

## April 2026 Letter from Texas

### The Texas US Senate Election: What did we learn from the March 3 Primaries?

#### Part Two

Richard Murray, Senior Research Fellow, Hobby School of Public Affairs

The March 2026 letter reviewed the recent history of party primaries in Texas, focusing on record turnout in a midterm year and the surprising fact that 150,000 more people voted in the Democratic than the Republican primary election. This letter looks at the U.S. Senate primaries in Texas – where more money was spent than in any previous state nomination process.

Both primaries drew outsized national media attention and the results, incomplete on the Republican side until a late May runoff, likely ensure the most expensive November contest in the nation. How did that happen? Just a year ago the Texas seat was rated “safe Republican” and Democrats were expected to look elsewhere in their longshot effort to overturn a 53-47 deficit in the U.S. Senate.

In brief, Republicans got a worst-case primary outcome – a runoff with the most vulnerable November contender, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, favored over longtime incumbent John Cornyn. Democrats got the reverse – a clear decision on March 3 with the underdog winner, State Representative James Talarico, emerging as a “fund-raising juggernaut” breaking all records for a Senate hopeful in the first quarter of a year. Combined with the continuing slide in President Trump’s political ratings, Texas returns as a competitive state for the first time in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### ***The Republican Primary: Senator John Cornyn is forced into a runoff with Attorney General Ken Paxton***

Since John Tower scored a shocking upset in a 1961 U.S. Senate special election to replace the newly elected Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, no Republican incumbent has faced a serious primary challenge until this year.

Several factors produced this unusual result. Senator John Cornyn, first elected in 2002, was never a favorite of conservative activists, yet serious challengers passed on running against him in 2008, 2014, and 2020. Cornyn’s luck ran out in 2025. Newly reelected President Trump withheld an endorsement of the veteran legislator in contrast to most GOP incumbents running in 2026. That signal led three-term Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to enter the contest. Paxton, a Tea Party-flavored Republican from Collin County, had earned the passionate support of party activists even before leading the effort to overturn President Trump’s defeat in the 2020 presidential elections. But Paxton brought a ton of baggage to the race: Criminal indictments; accusations by senior AG staffers that their boss engaged in illegal actions; an FBI investigation; impeachment by the Republican majority state House in 2021; and a pending civil action where his longtime spouse, now a state senator, is seeking a divorce on “Biblical grounds.”

Paxton’s problems encouraged two-term Congressman Wesley Hunt from Houston to join the race in 2025 as a more conservative alternative to the sitting senator and a cleaner alternative to candidate Paxton. Five other hopefuls entered the fray, making it difficult for anyone to secure the required primary majority and avoid a late May runoff. Several polls showed Cornyn lagging behind Paxton in late 2025 and early 2026, perhaps even running behind Hunt. The Washington D.C. Republican establishment, deeply concerned that a Paxton nomination would put a supposedly “safe seat” at risk, staged a massive financial intervention. PACs controlled by the national party poured more than \$70 million in the primary, helping to set a record for total spending in a senate primary. Most of that money was spent on a negative campaign savaging Paxton, with the remainder documenting Cornyn’s consistent support of the Trump agenda in Congress.

The massive negative advertising campaign worked to a degree. As Table 1 shows, Cornyn led the field with 42.0% of vote to 40.5% for AG Paxton, with Hunt fading to 13.5%. However, with the Texas majority requirement, this prolonged the Cornyn-Paxton battle for another 86 days.

**Table 1: Statewide Vote in 2026 Republican Primary**

John Cornyn	911,382	42.0%
Ken Paxton	878,564	40.5%
Wesley Hunt	293,250	13.5%
Others	84,714	3.9%
Total	2,166,910	100.0%

Source: Office of the Texas Secretary of State

Before we break down the March Republican vote, keep in mind that while Texas is a remarkably diverse state of 31 million people, the 2.17 million voters in the GOP March primary were far more homogeneous. Eighty-five percent of GOP primary voters were Anglos compared to a statewide white/non-Hispanic population of less than 40%. Nearly 80% of the primary voters were fifty or older; fewer than four percent were under thirty. Almost all primary voters describe themselves as “conservative” or “very conservative.” Seventy-three percent have a “very favorable” opinion of Donald Trump, with 13% given him a “somewhat favorable” rating.<sup>1</sup> Rural areas and smaller cities outside metropolitan areas are generally declining in population, but punch well above their weight in Republican primaries. Almost all voters in these counties participate in the GOP primary because this is the effective election for their local officials who are typically unopposed in November.

<sup>1</sup> Survey of 1225 GOP primary voters April 6 – 7 by Texas Public Opinion Research.

Table 2 shows support for the three major Republican candidates across the state. Most areas featured a close vote. Cornyn carried the Dallas/Fort Worth metro counties by about four percent while trailing Paxton in the Houston area by six percent. Cornyn had a small lead in the San Antonio area, but won the Austin metro counties by 16% and led in the low turnout South Texas/Border counties by 6.6%. Within the large metropolitan areas, Senator Cornyn led Attorney General Paxton in all the core urban counties (Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, Bexar, and Travis), split the vote in big inner-suburban counties like Collin, Denton, and Fort Bend, and lost exurban counties like Montgomery, Parker, Kaufman, Liberty, and Waller.

**Table 2: Republican Primary Senate Vote in County Groups**

<u>Major Metro Areas</u>	Total Vote	John Cornyn		Ken Paxton		Wesley Hunt	
Dallas/Fort Worth	554,248	239,986	43.2%	218,118	39.4%	75,881	13.7%
Houston	420,062	151,664	36.1%	180,001	42.9%	72,769	17.2%
Austin	149,215	74,430	49.9%	50,217	33.7%	18,147	12.3%
San Antonio	166,213	71,894	43.3%	69,448	41.8%	19,177	12.5%
<u>South Texas/Border</u>	101,039	45,065	44.6%	38,358	38.0%	10,093	10.0%
<u>Rest of Texas</u>	776,133	327,343	42.2%	360,730	40.5%	97,033	12.5%

Source: Office of the Texas Secretary of State

One gets a better sense of the vote division within the Republican electorate by examining differences across neighborhoods with big urban counties where populations cluster along socioeconomic and racial/ethnic lines. Harris County, with more than five million people, provides a good window into this dimension. The county contains 1,224 voting precincts with most having a distinct set of demographics. Table 3 shows the U.S. Senate vote in five groups of ten precincts – affluent Anglos, majority Black, heavily Hispanic, inner-city plurality Anglo, and exurban majority Anglo.

**Table 3: Republican Senate Vote in Five Voting Precinct Groups in Harris County**

Precinct Category	Cornyn Vote		Paxton Vote		Hunt Vote	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Affluent Anglos	3,008	52.2%	1,375	23.9%	1,318	22.9%
Majority Black	56	28.9%	59	30.4%	68	38.1%
75% + Hispanic	234	36.2%	246	38.0%	113	17.5%
Inner suburbs	2,158	37.9%	2,267	39.8%	1,095	19.2%
Exurbs	1,413	33.0%	1,953	45.6%	907	21.3%

Source: HarrisVotes, Harris County Clerk’s Office

These data confirm the fact that Republican primaries are decided by Anglo voters. There were virtually no GOP voters in the mostly Black precincts, and very few in Latino areas. In wealthy precincts dominated by Anglo voters, Cornyn secured over 50% of the vote, running about 30 points ahead of Paxton. But Paxton edged out Cornyn in the middle and lower middle-income neighborhoods with a 12.5% advantage in the heavily Anglo exurban precincts of Harris County.

The same pattern held across other urban areas. Cornyn carried the “country club” Republican precincts in Dallas, Fort Worth, and San Antonio with 50% or more of the vote, but fell far short of securing a majority in all other precincts. And that meant, of course, that the Republican U.S. Senate nomination would be decided in late May, not the first week in March.

## ***The Democratic Senate Primary: James Talarico enters the primary as a virtually unknown and emerges as a national political figure***

Texas Democrats have struggled to field quality candidates in statewide elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. That is hardly surprising since no party nominee has won any statewide office since 1994, and few have run within ten percentage points of their Republican opponents. Reflective of this dismal track record, *Texas Monthly* named the state Democratic Party the winner of the not-coveted “Bum Steer of the Year” award in 2020 for “promising a blue wave and then getting wiped out.”<sup>2</sup>

Readers of previous letters know I am not predicting the long-awaited blue wave will wash across Texas in November 2026. That might happen; it might not happen. But what is almost certainly going to happen is a *competitive, high-turnout* midterm election this year. Credit for that mostly goes to Donald J. Trump, whose 47<sup>th</sup> presidency seems oblivious to the factors that delivered his nearly 14 percent Texas victory over Kamala Harris in 2024, as contrasted with his 5.6% margin four years earlier. President Trump is not on the ballot, but he dominates every news cycle in unpredictable ways that divide his formidable electoral base, unify and energize his critics, and move swing voters away from Republican candidates as the midterm season gets underway.<sup>3</sup>

But if the short-term factors are giving national Democrats a strong tailwind, the party needs strong candidates in the Lone Star State if it hopes to break its 32-year losing streak. The U.S. Senate primary was a key test. Efforts in late 2025 to avoid a contentious primary fizzled, and a last-minute filing resulted in Congresswoman Jasmine Crockett joining State Representative James Talarico in the March primary.<sup>4</sup>

Crockett, an African American lawyer and former state representative had won the 30<sup>th</sup> Congressional District in Dallas when longtime incumbent Eddie Bernice Johnson retired in 2022. She quickly established herself in Washington D.C. as one of the most visible new members and a prolific fund-raiser by aggressively sparring with Republican House members like Marjorie Taylor Greene and attacking the Trump Administration. Crockett’s campaign argued her feisty style would turn out low-propensity voters that previous Democratic candidates had failed to mobilize.

Talarico had flipped a Republican Texas House district in 2018 and emerged as one of the most articulate critics of the Republican-dominated legislature. His credentials as a former junior-high school teacher and seminarian positioned him to criticize using tax dollars for private school

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<sup>2</sup> Cover, “The Endless Bummer,” January, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Examples include President Trump’s aggressive arrest and deport policies that have more than wiped out recent GOP gains among Texas Hispanics; launching a war of choice that have driven up gas prices in a state where almost all workers drive their own vehicles to work; and imposing tariffs in a state with the largest volume of international trade.

<sup>4</sup> Crockett’s late entry forced Colin Allred, the 2024 US Senate nominee who had been running for most of 2025, to drop his bid and file for a redrawn congressional seat in Dallas County. A perennial third candidate, Ahmad Hassan, also filed but, most importantly, *no Hispanic entered the race, which greatly increased the chances that Crockett or Talarico would exceed the 50% threshold and avoid a runoff.*

vouchers and oppose the posting of the Ten Commandments in all public schools. Despite these efforts, Talarico was less well-known than Crockett. He was, after all, one of 62 Democrats in a 150-member legislative body that meets in regular sessions for just 140 days every other year. Talarico represented just 200,000 people in a state with over 30 million residents, and his Austin constituents are far more liberal on social issues than most Texans. Eight years younger than Crockett, Talarico’s lower-key campaign stressed building a broad coalition of Texas voters disillusioned by the Trump presidency, including 2024 GOP voters.

Crockett’s national platform gave her a big leg up over the Austin-based Talarico. A statewide survey of 1,600 likely Democratic primary voters in early December found the Congresswoman had almost universal name recognition among likely primary voters – 94% - while Talarico’s name ID was 79%. Primary voters who said they knew the candidates rated both favorably, but Crockett’s greater familiarity and overwhelming support from Black respondents (89% to 8% for Talarico) gave her a lead of 51% to 43% in the Texas Southern University poll.<sup>5</sup> Other surveys in January and February showed the Congresswoman maintained a lead over State Representative Talarico.

Despite these initial advantages, Talarico defeated Crockett by more than six percent as Table 4 shows. Given the very short primary campaign season (filing closed in December and early voting started in mid-February) what happened? Three things stand out.

**Table 4: Statewide Vote in 2026 Democratic Senate Primary**

James Talarico	1,216,412	52.5%
Jasmine Crockett	1,071,900	46.2%
Ahmad Hassan	30,875	1.3%
Total	2,319,187	100.0%

Source: Office of the Texas Secretary of State

First, Crockett ran a subpar campaign. She teased getting in the senate race until the last day to file, thus starting her campaign months after Talarico. She did not hire a campaign manager – unusual to say the least in a statewide contest with 18.6 million registered voters spread over 254 counties. Her campaign strategy depended on maximizing Black turnout – which largely worked – but 75% of Democratic primary voters are not African Americans and Crockett did not connect with many of these voters. Finally, while Congresswoman Crockett had been an effective fund-raiser on the national stage, her late-starting senate campaign lagged in securing in-state contributions and an allied PAC never got traction.

Second, Crockett’s financial struggles turned out to be a huge problem because her opponent was raising money at an unprecedented pace. Talarico entered the senate race in September 2025 and

<sup>5</sup> Kayla Guo, “Jasmine Crockett leads James Talarico by 8 points in Senate Democratic Primary, new poll shows,” The Texas Tribune, December 12, 2025.

raised \$6 million in 20 days. He added another \$7 million between October 1 and December 31, according to his Federal Election Commission report.

Then, just as early voting was set to open, Talarico got an enormous break when CBS blocked Stephen Colbert's interview with the state representative from airing on February 16. Colbert told his studio audience:

“You know who is not one of my guests tonight? That's Texas State Representative James Talarico. He was supposed to be here, but we were told in no uncertain terms by our network's lawyers, who called us directly, that we could not have him on the broadcast. Then I was told in some uncertain terms that not only could I not have him on, I could not mention me not having him on.”<sup>6</sup>

The Talarico interview never aired on CBS, but Colbert posted it on YouTube where it became a viral hit with more than nine million views in 48 hours. The Talarico campaign said it pulled in \$2.5 million in the 24 hours following the interviews release – its single best fundraising day. By primary Election Day, the Talarico campaign had raised \$30 million, almost triple Crockett's contributions.

Third, Talarico took maximum advantage of his growing financial advantage by running a disciplined and focused campaign that avoided missteps. He avoided criticizing his opponent, conceding Crockett would be the choice of most Black voters, and pledged to vigorously campaign for her if she was the nominee. His campaign did not run negative ads, but an allied PAC spent \$6 million questioning Crockett's electability, pointing out she was the preferred opponent of Republicans. The Congresswoman complained that these PAC ads were racist dog-whistles but generally avoided direct attacks on her former Austin colleague.

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Mae Czachor, “Stephen Colbert slams CBS, says lawyers told him James Talarico interview could not air on “The Late Show”. CBS News, February 18, 2026.

Table 5 shows how the Talarico/Crockett vote broke down across Texas. Crockett won the big metropolitan areas of Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston, while Talarico had a strong lead in the San Antonio area and rolled up a huge majority in his Austin area base. Talarico won the border/South Texas counties by a 63%-34% margin, but Crockett had a small advantage in the remaining non-metro counties.

**Table 5: Democratic Senate Primary Vote in County Groups**

<u>Major Metro Areas</u>	Total Vote	James Talarico		Jasmine Crockett	
Dallas/Fort Worth	700,991	316,041	45.1%	377,510	53.9%
Houston	544,783	246,943	45.3%	290,293	53.3%
Austin	329,889	244,140	74.0%	83,560	25.3%
San Antonio	225,593	128,737	57.1%	94,201	41.8%
<u>South Texas/Border</u>	251,796	157,694	62.6%	86,563	34.4%
<u>Rest of Texas</u>	266,135	122,857	46.2%	139,773	52.5%

Source: Office of the Texas Secretary of State

Table 6 looks at how the five precinct groups in Harris County voted in the Democratic primary. As polls had suggested, Congresswoman Crockett had an 88%-12% advantage in majority Black precincts and ran slightly ahead in the increasingly racial diverse Houston exurbs, but lost affluent white and generally well-to-do inner suburbs by large margins. Heavily Hispanic precincts favored Talarico by 62% to 36%.

**Table 6: Democratic Senate Vote in Five Voting Precinct Groups in Harris County**

<u>Precinct Category</u>	Talarico Vote		Crockett Vote	
Affluent White	2,850	85.1%	467	13.9%
Majority Black	808	12.1%	5,866	87.6%
75% + Hispanic	1,622	61.8%	943	36.0%
Inner suburbs	2,251	67.3%	1,060	31.7%
Exurbs	1,296	48.9%	1,343	50.8%

Source: HarrisVotes, Harris County Clerk's Office

The Harris County results, coupled with the statewide data, confirm that Talarico used his big cash advantage to secure an almost two-to-one advantage among Latinos. This was decisive in an election where urban and suburban Anglos broke strongly for the Austinite while Blacks voted overwhelmingly for Crockett.

The Texas senate contest attracted huge national media attention which, coupled with Talarico's solid victory in a race where most polls showed Crockett ahead, made the previously unknown state representative a national political figure. The April 15, 2026 FEC campaign reports document Talarico's prominence. The Texan raised \$27 million in the January 1 – March 31 quarter, *the most ever raised by a US Senate candidate in the first 90 days of an election year*, with \$10 million collected after the March 3 election. To put his haul in perspective, this brought Talarico's total contributions to \$40.3 million, almost twice the \$22.0 million raised by the three Republican senate contenders.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Bottom Line: A perfect storm puts Texas's Republican senate seat at risk***

The 2026 senate primary greatly increased the odds of a competitive November election in Texas. On the Republican side, Senator Cornyn fell well short of the majority needed for renomination, a bad sign for a four-term incumbent who had a huge financial advantage over Attorney General Ken Paxton. Hopes that a Trump endorsement would unify the party behind the senator have faded. Post primary polls show Paxton leading Cornyn and that a Trump endorsement would not move enough voters to put the senior senator ahead. A Trump endorsement of Paxton would almost certainly sink the Cornyn campaign, but that would leave Republicans with a flawed nominee that GOP PACs have just spent millions thrashing.<sup>8</sup>

The threat to a weakened Republican nominee, whether John Cornyn or Ken Paxton, increased with the Democrats settling their nomination on March 3, and with that nominee, James Talarico, being described by the *New York Times* as “a fund-raising juggernaut.”<sup>9</sup> Republican nominees for major statewide offices in Texas usually enjoy a huge financial advantage over their Democratic opponents. Talarico's record-setting start seems likely to reverse that advantage and help fund a statewide effort that could benefit the seriously underfunded Democratic candidates for other statewide offices.

Republican hopes for a spring 2026 recovery fueled by Trump-mandated tax refunds are sinking in the Strait of Hormuz. Of all the things GOP candidates want to be talking about as the midterm elections loom, “forever wars” and rising gas prices are certainly not on the list. Polls have shown President Trump well under water with registered voters in Texas, but his much higher standing with the one to 1.5 million likely voters in the May GOP runoff, means Senator

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<sup>7</sup> The April 15<sup>th</sup> FEC reports showed Senator Cornyn had raised a total of \$12.9 million, Ken Paxton had raised \$7.0 million, and Wesley Hunt, \$2.1 million. These totals are of contributions made directly to individual federal candidates and do not include contributions to political action committees (PACs) that supported these candidates.

<sup>8</sup> “Polls show Paxton ahead in Texas’ Republican US Senate primary runoff,” Adam Powell, USA Today, April 10, 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Theodore Schleifer, “In Key Senate Races, Democrats Out-Raise Their Rivals in G.O.P.” *The New York Times*, April 17, 2026.

Cornyn and Attorney General Paxton have to compete in swearing fealty to the party leader. Pivoting to face a November electorate of more than ten million voters will be challenging, especially if Paxton emerges as the nominee.

One thing to watch in the coming weeks is whether the national Republican Party makes a massive second investment in Cornyn's campaign. Having spent \$70 million to get the Senator in the runoff, it would be most telling if now, in his moment of greatest need, the Washington establishment cuts bait in Texas.

*We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Reach out to us at [murraytx@cougarnet.uh.edu](mailto:murraytx@cougarnet.uh.edu); your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.*

Renée Cross contributed to this report.

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