

Letter from Texas: May 2026

President Trump's late intervention in the Republican primary creates a worst-case scenario for the Texas GOP

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Historically, Texas was critical in national elections, especially for Democratic presidential candidates like John Kennedy in 1960 and Jimmy Carter in 1976. Those days are long past. Texas Republicans established their dominance in the 1990s and 2000s as the state's Democrats faded into obscurity. The last Democrat to carry Texas in a presidential election was Mr. Carter, who narrowly defeat President Gerald Ford 50 years ago. No Democrat has won a U.S. Senate election since Lloyd Bentsen in 1988. The 2026 senate election was expected to be more of the same.

Analysts gave Democrats a good shot at retaking a US House majority – that often happens in the midterms of lame duck presidents – but that would be driven by congressional results outside the Lone Star State. The GOP controlled Senate looked out of reach in 2026. Democrats would need a net gain of four seats for a majority, and there was only one Republican seat up in a state (Maine) Kamala Harris had won in 2024. Almost all Republican Senate seats were in states Donald Trump carried easily in 2024. Texas, where Trump won by 13.9%, was on that list. The four-term incumbent, John Cornyn, was expected to be easily reelected over an underfunded Democrat. In other words, the usual.

That conventional wisdom of 2025 is now irrelevant. Senator Cornyn has just been crushed in a 64%-36% primary by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton. The GOP nominee will face off against Democrat James Talarico, who was virtually unknown to Texas voters a year ago. Previous letters have discussed how Mr. Talarico soundly defeated a popular African American Congresswoman, Jasmine Crockett, in the March Democratic primary and has been raising more money, to date, than any senate candidate in history. The new conventional wisdom is summed up in Nate Cohn's post-primary article in the New York Times: "Seat in Texas Is in Play for Democrats."¹

This letter focuses on Senator Cornyn's demise, President Trump's long-delayed intervention and why a reshuffled deck in Texas points to a bitterly contested, expensive, and nationally significant senate election.

Reviewing the 2026 Texas GOP Runoff

Major party nominees in Texas must secure a majority in primaries, so runoffs are common. In three recent high profile Republican runoffs that featured insurgent conservatives against establishment Republicans, the latter did much better in the lower- voting second round than the initial primary. In 2012, for example, Ted Cruz, a favorite of evangelical conservatives, trailed Lt. Governor David Dewhurst by 627,731 votes (44.6%) to 428,325 (34.1%) in a race for an open U.S. Senate seat. In the runoff, Cruz swamped Dewhurst, getting 631,812 votes (56.8%) to the Lt. Governor 's 480,126 (43.2%).

¹ *The New York Times*, May 31, 2026.

In March 2014, Ken Paxton, a state senator and Tea-Party favorite, got 44.5% against two more centrist Republicans, but surged to 63.4% in a low-vote runoff. Eight years later, Attorney General Paxton, under indictment in a securities fraud case and facing other credible accusations of misconduct, secured 42.7% in the March primary where 1,927,059 votes were cast, but crushed Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush, with 68.0% in a runoff where turnout dropped by 50% to 913,880 voters.

Given this primary history, Senator John Cornyn was not in a favorable position after the March 3 primary gave him a lead of just 42.0% to 40.5% over his runoff-tested challenger, Ken Paxton. There was, however, some reason to believe Paxton's runoff luck had run out. While pre-primary polls had shown Paxton leading Cornyn, the senator finished first on March 3 after a blizzard of brutal ads had hammered the challenger. The DC Republican establishment was all-in for Cornyn and pressuring President Trump to finally deliver his long-promised endorsement in the Texas race – which they assumed would go to the state's senior senator. Polls showed a Trump endorsement would not assure a Cornyn victory, but give him a good shot in a highly competitive election.

But President Trump dithered and dallied while the nearly three-month long runoff ground ahead. Paxton was again being outspent in a scorched-earth ad blitz, but polls showed he still held a small edge as the primary approached. Then, on May 19, the second day of early-in person voting, Trump's released a social media post: "Ken is a true MAGA warrior who has ALWAYS delivered for Texas, and will continue to do so in the United States Senate."² Race over. A week later the final tally was 885,949 votes (63.8%) for Ken Paxton; 501,725 votes (36.2%) for John Cornyn.

Is Trump trying to turn Texas blue?

Analyst Nate Silver asked this question in his Silver Bulletin release of May 23, 2026.³ As with so much in American politics these days, his query points to the reality that a big part of the unfolding Texas election story is driven by the actions, or inaction, of the 47th president of the United States.

In the 237-year history of the American presidency, and the 200 plus years of two-party politics, White House incumbents have occasionally injected themselves into internal affairs of their respective parties. Most often these efforts were to raise up or support friends within the party tent. Presidents have, on rarer occasions, tried to defeat office-holders of their own party. However, by my reckoning, there has only been one instance in pre-Trumpian history when a president attempted to purge a group of legislators by publicly backing primary challengers.

That was nearly ninety years ago. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, reelected in a massive landslide in November 1936, found key parts of his expansive New Deal legislation blocked by the U.S. Supreme Court, seven of whose nine members were appointees of Republican presidents. FDR's 46-state Electoral College victory had also given the Democrats 77 of 96 U.S.

²Gabby Birenbaum, *The Texas Tribune*, "Rallies, ad blitzes and a Trump endorsement: Inside the final days of the Cornyn-Paxton runoff," May 23, 2026.

³Coauthored with Eli McKown-Dawson.



Senate seats and 334 of 435 U.S. House seats. The 32nd American president decided to outflank the high court by adding up to six new seats, confident the Democrats' huge congressional majorities would do his bidding.

Roosevelt's "court-packing" plan failed. Conservative Democratic senators, increasingly concerned about the President's progressive economic policies, slowed and then killed the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill in 1937. Other reversals led President Roosevelt to announce in a 1938 fireside chat he was endorsing just 21 of 33 Democratic senators up for reelection. More importantly, FDR promised to campaign against several Democratic members blocking his policies.

As with his SCOTUS expansion, FDR's "purge" did not work. With the exception of the chair of the House Rules Committee, all Roosevelt's targets were renominated by large majorities. Republicans followed with major gains in the Fall 1938 elections. A new "Conservative Coalition" of Southern Democrats and Northern Republicans emerged on Capitol Hill that would dominate domestic legislative politics for a quarter-century.

Perhaps because of Franklin Roosevelt's experience, subsequent presidents largely avoided public attacks on members of their own party and none sought to systematically eliminate critics in party primaries. That is, until Donald J. Trump took office. In his first term, President Trump's umbrage at Republican Senators Jeff Flake of Arizona and Bob Corker of Tennessee led to their retirement rather than face Trump-backed opponents in their respective primaries. Lesson learned. Other GOP members avoided the president's ire and Mr. Trump stayed out of their primaries in 2018 and 2020.

That uneasy *détente* of the first Trump term has collapsed in his second term. While most congressional Republicans have sought to establish – or reestablish – a working relationship with the Trump 47 White House, the reelected president has vowed vengeance and retribution on those he deems tainted by past or present actions. Foremost among those are Republican members who had voted to impeach him in the House of Representatives or convict him in the 2021 Senate trial.

That rather short list grew in 2025 and 2026 as members like Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia and Thomas Massie of Kentucky broke with the White House. Lately, more targets have emerged as President Trump, never one much for custom or tradition, has demanded that Republican-controlled states, starting with Texas, redraw their congressional maps to preserve the GOP's narrow House majority.

None of this should have suggested trouble for Texas's senior senator, John Cornyn. Cornyn, as Majority Whip, had helped pass Trump's big tax cuts in 2017 and had supported all his first-term nominees for executive and judicial positions. He was *not* one of the senators who had voted to convict Trump. Cornyn had continued his steadfast support for President Trump in 2025 and 2026, voting with the administration over 99% of the time. Nor had he objected to the Trump-ordered 2025 congressional remapping in Texas.

So why did John Cornyn make the president's May hit list just days before voting ended in the Texas GOP runoff? A very late Paxton endorsement coming after the Washington GOP



establishment had invested over \$100 million to prop up the senior senator and savaging the challenger? I point to three factors.

First, John Cornyn, very much a George W. Bush establishment Republican, was never much liked or trusted by the energetic Tea-Partiers who began displacing the pro-business/country club leadership of the Texas GOP in the 2000s. Most of the Texas Old Guard had retired or been defeated by the late 2010s, but Senator Cornyn was still around in 2026 partly because no credible challenger ran against him in the 2014 or 2020 primaries. Trump, one should remember, had burst on the political scene in June 2015 as a fierce critic of the GOP establishment led by people like “low energy” former Governor Jeb Bush of Florida, George W. Bush’s younger brother.

Second, dislike on the Texas GOP’s right flank hardened into deep hostility toward John Cornyn after the 2020 election. The senior senator, unlike Ted Cruz, did not object to certifying the Joe Biden’s Electoral College victory in the wake of the January 6th assault on the Capitol. John Cornyn, an institutionalist, would not join the election deniers led by AG Paxton, who sued to block certification of Biden’s Electoral College victory. Additionally, Cornyn was one of 15 Republican senators who supported the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act passed by Congress after the Uvalde school shooting that killed 19 students and two teachers in May 2022. While popular with the American public, MAGA conservatives in Texas were furious that Cornyn had supported this modest gun control measure.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Trump’s endorsement came only after late polling showed Paxton likely to win the low-vote runoff. The president famously likes to back winners and shun losers, so why not burnish one’s reputation and claim credit for the result? That also gave Mr. Trump the opportunity to note in his social media post that while senator was “a good man,” he “was very late in backing me in what turned out to be a Historic Run for the Republican Nomination.”⁴ A little revenge dish served up, three years after Senator Cornyn was slow in getting on the Trump Train in 2023.

Whatever reason or reasons for the last-minute Trump endorsement, the year-long primary battle has created a hot mess for Republicans in Texas. More than \$100 million of GOP campaign money has been wasted documenting the flaws of the nominee. Now the party must pivot and unite behind the guy their own ads said was a crook who had betrayed his wife and was unfit for office. Senate Republican strategists estimated in a memo circulated just before the primary that it would cost the party an additional \$200 million or more to help Paxton, a weak fund-raiser, to beat Democrat James Talarico in the general election. In brief, national donors who just spent a huge amount to defeat Ken Paxton, are now going to be asked to pony up twice as much to get him elected. Rather head-spinning.

Not unexpectedly, the deposed Republican senator seems rather bitter about being thrown under the Trump bus. Three days after his humiliating defeat, John Cornyn posted what he called “an old but apt fable” on X.

⁴ Thomas Beaumont, Jesse Bedayn, and Kendra Lafleur, *AP News*, “Trump endorses Ken Paxton in Texas GOP primary, boosting his challenge to incumbent Sen. Cornyn,” May 19, 2026.



A scorpion, wanting to cross a river but unable to swim, convinces a dubious frog to ferry him over because, once in the water, their fates are conjoined. “Midway across the river, the frog stings the frog anyway, dooming them both. The dying frog asks the scorpion why it stung despite knowing the consequence, to which the frog replies: ‘I am sorry, but I couldn’t help myself, It’s my character.’”⁵ This post can be interpreted in various ways, but none would suggest Senator Cornyn is about to rally behind the Trump-endorsed nominee.

In that vein, when Sen. Cornyn returned to Washington after the Memorial Day recess, he told reporters that while he will support the “Republican ticket” in November, “he still believes Attorney General Ken Paxton is a crook who is unfit for office and will put the seat at risk in November. ‘I stand by everything I said during the whole campaign,’ Cornyn told reporters.”⁶

A week after the senate runoff, Nate Silver’s question seems even more relevant. My answer to his query is nuanced: President Trump is surely not aiming to turn Texas blue in 2026, but he fails to appreciate how his actions are making that more and more possible.

Party purges are dangerously unpredictable as FDR found in 1938 and Donald Trump is learning in 2026

Presidential scholars rate 1938 as the low point of FDR’s 12-plus years in office. President Roosevelt, concerned about ballooning deficits and pushing progressive policies too far, backed off his New Deal initiatives and the recovering economy slammed into reverse. Unemployment soared, profits and wage-growth reversed, and the specter of a second Great Depression loomed. Democrats took a shellacking in the November elections. Economics were primarily responsible for these reverses, but Roosevelt’s failed efforts to primary disloyal Democrats contributed to his setbacks. The rising threat of fascism and a global war in 1939 gradually restored economic growth and laid the foundation for Roosevelt’s reelection to an unprecedented third term in 1940 and a fourth in 1944, but 1938 was the year that started what FDR would later label as his transition from “Dr. New Deal to Dr. Win-the-War.”

Donald Trump, another consequential president like FDR, but term-limited unlike his predecessor, has had far more success in his efforts to remove Republicans in 2026 than Roosevelt had with Democrats in 1938, most notably in four May primaries. On the 5th of the month, Indiana Republican voters defeated five or six of the seven state senators who had blocked a Trump-proposed congressional map designed to flip two districts Democrats now represent (one senate race is still being contested). Eleven days later, Bill Cassidy, one of seven Republican senators who voted to convict President Trump in 2021 ran third in the Louisiana GOP primary behind Trump-endorsed Congresswoman Julia Letlow. And on the evening of May 19, hours after his Paxton endorsement, Trump got the good news that Congressman Thomas Massie had lost his seat in Kentucky to a hand-picked Trump challenger. A week later, Ken Paxton crushed John Cornyn in Texas.

⁵ Alexander Bolton, *The Hill*, “Cornyn shares fable of frog and scorpion after Trump sinks reelection,” May 29, 2026.

⁶ Joseph Morton, *The Dallas Morning News*, “John Cornyn stands by criticism of Ken Paxton as unfit for office,” June 1, 2026.



What a run. A half dozen state legislators, a prominent U.S. House critic, and two respected U.S. senators – all dispatched in party primaries at the direction of President Trump in less than 30 days. “Look at what happened last night”, Trump boasted to his cabinet the morning after the Texas primary. “That was the prelude to the midterms.”⁷

Maybe, but probably not. The *Times* article went on to note the emerging paradox of the second Trump presidential term. “He has an iron grip on his most loyal supporters, even as his overall popularity slips.”⁸

President Trump has used that iron grip to rid himself of troublesome critics in the last few weeks. His mindset seems to be that of Greta Garbo in the classic 1939 Hollywood film, *Ninotchka*. The title character, a dedicated Communist, arrives in Paris on a party mission and meets a Russian now residing in the French capital. The following exchange occurs:

Buljanoff: How are things in Moscow?

Ninotchka: Very good. The last mass trials were a great success. There are going to be fewer but better Russians.

Trump apparently believes, like Garbo’s character, that after the great success of the last primaries, there are going to be fewer Republicans but be better Republicans in office. Which will be better for him and his administration. The first may be true, the second is almost certainly not.

On the latter point, the tiny GOP House majority and the party’s 53-47 U.S. Senate edge means only a few defections can sink bills, reject nominations, and cause numerous other problems for a lame-duck president. Defeating incumbents in primaries means they will not be back next year, but they remain in office for office until January 2027. The coming months will be critical for the Trump presidency, as the prospects of losing one or both houses of Congress loom and courts get more aggressive in challenging an increasingly unpopular president.

It is no accident that in the immediate wake of purging state legislators and congressmembers, the president faces the greatest pushback from members of his own party than at any point in his first or second term. The coming days and months are going to be very difficult for Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune. The defenestration of Republicans like Senators John Cornyn of Texas and Bill Cassidy of Louisiana will make their already difficult jobs much more challenging. Trump’s purge, like Roosevelt’s, may backfire, albeit in a different way.

⁷ Zolan Kanno-Youngs, *The New York Times*, “Trump’s Sway in Primaries May Not Translate to the Midterms,” June 2, 2026.

⁸Ibid.



The 2026 Texas Primaries and the November General Election

Primary elections are very different from general elections. Many fewer people vote in the former, and the electorates are dramatically different. Take the Texas 2026 May primaries. A total of 4.5 million people voted, with 2.17 million choosing the Republican primary. The May GOP runoff had 1.4 million voters, a record, but less than eight percent of total registration. The Republican primary voters were, on average, older, whiter, and much more likely to be MAGA than the broader electorate.

We expect more than 10 million Texans will vote this November, so winning the Cornyn seat will require getting more than five million votes. Ken Paxton just got 885,949 votes in ousting the senator. *Paxton will need at least another 4.2 million votes to win the general election.* On the Democratic side, James Talarico got 1,216,412 votes in defeating Jasmine Crockett in the March primary. *Talarico will need at least another 3.8 million votes to prevail in November.*

The November election math is simple for both finalists. Getting your primary supporters back out figures to be pretty easy, but is nowhere near enough to win. Unifying primary voters who supported your opponent is important, and may be more difficult (especially for Paxton), but still not anywhere near enough to claim the Senate seat. Winning 50% plus of the six million non-primary voters is thus key.

In a state with nearly 19 million registered voters spread over 20 media margins, that is going to be expensive. Ken Paxton has never been an impressive fund-raiser, but should now get significant help from the Texas GOP establishment (Governor Abbott has over \$100 million in his political account and can raise much more). Still, given the staggering cost of a competitive campaign in Texas, the Attorney General is going to need bigtime help from national donors. One aspect of that is whether President Trump's \$350 million PAC will pitch in, or defer to the GOP's Senate Leadership Fund (SLF) to pick up the tab in Texas. The SLF, which Leader Thune controls, is adamant that the president, having pushed Cornyn out and stuck them with Ken Paxton, pony up. Good luck with that. Trump has been making primary endorsements like no president in history, but clings to *his* campaign funds like Linus' blanket in a *Peanuts* cartoon.

James Talarico has a very different situation. He has become, in the words of *The New York Times*, a fundraising juggernaut. Talarico's campaign said they raised \$3 million in the 24 hours after Paxton's victory – his best day in the campaign. He is going to need to keep that money machine running full tilt because the Texas Democratic establishment, to the extent one exists, is broke. No other Democratic statewide candidate figures to raise much money, and the national party, also being out-raised by Republicans, cannot be counted on to make big investments in a Texas senate race when much more affordable opportunities have emerged in Alaska, Iowa, Maine and other smaller states.

Attorney General Paxton is going to need a huge campaign investment because he is well-known but viewed negatively by a majority of Texas voters. He cannot easily change his own image, so he must define State Representative James Talarico as an unacceptable alternative. Talarico will need a big war-chest to both introduce himself to the many general election voters who hardly know him, and to reinforce John Cornyn's primary attacks on Paxton. This sets up the most expensive senate general election in U.S. history.



Texas voters can look forward, in the words of a recent *Texas Tribune* article to a senate race of “Tala-freak-o vs. Ken the Criminal.”⁹ If one dislikes negative campaigning, best to leave the state. Otherwise, buckle up, it’s going to be a bumpy ride for the next five months.

We’d love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Reach out to us at 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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⁹Kayla Guo, “Texas candidates sharpen attacks as the U.S. Senate race locks in,” May 27, 2026.

