

## Letter from Texas: February 2026

### A Democratic Primary voting surge adds to growing evidence of a “Blue Wave” in the Lone Star State

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

In-person early voting opened in Texas on February 17, officially launching months of primary contests across the United States. While voting will also conclude on March 3 in North Carolina and Arkansas, national attention has focused on the Lone Star State with virtually every prominent news organization running one or more features on the Texas contests.<sup>1</sup>

Why, after more than three decades of statewide Republican dominance, is Texas the most discussed state as the primary season kicks off? Readers of earlier monthly letters will recall a host of factors have combined to put Texas in play. These include the return to office of an emboldened President Trump neither restrained by a compliant Congress nor, until last week’s tariff decision, by a Supreme Court enamored of sweeping executive powers. The President has used his expanded powers to, among many things, impose tariff levels not seen in a century along with the most aggressive effort to remove undocumented persons in American history. Neither policy is popular nationally. That is especially the case in Texas which has the largest cross-border trade of any state and an economy deeply dependent on more than two million residents who lack legal status. Polls show that while Texans support a secure border and reject the excesses of “wokeism”, they are much more focused lately on economic issues and health care – areas where they give the Trump Administration poor marks.

Growing dissatisfaction with President Trump in Texas plays out in a state that has become much more racially, ethnically, and politically diverse. The state’s booming economy has attracted millions of new residents from other states (California is the number one source by a large margin, followed by Florida and New York) and other countries (India leads here). Meantime, the Texas Republican Party has marched farther and farther to the right on abortion restrictions, privatizing public education, narrowing voting rights, enacting aggressive redistricting maps, and not investing in health care. GOP candidates in 2026 have doubled down on absolute fealty to President Trump while stressing the dangers of Shariah law taking over Texas – neither of which are priorities for Independent and Democratic voters.

These policies have not made the Texas Democratic party popular. The state party organization is minimal, fragmented, and severely under-funded. There is virtually no active party structure outside side the big metropolitan counties and the heavily Hispanic border counties. Republicans have huge financial advantages. Governor Greg Abbott brags that he has \$125 million in his political account – likely the largest stash of any state officeholder. That said, the combination of Trump’s growing unpopularity and unhappiness with current economic policies and immigration enforcement have created

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<sup>1</sup> One of many recent examples is Michelle Cottle’s column “Democrats’ Texas Fever Dream Could Really Come True” in *The New York Times* on February 22, 2026.

opportunities for Democratic candidates. That was evident last November in special elections in Fort Worth and Houston, and in school board elections where progressive slates ousted GOP-backed majorities.

Since then, two additional data points support the proposition that 2026 will be the most competitive election year in Texas since the 1990s. This evidence is found in the January 31 runoff election results for a Fort Worth state senate seat and the dramatic increase in Democratic turnout in the party primaries that is now unfolding.

## **I. A stunning result in Tarrant County on January 31, 2026**

### ***The November 3, 2025 Special Election***

As most rural and smaller urban areas in Texas became dark red in the 1990s and early 2000s, the five counties with populations over a million moved, albeit more slowly, in the opposite direction. After the Trumpian takeover of the Republican Party in 2016, Dallas and Travis counties became dark blue while Harris and Bexar leaned more strongly Democratic. Tarrant County, which includes Fort Worth, was an exception. Donald Trump won Tarrant County in 2016 by 57,529 votes in 2016, lost to Joe Biden by just 1,826 votes in 2020, and defeated Kamala Harris by 42,125 votes in 2024. In contrast to the other big counties, most state legislators and local officials are Republicans in Tarrant County. The GOP's local resilience reflects several demographic factors: Less white flight than occurred in Dallas County; a smaller Black population than Harris County has; and a dispersed Hispanic population with lower levels of registration and voting compared to the other big metro areas.

With Tarrant County's overall Republican lean, an incumbent GOP state senator, Kelly Hancock, signed off on a new district in 2021 covering about half of Fort Worth and much of the northern suburbs of Keller, North Richland Hills, and Southlake. New Senate District 9 is considerably more Republican than the county as a whole, and seemed likely to remain safely red over the next decade. The data in Table 1 shows this was a reasonable expectation. Senator Hancock won reelection in November 2022 by more than 20% and Donald Trump carried the district by 17.2% in 2024.

Confident that Democrats posed no threat, Governor Abbott asked Senator Hancock to give up his safe seat after the 2025 legislative session, appointing him to the vacant Texas Comptroller position. Hancock's resignation triggered a special election in November. Two prominent Republicans filed, including Leigh Wambsganss, a former congressional staffer and longtime conservative activist who was endorsed by President Trump, Senator Ted Cruz, Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, and Tarrant County Judge Tim O'Hare. She also had the backing of West Texas billionaire Tim Dunn's PAC. The other Republican candidate, John Huffman, a former council member and mayor of Southlake, was endorsed by Fort Worth Mayor Mattie Parker, the *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, the *Dallas Morning News*, and backed by Miriam Adelson, a billionaire casino owner eager to expand into the Lone Star State.

Adelson, with other pro-gambling groups, poured over \$2.7 into Huffman's campaign, giving him a nearly two-to-one financial advantage over Ms. Wambsganss. With over \$4 million between them, the two Republicans waged what was essentially a GOP primary race. Huffman emphasized his practical experience in governing, his focus on property taxes, education, funding for law enforcement, and his credentials as someone who could get the job done in Austin. Wambsganss ran as a hard right social conservative. "My mission has always been clear: to defend conservative Christian family values, safeguard our freedoms and ensure Texas remains a stronghold for faith, family and freedom."<sup>2</sup>

Media coverage focused on the GOP contenders. A Democrat had also filed, but he had no electoral experience, no money, and no name identification in a senate district with a million people. Accordingly, attention focused on the Huffman/Wambsganss matchup, which was universally expected to produce a new GOP senator. Though better financed, John Huffman suffered the fate of most establishment Texas Republicans in the post George W. Bush GOP. He trailed his Christian right opponent 42,738 to 19,602 votes in the November 3 election. No surprise there.

There was, however, a very big surprise when all the SD9 votes were tabulated. The third candidate on the ballot, Democrat Taylor Rehmet, led the three-person race with 56,565 votes, 47.6% of the total cast.

Rehmet, the novice candidate who had raised little money and drawn scant media attention while the well-funded Republicans duked it out, had come within 2.5% of winning the seat outright in the first round of voting. In a coalitional party that relies heavily on female, minority, and college-educated voters, the Democratic candidate played against type. Taylor Rehmet is a white male, a union member, a machinist, a veteran, and the son of Republican parents. He also turned out to be a tireless campaigner who connected with grassroots activists who had battled (and often beat) the Wambsganss-backed slates in school board elections across the county in the spring of 2025. His campaign eschewed culture war issues and attacks on President Trump while decrying MAGA extremists. On election night, Rehmet credited his plurality to working people organizing and making their voices heard.

That worked in November when Republicans had fought with each other, but the GOP combined vote in the election had still exceeded Rehmet's by five percent. With a single candidate to rally behind, plus a huge financial advantage, party leaders like Lt. Governor Dan Patrick predicted Wambsganss would prevail in the January runoff.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in *The Texas Tribune* article "Democrat Rehmet, Republican Wambsganss head to runoff in special election for North Texas Senate seat," by Kayla Guo, Nov. 4, 2025. P. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

## ***The January 31 runoff sets off national shock waves***

A January 30, 2026 post from President Trump on Truth Social read:

“Make a plan to GET OUT AND VOTE” for the “phenomenal” Republican nominee, Leigh Wambsganss to “KEEP TEXAS RED!”

Two days later, when asked about the Texas result, Mr. Trump said:

“I didn’t hear about it. Somebody ran, where? I’m not involved in that. That’s a local Texas race.”

Taylor Rehmet’s surprising lead in the Texas senate election on November 3 drew some national attention, but high profile Democratic gubernatorial victories in Virginia and New Jersey, a landslide for Gavin Newsom’s congressional redistricting plan in California, and Zohran Mamdani’s strong showing in New York City’s mayoral contest led the national headlines.

That was decidedly not the case with the SD9 runoff three months later. Democrat Rehmet versus Republican Wambsganss was the only partisan race in the country on January 31, resulting in an extraordinary degree of national attention. The race was on deep red turf, with a sharp contrast in candidates, in a swingy county in a state that just might be joining the tiny “battleground” club for Electoral College votes.

Texas Republicans, alert to the evident danger of losing a “safe” seat, rallied behind Ms. Wambsganss. State leaders like Dan Patrick campaigned for the Republican candidate and, as noted above, President Trump pitched in to rally the GOP troops. These efforts did not just fail, they failed badly, as the data in Table 1 on page 5 shows. Taylor Rehmet, despite being outspent six-to-one, won the runoff by 14.6%, a 32 point swing from Trump’s margin over Harris in 2024 and a 35% swing from the 2022 state senate result. The big surprise was not just that the Democrat won, but that his margin was far greater than virtually anybody, including this observer expected. This surprising result led to stories like USA TODAY’s “Blue wave forming? Democrat’s Texas romp may be biggest sign yet.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Joey Garrison, February 3, 2026.

**Table 1: Party Voting in Texas Senate District 9: 2022 - 2026**

<b>2022 General</b>	<b>Rep Vote</b>		<b>Dem Vote</b>		<b>Rep Margin</b>
State Senate	166,864	60.1%	111,019	39.9%	20.2%
<b>2024 General</b>					
President	227,991	57.9%	159,992	40.7%	17.2%
<b>2025 November</b>					
State Senate	62,347*	52.4%	56,565	47.6%	4.8%
<b>2026 January</b>					
State Senate Runoff	40,648	42.7%	54,473	57.3%	-14.6%

\*The 2025 Republican vote combines 42,738 votes (35.9%) for Leigh Wambsganss and 19,602 votes (16.5%) for John Huffman.

### Analyzing the results

Since the election, several analyses have been published, as might be expected given the prominence of the surprising results. Some like the University of Florida’s Michael McDonald’s report documenting an across-the board shift in voter preference for the Democratic candidate in SD9 are well done.<sup>5</sup> Others less so. One post-election theme I object to is that Taylor Rehmet’s victory “was, at least in part, due to a significant leftward shift by Latino voters.” Another is that the Republican loss was because GOP voters stayed home while Democratic voters turned out in droves.

To get a better handle on what happened in the SD9 race, I’ve spent time pouring over the precinct returns and other analyses of who voted. Some of this work is reflected in Table 2 shown on page 6, which summarizes voting patterns across five precinct groupings in the district. These are:

- The 31 precincts in SD9 with voting age populations (VAP) comprised of more than 80% Anglos. These are middle and upper-middle class areas that are very strongly Republican.
- A sample of 20 precincts that are majority Anglo, but less than 80% in VAP.
- A sample of 18 racially and ethnically mixed precincts where there is no dominant voter group.

<sup>5</sup> Michael McDonald, “Texas Senate District 9 Analysis: A shift in preferences and turnout?”, February 14, 2026, US Elections Project Newsletter, University of Florida

- The 22 precincts in SD9 that are 80% plus in Hispanic VAP.
- The three voting precincts in SD9 that are majority Black.

**Table 2: Breaking down the Vote in Texas Senate District 9**

Precinct Group	VAP in 2020	2024 President Voted			2025 SD9 Election Voted			Jan 2026 Runoff Voted		
		Trump	Harris		Rep%	Dem%		Rep%	Dem%	
80%+ Anglo (N of 31)	66,076	79.8%	69.6%	29.2%	26.0%	66.3	33.7	22.0%	57.4	42.6
50-79% Anglo (Sample of 20)	68,435	64.3%	60.8%	37.8%	20.2%	55.2	44.8	16.2%	43.6	57.4
Racially Mixed (Sample of 18)	57,385	34.7%	53.2%	45.4%	9.1%	57.8	42.2	7.1%	34.9	65.1
80%+ Hispanic (N = 22)	42,117	26.1%	35.1%	63.9%	5.2%	18.0	82.0	5.3%	10.4	89.6
Majority Black (N = 3)	7,674	27.5%	27.7%	71.0%	7.7%	23.1	76.9	4.8%	18.5	81.5

VAP is the voting age population count by the 2020 US Census. Voted is the percentage of voted cast divided by the 2020 voting age population.

These precinct data lead me to the following conclusions:

1. SD9 was carefully crafted in 2021 to include very high turnout Anglo-dominated areas, combined with heavily populated Hispanic and mixed Hispanic/Black precincts featuring low levels of voter registration and turnout. The latter support Democratic candidates in General Elections, but contribute relatively few votes to the district totals. Note that the Hancock-approved map included only three Black majority precincts in SD9, and these were just barely above 50% in African American VAP.
2. The claim that Latino voters significantly contributed to Rehmet’s 57.3% vote share is overstated. Hispanic precincts clearly shifted toward the Democrat from 2024 to 2026. Harris’s margin over Trump was 29% (64% - 35%) in heavily Latino precincts; Rehmet’s was 80% (90% - 10%), but Hispanic voters only accounted for about five percent of the total vote in SD9, so they could not account for most of Taylor Rehmet’s margin of victory.
3. The precinct data is less clear for Black voters because of their lack of concentration, but the African American voter shifts were likely smaller. Black voters had high levels of Democratic support in previous elections like the 2024 presidential race so there was less room for improvement. That being the case, Rehmet’s surprising victory mostly reflected the fact that he made large and consistent gains in voter preference across *all* Anglo-dominated precincts.

4. The precinct-level data cannot directly refute the assertion that Wambsganss lost because Republicans stayed home. However, note that the vast majority of the approximately 570,000 registered voters in SD9 “stayed home.” That is what usually happens in special elections (a rare exception was the 2025 California referendum on redistricting where more votes were cast than in the 2022 General Election). And among the minority who did not stay home on January 31, many more of these voters were in Republican neighborhoods than Democratic precincts. The voting age population turnout in the 80% plus Anglo precincts (which were the most strongly Republican in SD9) was over four times as high as VAP voting percentages in Black and Hispanic areas.
5. Independent analyses of the vote history of the January runoff voters *do not show a spike in voters with a Democratic vote history*. Rehmet campaigned to win crossover voters. Available evidence strongly suggest he succeeded.

Summing up, Taylor Rehmet won because he made across-the-board gains in a district where at least 85% of the January 2026 voters were Anglos. His gains were most pronounced in the racially and ethnically mixed precincts populated by lower-middle and working class voters who were disproportionately white. Since those voters were the focus of his campaign that should not be surprising. Rehmet did make large percentage gains in the low-turnout Black and Latino areas. That should be a major concern for Republicans around the state because these voters will be a much larger share of the state electorate than was the case in the SD9 January vote.

## **II. Early voting patterns in the 2026 primaries raise a red flag for Republicans**

American states have some form of preliminary voting to narrow the choices on the November General Election ballot. Texas uses a variant of the “open primary” with the vote starting in late February. Qualifying voters (persons over 65, disabled, etc.) can vote by mail, while all registered persons can vote early in their county of residence. In-person early voting has become increasingly popular in Texas, so that nearly half of the total primary vote is usually cast before the official Election Day.

Texas does not allow registration by party, so when the primaries roll around in even-numbered years, all registered voters can vote in either the Republican or Democratic primary, but not both. Texas requires the primary winner to get a majority (50% plus) of the total vote to become the party nominee. If no person secures that, a runoff is required. This year that is May 26, 2026, almost three months after the primary. Voters who cast a ballot in the primary can only vote in the same party’s runoff, but voters who skipped the first round can vote in the Democratic or Republican runoff (but not both).

Primary elections are enormously important for two reasons. First, as noted, they narrow the November field to just one Republican and one Democrat on the General Election ballot for each office. Second, since most Texans now live in counties and districts that lean strongly Republican or Democratic, the winner of the locally favored party primary is virtually assured of prevailing in the November General Election.

In the great majority of rural and smaller urban counties few Democrats file for office, so the Republican winner in March (or May if a runoff is required) often wins the election long before the final vote is scheduled. Conversely, as big urban counties like Dallas and Travis have become dark blue, many local races are decided in the Democratic primary because no Republican files for these offices.

Table 3 summarizes the overall pattern of primary voting in Texas from 1992 to the present. Despite the importance of these elections, the great majority of registered Texans sit them out. That is especially true in the non-presidential midterm primaries where the combined primary turnout among registered voters averaged a paltry 14.6% between 1994 and 2022.

**Table 3: Party Primary Voting History in Texas: 1992 – 2026**

Year	Reg. Voters	Pres Primary Year		Non-Pres Primary Year		Combined Turnout %
		Dem Vote	Rep Vote	Dem Vote	Rep Vote	
1992	7,841	1,483	978	--	--	31.4
1994	8,929	--	--	1,028	558	17.8
1996	9,547	921	1,020	--	--	20.3
1998	11,089	--	--	654	550	10.9
2000	11,410	787	1,127	--	--	16.8
2002	12,131	--	--	1,003	627	13.4
2004	12,161	829	688	--	--	12.4
2006	12,667	--	--	508	655	9.2
2008	12,607	2,875	1,362	--	--	33.6
2010	12,939	--	--	681	1,485	16.7
2012	12,908	590	1,449	--	--	15.8
2014	13,544	--	--	554	1,338	14.0
2016	14,130	1,436	2,836	--	--	30.2
2018	15,183	--	--	1,023	1,549	16.9
2020	16,107	2,094	2,017	--	--	25.5

2022	17,183	--	--	1,076	1,954	17.6
2024	17,948	982	2,323	--	--	18.4
2026	18,658	--	--	865,385	747,153	6.2
				(after 8 days of early voting)		
(Derek Ryan Projections from early voting)				2,964	2,550	26.8

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Data are in thousands except for 2026 EV totals.

Primary turnout in presidential years varies greatly. When there is a spirited contest for a party's nomination, voting spikes up sharply as happened in the 2008 Democratic battle between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama and the Ted Cruz-Donald Trump showdown in the 2016 Republican Primary. Donald Trump has continued to be a turnout machine in the Texas GOP presidential primaries with over two million votes cast in both 2020 and 2024.

Now to 2026. From the first day of early voting, it was apparent we were *not* going to see the usual low turnout non-presidential primaries Texans expect. Republican voting has been robust, reflecting a brutal US Senate primary where long-term incumbent John Cornyn faces two strong GOP challengers, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and Houston Congressman Wesley Hunt. Outside groups have poured tens of millions of dollars into this race, mostly in support of Senator Cornyn. With Paxton running for the US Senate, four major candidates are waging an expensive race for Texas AG. There are a half dozen Republican congressional districts open because of incumbent retirements plus several newly drawn districts: both have attracted more Republican contenders. Well over 100 million dollars has been spent in the GOP primary. Based on the first nine days of early voting, Republican analyst Derek Ryan projects the final Republican primary vote will total 2.4 million, which would exceed the 2024 presidential primary total.

The bigger story, however, is on the Democratic side. Traditionally, GOP voters dominate the midterm primaries. In the last four non-presidential primaries, Republican voters outnumbered Democrats by an average 1.6 million to 834,000 – a two to one ratio. This year, even with Republican turnout setting a midterm record, the Texas Democratic vote is exceeding the GOP turnout. Ryan projects a final Democratic vote of 2.8 million, on a par with the Obama/Clinton presidential primary total of 2008.

What the hell is going on here? There is – obviously – no presidential campaign to drive up voting. Total Republican election ad spending outpaces Democratic outlays by a four-to-one margin. Far more Republicans are running for local and district offices in Texas than Democrats. And yet more voters are choosing to get in the Democratic line for early voting than the Republican queue. Why are so many Texans voting in a primary for candidates of a party that has not won a statewide election since 1994?

Great question.

My take is three things are happening. First, the Texas electorate ain't what it used to be. Table 3 shows there are about 18.7 million registered voters in Texas today. There were about 14 million ten years ago. The great majority of the expanded Texan electorate are persons of color – Hispanics, Blacks, Asian Americans. Most have not been reliable primary voters, and, *if* they have voted, not necessarily in Democratic primaries. This year they are both voting in larger numbers and mostly voting in the Democratic Primary. That is reflected in populous (and growing) suburban counties like Collin, Denton, and Fort Bend where the primary vote is traditionally Republican. This year Democratic primary early voters equal or exceed Republican voters in these high-turnout diverse suburban areas.

Second, and most important in my opinion, is President Donald J. Trump. Trump is, as I have previously opined, one of the most consequential presidents in American history. Whether the changes his administration have brought and hope to bring are good or bad for the nation is not my purpose here. What is indisputable is that Trump<sup>47</sup> has deeply polarized Americans, especially in recent months after events in Minneapolis amid growing concerns among voters about their economic future. The President, as in his 2026 State of the Union address, continues to rally his sizeable base that still strongly supports him and – most importantly for our purposes, votes in Texas Republican primaries. But as the GOP primary becomes even more Trump-centered, that drives anti-Trump Democrats and Independents toward the alternative primary.

Mr. Trump is a truly a turnout machine ... for both primaries. But, in my opinion, the anger and fear on the anti-Trump side is more intense this year than support for the President's policies is among Republicans, which drives more primary voters into the Democratic line at the polls.

Third, Democrats have partially overcome one of their biggest problems in Texas in 2026 – weak candidates at the top-of-the-ticket. The party has ended up with two candidates – Jasmine Crockett and James Talarico – that have used their US Senate campaigns to channel the deep angst of Democratic and Independent voters into getting people off their couches and to the polls. Both candidates are popular with Democratic voters. Congresswoman Crockett entered the race with much higher name recognition than State Representative Talarico, but he has raised and spent more campaign funds. Between them, they have motivated a wide swath of the coalitional party to get involved in this election. The Talarico/Crockett contest is close, and the outcome is difficult to predict with a vastly larger midterm electorate. The Democratic winner on March 3rd will likely have the advantage of watching the Republican US Senate contest drag on to late May.<sup>6</sup>

The 2026 Texas primaries have surprised political observers and voters alike. More surprises may come in November as Texas seems headed toward a classic partisan battle in the Lone Star State.

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<sup>6</sup> There is a third candidate on the ballot, Ahmad Hassan, who got two percent in a recent poll, so if the Crockett/Talarico race ends up a virtual dead heat, he could force a May runoff. But in the Republican race no poll has shown any candidate close to securing a majority needed to win on March 3<sup>rd</sup>.

In the March Letter from Texas, I will sort through the primary vote results. Did Democrats end up outvoting Republicans as Derek Ryan projected? Where were the biggest swings in primary voting? Did the polls that (mostly) predicted Paxton would lead Cornyn into a May runoff, and that Crockett had maintained a lead over Talarico, pan out? Did the Lower Rio Grande Valley primary vote swing back to the Democrats? Lots of questions to answer next month.

*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.

Suggested citation: University of Houston Hobby School of Public Affairs, February 2026, "Letter from Texas"