



By: James Oliphant

On a mission from God: Texas Senate race tests Republicans' grip on Christian voters



In a critical U.S. Senate race in Texas, both candidates claim to have God on their side. The question is, which God?

The contest between Republican Ken Paxton and Democrat James Talarico could determine whether Democrats wrest control of the Senate in the **midterm elections** in November. As such, it has become perhaps the most closely watched – and expensive – race on the board.

Elections in America often involve questions of religious faith and piety, with Republicans typically trying to appeal to conservative evangelical voters by blasting their opponents as nonbelievers or pretenders.

But the Texas race has turned that dynamic on its head. It's a fight where the Democrat Talarico is a seminarian who credits Jesus for his political career. The Republican Paxton has been impeached by his own party, faced criminal indictment, and confessed to an extramarital affair.

Given that, you might think there's no way for Paxton to try and take the moral high ground. You would be wrong.

A “monopoly on biblical interpretation”

Paxton and his allies have made Talarico's faith a central issue in the race, arguing that his interpretation of Christianity is rooted in “liberal theology” that departs from traditional readings of biblical scripture. “His views are antithetical to Christian, historical Christian views,” Paxton said on a podcast in June.

A top Paxton supporter, Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick, was blunter: “James Talarico will go to hell,” Patrick said on the same podcast. “He decided to bring the Bible into this election.”

Paxton contends Talarico uses his faith to justify abortion and transgender rights, fighting climate change and other liberal

policies, pointing to statements Talarico has made about God being “**nonbinary**.”

Talarico has largely focused on Paxton's scandal-soaked record while defending his approach on Christian doctrine. He has been an outspoken critic of the Christian nationalism Paxton embraces, which advocates tearing down the walls between church and state.

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“I'm a Christian, but I know the most dangerous form of government is theocracy because the only thing worse than a tyrant is a tyrant who thinks he's on a mission from God,” he said on CNN in April.

Talarico opposed a **Texas law** requiring the posting of the biblical Ten Commandments in public classrooms – something Paxton favors – saying he doesn't “want the government forcing a religion down my throat.”

In Talarico's view, Christianity means siding with marginalized people, including immigrants and the LGBTQ+ community. He has castigated Paxton for claiming that he has a monopoly on biblical interpretation.

Texas Democrats have fallen in love and been burned before

It may help Talarico's cause that he's young (37), telegenic, and presents himself with Youth Minister energy, making it more difficult for Paxton's punches to land. The race has elevated his profile nationally, resulting in a torrent of outside money to bolster his campaign.

Polls have shown **Talarico** with a slight lead, which in itself is a bit of an upset in a right-leaning state that hasn't elected a Democrat to the U.S. Senate since 1988. Democrats need a

net gain of four seats to take control of the Senate, with Texas offering the opportunity to pick up one that was held by Republican John Cornyn.

Trump's endorsement, handed to Paxton at almost the last minute, swung the primary in his favor

Political analysts for years have suggested sprawling Texas, with its 40 electoral votes, could turn blue as its population diversifies, but that has yet to be the case. And Texas Democrats have fallen in love and been burned before, as evidenced by Beto O'Rourke's two-point loss to Republican Senator Ted Cruz in 2018.

The current Senate race might not have been nearly as competitive if not for President **Donald Trump**, who backed Paxton over Cornyn in the Republican primary.

Cornyn, a four-term senator and former Texas Supreme Court justice, never won a Senate election by fewer than 10 percentage points. And even though Cornyn spent years supporting Trump's agenda and tried to placate the president at almost every turn, Trump viewed him as part of a Republican establishment he regards as disloyal. Trump's endorsement, handed to Paxton at almost the last minute, swung the primary in his favor.

A luggage cart full of liabilities

Unfortunately for Republicans, Paxton has a luggage cart full of liabilities: He was indicted on securities fraud charges in 2015 (the charges were dismissed after he reached a settlement) and was impeached by the Texas House of Representatives for misconduct in office while Texas attorney general (he was acquitted).

He has maintained both cases were politically motivated, but Talarico has seized upon his record as evidence Paxton is corrupt. In another blow, Paxton's wife last year filed for

divorce "on biblical grounds," accusing him of adultery.

Trump has never claimed to be devout – and by all accounts, the last regular church service he attended was the day of his second inauguration

Normally that might be enough to sink a politician, especially one who places his faith at the centerpiece of his campaign. But in Trump, Paxton not only found an ally but a role model.

Trump has never claimed to be devout – and by all accounts, the last regular church service he attended was the day of his second inauguration. Yet he has commanded the lion's share of the evangelical vote in his last three presidential bids.

Part of the reason is that Trump has delivered for those voters. He ordered the U.S. embassy in Israel relocated to Jerusalem despite the fraught politics of the move. His hand-picked U.S. Supreme Court justices helped do away with constitutional protection for abortion rights. He has been an active opponent of policies supporting transgender care.

A "desperate gambit to hold onto power"

All of it suggests an undeniable tenet of U.S. politics: self-identified white Christians tend to vote in America with regard to culture and political ideology, rather than theology or godliness.

A Pew Research **survey** in 2024 found that 85% of white evangelicals identified with the Republican Party – and that a majority of white Protestant registered voters also side with the GOP. About two-thirds of Americans identify themselves as Christian, according to the 2026 Public Religion Research Institute **census**.



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Those white evangelicals, who PRRI says comprise just 13% of the country, are reliable, motivated voters, which is one reason why candidates such as Trump and Paxton court them so assiduously. Meanwhile the share of voters who say they never attend church services rose to 53% in the survey.

“These changing demographics help explain why – in a desperate gambit to hold onto power – white evangelicals have been willing to give themselves over to the MAGA movement and to turn against the principles of a pluralistic democracy,” Robert P. Jones, the president of PRRI, said in a statement accompanying the survey results.

Trump, who is on his third marriage, managed to overcome allegations of subverting democracy, self-dealing and sexual assault to recapture the White House from Joe Biden, a church-going Catholic who has never been divorced and who made his faith part of his political persona.

Paxton is hoping to replicate that success in Texas. For Talarico and the Democrats, the race offers a chance to establish a new template for success in a party that has struggled to define itself in the wake of Biden’s defeat.

Swinging some religious voters his way would offer similar candidates a roadmap for reconciling liberalism with belief – while demonstrating to Republicans that they no

longer have the corner on faith. That, in turn, might lead to more nuanced conversations about the role of religion in America’s politics.