

Letter from Texas: September 2026

With a “Blue Wave” building in Texas, can a late surge of GOP money preserve 30-plus years of Republican dominance in the 2026 elections?

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After decades of teaching and writing about Texas politics, I began this monthly letter in the summer of 2025. My sense was the Trump47 presidency was going to make the Lone Star State politically competitive a lot quicker than most expected. Had Vice-President Kamala Harris eked out a narrow Electoral College margin in November 2024 – a very real possibility – Texas would have, in my opinion, remained a reliably red state for at least four more years. But Harris lost. More importantly, former President Donald J. Trump won.

A few months into his second term, it was clear that Trump47 was not going to be a rerun of his first presidency. Trump ran as a disruptor in 2016, but mostly governed in a conventional Republican fashion. His 2017 tax bill closely hewed to GOP orthodoxy, with most of the benefits going to higher-income earners and corporations. He had assailed Mexican immigrants as bad people and criminals in 2015, but once in office, deported fewer persons than the Obama administration. The President attacked the mainstream press and political opponents in harsh and often crude terms, but did not unleash the powers of the executive branch to destroy his perceived enemies. He staffed his administration with retired generals, business executives, and elected officials like U.S. Senator Jeff Sessions and Congressman Mike Pompeo. As promised, he kept the United States out of “endless foreign wars.”

From the git-go in 2025, it was clear Trump was going to run a different show this time around. Humiliated and embittered by two impeachments in his first term, four criminal investigations, and a fraud conviction after he left office, he sought vengeance against those who had tried to destroy him. No more three-star generals or former CEOs from Exxon-Mobil; loyalists would staff the new administration. Now Trump could indulge his long-held view that high tariffs on trading partners who had been ripping us off for decades would restore a “golden age” ala President William McKinley’s tenure in the 1890s. The border would not only be closed, but millions of undocumented persons in the United States would either leave voluntarily, or be rounded up and deported.

Emboldened by a 2024 U.S. Supreme Court decision granting sitting presidents virtually complete legal immunity, Trump has pushed the limits of executive power far beyond any predecessor in peacetime. Trump unbound is, for better or worse, one of the most consequential presidents in American history. Previously, our most impactful chief executives – Washington, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt – dealt with crises they did not create. Trump, by contrast, was sworn in at noon on January 20, 2025 with a country at peace, a growing economy, low unemployment and inflation trending down. Violent crime was declining after a surge in the Covid years, and drug overdose deaths were finally falling.

Yet candidate Trump had campaigned on the premise that America was broken, and that only he could fix it. From Day One, prices would come down, he would end the Russia-Ukraine war and other conflicts, respect for the U.S. would rebound, and his domestic foes in the crooked media and elected offices would be brought to heel. A pretty tall order.

Watching this in early 2025, it seemed to me Texas was going to provide a serious test. Texas was doing very well economically. “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is a widely shared view in these parts. Most Texans want a secure border, but massive roundups and deportations of hundreds of thousands of longtime, mostly Latino, residents would almost certainly generate a huge backlash. More international goods move back and forth across the Texas border than in any other state. Tariffs would be very disruptive to that trade. The decades-long Texas economic “miracle” cited by Governor Greg Abbott and other Republican leaders requires more and more workers born outside the United States. That fact means dramatically restricting legal immigration as well as vigorously enforcing laws aimed at undocumented workers could seriously imperil the economic boom Texas has been enjoying. Add in that Texas has a relatively small population of whites without a college education (the largest part of Trump’s MAGA base), and you’ve got a tougher challenge for the reelected president and his party than most appreciated.

Politically, Texas Republicans seemed in great shape on January 20, 2025. No Democrat had won a statewide office since 1994 – the longest losing streak in modern American politics. Donald Trump had beaten Kamala Harris by almost 14 percent in Texas, compared to splitting the vote in the rest of the country. The powerful business sector in Texas, long rooted in the state’s oil and gas companies, was expanding. Elon Musk, the world’s first trillionaire, had moved his flag to Austin while Charles Schwab joined the migration from Wall Street to “Yall” Street in Dallas. The business establishment, once aligned with conservative Democrats in Texas, now provided huge financial resources for Republicans who controlled every lever of political power in Austin.

Twenty months after Trump’s second inaugural, we are living in a very different political world in the Lone Star State. My hunches that the reelected president’s agenda would cause major problems in Texas were mostly borne out. Tariffs were unpopular and contributed to, rather than reducing, inflation. Texans supported tight border controls, but recoiled at aggressive tactics by Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE).. Trump’s attacks on enemies in the mainstream press, law firms, universities, and the medical establishment played well to the MAGA base, but had little appeal to the new voters who had moved toward the Republicans in 2024 because of dissatisfaction with the Biden/Harris economy.

What I (and just about everybody else) did not foresee was President Trump’s decision to join Israel in a war of choice against Iran on February 28, 2026. That venture, roundly criticized by many of the America Firsters in the Trump coalition like Tucker Carlson, has failed to achieve its strategic objectives while backfiring spectacularly with voters. The war, supposed to last four to six weeks, drags on into an 8th month with no end in sight. The conflict triggered much higher energy prices which are contributing to higher inflation and interest rates. And this has, more than anything else, wiped out the President’s greatest political asset – the belief that he and his party can manage the economy better than the Democrats. That critical shift has knocked the Republicans back on their heels as we head into the final weeks of the 2026 midterm election. Numerous polls show a strong

swing away from Republicans in recent weeks and prominent conservatives like Ann Coulter are now predicting a GOP “bloodbath” on November 3.¹

The faltering U.S. Senate campaign of Ken Paxton has turned Texas into a GOP money pit as midterm voting begins

An interesting aspect of national polls since midsummer is that the decline in Republican electoral fortunes is not so much in the traditional “swing” states of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, but rather in “Deep Red” states like Iowa, Ohio, Florida, and Texas.

The Texas U.S. Senate race, on track to be the most expensive in the nation’s history, has been the focus of numerous non-partisan polls. Lest one doubt the GOP is in trouble in Texas, review the recent poll results for the Paxton-Talarico U.S. Senate race as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Recent Texas Polls for U.S. Senate

Source	Release	Sample	Talarico	Paxton
New York Times/Siena	10/03/2026	615/LV	51%	45%
Texas Public Opinion Research	9/25/2026	1,007 LV	49%	44%
Marist Poll	9/23/2026	1,139 RV	50%	44%
Texas Southern University	9/22/2026	1,800 LV	47%	46%
Trafalgar Group	9/18/2026	1,079 LV	46%	45%
Emerson College	9/17/2026	1,000 LV	47%	46%
Siena College	9/17/2026	614 LV	49%	43%
Average of Polls	—	—	48.4%	44.7%

Source: Summaries compiled by 270 to Win and the New York Times, October 3, 2026. LV refers to likely voters and RV refers to registered voters in the samples.

All recent surveys show Democrat James Talarico running ahead of Republican Ken Paxton. Talarico’s lead is small – three to four points – but consistent. Eight years ago, Congressman Beto O’Rourke mounted a strong challenge to Senator Ted Cruz, but he trailed in statewide polls and lost by 2.6%.

¹Julia Ornedo, The Daily Beast, “Ann Coulter warns GOP of midterm losses over Iran war,” September 29, 2026.

Internal GOP polls suggest an even more dire situation. One such September survey, leaked to Harvey Kronberg’s *Quorum Report* in Austin, showed Talarico leading Paxton by 52% to 41% among likely voters in Tarrant County’s State Senate District 9. Trump won this district by 17% over Kamala Harris in 2024. Anything approaching a 28-point shift in the state’s largest swing county would portend a Democratic tsunami wave in Texas on November 3.

At this late stage in the electoral cycle, there aren’t many options for rescuing the faltering GOP senate nominee. Ken Paxton is, to put it charitably, a very poor campaigner. Accepting debates with the more polished Talarico carries more risks than upsides. James Talarico could stumble, but after a year of campaigning he has avoided missteps and continues to raise more money than any other candidate in the country.

And Governor Abbott, expected to provide a strong boost for all statewide Republican nominees this year, is in a very competitive race with Gina Hinojosa as the poll results in Table 2 indicate.

Table 2: Recent Texas Polls for Governor

Source	Release	Sample	Abbott	Hinojosa
New York Times/Siena	10/03/2026	615 LV	46%	49%
Texas Public Opinion Research	9/25/2026	1,007 LV	50%	46%
Marist Poll	9/23/2026	1,139 RV	46%	49%
Texas Southern University	9/22/2026	1,800 LV	49%	45%
Emerson College	9/17/2026	1,000 LV	49%	46%
Siena College	9/17/2026	614 LV	45%	49%
Average of Polls	—	—	47.5%	47.3%

Source: Summaries compiled by 270 to Win and the New York Times, October 3, 2026. LV refers to likely voters and RV refers to registered voters in the samples.

Then there is the Big Guy – President Donald J. Trump, who won Texas by almost 14% in 2024. A longtime cultural warrior against wokeism, Paxton earned his MAGA spurs with Trump in December 2020 when he filed a lawsuit challenging Joe Biden’s Electoral College wins in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The U.S. Supreme Court, in *Texas v. Pennsylvania*, quickly rejected this effort but Paxton cemented his standing with the 45th and 47th president.

Could Trump turn the tide in Texas? He tried. The president insisted the party hold a rare midterm national convention in Dallas in September to highlight his support for Paxton and other Texas Republicans. At that gathering, Trump teased Paxton about his looks and sartorial choices, but went on to add “but you know what, he is – he’s the greatest attorney general in America.”²

Trump’s foray did not work. A few days after the two-day Texas event, Ken Paxton met with a small group of major Republican donors in Washington D.C. One participant surreptitiously recorded a conversation between another attendee and the attorney general:

“Do you feel like he’s [Trump] a little bit of a drag?”

Paxton: “So to be honest with you, the numbers – when we did that convention – it dropped our numbers. Everybody’s numbers dropped. Right now, yeah, not good.”³

The only viable option, after the Dallas convention did not help Paxton and other state Republicans, was a massive financial intervention. That intervention has now happened. Mike Allen reported in Axios on October 1 that, “A new Texas PAC spent \$131 million in just 17 days supporting the struggling Ken Paxton in his Senate battle, and tens of millions more could be on the way.” This has enabled the group backing Paxton to outspend Talarico by as much as 5 to 1 in the last two months of the campaign.

This spending is clearly not too little, but is it too late? Ken Paxton’s negative image has been baked into the political cake after ten months of relentlessly negative attacks; first by the campaign of Senator John Cornyn, and now James Talarico’s. Those perceptions, in my opinion, cannot be altered very much. The new funds will therefore have to be directed at increasing James Talarico’s negatives so that Paxton can regain votes as the lesser evil. Flawed, perhaps, but still better than a far-left Democrat out of touch with Texas values.

An important point to keep in mind in looking at comparable spending in the U.S. Senate race is that all campaign dollars raised and spent are not the same. Talarico has raised almost all the money being spent by his campaign directly, much of it well before the infusion of PAC dollars to Paxton’s campaign. This is doubly beneficial. Campaign funds raised directly by a candidate for federal office buy ads at a discounted rate. PACs pay more; often much more. And raising money early enables a campaign to reserve desirable times on TV like the expensive 30-second spots adjacent to the 6 p.m. local new programs in Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston where over half of Texas voters live. Late PAC money not only has to pay much more for spots, but may also find the most desirable times are not available. Bottom line: Talarico’s advertising dollars will go a lot farther than Paxton’s PAC spending from here on out.

² Theodore Schleifer, “Paxton Privately Said Trump Convention Hurt Him,” The New York Times, October 1, 2026.

³ Ibid.

How will this expensive ad war in Texas work out? I do not know, nor does anyone else. Most Texas voters will certainly hear and see reasons not to vote for Democrats like Talarico and Hinojosa. They will also see and hear more about Paxton's missteps and Abbott's weaknesses. At the end of the day, will Talarico's cringey "six genders" overshadow Trump's six dollars diesel? We will find out in four weeks.

Money is certainly important (especially in Texas) but candidates and campaigns also matter in elections

Most democratic countries use rules that greatly reduce the influence of campaign contributions on election outcomes. Parliamentary elections in the United Kingdom last a few weeks, and campaigns are waged in 650 small constituencies where door-to-door canvassing counts far more than TV ads. Strict limits often inhibit the ability of moneyed interests and wealthy individuals in other countries to invest in political races. Public airtime for parties and candidates is often provided and commercial campaign ads prohibited. In Canada, candidates can buy campaign spots, but these expenditures count toward the strict limits on what they are allowed to spend.

The United States is an outlier. American candidates can spend their own money without limit – increasingly important in a nation with hundreds of multi-billionaires. Direct contributions to federal candidates are limited to \$3,500 per election, but the U.S. Supreme Court has steadily relaxed the limits on individuals, groups, and industries using political action committees (PACs) to funnel money into the political process. Little free air time is provided in the U.S., and there are no restrictions on how much can be spent in our elections. This is truly a wonderful country for political consultants, who collect huge fees win-or-lose. Perhaps not so great for the country, but that is a story for another day.

In any case, money matters and nowhere more so than Texas where we have 20 separate media markets, including the 4th (Dallas/Fort Worth) and 6th (Houston) largest in the United States. Blanketing the state with TV ads costs several million dollars a week, so campaigns can burn through enormous sums over the very long campaign season in Texas, where major candidates must file for office *eleven months* before general elections in November.

Candidates and PACs must report contributions and expenditures (albeit after the fact) so media coverage focuses on the money raised and spent along with horse-race polls. That makes sense in a big, expensive state like Texas where we see an incumbent governor, Greg Abbott, starting his 2026 campaign with more than \$100 million in his coffers, while his principal opponent, State Representative Gina Hinojosa, had to loan her campaign \$300 thousand just to get started back in 2025. Hinojosa is now raising significant money and is running expensive ads down the stretch, but she will almost certainly be outspent by at least a three-to-one ratio when the final accounting is available after the election.

The Texas U.S. Senate race, as noted, features a striking contrast as we enter the final weeks. James Talarico, the Democrat will likely end up raising more money (\$150 million plus) than any candidate in the country. His Republican opponent, Ken Paxton, a poor fundraiser, will benefit from the largest amount of outside spending (\$200 million or more) on his behalf in this midterm election.

Given this reality, Deep Throat’s advice to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in the Watergate break-in to “follow the money” surely applies in American elections. Yet other factors matter. Tom Spreyer just spent \$220 million running for governor of California. He finished third to candidates who spend a fraction of his outlays. The American Israeli Political Action Committee (AIPAC) dropped over \$30 million in the 2026 Democratic senate primary in Michigan against Abdul Al-Sayed. He won. Kamala Harris raised over a billion dollars in her 107-day campaign against Donald Trump and outspent the former president down the stretch. He won.

In short, money matters, but other factors also drive election results. Candidate quality varies greatly. Some office-seekers have a great work ethic and can recruit and inspire a strong staff. Others, not so much. Some know the issues and can articulate their positions in understandable ways to voters. Others struggle. Some are energizer bunnies (Donald Trump). Others, not. (Remember “low energy” Jeb Bush in 2016). A problem with this dimension is that candidate assessments *during a campaign are inherently subjective*. Polls, money raised, money spent – these are hard numbers. We do not have accepted metrics for laziness, grasp of relevant policy, etc. Given that, most media coverage shy away from focusing on individual candidates. Post-election analyses, by contrast, often explain the results by emphasizing how well or poorly so-and-so performed on the campaign trail. That Monday morning quarterbacking is not helpful when we are trying to understand what is happening *before* Election Day.

With less than 30 days left before voting concludes, one reason Democrats are doing well in top-of-the-ticket races this year is their top Texas candidates are better suited for the 2026 general election. The GOP nominees are older white guys (Paxton is 63, Abbott is 68) who have honed their campaign skills in Republican primaries where only about 1.5 million people vote. The GOP primary electorate is older, much whiter, and dominated by staunch MAGA partisans. The November electorate will be much larger (probably around 10 million), younger, and far more racially and ethnically diverse. Talarico, 37, and Hinojosa, 52, are better fits to run in this larger electorate where a sizeable majority of likely voters disapprove of the job President Trump is doing.⁴ The relative weakness of the top Republican candidates is reflected in the fact that Governor Abbott and Attorney General Paxton have refused invitations to debate their opponents.

Structural factors also matter greatly, and most of these offset the short-term factors favoring Democrats in this midterm cycle. Texas voters do not register as Republicans, Democrats, or Independents, but the state’s electorate clearly skews toward GOP candidates. Republicans entered the 2026 election cycle with something like an 8-10 point advantage in party identifiers. Democrats can win statewide only if they unify their base, *and* peel off some normally Republican votes, *and* get a majority of self-described Independents’ support. Not easily done.

Outside the four urban counties of Harris, Dallas, Bexar, and Travis, the great majority of elected officials are Republicans, with much stronger local party organizations in place. Statewide Democratic candidates have to build their campaigns from scratch in these areas – hard to do with 254 counties in Texas. In short, there are very good reasons Democrats have failed to elect a single

⁴ The New York Times-Siena poll of 615 likely voters in Texas released on October 3 found Trump’s job approval at 40% and disapproval at 57%. Just 27% *strongly* approved, while 48% *strongly* disapproved.

statewide candidate in 15 consecutive elections. Maybe they can break this losing streak in November 2026 when short-term factors, including an unexpected foreign war, have badly hurt Republicans across the country, but skepticism is warranted.

Looking ahead to November 3

A few voters, mostly seniors, have received mail ballots, but the overwhelming share of Texans vote in-person. Most choose to do so during an 11 or 12 day early vote window when counties open in-person stations where residents can mark and deposit their ballots. In the 2024 presidential election, the Texas Secretary of State reported 11,388,674 votes were counted, of which 9,133,238 (80.2%) were cast early. We expect the same ratio in 2026, with roughly 8 million early votes, and perhaps 2 million Election Day voters.

Early in-person voting starts on October 19 this year and runs through October 30. The number of votes cast each day is recorded in every county, as is the identity of each registered voter. The votes for candidates are not reported until after the polls close at 7 p.m. on Election Day, but observers can see important trends based on the daily totals, which include relative turnout across counties. Is liberal Travis County turning out more or fewer voters than in past general elections? What about the heavily Hispanic counties in South Texas? What is the ratio of male voters (more supportive of Republicans) to female voters (who lean Democratic)? Texas does not ask registrants their racial or ethnic identity, but if early voting is heavy in south Dallas County, that signals Black turnout is high. Rural counties turned out very high percentages of voters in 2018, who voted overwhelmingly for Senator Ted Cruz. Are they showing up in equal numbers this year, as Ken Paxton and Greg Abbott are hoping?

Derek Ryan, an Austin based Republican consultant, checks to see if voters in 2026 have a history of voting in party primaries, or have only voted in general election, or have no past vote history in Texas. This historical data provides political junkies like me a pretty good idea of how the election in Texas is likely to turn out once we get deep into the in-person early voting window.

Accordingly, I will review the political landscape in our next letter in the last week of October, once we have several million votes cast. The pattern may well show the election is going to be very close or leaning toward one party or the other. We should also keep in mind that the actual election returns the evening of November 3 will initially be almost entirely of early votes. Ballots cast on Election Day take longer to tabulate and report, and final totals in close races may take days to be reported. Recent history shows there is not a big difference in the vote pattern of early voters versus Election Day so, unless we have a cliffhanger contest, most winners and losers should be apparent before midnight on November 3.

Then, the countdown begins for the 2028 Texas presidential primary elections in early March 2029.

We'd love to hear your thoughts, questions, or perspectives on these issues. Reach out to us at rmurray@cougarnet.uh.edu; your input helps inform our work and keeps the conversation going.

Renée Cross contributed to this report.