

## Letter from Texas: July 2026

### **Could Texas Republicans lose their “trifecta” this November? The key battleground is the state House of Representatives**

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Lt. Governor Dan Patrick surprised some a few weeks after the March 2026 party primaries when he told fellow conservatives at the Texas Public Policy Foundation’s annual conference in Austin that Republicans were “going to have a tough time” holding their majority in the state House in the fall election.<sup>1</sup> That loss would end the “trifecta” control of both houses of the Texas Legislature and the governorship that has enabled the GOP to draw very favorable electoral maps in the Lone Star State.

After a bitter senate primary where challenger Attorney General Ken Paxton forced four-term US Senator John Cornyn in a late May runoff, Patrick warned that a divided GOP could not only lose the senate seat they had held since 1961, but also their majority in the Texas House of Representatives. The Cornyn reelection campaign elaborated on that theme. Replacing the veteran senator with a controversial nominee like Paxton could lead to a down-ballot “bloodbath” undoing the statewide dominance the GOP had enjoyed since the 2002 elections. Primary voters were not impressed. Boosted by President Trump’s late endorsement, Paxton crushed Cornyn 64% to 36% in the May runoff.

With less than 100 days until the November election concludes, revisiting Lt. Governor Patrick’s warning is appropriate. Are Republicans really going to have a tough time holding their House majority, or was this just hyperbolic rhetoric designed to unite the GOP in a challenging election cycle?

There are good reasons for the latter view. Republicans hold an 88 – 62 advantage in the Texas House of Representatives. They could lose a dozen seats and still have a majority. The statewide House map was carefully crafted by Republicans in 2021 and worked well in the 2022 and 2024 General Elections. Fewer than a dozen seats were close in 2024 and these were about equally won by Democrats and Republicans. Candidate quality matters in most elections, and in the 20 districts that Democrats have some chance of flipping (see Table 1 on page 9 ), 14 feature Republican incumbents while most Democratic challengers are novices with little or no campaign experience. The largest source of campaign money in state legislative elections is the “Austin Lobby” and these folks follow the basic rule that “losers don’t legislate.” Lobbyists, and the many interests they represent at the state capitol, support Republicans in competitive races because they have been the “winners” for more than two decades.

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<sup>1</sup> Alejandro Serrano, “Dan Patrick says Republicans will “have a tough time” holding Texas House majority in November,” *The Texas Tribune*, April 8, 2026.

The GOP financial advantage is further magnified by the fact that Governor Abbott, who has a huge stake in his party's continued control of the Texas House, is sitting on a campaign stash of over \$100 million, second only to President's Trump's \$400 million MAGA cash pile.

Finally, there are good reasons Texas is dark red on color-coded maps. Texans are more culturally conservative and religious than Americans outside of the South, and voters with these values mostly align with the Republican Party. The Texas Democratic Party has no statewide bench and has effectively collapsed outside metropolitan areas save for a few Hispanic majority counties. Local Democrats are tethered to a national party many Texas voters view as out of step with their values. In November 2024, the national popular presidential vote was close (Harris lost by 1.5%). Donald Trump won Texas by 13.9%.

Given all this, should one dismiss Dan Patrick's warning? I think not. In this letter I examine why there is a real battle unfolding for control of the Texas House of Representatives this fall.

### ***A "Blue Wave" seems more and more likely in Texas as the fall election approaches***

Midterm elections are usually tough for incumbent parties, especially when one party controls the presidency and both houses of Congress as is the case in 2026. We noted that pattern in the 2018 midterm when President Trump's party lost 41 House seats and their congressional majority. Two of the lost seats were in previously "safe" Republican seats in Houston and Dallas. The losses in 2018 extended down-ballot in Texas where Democrats flipped 12 House and two state Senate seats.

The single best predictor of how the president's party does is the incumbent's job approval rating. President Trump was underwater in 2018. His overall rating in 2026 is even lower and has dropped sharply in recent weeks. The latest YouGov national poll had Trump's job approval rating at 34%, with 62% disapproval, putting him 28 points underwater.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, at this point in Trump's first term, his job rating was -9%. YouGov estimates Trump's Texas job approval rating in late July 2026 is -20%. Eight years ago, Texans were evenly divided in assessing Mr. Trump's job performance.

The president's declining status is reflected in Texas voting results in 2026. The only partisan contest was a Tarrant County election to fill a vacant state senate seat. In a January 31 runoff, Democrat Taylor Rehmet defeated Trump-endorsed Republican Leigh Wambsganss by 57% to 43%. Trump had won the district by 17% in 2024 – a swing of 31 points. The March primaries – where both parties had competitive US Senate elections – showed Democratic voting (2.3 million) exceeding Republican participation (2.1 million). This year's primaries marked the first

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<sup>2</sup> *The Economist*, "Trump's job a record low driven down by Gen X, white Americans, and Independents," July 28, 2026.

time in 30 years more Texas voters elected to cast a Democratic as opposed to a Republican ballot in a midterm primary.<sup>3</sup>

Since the March 3 primaries, indicators uniformly point to an even tougher electoral environment for Republicans. The US/Israeli war against Iran launched on February 28, 2026 was – according to President Trump – going to be a 4 - 6 week operation. Never popular, the war is entering its sixth month with no end in sight. Gasoline prices are much higher than before the war, and inflation has ticked up giving Democrats a rare advantage on managing the economy – Donald J. Trump’s biggest advantage over Biden/Harris in 2024.

The other big issue advantage Republicans had in 2024, managing immigration, has also reversed as voters have soured on the aggressive arrest and removal of undocumented persons by the Trump administration. Hispanics, who constitute about 25 percent of registered voters in Texas, have been especially concerned. Polls document a sharp decline in Latino support for Republicans in Texas. Those concerns have deepened with the July 7 shooting of Lorenzo Salgado Araujo in Houston’s East End neighborhood. Mr. Salgado Araujo, a 35-year US resident, was fatally wounded by an ICE agent as he drove to a construction job site with three other undocumented workers. His three children – all US citizens – have disputed the Department of Homeland Security’s claim that the victim endangered the ICE officers with his vehicle.

The loss of support from Latinos is of particular concern to both parties in this cycle because their share of the Texas electorate is steadily growing at the same time that their partisan attachments have weakened. Hispanics now constitute a large share of the “swing” voters in Texas. In 2016 and 2018 they moved toward the Democratic candidacies of Hillary Clinton for president and Beto O’Rourke for U.S. Senate. In 2024 they swung sharply toward Donald Trump. Current polling suggests a strong movement back toward Texas Democratic candidates. In the 20 swing House districts listed in Table 1 on page 9, the Spanish-surname registered voter (SSRV) ranges from 10% to 80%. A big Latino shift endangers many Republican House seats. The Tarrant County state senate race earlier this year was a red flag warning as Taylor Rehmet crushed Leigh Wambsganss in heavily Hispanic precincts.

### ***The US Senate race between Republican Ken Paxton and Democrat James Talarico impacts down-ballot contests for legislative seats***

With the November election looming ever closer, it is increasingly clear that the top of the ticket race between Democrat James Talarico and Republican Ken Paxton is making a challenging election cycle situation more difficult for the Texas GOP this year. Republicans have not lost a U.S. Senate election in Texas since 1988, and most of their victories have been by margins for ten percent or more. The notable exception was 2018, when El Paso Congressman Beto O’Rourke lost his race against Senator Ted Cruz by just 2.6 percent. However, two years later

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<sup>3</sup> Texans does not allow registration as a party member, so voters can cast a ballot in either the Democratic or Republican primary in March of even-numbered years.

incumbent John Cornyn won reelection by ten percent, and Cruz's margin rose to eight percent over Congressman Colin Allred in November 2024. This year looks very different.

What makes this contest different? First – the long, divisive, expensive Republican primary. For the first time since the GOP won a U.S. Senate seat in 1961, a sitting Republican senator (Cornyn) faced a *strong challenge in the party primary*. President Trump could have prevented this but pointedly did not endorse the incumbent. Trump's decision encouraged Attorney General Paxton, Congressman Wesley Hunt, and four others to file against John Cornyn. National Republicans poured more than \$100 million into the race to support Senator Cornyn and deny the nomination to Paxton, widely viewed as a risky candidate in the fall. It was not enough, but the massive negative ad campaign further damaged Paxton's reputation.

Second, although Ken Paxton crushed Cornyn in the May 26 runoff, that was mostly due, in my opinion, to President Trump's endorsement just as in-person early voting was getting underway in the May runoff. Ken Paxton raised little money, made few campaign appearances, and avoided reporters, depending on deep MAGA base support and his gamble that, in the end, Trump would endorse him. That worked in the low-turnout May runoff, where Paxton got about the same number of votes (888,196) as he received in March (878,405) while John Cornyn's support collapsed after President Trump gave the Attorney General his "total and complete endorsement."<sup>4</sup>

Third, Ken Paxton virtually disappeared after winning the May runoff. The new nominee did few campaign events, little or no outreach to establishment Republicans in Texas and Washington who had backed John Cornyn and received mostly negative media coverage. Importantly, the Attorney General has raised far less money than his Democratic opponent, State Representative James Talarico. A July 30, 2026 article in *The New York Times* noted:

In the primary, Mr. Paxton defeated Senator John Cornyn, a favorite of many of the country's and state's largest donors. The Republican nominee still lacks enthusiasm from these contributors, who financed ads in the primary repeatedly calling him a criminal and womanizer. Their opinions largely haven't changed, especially with the continuing drumbeat of revelations of Mr. Paxton's world travels with his girlfriend, the Republicans said.<sup>5</sup>

Texas, with 18 media markets, is a very expensive state to campaign in. Paxton's weak fund raising has major implications. His opponent, James Talarico, by contrast, has continued raising money at a furious clip. The Democrat entered July with about nine times as much cash in his principal campaign account than Paxton reported in his coffers. The *Times* noted Mr. Talarico has been on television since June, spending about \$12 million on ads to introduce himself to voters. Paxton has been "dark" with no television spending yet scheduled, according to

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<sup>4</sup> Cornyn got 910,382 votes in March (42.0%), but just 503,430 (36.2%) in May.

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Schleifer, "After Vicious Primary, G.O.P. Is Slow to Spend on Texas Senate Race," July 30, 2026.

AdImpact, a media tracking firm.<sup>6</sup> Talarico, who struggled to win Black votes in the March primary, was also able to announce a \$25 million commitment to fund outreach to the state's large African American electorate for the fall election. This commitment would constitute by far the largest such investment in Texas election history.

Fourth, rather than heed Lt. Governor Patrick's advice and rally behind the nominee, Senator Cornyn has avoided the campaign trail in Texas and was in a high-profile fight in Washington with President Trump over confirming Todd Blanche as Attorney General. President Trump has called Senator Cornyn a sore loser and noted that his 24-year Washington D.C. career was ended by his endorsement of Paxton. A "kumbaya" reconciliation between Paxton and Cornyn seems increasingly remote.

These developments have helped pushed the Texas Senate race from "safe" Republican, to "lean" Republican, to "tossup." On July 31, the prediction markets Kalshi and Polymarket gave Paxton a 53% chance of winning in November to Talarico's 47%. The average of recent polls gives Talarico a slight edge, 47.0% to 45.1%. A new Fox survey has the Democrat with a 51% to 48% lead and six-point advantage among voters who say they are highly motivated in this year's election in Texas.

The senate race is drawing enormous media coverage and will drive voter turnout. Few voters in the big media markets know who represents them in Austin, and most cast down-ballot votes for the party they favored at the top of the ticket. Candidate quality is a big deal at the top of the ticket, but makes much less difference, for example, in the DFW media market that includes nearly 40 state representative districts. As the senate race enters the final stretch, Talarico's fund-raising juggernaut compared to Paxton's money struggles offsets the massive GOP money gap in other statewide contests. It also enables, as mentioned, the Democratic nominee to fund expensive voter persuasion and turnout efforts in Black and Hispanic precincts that will potentially benefit Democratic legislative candidates in big metropolitan areas.

### ***The normal Republican advantage in Texas district elections is limited in House of Representative contests***

A big reason Democrats have a decent chance of winning the senate race is that, as a statewide contest, it cannot be gerrymandered to give the Republican nominee a structural advantage. All votes go into one big pot, are equal in weight, with a winner-take-all result. District contests, however, can be greatly influenced by partisan gerrymandering, and Texas Republicans are masters of the art. That being the case, how can they lose their House majority? Mostly because of a special rule that applies only in these contests.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Most political offices in Texas are filled in *single member district* elections. These include the 38 Texas seats in the U.S. House of Representatives, 31 Texas Senate seats, 15 State Board of Education positions, and the 150 Texas House of Representative offices. In all four cases, the maps drawn for these bodies are subject to partisan gerrymanders. This has given the Texas Republican Party a key mechanism to maintain and enhance their control of state politics even as their vote base among older, conservative Anglos has shrunk.

U.S. Supreme Court decisions in recent years have removed virtually all restraints on partisan gerrymanders. Texas Republicans have used the removal of these limits aggressively as reflected in the redrawing of the state's 38 congressional districts in the summer of 2025.

There is, however, one set of Texas district elections where the ability to aggressively gerrymander is limited – the Texas House of Representatives. That limitation gives Texas Democrats an opportunity to win control of this body as Lt. Governor Patrick warned in April.

The constraint is the “county line rule.” Texas courts have interpreted a provision of the Texas Constitution to require that seats in the House of Representatives must be apportioned across the 254 counties, consistent with the one-person, one-vote rules required by federal courts, to respect county lines as much as possible. Federal courts require congressional districts be exactly equal in population based on the most recent US Census, but state and local districts can deviate from exact equality by plus or minus five percent.

How does this combination of federal rules requiring near population equality with state rules prohibiting splitting counties unless necessary work? The 2021 redrawing of the Texas House provides a good example. The 2020 census data released in the summer of 2021 showed Texas had added four million people since the 2010 count. Growth had been uneven, with most of the gain in the four big metropolitan areas that constitute the Texas Triangle. Many rural counties lost population. Since the House membership is fixed at 150 by the Texas Constitution, seats would have to be moved from out-state into the Triangle.

The 2020 census counted 29,145,506 persons in Texas. That meant each of the 38 congressional seats must contain exactly 766,987 people. The same population divided by 150 (the number of state House seats) yields an average of 194,303 persons. But here, districts can deviate up to five percent from this exact population. Which meant all state House districts could contain a maximum population of 204,019 and a minimum population of 184,587.

If any individual county's population falls within this range, like Ellis County in the Dallas area with 192,460 people, it *must* be assigned a single Texas House seat that exactly matches the county boundaries. No gerrymandering is possible in Ellis County. Brazoria County, with 372,031 people, was a little short of the ideal population to get two seats with an average of 186,066 – but that was just within the permitted max/min range – so Brazoria must be given two whole districts that do not cross county lines. Within the county, the Republican-controlled map makers could split the county however they liked as long as they kept the two districts

roughly equal in population. So, some gerrymandering is possible in Brazoria County but is limited by the inability to move any part of the two districts across county lines.

How does the county line rule work in Harris County, where the 2020 census counted 4,730,408 people? Divided by 150, Harris County was entitled to 24.35 Texas House seats in the 2021 redrawing. Given the +/- five percent deviation permitted, this is rounded to 24 seats that must be entirely within Harris County. Like Brazoria County, the 24 Harris County districts can be gerrymandered for partisan purposes, but none can cross the county line. Harris County is a box containing 24 districts of approximately equal population. Fort Bend County's population was 822,779 in 2020, entitling it to 4.23 seats in the 2021 remapping. Four whole seats had to be entirely within the county box, with the surplus population assigned to one adjacent county or counties needing more people to get above the required minimum. Waller County, which had just 56,794 people, must be treated as a little box added to other small counties until you get to the minimum of 184,587 people needed for a full district.

This general rule for the Texas House of Representatives that prohibits splitting any county unless necessary to achieve equal (or nearly equal) population severely limits the extreme gerrymandering we note elsewhere in state maps. The 2025 congressional redistricting, for example, ran CD13 from Dalhart in the far northwest corner of the Texas Panhandle 400 miles into Denton County to connect the Democratic voters around the University of North Texas with 30 mostly rural and conservative counties to the north and west. If the county limit rule had applied, Denton County, with 906,422 people, would have a congressional district sited entirely within the county with the excess population of 139,435 assigned to just one other district.

The county limit rule is becoming more and more of a problem for Texas Republicans because of demographic changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The county boxes do not change, *but the people in the boxes do change*. Since the 2000 census, more and more Texas House seats have been apportioned to fast-growing counties in the four big metropolitan areas that constitute the Texas Triangle. Eighty-four of the 150 districts are now sited in just ten counties within the Triangle.<sup>7</sup> Travis County has been dark blue for 20 years, but Republicans have been able to hold onto 21 state House seats in the other four core urban counties of Harris, Dallas, Tarrant, and Bexar. Most are in danger because of the out-migration of whites combined with increasing numbers of Hispanic and Black voters. Democrats have also won a few seats in the big suburban counties of Collin, Denton, Fort Bend, and Williamson and are now becoming more competitive as minorities (especially Asian Americans) are moving into these areas. Only one big suburban county, Montgomery, remains deep red going into this fall's election.

Since the Texas House of Representative membership is fixed at 150, adding seats in the big metro areas means losing districts elsewhere. Some of the shrinkage is in Democratic counties in South Texas and along the border, but most losses are in deeply Republican rural Texas and smaller metropolitan areas.

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<sup>7</sup> In addition to the 24 districts in Harris County, 14 are in Dallas County, 11 in Tarrant, 10 in Bexar, 6 in Travis, 5 in Collin, 4 in Fort Bend and Denton, and 3 in Williamson and Montgomery.

Finally, the population shifts over a decade mean GOP redistricting maps in metropolitan areas become less effective over time. Older Anglos age out of the electorate while new voters are disproportionately Latino, Black, or Asian. Republican candidates, of course, get many minority votes, but Anglos are far more supportive of the party's nominees than are other segments of the electorate. Texas, unlike Florida and the Carolinas, does not get regular infusions of retiring baby boomers from other states to replace losses due to death or disability.

***The March 2026 primary documents the risks for the Republican majority in the Texas House of Representatives***

The March 2026 primary highlighted the risk for the House Republican majority. Texas does not register voters by political party affiliation. All voters are thus free to choose which partisan queue to join. Most select the dominant local party, since the primary election effectively chooses their local sheriffs, judges, county commissioners and state legislators. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that meant many more Texans voted in the Democratic primary than the Republican election. That has reversed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with Republicans outnumbered Democratic primary voters.

In non-presidential years such as 2026, we expect about 1.5 million voters will cast Republican ballots compared to one million in the Democratic primary. This year was different. Both parties had spirited contests for the U.S. Senate nomination – a first in Texas. And more people voted in the Democratic primary than the Republican contest. That unique situation provided a rare measure of comparative partisan strength in the Texas House of Representative districts that will determine majority control in Austin next year. Almost all of the 62 Democratic-held seats are not in play, but with 88 districts to protect – and the county line limit preventing aggressive new maps to shore up endangered members – there are a lot of Republican seats that are potentially competitive.

The primary vote distribution is one measure of relative competitiveness. Table 1 includes the 20 House districts that are most at risk for Republicans. In 18 of these, more people voted in the Democratic than the Republican primary, and in two other cases in Denton and Harris Counties, the differences were small.

**Table 1**

**Republican-held Texas House Districts where the Democratic primary vote exceeded or nearly equaled GOP turnout**

| House.<br>Dist. | Area/<br>County | Rep<br>Voters | US Senate Votes |         | Dem<br>Voters | US Senate Votes |          |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|-----------------|---------|---------------|-----------------|----------|
|                 |                 |               | Cornyn          | Paxton  |               | Talarico        | Crockett |
| 031             | S. Texas        | 13,041        | 5,153           | 5,614   | 26,240        | 10,413          | 5,977    |
| 034             | Nueces          | 8,009         | 3,787           | 3,042   | 11,939        | 7,044           | 3,498    |
| 037             | S. Texas        | 9,328         | 4,076           | 3,095   | 15,706        | 9,091           | 5,393    |
| 052             | Williamson      | 18,295        | 8,501           | 6,337   | 21,965        | 14,902          | 6,405    |
| 063             | Denton          | 16,512        | 7,162           | 6,024   | 16,313        | 9,344           | 6,805    |
| 080             | S. Texas        | 8,811         | 3,460           | 3,688   | 18,291        | 8,515           | 6,137    |
| 093             | Tarrant         | 15,126        | 5,867           | 6,147   | 16,481        | 7,939           | 7,895    |
| 094             | Tarrant         | 17,442        | 7,714           | 6,464   | 17,443        | 7,364           | 7,458    |
| 096             | Tarrant         | 16,277        | 7,982           | 5,776   | 19,646        | 7,106           | 12,306   |
| 097             | Tarrant         | 18,084        | 8,656           | 5,979   | 20,074        | 10,319          | 9,584    |
| 108             | Dallas          | 23,398        | 13,886          | 5,761   | 23,135        | 16,907          | 5,559    |
| 112             | Dallas          | 17,814        | 8,439           | 5,996   | 21,976        | 11,978          | 9,281    |
| 118             | Bexar           | 10,903        | 4,730           | 4,825   | 17,631        | 8,936           | 7,812    |
| 121             | Bexar           | 18,781        | 9,118           | 6,814   | 22,598        | 14,873          | 7,152    |
| 122             | Bexar           | 22,164        | 10,435          | 8,456   | 22,853        | 15,135          | 7,034    |
| 127             | Harris          | 17,364        | 6,396           | 7,034   | 18,002        | 6,785           | 10,882   |
| 129             | Harris          | 16,364        | 6,500           | 6,494   | 15,860        | 9,939           | 5,561    |
| 132             | Harris          | 13,939        | 4,953           | 5,523   | 17,023        | 8,244           | 8,559    |
| 138             | Harris          | 14,030        | 5,712           | 4,816   | 14,321        | 6,962           | 5,187    |
| 150             | Harris          | 12,937        | 4,516           | 5,127   | 13,996        | 6,116           | 7,658    |
| Total Votes     |                 | 308,619       | 137,113.        | 113,012 | 371,493       | 197,912         | 146,143  |

Sources: County election official websites. The US Senate vote in each district was calculated by the author from precinct-level returns.

The vote pattern in March is also relevant to November because the primary nominees will, of course, head their party ticket in the fall General Election.

Several things stand out from the vote patterns in this table.

- The competitive districts were a bit more Democratic than the state as a whole. Statewide, Democratic voters accounted for 51.7% of the 4.5 million ballots cast, but in the 20 most competitive House districts the Democratic vote totaled 54.6% of the 690,000 voters.
- Democrats, as the Cornyn campaign had warned, got the fall matchup they wanted out of the Republican primary. The incumbent senator got 137,113 votes in these districts compared to 113,012 for Paxton. Cornyn led in 13 of the districts, Paxton in just seven. The primary vote pattern showed the attorney general's vote strength was in rural Texas, smaller and mid-sized metropolitan areas, and exurban counties like Montgomery. Paxton's support in these areas may enable him to win statewide against Talarico, but control of the Texas House depends more on areas where Cornyn was the preferred candidate.
- Table 1 also documents the fact that Democrats have a better shot at winning control of the Texas House with Talarico than Jasmine Crockett as their nominee. The Austin State Representative got 197,912 votes in these districts compared to 146,143 for the Dallas Congresswoman. He led in 15, while she got more votes in five districts.
- Geographically, the most important "boxes" are in Harris County where five of 24 seats are competitive and in Tarrant County where four of 11 seats could flip.
- Republican-held seats in South Texas, San Antonio, and Corpus Christi point to the critical importance of Hispanic voters in determining majority control next year. If Republicans can hold their recent gains with Latino voters, they have a very good chance to retain power in Austin. Conversely, a big swing to Democratic candidates as happened in the special senate election in Tarrant County earlier this year would greatly ease the Democratic path back to power after being largely shut out of power since 2002.
- Talarico, as noted, led the March voting in most of the competitive state House races. However, if Democrats are going to flip districts like 127 in Harris County and 096 in Tarrant County where Crockett rolled up big margins, the senate nominee must turn out Black voters in precincts where he got as little as 10% of the primary vote. Talarico's pledge of \$25 million for a Black-focused vote program is doubly important his fall. He cannot win the U.S. Senate seat without robust African

American support, and Democratic control of the Texas House also partly hinges on what happens in these districts where the Black population is surging.

***My conclusion: Republicans should heed Lt. Governor Patrick's warning – their state House majority is at risk – but are likely to retain control despite significant losses***

After decades of following Texas politics, I began writing these monthly letters last year because I sensed the state was entering one of those rare periods when the tectonic plates were shifting. Fundamental changes were coming. The relative stability that had followed the Republican takeover of the Lone Star State in the 1990s was ending, but what would follow is not at all clear.

What is more and more evident is that people – voters - are unhappy. The Republican base that participates in party primaries just fired their four-term senator, John Cornyn, and replaced him with a fire-brand insurgent who may well lose the seat to a young Democrat hardly anyone in Texas had heard of two years ago. Our long-serving governor, Greg Abbott, who has relentlessly promoted economic growth, now faces a reaction in deep-red rural Texas as hundreds of new data centers stress water and power resources. A recent Fox News poll has Abbott leading his little-known Democratic opponent by a single percentage point. Unhappy Texas voters gave Donald J. Trump a 14% victory over Vice-President Kamala Harris 21 months ago. New polling from YouGov shows the president is now deeply underwater with Texas voters.

Circling back to Dan Patrick's warning earlier this year, Republicans should be worried about the Texas House. Alone among Texas district maps, these cannot be jiggered and rejiggered to protect a majority, unlike congressional and state senate maps. A blue wave of some size is almost certainly building in the state. But will the wave be large enough to overturn the 88 – 62 Republican advantage?

My guess (and we are all guessing three months before voters render their decision) is Republican House seats will be lost. However, likely not enough to give the Democrats the majority and the Speaker's gavel. The problem is that to net 14 or more seats, Democrats would need to succeed in three different sets of districts this fall.

One group includes upscale, mostly Anglo districts in big metropolitan areas. Talarico seems poised to win some of these upscale, well-educated areas that gave most of their votes to Senator Cornyn in the primary. But many of these voters will split their tickets and stick with incumbents like Fred Meyer in Dallas County's HD108 or Marc Lahood in Bexar County's HD 121.

The second set includes majority Hispanic districts in South Texas. Talarico will likely win these districts. Paxton did poorly in most and does not have the resources to match his better funded Democratic opponent. However, veteran incumbent Republicans like Ryan Guillen in HD 31, a 6<sup>th</sup> generation rancher who has represented his district since 2003, will almost certainly run

much better than his party's senate nominee. Representative Guillen has a good shot at reelection even as his district votes for Democrats at the top of the ticket.

Finally, there are the fast-growing suburban districts in the Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Austin metropolitan areas. These districts are extremely diverse as Asian Americans, Latinos, and African Americans are moving into areas long dominated by conservative Anglos. The very well-funded Talarico, who has been quietly moving toward the center over the summer, will likely win some of these districts, but can Democratic House challengers defeat Republican incumbents? Maybe, but most local GOP nominees should benefit from ticket-splitting and run far enough ahead of Paxton to hold their seats.

Bottom line: Democrats need a political “hat-trick” to win enough seats to take control of the Texas House of Representatives this year. In ice hockey, a player rarely scores three goals in a single game. A political hat trick this year in the Texas House will also be difficult. The Democratic wave may be big enough to swamp the Republicans in these three different sets of districts across Texas, but more likely Republicans will hold a reduced House majority for at least one more election cycle.

*We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us at [rmurray@cougarnet.uh.edu](mailto:rmurray@cougarnet.uh.edu); your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.*

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