers conceded, was “largely aspirational.” When Dunn and Wilks win, they win, Rogers told me, “and when they lose, they still win, because the people left in office are afraid to disagree with them. You can’t be in politics long without being influenced by them in one way or another.”

That influence, Rogers soon realized, extended well beyond the House. In the 2022 gubernatorial primary, Dunn and Wilks backed Don Huffines, a real estate investor and former state senator who ran to the right of Abbott, through a new PAC they dubbed Defend Texas Liberty. Huffines called for sending troops to the border, abolishing property taxes and passing a school-voucher program. Abbott handily won the primary, but he also started to sound a lot more like Huffines, particularly when it came to private-school vouchers.

Abbott’s newfound ardor for vouchers was striking. He asked faith leaders to “go to the pulpit” for the measure and called four special sessions of the Legislature in an attempt to rally the House into passing it. That vouchers undermine church-state separation while also draining resources from public schools has made them appealing to both free-market fundamentalists and far-right Christians. Yet vouchers are unpopular in rural districts across Texas, where Friday-night football games are sacrosanct and private schools are scarce. When Abbott failed to corral the votes he needed, he began to vigorously campaign against the holdouts, including Rogers.

“How did someone who pitched himself as a governor committed to public education end up leading the charge to destroy public schools?” asks James Talarico, a Democratic member of the House and a former public-school teacher. “Follow the money.” Abbott’s motivations have remained a subject of speculation in Austin, but Talarico suggested that the governor started to push for vouchers in earnest because he was shut out by Dunn and Wilks. Last December, Abbott intensified his push after receiving \$6 million from Jeff Yass, a pro-voucher billionaire in Pennsylvania, to spend in this year’s primaries.

In an opinion essay in *The Midland Reporter-Telegram*, Dunn wrote that he is “basically uninvolved” with the voucher movement, but candidates he and Wilks backed have repeatedly testified in support of vouchers; Texans for Fiscal Responsibility has given high marks to those who support the measure; and the Texas Public Policy Foundation, where Dunn has long served on the board, joined Abbott on a tour of private Christian schools across the state.

As the voucher fight escalated, the House decided to bring impeachment charges against Attorney General Paxton, claiming, among other charges, that he had abused public trust and committed bribery. Paxton, one of the biggest recipients of Dunn and Wilks largesse, had refused to defend the Texas Ethics Commission against lawsuits filed by Empower Texans in an effort to strip the campaign-finance watchdog agency of its powers. The Dunn-Wilks political machine seemed to view the impeachment as an existential threat. In May 2023, Jonathan Stickland, a political adviser to Dunn and Wilks and the president of their new PAC, Defend Texas Liberty, wrote on X that a vote to impeach Paxton was “a decision to have a primary.” In June, Defend Texas Liberty paid for a billboard in Rogers’s

district attacking him for joining “61 Democrats to impeach Ken Paxton,” without mentioning that in doing so Rogers had also joined the majority of Republicans.

That same month, Defend Texas Liberty contributed \$3 million to Dan Patrick, the lieutenant governor and a former conservative talk-show host, shortly before he was set to preside over the impeachment trial in the Senate. (Patrick did not respond to a request for comment, but he has denied that the donation influenced his impartiality at the trial, during which Paxton was acquitted on all 16 articles.) Texas Monthly calculated that the well-timed gift from Defend Texas Liberty was 30 times more than what the group gave Patrick when he ran for re-election in 2022. Hours after the donation was made public in a campaign-finance report, Stickland, the political adviser, wrote on X: “This is just the beginning, wait till you see the next report. We will never stop. Ever.”

He spoke too soon. Last October, The Texas Tribune reported that Stickland met for hours with Nick Fuentes, one of the country’s most prominent white supremacists, at an office park near Fort Worth owned by Wilks Development, the family’s real estate company. A Holocaust denier and antisemite, Fuentes has popularized the idea of an imminent “white genocide,” a fear that has been used as a justification by several mass shooters, including the one who killed 23 people at a Walmart in El Paso in 2019. (Defend Texas Liberty replaced Stickland and released a terse statement opposing Fuentes’s “incendiary views.” Stickland did not respond to requests for comment.) After The Tribune’s reporting prompted a rare bipartisan outcry, Dunn and Wilks phased out Defend Texas Liberty and poured \$6.8 million into a new vehicle, Texans United for a Conservative Majority. The rebranded PAC has not been shy about communicating its vision. Its new logo replaces the Goddess of Liberty statue that crowns the top of Austin’s Capitol building with a cross.

“*We have a three-party system in Texas, and they all loathe each other,*” Vinny Minchillo, a Republican-aligned consultant in Plano, said. “You have the Democrats, the more traditional moderate Republicans and the official state G.O.P., a dysfunctional organization which has been pretty much completely overtaken by the Dunn and Wilks side of things.” Once ridiculed as unserious fanatics by the conservative establishment, Dunn and Wilks are now its kingmakers.

Nowhere was this more evident than at the Texas Republican Convention in San Antonio in May. In the exhibit hall, there was plenty of generic Republican fare—gold-standard absolutists, Patriot Mobile vendors, merch stores hawking sweatshirts printed with “Jesus was accused of Insurrection too”—but many booths were linked to the Dunn-Wilks universe. Wilks Development co-sponsored the weekend, and the Dunn family hosted a “grassroots” breakfast, closed to the press. A WallBuilders booth was selling “The American Story,” a two-volume revisionist history that Barton co-wrote with his son. State Senator Angela Paxton, the attorney general’s wife, spoke on a panel dedicated to “Upholding Our Judeo Christian Heritage & Values.”

On a prominent stage erected by Texas Scorecard, lawmakers talked up the Contract With Texas, an open letter that began to circulate in the weeks before the convention. It asked for “all G.O.P. legislative priorities” to receive a floor vote before any Democratic bill and for the removal of all Democratic committee chairs. No one knew for sure who was behind the letter, which would significantly curb the influence of a party that holds 42 percent of seats in the House, but at least 21 of its 23 signatories had taken money from Wilks and Dunn’s entities.

One morning, I ran into Mark McCaig, the publisher of The Texas Voice, a conservative political blog, in the main lobby, where children wearing bright yellow sandwich boards printed with the phrase “Abolish Abortion” had been serving as an unofficial welcome party. McCaig has a close-cropped beard and a wonkish demeanor. The previous day, the general counsel of the Texas Republican Party posted a photo of McCaig chatting with a Texas Tribune journalist on Facebook; her caption denounced McCaig as a “plague” and The Tribune journalist as a “pagan reporter.”

McCaig told me he didn’t mind “committing the sacrilege” of talking to other reporters, though he confessed that he often had trouble articulating Dunn and Wilks’s goals when asked. “They say they want to make things even more conservative,” he observed, “but I don’t know what else is left to accomplish socially.” Buoyed by the MAGA wave, the Legislature has passed bills—permitless-carry laws, abortion bans, L.G.B.T.Q. restrictions, border militarization—that would have seemed far-fetched just a few years earlier. “A lot of pro-life leaders in the state

don't want to give women the death penalty," McCaig continued. "You start to wonder what their true agenda is, and I think it's power."

The most far-reaching of these efforts to consolidate power may be the Convention of States Project. A highly controversial effort, partly funded by Dunn, it represents one of the best hopes for Christian Nationalists, among other interested parties, who want to transform the laws of the land in one fell swoop. "When we started the Convention of States—and I was there at the beginning—I knew we had to have a spiritual revival, a Great Awakening and a political restoration for our country to come back to its roots," Dunn said at a 2019 summit for the group, where he spoke alongside Barton. "What I did not expect is that the Convention of States would be an organization that would trigger that Great Awakening."

The Convention of States Project takes its cues from Article V of the Constitution, which proposes two paths for constitutional amendments. The familiar path—a two-thirds vote in each chamber of Congress to be ratified by three-fourths of states—has been deployed successfully 27 times. The other path, which involves two-thirds of states passing resolutions to call for a constitutional convention, is rarely discussed and has never been used.

One afternoon in San Antonio, Mark Meckler, the president of the Convention of States and one of Dunn's close friends, pitched a packed room of delegates on this second path. Wearing a blue trucker cap printed with a C.O.S. logo, he mocked the group's critics, which included "every other baby-killing America-hating Marxist organization in the country" as well as the John Birch Society. "Thank God, those people were not at the Alamo," Meckler said. "Because we wouldn't remember the Alamo, because there would have been no Alamo, because all those people would have just run away."

Meckler, who lives in a home that Dunn transferred to him near Austin, is a deft salesman. He said he regularly hears from people who find the prospect of a convention frightening. During his lecture, he sought to assuage those fears, casting the prospect of a Constitutional convention as a humdrum exercise that would bore even its own attendees.

"What's going to happen at a convention?" Meckler asked, pausing for dramatic effect. "People are going to make suggestions." Some of the delegates laughed. "Are you guys scared? I've never been to a meeting where I was afraid of people making suggestions." Yet nothing in Article V limits the scope of the laws that might be changed.

"It's a gamble, but if it pays off, it would be the biggest opportunity ever for billionaires to transform the government," Montgomery, the researcher of the religious right, said. The Mercer family and Koch-funded groups have also backed the effort. The Convention of States says that 19 states have passed its resolutions. To win over the remaining 15, the group has started to back primary challengers to Republicans who oppose them in states across the country. During a 2018 appearance on Fox, Meckler admitted that critics of the movement were getting at "something truthful" when they complained that the convention was "intended to reverse 115 years of progressivism. And we say, 'Yes, it is.'"

This spring, Rogers took me on a tour of his ranch, a 3,000-acre property that abuts the Brazos River. "Our forefathers intended for ranchers and farmers to be able to serve in the Capitol," he told me as we cut through the tall grass. Rogers insisted to me that he was better off working his land, because it allowed him to spend more time with his grandchildren. But as the afternoon turned to evening and he began to play the consolatory voice mail messages he had received from constituents and colleagues, it was evident the loss still rankled. "I've been coming up with a short list of people interested in running for office," he said, "but I've yet to find anyone who's willing to go through what I did without billionaire support."

Dunn's wealth is only growing. Last December, he signed an agreement to sell his oil company to Occidental Petroleum in a deal valued at \$12.4 billion. Seventeen days later, he made the \$5 million contribution to a Trump PAC. Brad Parscale, Trump's 2016 digital campaign manager, recently bought a modern farm-style house around the corner from Dunn's compound in Midland. Dunn has poured millions into a new effort led by Parscale to use A.I. to target voters.

Before I left, Rogers brought out a little-known book, first published in 1998, called "Confrontational Politics." Its author, H.L. Richardson, was a Republican state senator in California who was known for ruthlessly campaigning

against other Republicans in the 1970s and 1980s.

The text had been recommended to Rogers by someone who knew that Dunn encouraged his associates to study it, and the tactics deployed against Rogers appeared to be lifted directly from its pages. Richardson advised conservatives to cultivate single-issue groups, to “joyfully punish the adversaries” and to keep in mind a vital principle: The route to political domination starts at the local level. “Control the bottom,” he wrote, “and one day you control the top. One day the man you elected to city council becomes the state senator and then moves to Congress and talks to the president on your behalf. If you really become effective, one day the phone rings and you are asked to come to Washington to advise the president. Somebody is leveraging the president at this very moment. Why not you?”

Doris Burke contributed research.

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Document 9 of 48

Latest battle in culture wars: Putting chaplains in schools

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

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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.

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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."

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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.

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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

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"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.

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"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.

DETAILS

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Putting chaplains in public school is the latest battle in culture wars

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

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FULL TEXT

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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.

DETAILS

Subject:	Public schools; Students; Religious beliefs; Christianity; Freedom of religion; Legislators; School boards; Empowerment; Clergy; Supreme Court decisions; Church &state; Political campaigns; Mental health; Theocracy; School districts
Location:	Indiana; Texas; United States--US; Utah
Company / organization:	Name: Supreme Court-US; NAICS: 922110
Publication title:	The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.
Publication year:	2024
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Last updated:	2024-03-27
Database:	U.S. Major Dailies

Document 11 of 48

13 faith trailblazers who made a big difference this year

Shimron, Yonat . Shimron, Yonat.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

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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.)

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- *Religion News Service*

DETAILS

Subject:	Public schools; Christianity; Musical performances; Jewish people; Religion; Charities; Drag (Performance); Truces & cease fires
Location:	Texas; New York; United States--US; Israel; Gaza Strip
People:	Biden, Joseph R Jr
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Last updated:	2023-12-30

Document 12 of 48

13 emerging faith leaders who made their mark in 2023

Shimron, Yonat . Shimron, Yonat.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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DETAILS

Subject:	Public schools; Christianity; Musical performances; Jewish people; Leadership; Religion; Charities; Drag (Performance); Truces & cease fires
Business indexing term:	Subject: Leadership
Location:	Texas; New York; United States--US; Israel; Gaza Strip
People:	Biden, Joseph R Jr
Company / organization:	Name: Catholic Charities USA; NAICS: 813211; Name: Hamas; NAICS: 813940
Publication title:	The Washington Post (Online); Washington, D.C.
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Scores of chaplains urge Tex. schools to forgo chaplains

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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*

DETAILS

Subject:	Public schools; Clergy; Students; Religion; Presbyterian churches; Christianity; School boards; School districts
Location:	Texas; United States--US
Company / organization:	Name: American Civil Liberties Union--ACLU; NAICS: 541110, 813311
Publication title:	The Washington Post; Washington, D.C.
First page:	B.2
Publication year:	2023
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Copyright:	Copyright WP Company LLC d/b/a The Washington Post Aug 26, 2023
Last updated:	2023-08-26

Document 14 of 48

More than 100 chaplains urge Texas school boards not to hire chaplains

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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"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*

DETAILS

Subject:	Clergy; Public schools; Students; Religion; Presbyterian churches; Christianity; School boards; School districts
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Activists pressed Texas bill to put chaplains in schools

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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

This article was reported with support from the Stiefel Freethought Foundation.

DETAILS

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Meet the activists behind the Texas bill to put chaplains in schools

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

On Wednesday afternoon, Texas state Rep. James Talarico 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, 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.

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—Religion News Service

DETAILS

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Document 17 of 48

Texas lawmakers approve bill to allow school districts to replace counselors with chaplains

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

The Texas House of Representatives Wednesday gave final approval to a bill to allow uncertified chaplains in public schools, including to replace professional counselors, the last step before the measure is signed into law.

The bill, which now goes to Texas Gov. Greg Abbott (R), came in a session of aggressive legislative measures in Texas and several other states aiming to weaken decades of distinction between religion and government. Supporters say they believe the Supreme Court's ruling last summer in *Kennedy v. Bremerton*, in favor of a high school football coach who prayed with players, essentially removed any guardrails between them.

At midnight Tuesday, a bill that had passed the Senate requiring a version of the Ten Commandments be hung in every classroom in the state did not secure a House vote in time and died.

The Senate 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 failed to make it out of House committees Wednesday and were not considered likely to resurface this session.

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 forceful 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.

"Religious freedom means that parents —not school officials or state legislatures —have the right to direct their

children's religious education. Families should be able to trust that their children will not have a particular religious perspective forced on them while attending our public schools. This bill violates the religious freedom of every student and family in Texas," said Rachel Laser, President and CEO of Americans United.

Earlier this month the House sponsor of the chaplain bill, Rep. Cole Hefner (R), told a House debate that 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.

A half-dozen Democratic lawmakers rose to ask Hefner to amend the bill, saying it didn't provide protection for a diversity of religions, among other things.

Hefner and the majority rejected almost all amendments, including one requiring parental consent and another requiring chaplains to serve students of all faiths and not proselytize.

They also turned down one striking the bill's requirement that every school district in Texas, within six months, vote up or down whether to have chaplains. The sponsor said it was unnecessarily provocative and divisive at a time when school board members in some places need security due to fierce division over issues that often have a religious component.

Rep. James Talarico (D), who is a seminary student, had proposed adding the requirement that chaplains get an endorsement like chaplains in hospitals and the military. Hefner had initially added that amendment, but the Senate rejected that requirement.

Talarico also 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.

On Tuesday, Hefner on the House floor responded to Talarico's complaint that people with no educational or professional requirements and training could be afforded access to students in public schools.

"I trust our school districts to spell out any qualifications they would require," Hefner said.

Talarico then noted that Hefner and the majority rejected amendments barring chaplains from imposing their beliefs on students and respecting the free exercise of religion.

"Should we encourage infiltration of our schools?" Talarico asked Hefner.

"Here's what I really think. I think it's preposterous that members in here will defend acts of —certain inappropriate drag shows in our schools and inappropriate material in our libraries and then have audacity to say this is a problem." Americans United for Separation of Church and State said it knows of no other bills that replace guidance counselors with chaplains.

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Document 18 of 48

In Texas, lines between church, state are blurring

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

[ProQuest document link](https://www.proquest.com/usmajordailies/blogs-podcasts-websites/texas-lawmakers-approve-bill-allow-school/docview/2818550688/sem-2?accountid=46320)

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.

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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."

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Document 19 of 48

Texas pushes church into state with bills on school chaplains, Ten Commandments

Boorstein, Michelle . Boorstein, Michelle.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

This story has been updated.

AUSTIN —Texas lawmakers had been 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 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 legislation that the House was considering 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 a midnight deadline passed without a vote on the Ten Commandments bill, meaning the measure is dead for the session. But several other measures promoting religion in public spaces still have a shot at passage before the regular legislative session is scheduled to end May 29. 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.

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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.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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PHOTO:RICK JOHNSON, center, wants "extreme sexual content" removed from school shelves.

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PHOTO:JEN COUSINS, center, co-founded the anti-censorship Florida Freedom to Read Project.

PHOTOGRAPHER: Carolyn Cole Los Angeles Times

DETAILS

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Document 21 of 48

Two moms are at the center of the fight against book banning in America: 'It's exhausting'

Fleishman, Jeffrey . Fleishman, Jeffrey.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

ORLANDO, Fla. —

The tattoos on Jen Cousins’ arms speak to literacy and how books can take on 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 non-binary. 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.

Column One

A showcase for compelling storytelling from the Los Angeles Times.

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, while 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 non-binary 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.

L.A. Times Book Club: State of Banned Books

What: Actor, author and “ReadingRainbow” founder **LeVar Burton** joins the L.A. Times Book Club to discuss the “State of Banned Books” with Times editor **Steve Padilla**.

When: May 24 at 7 p.m. Pacific.

Where: ASU California Center, 1111 S. Broadway, Los Angeles. This book club event also can be attended virtually. Get tickets.

Join us: Sign up for the Book Club newsletter for the latest books, news and events.

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Texas legislature votes to allow chaplains in public schools

Jenkins, Jack . Jenkins, Jack.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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

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—*Religion News Service*

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The Texas legislature explores new frontiers of Christian nationalism

Waldman, Paul . Waldman, Paul.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

As everyone knows, there is no more effective way to shape the behavior of young people than through state-mandated posters on their classroom walls. At least that's what Republicans in the Texas legislature seem to believe, which is why they're advancing a bill requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom in the state.

Texas is growing more purple with each passing year, which is exactly why the Republican-dominated legislature is reasserting the right's political and cultural power with ever more radically conservative laws. Part of that effort is a series of bills meant to impose not just religion but Christianity into public schools.

One bill would allow schools to mandate "a period of prayer and Bible reading on each school day." Another says school personnel must be allowed to "engage in religious speech or prayer while on duty." Yet another would allow schools to replace school counselors with "chaplains" —no training or certification required. The centerpiece is the bill requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments, which has already passed the state Senate.

That bill, Democratic state Rep. James Talarico told me, "not only violates our American values, but I think it violates my Christian values."

Talarico brings a unique perspective to this debate. He's young and progressive, used to be a teacher, and is also a Christian who is enrolled in a Presbyterian seminary in Austin.

Talarico recently went viral for a series of clips in which he questioned Rep. Candy Noble, the bill's Republican sponsor in the House. The exchange highlighted how when challenged, conservatives often retreat to preposterous arguments claiming that they have no religious motives when they push Christianity into the classroom.

When Talarico asked Noble how a Hindu or atheist student would feel when seeing "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" on their classroom wall, she said, "I am hoping that when they see that, they will look at it and wonder about our Founding Fathers."

That might make one wonder whether Noble is familiar with the Ten Commandments herself. The first four are about devotion to the god of the Old Testament, instructing readers to reject all other gods, to make no graven images, not to take this god's name in vain, and to keep the sabbath.

Christian nationalism rejects our legal and cultural tradition of religious pluralism. It holds that the United States was a Christian nation from its founding and that Christianity should be the basis of public policy and political power.

Prominent national Republicans are increasingly emphasizing Christian-nationalist themes. Sen. Josh Hawley (Mo.) declared in a speech last year that "without the Bible, there is no America." Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis released an ad claiming that he was literally created by the almighty to do His work in politics.

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said last year, "We were a nation founded upon not the words of our founders but the words of God because He wrote the Constitution." Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (Ga.) calls herself a "proud Christian nationalist."

The right is surely growing more focused on creating a kind of Christian cultural hegemony in public institutions in part because Christianity is in a steep decline. Three decades ago, about 90 percent of Americans identified as Christian. Today, the number has fallen to the low 60s and the decline is likely to continue.

Something similar is happening politically in Texas. Republicans have a lock on power, yet the state continues inexorably moving away from them, culturally and demographically.

"I think this is the death rattle of a dying worldview," Talarico told me. "In some ways, the far right is like a wounded animal here in Texas. They know that Texas is becoming increasingly diverse, Texas is becoming younger, and that new Texas is not going to stand for these extreme policies."

Posting the Ten Commandments in schools is an obvious violation of Supreme Court precedent. But a series of recent decisions culminating last year in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, which allowed a public high school football coach to hold prayer sessions on the field after games, has convinced the right that the court will greenlight almost any injection of Christianity into public institutions.

A legal challenge to these Texas measures could become the vehicle for the Supreme Court to once and for all banish the establishment clause to a constitutional netherworld, where the court essentially decrees that it has no force. It's the same place the court deposited the "well-regulated militia" clause of the Second Amendment.

But Talarico insists that people like him can change minds and fight back. "Christians like me have a moral obligation to speak out," he told me. Nothing less than the possible repeal of the idea that America is a religiously pluralistic nation is at stake.

DETAILS

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Document 25 of 48

Pickleball should die. Long live pickleball!

Goins, Drew . Goins, Drew.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

You're reading the Today's Opinions newsletter. Sign up to get it in your inbox.

In today's edition:

Pickleball is the worst. Pickleball is the best.

Check whether AI is coming for your job specifically

How far can Christian nationalists take things?

Two Black mothers' lessons for life, and for death

Half-sour on pickleball

I dink, therefore, I am.

You might feel the same way if pickleball —with its signature just-over-the-net return known as "dinking" —has also become your *raison d'être* since the sport's explosion in popularity.

But not *Rick Reilly*. "I hate pickleball," says Reilly.

Also to note: "It's *not* a sport," the contributing columnist writes. (*Italics mine, derision his.*)

His piece scorning the court game is delightfully cranky; he hates the sight (*inelegant*) and the sound ("*pwock!*") and would also hate the smell if it had one.

"But wait," the PicklePushers wail. "It's America's fastest-growing sport!"

So what? The Diphyllbothrium is a fast-growing tapeworm. Doesn't mean I want it.

Luckily, for us aficionados, *Katrina vanden Heuvel* (presciently!) volleyed pickleball criticism last year.

The sport (yes, sport!) is providing Americans of all walks of life an easily accessible way to make friends and strengthen real-life networks. It's restoring our social capital. Pickleball, perhaps, could even lower crime.

As vanden Heuvel wrote, "Any phenomenon that can foster community on this scale is worth checking out."

Sorry, Rick. Nice serve, but I'd say we're 0-0-1.

Chaser: Law professor *James Boyle* wrote a love letter to the regular pickup game. Yes, he included pickleball.

Find your AI outlook

We all know artificial intelligence is coming for our jobs. But is it coming for *your* job?

Dancers, you're safe. Interior designers, not so much. (As a journalist, the third profession available to gay men, I fall somewhere in the middle.)

Graphics and data columnists *Yan Wu* and *Sergio Peçanha* scraped a bunch of new data to plot various occupations based on how likely they are to be affected by the AI boom. You can type yours in to find where on the graph your future lies.

The catch is that we still don't really know whether AI will replace us or we'll end up harnessing it to do our jobs even better. That will also vary greatly profession to profession.

And even if your job disappears, take heart. "From lamplighters to switchboard operators to video store clerks, professions have come and gone," Yan and Sergio write. "We've adjusted."

Chaser: Columnist *Karen Attiah* is getting out ahead of things. She wrote in January that, for writers, AI is like a performance-enhancing steroid.

From *Paul Waldman's* column on the Republican-dominated Texas legislature's attempt to have the Ten Commandments displayed in every public school classroom in the state.

But ...but ...isn't there direct Supreme Court precedent against that? Hey, what's precedent these days?! Worth a shot!

Paul writes that, legally, this will be a test of how far a minority can go imposing Christian nationalism in a decreasingly Christian nation.

But James Talarico approaches the matter religiously, too. The Texas legislator is a Christian himself—and he makes a case this goes against the faith's values, as well.

Less politics

Two Black mothers, two deeply personal lessons.

The first comes from Doris Cammack Spencer, mother of *Patricia Spencer Favreau*. Favreau, who has seen much of the world, writes that her mother mostly stayed within the States. But her journeys navigating the world first as a Black girl integrating an Anacostia school and then as a Black woman climbing the ranks of government and marching for civil rights were more profound than overseas vacations.

"Her physical passport might be empty," Favreau writes, "but her personal passport is abundantly full."

The second lesson is from the mother of contributing columnist *Theodore Johnson*. She died two years ago this Wednesday, and Ted has been reflecting on his grief.

How does a Black man navigate such a devastating emotion when he's taught he has to be strong—but not too strong? How does vulnerability work when stability is what the world demands of you?

Ted doesn't have all the answers, but he's still being pointed in the right direction by his mother's words: "I'm proud of the man you've become."

Smartest, fastest

Far(ther)-right outlets are using Fox News's disrupter playbook against it. *Catherine Rampell* writes that *the network* has two options to fight back.

President Biden's biggest liability for 2024 is his own vice president. Columnist *Matt Bai* offers *an answer* to the Kamala Harris question. (And, no, it doesn't involve replacing her.)

Columnist *Eugene Robinson* writes that society made the choices that put Jordan Neely on the New York F train where he died.

It's a goodbye. It's a haiku. It's ...The Bye-Ku.

Agile on the court

Until you botch the match point

Pwock! goes a hip joint

Have your own newsy haiku? Email it to me, along with any questions/comments/ambiguities. See you tomorrow!

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Document 26 of 48

Meet the young Democrats waging war on MAGA from behind enemy lines

Sargent, Greg . Sargent, Greg.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Catalyzing events in U.S. history have a tendency to shape generations of public officials. In the 1920s, Prohibition and the GOP's depression economics gave rise to the New Deal Democrats. Racial and cultural repression in the mid-20th century spawned classes of lawmakers fighting for the "rights revolution." In the 1970s, the Vietnam War and Watergate inspired the antiwar "Watergate babies" to run for Congress.

It might be happening again: The reactionary turn underway in many red states is beginning to shape a new generation of young Democratic officials, many of whom will one day be the party's leaders.

In these red states, young Democrats are entering local politics and developing public presences in response to the far-right culture-warring unleashed by GOP majorities. New restrictions on abortion and the growing right-wing backlash to LGBTQ rights are radicalizing a wave of Democratic public servants who mostly hail from the Gen Z and millennial generations.

"We're seeing this across the country," said Amanda Litman, a co-founder of Run For Something, which recruits progressive candidates for state and local office. "It's no coincidence that some of the loudest voices pushing back are young leaders in red states, often from urban environments, often people of color, often LGBTQ themselves." Last week, after the GOP-controlled state legislature in Tennessee expelled two young Black lawmakers for protesting gun violence, and after a Texas judge invalidated federal approval of abortion medication, Run For Something's candidate recruitment spiked. Litman says more than half the new candidates are from red states.

What binds these lawmakers and candidates together is an acute sense that the character of the country is on the line and it could determine their own futures. "For them, every part of this conversation is personal," Litman says.

That's how Florida state Rep. Anna Eskamani feels. Like many others, the Democrat was first inspired to seek office in 2018 by Donald Trump's presidency. Now, with GOP majorities in Florida pushing book bans, limits on classroom discussions of race and gender, and a six-week abortion ban, Eskamani says she often feels under siege.

"Sometimes, I joke about walking into the Death Star," Eskamani said about entering the state capital in Tallahassee. "Each one of the communities you care about and the values you cherish are under attack."

Eskamani has unleashed rousing broadsides on GOP anti-choice bills and has irritated Republicans with her public mockery of their anti-woke posturing. Because the state's Democratic minority is limited in what it can accomplish, Eskamani says, she stages social media-friendly moments to "effectively communicate outside the chamber" and communicates regularly with other red-state Democrats about what works and what doesn't.

This fatalistic awareness of the limits on their power and their corresponding use of emotional social media appeals—often highly personal ones—to reach national constituencies are hallmarks of this crop of lawmakers.

In Nebraska, for instance, state Sen. Megan Hunt recently attacked anti-transgender legislation in an intensely personal speech discussing her own son's transition. The next day, Hunt went viral for ripping into GOP colleagues for harming her family. "Don't ask me how my weekend was," she told them. "I don't like you."

In Missouri, state Rep. Ian Mackey confronts Republicans about anti-trans bills by describing his upbringing as a gay kid in a rural area. He recently told them in a speech: "I think every day of the kids who are still there, who haven't made it out."

In Montana, state Rep. Zooney Zephyr, the state's first trans legislator, recently delivered a tearful floor speech to GOP colleagues about the long struggle for LGBTQ rights. In Texas, state Rep. James Talarico uses his experience as a former teacher to challenge far-right legislation, recently earning national attention by getting a Republican to admit his censorship bill would ban the beloved western book "Lonesome Dove."

Some of this is happening in bluer states, too. In Michigan, when state Sen. Mallory McMorrow went viral for skewering the bigoted anti-trans term "groomer" and loudly defending LGBTQ rights, even hard-bitten veteran Democratic operative James Carville conceded it was effective.

And in Virginia, Del. Danica Roem was elected in 2017 as the first openly transgender state legislator in the country. She was able to win by making the campaign about non-fraught issues such as traffic congestion. But she is now also

speaking angrily in response to Republicans pushing anti-trans legislation and highlighting her own personal suffering from bigotry.

As Democratic strategist Simon Rosenberg told us, many of these younger Democrats "have only known a radicalized GOP and social media." Time after time, they have argued that these battles are about something larger than ordinary policy disputes, involving intolerable affronts to people's fundamental dignity and humanity. And while their procedural parries will mostly fail, they are hijacking media attention and shining it on the culture-war cruelties unfolding in their states.

Michael Kazin, the author of a new history of the Democratic Party, sees parallels between this generation and previous ones whose deepest political aspirations were shaped in reaction to broad historical currents.

"Every generation seeks to leave its mark," Kazin told us. "As before," he added, this one is "trying to realize the promise of a multicultural America against a movement or formation that's trying to pull us back to an earlier sense of what America should be."

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Document 27 of 48

Want rights, parents? Accept the responsibility.

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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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Document 28 of 48

The parents' rights movement keeps ducking parental responsibilities

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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Document 29 of 48

How to fight book bans - and win

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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How to fight book bans — and win

Rosenberg, Alyssa . Rosenberg, Alyssa.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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 McMurry'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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Tras la agitación reciente, la contienda para gobernador en Texas se intensifica

Goodman, J David . Goodman, J David.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Uno de los tiroteos escolares más letales en la historia de Estados Unidos. El renacimiento de una prohibición del aborto de la década de 1920. El peor episodio reciente de muerte de migrantes en el país. Y una red eléctrica, que falló durante el frío intenso, ahora se batalla bajo un calor abrasador.

La implacable sucesión de muertes y dificultades que enfrentan los tejanos en los últimos dos meses los ha desanimado en cuanto a la dirección del estado, perjudicando al gobernador Greg Abbott y haciendo que la carrera para gobernador sea quizás la más competitiva desde que los demócratas ocuparon ese cargo por última vez en la década de 1990.

Las encuestas han mostrado una competencia muy justa de un solo dígito entre Abbott, el titular de dos mandatos, y su omnipresente retador demócrata, el excongresista Beto O' Rourke. O' Rourke ahora está recaudando más efectivo para la campaña que Abbott (de \$27.6 millones a \$24.9 millones en la última presentación) en una contienda que probablemente sea una de las más caras de 2022.

De repente, de manera improbable, quizá imprudente, los demócratas de Texas nuevamente se atreven a pensar —como lo han hecho en muchos años electorales recientes— que tal vez este podría ser el año.

“Parece que algunas de las peores cosas que están sucediendo en este país tienen sus raíces en Texas” , dijo James Talarico, representante estatal demócrata del norte de Austin. “Estamos viendo un renovado espíritu de lucha” . Al mismo tiempo, los vientos del descontento nacional azotan con fuerza en la otra dirección, contra los demócratas. Los tejanos, como muchos estadounidenses, han sentido la tensión del aumento de la inflación y tienen una mala opinión del presidente Joe Biden. A diferencia de hace cuatro años, cuando O' Rourke desafió al senador Ted Cruz y casi ganó durante un referéndum de mitad de período sobre el presidente Donald Trump que elevó a los

demócratas, ahora son los republicanos los que están animados por la animosidad hacia la Casa Blanca y están preparados para lograr avances en las contiendas estatales.

Pero en las últimas semanas ha habido un cambio perceptible en Texas, como se registra en varias encuestas públicas y algunas encuestas internas de campaña, después del tiroteo en la escuela de Uvalde, Texas, que mató a 19 niños y dos maestros y el fallo de la Corte Suprema de EEUU sobre el aborto, *Dobbs vs Jackson Women's Health Organization*, que volvió a poner en vigor una ley de 1925 que prohibía todos los abortos excepto cuando la vida de la mujer estuviera en peligro.

“Dobbs en los márgenes ha dañado a los republicanos en Texas. Uvalde en los márgenes ha perjudicado a los republicanos en Texas. La red ha perjudicado a los republicanos en Texas”, dijo Mark P. Jones, profesor de ciencias políticas en la Universidad Rice, quien ayudó a realizar una encuesta reciente. “Biden y la inflación han sido su gracia salvadora”.

La mayoría de los votantes encuestados no clasificaron las armas o el aborto entre sus principales temas en la encuesta reciente, realizada por la Hobby School of Public Affairs de la Universidad de Houston, pero muchos de los partidarios de O'Rourke sí lo hicieron, sugiriendo que los temas podrían ayudar a energizar a sus votantes, dijo Jones.

Y el tema del control de armas fue una de las principales preocupaciones de otro grupo que los republicanos han estado luchando duro para alejar a los demócratas: las mujeres hispanas.

Una encuesta separada, realizada por la Universidad de Texas en Austin y publicada este mes, mostró que el 59% de los encuestados pensaba que Texas estaba en el “camino equivocado”, el número más alto en más de una década de hacer esa pregunta. Otro, de la Universidad de Quinnipiac, encontró a O'Rourke a 5 puntos porcentuales del gobernador.

Como las nuevas encuestas mostraron que los números de O'Rourke estaban mejorando, la campaña de Abbott convocó una conferencia telefónica con reporteros este mes.

“Vamos por buen camino, donde queremos estar”, dijo Dave Carney, estratega de campaña del gobernador, y agregó que su estrategia aún implicaba vincular a O'Rourke con Biden y recordar a los votantes las posiciones de O'Rourke sobre el control de armas, la reforma policial y la industria petrolera durante su fallida carrera en las primarias presidenciales demócratas de 2020.

“Va a estar reviviendo el desastre espectacular de postularse para presidente y todas las cosas que dijo”, dijo Carney. “Créame, le gustaba hablar, y todo está en video, y todo es contrario a lo que son los valores y lo que cree la gran mayoría de los tejanos”.

Ese enfoque ha sido parte del mensaje de Abbott desde el principio, particularmente en el tema de las armas. En uno de los primeros ataques contra O'Rourke, la campaña de Abbott destacó su promesa durante la campaña presidencial de eliminar los rifles AR-15.

Esos comentarios se produjeron durante un debate de las primarias demócratas en 2019 que ocurrió poco después de un tiroteo masivo mortal en un Walmart en El Paso, Texas, la ciudad natal de O'Rourke y donde se desempeñó como representante federal estadounidense.

Después de la masacre de la primaria en Uvalde en mayo, O'Rourke respondió con una táctica política igualmente arriesgada: interrumpir una conferencia de prensa celebrada en Uvalde el día después del tiroteo para desafiar directamente a Abbott por su historial de armas. “Esto depende de ti”, dijo O'Rourke.

El momento, que enfureció a muchos republicanos, pareció al mismo tiempo haber energizado a los demócratas que, como Talarico, estaban ansiosos por ver un abanderado agresivo en todo el estado. “Él nos estaba mostrando a todos los que creemos en la democracia en el sentido amplio del término cómo responder”, dijo Talarico.

En Uvalde, una ciudad de mayoría hispana donde la caza es un pasatiempo común, el estado de ánimo político ha cambiado desde la masacre en la primaria Robb. Muchos ahora apoyan leyes de armas más estrictas. “Todo el mundo tiene armas aquí”, dijo Vincent Salazar, quien perdió a una nieta en el tiroteo. “Pero esto es diferente. Nadie necesita un AR-15. Tenemos que prohibirlos”.

En una marcha organizada por las familias de las víctimas este mes, O'Rourke se dirigió a la reunión y pareció

recibir una cálida bienvenida. “¡Voten para sacarlos!” , corearon algunos en la multitud.

Carney, en su llamada con los periodistas, admitió que el tiroteo en la escuela y las nuevas restricciones estatales sobre el aborto habían ayudado a O’ Rourke. “Sinceramente, la ventaja de todo esto para Beto ha sido la recaudación de fondos en línea” , dijo.

O’ Rourke ha eclipsado a Abbott en donaciones pequeñas, recaudando más del triple de dinero en efectivo en donaciones de \$200 o menos, según un análisis del Texas Tribune. Y también ha comenzado a recibir grandes cheques: un millón de dólares del multimillonario George Soros, el perenne patrocinador de los candidatos demócratas, y dos millones de dólares de Simone y Tench Coxe, recién trasladados a Austin, Texas, desde California. Aún así, Abbott, un recaudador de fondos prolífico, tiene más efectivo de campaña en el banco (casi \$46 millones en comparación con los \$24 millones de O’ Rourke) y la capacidad de atraer rápidamente una gran red de donantes adinerados. Abbott recibió 62 donaciones de \$100,000 o más durante el último período de recaudación de fondos, en comparación con las seis de O’ Rourke.

Entre los mayores donantes del gobernador se encuentran ejecutivos de energía como Javaid Anwar de Midland Energy (alrededor de \$1.4 millones), Kelcy Warren de Energy Transfer (\$1 millón) y Gary Martin de Falcon Bay Energy, quien le ha proporcionado a Abbott \$680,000 en viajes en avión.

La campaña de Abbott ya reservó \$20 millones en gastos de publicidad para el otoño, que Carney dijo que estarían dirigidos agresivamente a los votantes del gobernador para mantenerlos comprometidos y expulsarlos.

“Estamos restringiendo la transmisión a menos del 10% de los votantes” , dijo. También predijo que Abbott ganaría entre los tejanos hispanos.

Adryana Aldeen, consultora de políticas públicas que ha trabajado con el Partido Republicano de Texas en el pasado, dijo que ambos candidatos tienen conexiones con la comunidad hispana, y destacó la fluidez del español de O’ Rourke y su educación en la mayoría hispana de El Paso y la esposa de Abbott, cuya familia emigró de México.

“Está muy claro que los latinos son muy conservadores en sus valores” , dijo, pero con margen para la moderación. Sobre las armas, citó su propia opinión de que la ley de portación sin permiso del estado, aprobada en 2021 y firmada por Abbott, puede haber ido demasiado lejos en la dirección de eliminar las restricciones.

“Yo personalmente tengo un arma. Tengo licencia para portar esa arma. Tuve una verificación de antecedentes. Creo que está bien tener esas cosas” , dijo. “Sé que muchos de mis compañeros republicanos no están de acuerdo” .

Buscando capitalizar lo que sus asesores ven como impulso, O’ Rourke ha regresado a la carretera, su zona de confort político, con un viaje de 49 días a eventos en Texas.

“Si miras de abril a julio, la carrera cambió 5 puntos” , dijo Chris Evans, un portavoz de la campaña. “La gente no está contenta con la dirección que está tomando el estado, y vamos directamente a ellos y les ofrecemos la alternativa” .

Pero no está claro cuánto durará el efecto de los eventos recientes en el electorado de Texas.

Sophia Graves, de 50 años, tenía en mente el aumento de los costos al consumidor en una tarde reciente en el First Colony Mall en Sugar Land, una comunidad de rápido crecimiento en las afueras de Houston que se encuentra entre las más diversas del país.

“Todo es caro en este momento” , dijo Graves, una agente de bienes raíces de la cercana ciudad de Missouri, que estaba de compras con su hija de 17 años. “Necesitamos alivio” .

Pero dijo que todavía planeaba votar por O’ Rourke porque “él es simplemente refrescante” y estuvo de acuerdo con él en políticas como el aborto y la necesidad de regulaciones más estrictas sobre las armas. Ella dijo que los acontecimientos recientes la habían hecho optimista de que él podría ganar. “Tengo más esperanzas” , dijo. “Es tiempo de un cambio” .

La inflación también era la principal preocupación de Ahmad Sadozai, ya que amenazaba el estilo de vida de la clase media que, según él, atraía a tantos inmigrantes a Estados Unidos. “Amo este país” , dijo Sadozai, quien llegó a Texas como refugiado de Afganistán hace casi 20 años y tiene dos trabajos, como conductor de autobús escolar y asistente de salud en el hogar. No tenía un candidato preferido para gobernador.

“Necesitan aumentar los salarios” , dijo, haciendo una pausa para morder un helado de plátano en un waffle enrollado. “Aparte de eso, me encanta. ¡Mira lo que estoy comiendo!” , dijo con una sonrisa.

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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 Javid 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.

"Everything is expensive right now," said Ms. Graves, a real estate agent from nearby Missouri City, who was shopping with her 17-year-old daughter. "We need relief."

But she said she still planned to vote for Mr. O'Rourke because "he's just refreshing" and she agreed with him on policies like abortion and the need for stricter gun regulations. She said recent events had made her optimistic that he could win. "I'm more hopeful," she said. "It's time for a change."

Inflation was also Ahmad Sadozai's main concern, threatening the middle class lifestyle that he said drew so many immigrants to the United States. "I love this country," said Mr. Sadozai, who came to Texas as a refugee from Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago and works two jobs, as a school bus driver and a home health aide. He did not have a preferred candidate for governor.

"They need to raise the salaries," he said, pausing to take bites of a banana sundae in a rolled-up waffle. "Other than that, I love it. Look at what I'm eating!" he said with a smile.

Edgar Sandoval contributed reporting.

Edgar Sandoval contributed reporting.

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)

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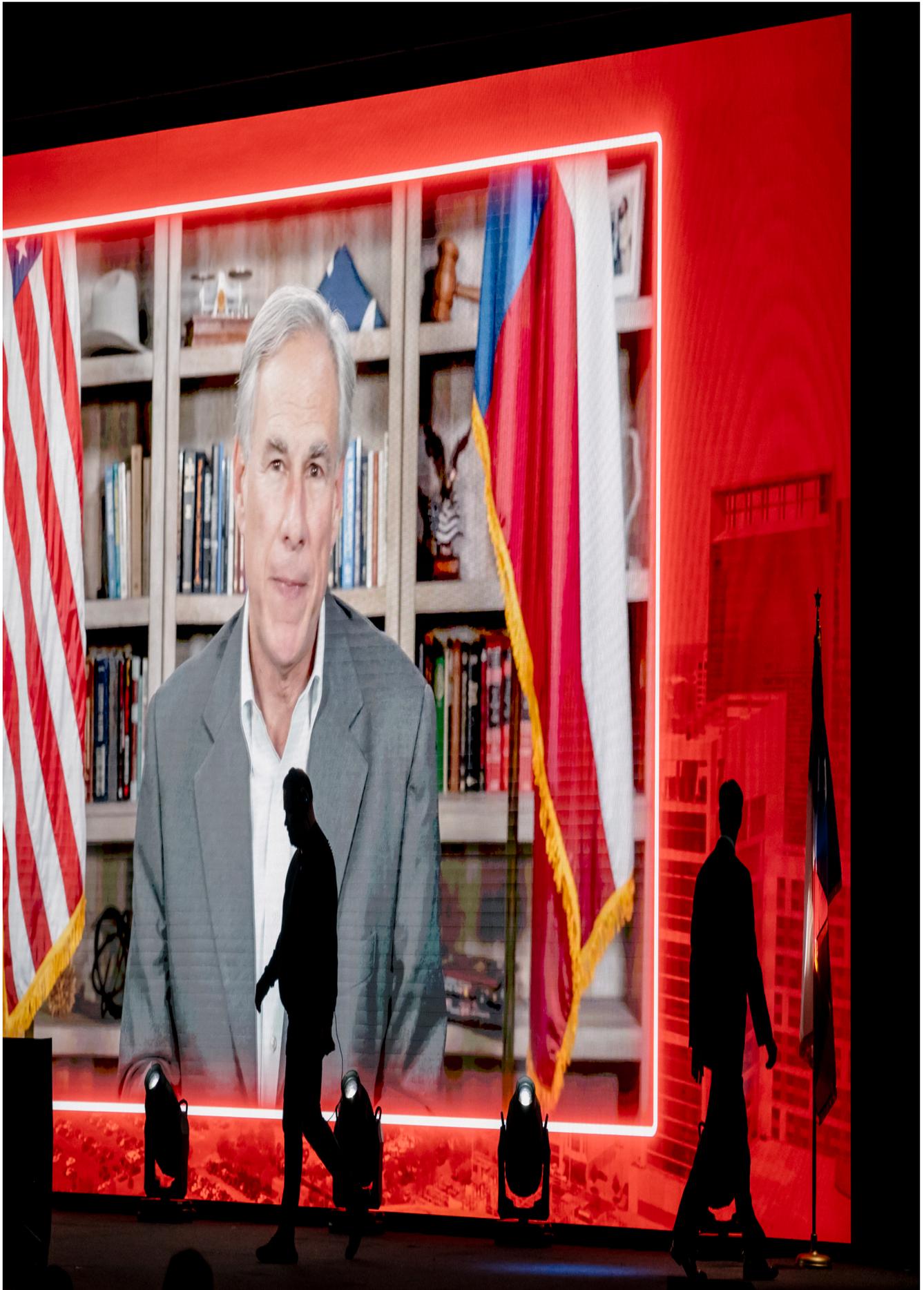
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After Recent Turmoil, the Race for Texas Governor Is Tightening

Goodman, J David . Goodman, J David.

[ProQuest document link](https://www.proquest.com/usmajordailies/newspapers/texas-turmoil-jolts-race-governor/docview/2693604719/sem-2?accountid=46320)

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.

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.

“Everything is expensive right now,” said Graves, a real estate agent from nearby Missouri City, who was shopping with her 17-year-old daughter. “We need relief.”

But she said she still planned to vote for O’ Rourke because “he’s just refreshing” and she agreed with him on policies like abortion and the need for stricter gun regulations. She said recent events had made her optimistic that he could win. “I’m more hopeful,” she said. “It’s time for a change.”

Inflation was also Ahmad Sadozai's main concern, threatening the middle-class lifestyle that he said drew so many immigrants to the United States. "I love this country," said Sadozai, who came to Texas as a refugee from Afghanistan nearly 20 years ago and works two jobs, as a school bus driver and a home health aide. He did not have a preferred candidate for governor.

"They need to raise the salaries," he said, pausing to take bites of a banana sundae in a rolled-up waffle. "Other than that, I love it. Look at what I'm eating!" he said with a smile. This article originally appeared in The New York Times.



Enlarge this image.

DETAILS

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Document 34 of 48

Harris' s speech is a chance to show her work on a central part of her agenda.

Kanno-Youngs, Zolan . Kanno-Youngs, Zolan.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Vice President Kamala Harris is expected to urge Congress during a speech in Atlanta on Tuesday to pass legislation to protect voting rights, a significant moment for a vice president who has struggled to define her role in the White House while overseeing an issue that has proved uncompromising.

According to a White House official, Ms. Harris plans to reference Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.' s history of fighting for the right to vote when she calls on the Senate to pass a broad elections overhaul, the For the People Act, as well as the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, named for the Georgia congressman and civil rights icon who died in 2020.

Protecting the right to vote is one of many difficult issues in Ms. Harris' s portfolio. But unlike those other issues, such as deterring migration from Central America, Ms. Harris specifically requested that voting rights be included in her responsibilities. The Biden administration has described the assignment as central to its legacy after Republicans in 19 states enacted voting restrictions last year.

So far, Ms. Harris appears to be focused on meeting with advocates to discuss organizing strategies. White House officials have emphasized that she works on voting rights on a daily basis, but have not provided specifics on how she plans to work with lawmakers to pass the two pieces of legislation.

The speech on Tuesday is an opportunity for Ms. Harris to reassure increasingly anxious supporters of the president who fear the administration has put aside protecting voting rights in favor of other priorities. It also gives her a public chance to persuade a few Democratic holdouts, as well as Republicans, to allow the bills to advance.

Ms. Harris will be building on comments that she made last week on the anniversary of the deadly Jan. 6 riot.

“In this very building, a decision will be made about whether we uphold the right to vote and ensure free and fair elections,” Ms. Harris said from the Capitol last week. “Let’ s be clear: We must pass the voting rights bills that are now before the Senate, and the American people must also do something more. We cannot sit on the sidelines.”

An early test for Ms. Harris came last summer, when she met with Texas legislators who had walked out and come to Washington to protest their state’ s voting restrictions.

James Talarico, the youngest member of the Texas Legislature, said in an interview that Ms. Harris had encouraged

him and other lawmakers to focus not just on raising awareness of the issue, but also on pressuring members of Congress to pass voting rights legislation.

“It felt like a strategy meeting,” Mr. Talarico said. “It was: ‘You have to start at the Senate, you got to go to leadership.’ It was like she was helping us with a plan of action.”

Mr. Talarico said he was glad voting rights was among the “thorny issues” in the vice president’s portfolio.

DETAILS

Subject:	Voting Rights Act; Speeches; Vice Presidents; Legislation
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On voting rights, Democrats make headlines. That's it.

Balz, Dan . Balz, Dan.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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."

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dan.balz@washpost.com

DETAILS

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Democrats are making headlines on voting rights, but little more to counter restrictive efforts by Republicans: Biden and Texas Democrats draw attention to the issue, warning of threats, but options to counter GOP legislators remain elusive, absent action on the filibuster.

Balz, Dan . Balz, Dan.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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'Did Donald Trump lose?' : A revealing Fox News interview leads to a challenging question for its host

Bump, Philip . Bump, Philip.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

It is an accomplishment to be a Fox News host who is notably more supportive of Donald Trump than his peers, but it's an accomplishment that Pete Hegseth has attained.

During Trump's presidency, Hegseth was reported to speak with Trump regularly, advocating for a presidential pardon for several service members who were accused or convicted of war crimes, advocacy Trump heeded. Hegseth, who conducted an on-air interview with Trump that overlapped with a campaign rally for the then-president, was at one point rumored to be in the mix for a Cabinet position.

It is not surprising, then, that, given the chance to host a show in prime time for the network (versus his usual appearances on the network's morning programs), Hegseth approached the news of the day with a distinctly Trump-sympathetic flavor. As his guest on Tuesday evening made very explicit, to Hegseth's obvious discomfort.

The particular news on that particular day was about an effort by Democratic legislators in Texas to prevent the state from passing new restrictions on voting by leaving the state. If the legislature can't reach a quorum, it can't pass bills, and without Democrats in Austin, it can't reach a quorum. So by decamping to D.C., those legislators could block any law from passing—and gain a platform to advocate for a cause that's at the center of Democratic politics at the moment.

Hegseth welcomed one of those legislators, Texas state Rep. James Talarico (D), to serve as a foil for his own frustrations about the Democrats' tactic. After contextualizing Talarico's appearance by noting that he flew to D.C. with his colleagues on a private jet (*elitist!*, viewers were meant to think) and accusing him of having talking points saying that "Republicans are authoritarians and racists" (*anti-White racism!*)—all before Talarico said a word—Hegseth asked the legislator to explain how he wasn't just a "prop or a puppet" for the national party.

After a brief bit of biography, Talarico replied.

"I swore an oath when I first got elected two years ago to uphold the Constitution, the Constitution of the United States and also the Constitution of the great state of Texas," he said. "And after our former president, Donald Trump, started his big lie that the election was stolen, Republican legislators in capitals across the country started to push voter suppression methods."

That last bit was hard to hear because Hegseth, as he would do repeatedly, interrupted with another question.

"How did you make this about Donald Trump in 20 seconds?" he said, overlapping with Talarico's comments. "That's a bit of a record." (*Trump derangement syndrome!*)

Of course, Talarico's right. A massive surge in new legislation aimed at scaling back voting access—often access expanded in 2020—has been proposed by Republican legislators. Those restrictions are often framed as being about revisiting voting rules in a post-pandemic world. (As Hegseth asked, "If covid's not there and—or ultimately minimized in our application, shouldn't we be making sure that the rules go back to something that makes sense, that's reasonable?")

The restrictions, though, are often obviously or explicitly also predicated on Trump's incessant dishonesty about the security of the election itself. Republicans are trying to both convince their pro-Trump base that they're tackling

rampant election fraud that Trump has convinced voters occurred (although it didn't) and trying to preserve the ability to describe their actions as being simple reexaminations of voting processes. But, as Tuesday night's interview progressed, the inferior durability of the latter rationale was made obvious.

Talarico explained how the Texas law would scale back voting access, by reducing voting hours in some places, including overnight ("It's voting at 2 a.m. in the morning that is the key issue," Hegseth scoffed) and by adding a requirement for mail-in voters to provide a driver's license number or part of their Social Security number. This is a central point for Democrats: Many people, often lower-income or older, may not have a license or have their Social Security numbers readily available, necessitating going through a layer of bureaucracy to obtain the necessary information before they can cast a ballot.

"If the bill passes," Hegseth taunted Talarico, "will there be any ... minority or a woman that's not able to vote?"

The answer is: of course. Of course there will be someone who suddenly discovers that they can't get away from work to vote or who can't get a Social Security number in time. The question is how significant that burden is as a deterrent. In most states, we've agreed that the burden of registration is worth it; where states disagree is on requirements beyond that.

But Talarico's response to Hegseth was important. He cited a Republican official who runs the state's elections.

"She actually said that Texas's elections in the past two cycles were safe, smooth and secure," he explained. "Those were the three words she used. So we know this is a nonexistent problem."

This is the flip side of the deterrence question. Hegseth and other Republicans are arguing that these changes are necessary to protect the election results, but there's no evidence at all that those results have been in any way tainted by illegal voting. In testimony before the legislature over the weekend, a Texas elections official told lawmakers, "I don't think we have any evidence of actual fraud" in the 2020 election.

An analogy is useful here. Imagine that someone shows up at your door selling Internet-connected window locks. He argues forcefully that a burglary ring is operating in your neighborhood and that these locks are a way to keep criminals at bay. They're not free, sure, and he profits from them, but he's just looking out for your safety. But you know that crime isn't rampant and, after speaking with police, they tell you that after an extensive review of their records they have found no evidence of anything more than a couple of guys taking Amazon packages.

Would you buy the locks?

Talarico's point was that the effort to impose new restrictions on voting were necessarily predicated on the idea that elections are at risk without them, something for which there's no evidence. Hegseth tacitly reinforced this point.

Hegseth asked Talarico if he supported voter ID laws and Talarico said he didn't.

"You oppose voter ID?" Hegseth sputtered. "You don't think the most sacred obligation of our republic, you should have to prove who you are in order to vote?"

That's the issue in a nutshell. Which is more important, letting more people vote or doing more to verify that people who are voting are who they say they are? In each scenario, the number of exceptions is fairly small: A small percentage of people won't be able to obtain the necessary ID (even if it's their fault that they can't) and a handful of people might try to vote illegally (though, of course, there are other checks in place to protect ballots).

A critical issue in the moment is the extent to which the impulse toward restrictions is based on dishonest claims about election security. Talarico kept coming back to Trump's false claims, eventually simply asking Hegseth his view directly.

Talarico gets at an important point here that also overlaps with his political opponents in Austin. It's not just that there are a lot of people who believe Trump's false fraud claims, it's that there are a lot of people for whom bolstering those claims provides an ancillary benefit. Political support. Viewership. Advertising dollars.

Even if Hegseth does think that Trump's fraud claims are false, there are a number of reasons that he would be disinclined to admit it on air. For one, Fox News is at least somewhat concerned about losing audience to further-right networks like One America News or Newsmax that proudly echo Trump's claims. For another, Trump himself was probably watching and Hegseth would likely be wary of picking up his phone for a few months if he had admitted that Trump's claims were invented.

That's a central part of what's happening. There is a big incentive for Republicans to pretend that rampant fraud occurred and an even bigger incentive (curtailing often-Democratic votes) to passing laws addressing the putative issue. At the same time, there are *disincentives* to pointing out Trump's falsehoods, as those who have done so can attest.

This is at the heart of the current debate. Trump's falsehoods are in fact inextricable from the proposed changes —just as similar proposed changes in the past have been inextricably linked to other false claims about election security. Trump picked up on an existing rationale the party had used to pass voter restrictions for years, weaponizing it to his political benefit. And now it's driving a slew of new proposals.

After declining to answer Talarico's question, Hegseth pivoted back to more favorable terrain: Why weren't the Democrats on that private plane wearing masks?

Hypocrites!, his viewers were expected to think. Hegseth wins again.

DETAILS

Subject:	Political campaigns; Election results; State elections; Television news; Legislators; State laws; Political advertising; Political parties; Fraud
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Document 38 of 48

A Texas Democrat called out Fox News on Fox News. He says he hadn't planned on it.

Barr, Jeremy . Barr, Jeremy.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Something unusual happened during the 7 p.m. hour on Fox News on Tuesday night.

Host Pete Hegseth was pressing Texas state Rep. James Talarico about his decision to flee Austin with dozens of other Democratic lawmakers this week—a procedural gambit intended to block Republicans from passing strict voting laws back home.

The on-screen graphic called the Democrats' exodus to Washington, D.C., a "stunt," and Hegseth's interview with the 32-year-old lawmaker made it clear he agreed.

"We know you met with [Democratic Senate Majority Leader] Chuck Schumer and [Democratic House Speaker] Nancy Pelosi today," the host told Talarico. "You've been told to say you're protecting democracy, that Republicans are authoritarian and racist. ...It kind of seems they're using you as a prop, or a puppet."

Talarico tried to argue his case—that former president Donald Trump's false claims that the November election was rigged against him had inspired Republicans in Texas and other states to launch legislative attacks against voting rights. But all the while, Hegseth smirked, laughed into the camera and constantly interrupted his guest.

It was standard Fox opinion fare—until about six minutes into the interview, when Talarico turned the tables.

"You have made a lot of money personally and you've enriched a lot of corporations with advertising by getting on here and spewing lies and conspiracy theories to folks who trust you," Talarico told Hegseth.

He then gave the host a challenge: "Tell your voters right now that Donald Trump lost the election."

Hegseth did not. The longtime Fox host had said in November that it was "premature to declare that Joe Biden is the president-elect," even after his own network had called the race.

Sensing the host's reluctance, Talarico pounced. "Is this an uncomfortable question for you?" he asked.

Talarico received plaudits from Democrats on social media for his performance, which quickly went viral. A version of the segment shared by Talarico on Twitter had been viewed approximately 700,000 times as of Wednesday afternoon. Hegseth seemed less pleased. "It's not your show, sir," he told Talarico at one point in the interview. "I don't really feel any obligation to answer anything from you."

The clash felt like a throwback to a bygone era in cable news—when cross-partisan rumbles were common on Fox opinion shows such as "The O'Reilly Factor," hosted by flamethrower Bill O'Reilly. They have become less common in

recent years, as Democratic politicians have largely steered clear of Fox opinion shows, even while appearing with some regularity on the network's news programs.

Talarico told The Washington Post he had no intention of clashing with Hegseth when he went into the interview. "I'm a former teacher, so I'm very conflict-averse typically," he said. "That kind of stuff makes me anxious."

The Democrat said he initially thought the appearance would be an opportunity to get his message across to constituents who watch Fox—but soon realized that Hegseth had no intention of letting him do so.

"I just kind lost my temper a little bit when I was being interrupted," he said. "The train jumped the tracks a little bit during the interview. I think I got angry. And I don't like to get angry. ...I didn't anticipate the level of disruption, interruption and unwillingness to even listen to each other. The aggressiveness is what took me aback."

Talarico, who brushed up on Hegseth's background quickly before the interview by watching a video of him on YouTube, said he discerned quickly that the host "was not interested in having a conversation."

The lawmaker said he was surprised that Hegseth did not acknowledge Biden's victory, even when asked directly. "I knew it would make him uncomfortable, but I thought he would just say 'yes' and move on," Talarico said. "The silence surprised me."

Talarico said he would "love" to return to Fox News as a guest, even if his last experience "was a little traumatic." Representatives for the network, however, did not respond when asked about the clash and whether Talarico would be invited back.

DETAILS

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Document 39 of 48

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

Rogers, Katie . Rogers, Katie.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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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.

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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

Subject:	Legislators; Political parties; Voting Rights Act; Speeches; Election results; Legislation; State elections; Presidential elections; Democracy; Congressional elections; Voting rights; Presidential communications and messages; State laws
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Document 40 of 48

‘Have you no shame?’ Biden frames voting rights as a moral reckoning.

Rogers, Katie . Rogers, Katie.

[ProQuest document link](https://www.proquest.com/usmajordailies/newspapers/biden-portrays-right-vote-as-under-siege/docview/2550995543/sem-2?accountid=46320)

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DETAILS

Subject:	Voting Rights Act; Speeches; Presidents; Democracy; Civil rights; Voting rights
Location:	Texas; United States--US; Georgia
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Identifier / keyword:	Biden, Joseph R Jr; Voter Registration and Requirements; Voting Rights Act (1965); Filibusters and Debate Curbs; Senate; House of Representatives; State Legislatures; Republican Party; Democratic Party; United States Politics and Government; Speeches and Statements; Philadelphia (Pa); Trump, Donald J; Presidential Election of 2020; Texas
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Document 41 of 48

‘The Ezra Klein Show’ Book Recommendations

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Readings that the podcast’s guests say shaped their thinking.

“The Ezra Klein Show” explores ideas with some of today’s most dynamic thinkers. We cover politics, culture, history, philosophy, psychology, technology and more. The topics are wide-ranging, but every episode ends with Ezra asking his guest (or guests) to recommend a few books that have shaped their thinking. Below is a list of all the books recommended on the show this year, in reverse-chronological order.

You can view book recommendations from guests in 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025. Listen to and follow “The Ezra Klein Show” on Apple, Spotify, Google or wherever you get your podcasts.

James Talarico

Can James Talarico Reclaim Christianity for the Left? (Jan. 13, 2026)

- “Lonesome Dove” by Larry McMurtry
- “Jesus and the Disinherited” by Howard Thurman
- “The Upswing” by Robert D. Putnam and Shaylyn Romney Garrett

M. Gessen

Venezuela, Renee Good and Trump’s ‘Assault on Hope’ (Jan. 10, 2026)

- “Tomorrow Is Yesterday” by Hussein Agha and Robert Malley
- “One Day, Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This” by Omar El Akkad
- “The Hill” by Harriet Clark

Jonathan Blitzer

What Trump Wants in Venezuela (Jan. 6, 2026)

- “The Known World” by Edward P. Jones
- “What You Have Heard Is True” by Carolyn Forché
- “The Spy and the Traitor” by Ben Macintyre

Stephen Batchelor

This Question Can Change Your Life (Jan. 2, 2026)

- “Children of a Modest Star” by Jonathan S. Blake and Nils Gilman
- “Work Like a Monk” by Shoukei Matsumoto
- “The Second Body” by Daisy Hildyard

DETAILS

Subject:	Political power; Books
People:	Schumer, Charles E; Brown, Margaret Wise (1910-1952); Altman, Sam; Sendak, Maurice; Malcolm X; Saunders, George (1958-); Klein, Ezra; Chomsky, Noam; Warren, Elizabeth
Company / organization:	Name: Senate; NAICS: 921120
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Document 42 of 48

After walkout, calls for action

Gardner, Amy . Gardner, Amy.

[ProQuest document link](#)

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.

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Annie Linskey and Mike DeBonis contributed to this report.

DETAILS

Subject:	Civil disobedience; Political leadership; Legislators; Debates; Voting Rights Act; Press conferences; Political campaigns; Legislation; State elections; Presidential elections; Democracy
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Company / organization:	Name: Congress-US; NAICS: 921120; Name: Senate-US; NAICS: 921120
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Document 43 of 48

After defeating restrictive voting bill, Texas Democrats send loud message: ‘We need Congress to do their part’: The coordinated walkout jolted the national debate about voting rights, putting the spotlight on Democratic-backed federal voting rights legislation that has been stalled in the Senate.

Gardner, Amy . Gardner, Amy.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

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The final version included numerous provisions inserted at the last minute, including language making it easier to overturn an election, no longer requiring evidence that fraud actually altered an outcome but only that enough ballots were illegally cast that could have made a difference. The legislation also would have changed the legal standard for overturning an election from "reasonable doubt" to "preponderance of the evidence" —a much lower evidentiary bar.

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Annie Linskey and Mike DeBonis contributed to this report.

DETAILS

Subject:	Civil disobedience; Political leadership; Debates; Legislators; Press conferences; Voting Rights Act; Political campaigns; Legislation; Presidential elections; Democracy
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Company / organization:	Name: Congress-US; NAICS: 921120; Name: Senate-US; NAICS: 921120
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Document 44 of 48

Shows Like ‘Cops’ Fell Out of Favor. Now Texas May Ban Them.

Fortin, Jacey . Fortin, Jacey.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

Lawmakers passed a bill named for Javier Ambler II, who died in 2019 after officers arrested him in front of a “Live PD” television crew. If the governor signs it, this would mean the end of police cooperation with reality TV shows. Two years ago, a television crew gathered in the small city of Hawkins, Texas, to film the life and work of Manfred Gilow, the chief of police there.

Cameras followed Chief Gilow as he and his officers responded to calls, snapped handcuffs onto wrists and searched vehicles for drugs. The program was not available on Texas televisions; Chief Gilow is from Germany, and that is where “Der Germinator” (a portmanteau of “German” and “The Terminator”) was broadcast.

Last year, after the nationally broadcast policing shows “Cops” and “Live PD” were canceled, “Der Germinator” filmed a second season. But prospects for a third may have dimmed last week, when the Texas Legislature passed a bill that would make it illegal for law enforcement agencies to authorize reality television crews to film officers on duty.

“Policing is not entertainment,” said James Talarico, the Democratic state representative who introduced the legislation. The office of Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, did not respond to requests for comment this week about whether he would sign the legislation.

Reality law enforcement shows, Mr. Talarico said, “rely on violent encounters between citizens and the police to boost their own ratings.” He cited an investigation by The Austin American-Statesman, which reported last year that law enforcement officers in Williamson County, Texas, were more violent when the “Live PD” cameras were rolling. The bill, which the Legislature passed with bipartisan support on May 13, is named after Javier Ambler II, a 40-year-old father of two who died in 2019 after Williamson County officers forcibly arrested him in front of a “Live PD” camera

crew.

Mr. Ambler's sister, Kimberly Ambler-Jones, 39, said she believed that her brother would still be alive if the television crews had not been filming. "Because they had 'Live PD' there, it had to be hyped up," she said. "It had to be drama."

That show was taken off the air in June. So was "Cops," which had beamed arrests, confrontations and car chases to televisions across the United States for decades.

The cancellations came amid nationwide protests over the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. They also followed years of campaigning by the racial justice organization Color of Change, which had been pushing networks to drop "Cops" since at least 2013.

Arisha Hatch, the organization's vice president and chief of campaigns, said the shows were one-sided and served as propaganda for law enforcement.

"They violate the civil liberties of people who are forced to become the stars of the show," she said. "They operate to make a joke about how Black communities and poor communities are overpoliced."

Ms. Hatch welcomed the Texas bill, noting that the state-level legislative approach appeared to be without precedent. But with two flagship policing programs already canceled, it is unclear whether the law would have any immediate effect if approved by Governor Abbott.

A reality series set in Texas called "Lone Star Law," on Animal Planet, could most likely continue filming as long as it keeps its focus on wildlife and game wardens, Mr. Talarico said.

"Der Germinator," on the other hand, could be at risk.

Chief Gilow argued that the program should be allowed to continue, characterizing it as more of a documentary than a reality show. He said it offered German viewers a glimpse of life in the United States, as well as a cautionary tale about the consequences of crime.

"I think it is positive," Chief Gilow said. "But you will have some people just hating it because they hate the police." He added that the show did not violate anyone's rights and blurred the faces of people who did not consent to be filmed.

Ms. Ambler-Jones said she hoped that Mr. Abbott would sign the bill—and that similar legislation would spread beyond Texas.

"I know people feel like this is just entertainment," she said of reality policing programs. "But you don't understand what the person on the other side of that camera is dealing with."

For months after Mr. Ambler's death, his family did not know what had happened to him—only that he had died in law enforcement custody. The details became public last year, after The Austin American-Statesman and the news outlet KVUE obtained body camera footage.

Mr. Ambler was driving in the Austin area on March 28, 2019, when Williamson County deputies tried to stop him because he did not dim his headlights to traffic, officials said. After deputies tried to pull Mr. Ambler over, the authorities said, he kept driving for more than 20 minutes before crashing his vehicle.

The body camera footage showed that the officers restrained Mr. Ambler and used a Taser on him multiple times. "I have congestive heart failure," Mr. Ambler could be heard saying. "I can't breathe."

Mr. Ambler was taken to a hospital, where he was pronounced dead. "Live PD" footage of the arrest was never broadcast on television.

Since then, Williamson County officials have faced several lawsuits related to reality television footage. Two deputies were indicted on second-degree manslaughter charges in Mr. Ambler's death, and the former county sheriff, who lost his seat after a November election, was indicted on charges of evidence tampering. All have pleaded not guilty. A spokeswoman for Williamson County declined to comment because of pending litigation. Big Fish Entertainment, the production company behind "Live PD," did not immediately respond to emailed questions.

Mr. Talarico said he hoped the legislation, if signed into law by the governor, would keep "Cops" and "Live PD" out of Texas for good. "Without the force of law, there's nothing preventing these shows from coming back," he said, "except for their own conscience."

DETAILS

Subject:	Body cameras; Legislation; Governors; Law enforcement; Reality programming; Television sets; Camcorders
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New Texas seeks more leadership amid crises

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

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FULL TEXT

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.

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Texas's promise of modern living on a small-government budget coupled with its growing population of young, non-white 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 now home to nearly 1 in 10 Americans. But the state budget, when adjusted for population and inflation, shrunk 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.

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"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

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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.

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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 expectations

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

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With new Texas, new expectations for leaders

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FULL TEXT

Old frontier ethic collides with demands of diverse and growing population

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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.

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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.

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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."

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

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Biden's low-key approach to storm wins praise but courts risks: Biden's quiet approach to the Texas freeze marks a sharp contrast to Trump's handling of natural disasters. The president's strategy has won praise, but it risks keeping the government's profile low.

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FULL TEXT

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 next 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 this 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."

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