

Danger to Conservative Growth in Texas: Texas House Speaker Joe Straus & His Lieutenants

Conservatives are on a roll! Several encouraging events attest to this heartening fact. For example, a recent Gallup poll found:

- Conservatives are now the largest ideological group in America, with 40% of Americans identifying themselves as conservative, 35% as moderate, and only 21% as liberal. ¹
- Conservatives outnumber liberals in all fifty states, including even Vermont, New York, and Rhode Island. ²

In recent months, conservatives also enjoyed historic and unprecedented victories in solidly Blue States, including Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Hawaii.

And so far this year, conservative Republican candidates across the nation have won primaries against better funded moderate and liberal opponents, including Rand Paul over Trey Grayson (and Charlie Crist has now removed himself from the Republican Party in the face of overwhelmingly growing conservative support for Marco Rubio).

In Congress, moderate and liberal Republicans are being sent home, including U. S. Sen. Bob Bennett (who was removed by the Utah Republican Party); others are simply not returning to Congress (e.g., Sen. George Voinovich of Ohio).

Here at home, Texas remains one of the nation's most conservative Republican states. Not only do Republicans hold every statewide office but Texans call themselves conservative by a margin of 3 to 1 over liberal. ³ Not surprisingly, the promise of conservative gains is clearly visible on the horizon, but one of the greatest obstacles to realizing those gains may be Republican House Speaker Joe Straus, who worked against several conservative candidates in the recent primary and is even actively working to help elect Democrats and defeat conservative Republican candidates.

But this regrettable fact is not surprising when considering the manner in which Speaker Straus gained his position. Two years ago, he was one of the now infamous "Gang of 11" moderate and liberal Republicans who joined with Democrats to oust the conservative Republican Speaker and choose their own replacement. Straus (who had served only one full term in the House) was chosen – with the full support of Democrats – from among the Gang of 11 to become House Speaker. (The ten remaining members of the original "Gang of 11" included Reps. Jim Pitts, Rob Eissler, Byron Cook, Edmund Kuempel, Jim Keffer, Burt Solomons, Charlie Geren, Tommy Merritt, Delwin Jones, and Brian McCall.).

The "Lone Star Report" accurately noted:

Republican Joe Straus became Texas House Speaker in 2009 because of Democrats. Straus reached the 76 votes needed to win the Speaker's seat when over 60 Democrats decided to form a coalition with fewer than a dozen moderate Republicans. . . . If the decision had been made only within the Republican caucus . . . Straus would never have been considered for Speaker. ⁴

Straus, owing so much to the ten other liberal Republicans who joined Democrats to elect him, rewarded the ten with plum assignments as committee chairs and made them his trusted lieutenants (more on the effects of these decisions will appear below).

In some ways, the recent primary actually weakened Speaker Straus' position, for three of his ten trusted lieutenants are now out of the House (liberal Republicans Delwin Jones and Tommy Merritt were beaten in the primaries by conservative candidates Charles Perry and David Simpson; Brian McCall resigned to take an appointment to head a Texas college, and he was replaced with the more conservative Van Taylor). The remaining "Gang of 10" has now been reduced to the "Gang of 7," and for Straus, losing any of them (or for that matter, losing any Democrat seats to conservative Republicans) undermines his chances of being returned as Speaker.

As the "Lone Star Report" correctly pointed out:

To survive as Speaker, Joe Straus must . . . hope that Democrats once more do relatively well but fall just short of a Democratic majority.⁵

If Democrats gain the majority this election, they will choose a genuine Democrat as Speaker; and if Republicans gain enough conservative seats to overcome the "Gang of 7," they will choose a genuine Republican Speaker. As the "Lone Star Report" noted, Straus' best chance of returning as Speaker is if Republicans maintain only narrow control so that he can preserve his coalition of Democrats and the remaining "Gang of 7."

Do objective facts actually demonstrate that Speaker Straus is not only helping Democrats and working against conservative Republicans but that he is also impeding a conservative legislative agenda? Absolutely! Consider:

- Speaker Straus just joined with Democrat John Sharp to host a fundraiser for Democrat incumbent Patrick Rose to defeat conservative Republican challenger Jason Isaac.
- Texans for Economic Development (TED) is a pro-gambling PAC run by the former head of the State Democratic Party. Last cycle, TED spent \$300,000 in their attempt to defeat conservative House members, including Reps. Betty Brown, Nathan Macias, Bill Zedler, and Phil King (three of the four have been defeated). The Straus family gave \$80,000 to TED.
- Parent PAC also targets conservatives in the Texas House (and on the State Board of Education), having spent almost \$1 million to remove conservative Republicans. Several of Straus' Republican lieutenants wrote out large contributions to Parent PAC.
- Speaker Straus' political director is Gordon Johnson, a Democrat lobbyist who ran TED. Straus chose as his original Chief of Staff former Democrat State Representative Clyde Alexander; his new Chief of Staff is Denise Davis, who was a central figure in the House coup to overthrow former conservative House Speaker, Tom Craddick.
- In the recent primary, Speaker Straus used his resources in attempts to defeat the more conservative candidates (such as Van Taylor, Charles Perry, and David Simpson) who were running against liberal Republican House members; his Republican lieutenants were also dispatched into several primary races to work against conservative Republican candidates.
- This year, 64 conservative state legislators formed GOPAC-TX to "increase the number of Republicans serving the Texas Legislature by recruiting, training, and funding conservative candidates." After an excellent and effective beginning, Austin lobbyists report that the Speaker put out the word they were to give no more money to GOPAC-TX; hence, funding has dried up for this outstanding conservative organization committed to defeating Democrats.
- Conservative State Senator Dan Patrick formed Independent Conservative Republicans Of Texas (ICROT) for a purpose similar to that of GOPAC-TX; and while 90% of House and

Senate Republicans joined the group as charter members, Speaker Straus and six of his lieutenants refused to do so.

- Texas Conservative Coalition (TCC) is composed of dozens of House members who must have a conservative voting record of at least 70% before he or she can become a member of TCC (70% is a percentage that is only mediocre, and barely passing in most venues). In the “Gang of 11,” only Byron Cook and Rob Eissler could qualify as members.
- Joe Straus has no opponent in the November election, and while Speaker Straus has amassed a war chest of well over \$3 million, he has repeatedly said that he will not allow any of that money to be used to defeat any incumbent Democrat. Speaker Straus has shown an amazing talent for raising money, but he is not willing to use it to help any of the Republican challengers in promising races who are struggling to raise money (traditionally, such sharing is a customary practice for those with large war chests and either no or weak opponents). In fact, Straus is traveling to east Texas for a major fundraiser to further increase his personal war chest rather than helping raise any money for the three East Texas Republican candidates (Erwin Cain, James White, and George Lavender) running against liberal Democrats.
- Concerning the Speaker’s selections for committee heads, Democrat House member Rene Oliveira is a big tax and spend liberal, receiving an abysmal 35% rating from Texans for Fiscal Responsibility. Nevertheless, Speaker Straus made Oliveira Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee with the responsibility of handling all tax policy. Oliveira has announced that he is seeking \$3-4 billion in new taxes/tax revenues.
- Speaker Straus made Republican lieutenant Todd Smith Chairman of the Elections Committee, and Smith was able to hold the Voter ID bill in committee long enough to prevent it from coming to a vote on the floor, even though that measure had received the support of 93% of Republican voters in the primary and had already been passed in the Senate.
- Speaker Straus made Republican lieutenant Burt Solomons Chairman of State Affairs Committee, and Solomons kept all immigration bills from coming to the floor. Significantly, multi-millionaire Gaylord Hughey, one of Texas’ strongest and most vocal opponents of immigration bills, was pleased with that inaction; he is hosting a major fundraiser for Straus.
- Solomons also held the pro-life sonogram bill in committee long enough to keep it from coming to a floor vote, even though it had already passed the Senate. (Incidentally, as a reflection of Solomons’ philosophy, he had previously even objected to teaching that America is a blessed and unique nation – i.e., American Exceptionalism, and he also adamantly opposed a house bill to have Texas students recite portions of the Declaration of Independence.)
- Speaker Straus made Republican lieutenant Edmund Kuempel Chairman of the Licensing Committee, and while Straus’ other lieutenants kept measures such as Voter ID, immigration, and the pro-life sonogram bill bottled up in committee until the end of the session, Kuempel did get pro-gambling bills to emerge from his committee. (The Straus family owns racetracks and gambling interests across the state, and supports gambling and VLTs.)
- Control of redistricting for the next ten years is at stake in this election, and at a time when Texas is expected to gain 4 new U. S. congressional seats as well as draw improved prospects for Republican state legislative districts, Speaker Straus made Delwin Jones

(former Democrat, and the most liberal Republican in the House) Chairman of the Redistricting Committee.

- Speaker Straus inexplicably appointed liberal Democrat state representatives Mike Villarreal, Abel Herrero, and Aaron Pena to head legislative redistricting subcommittees, holding hearings in cities such as San Antonio, Corpus Christi, McAllen, etc. The testimony collected in those hearings will be used in lawsuits filed by Democrats to contest the redistricting lines that will be drawn next year by Republican leaders, and Speaker Straus is aiding this forthcoming Democrat challenge.
- Straus Republican lieutenants Charlie Geren, Jim Keffer, and Byron Cook aired a radio ad supporting Democrat Mark Homer over conservative Republican Kirby Hollingsworth, helping the Democrat to a narrow win.
- Straus Republican lieutenant Jim Keffer did a mail piece for Democrat Mark Strama to help him defeat his Republican opponent.
- Straus lieutenants Dan Branch and Jim Pitts are helping Democrat Ellen Cohen against her Republican challenger, doing events with her in her district.
- Powerful Houston Democrats Sylvia Garcia (Democrat County Commissioner in Harris County) and Elyse Lanier (wife of the former liberal Democrat mayor Bob Lanier) sponsored a Democrat fundraiser for Speaker Straus with numerous Democrat officials and high ranking union officials.

There are additional examples, but these are sufficient to affirm that the greatest threat to conservative Republican gains in the State House this election cycle probably is not from Democrats but instead may be from Speaker Straus and his “Republican” lieutenants.

Interestingly, following a number of press stories that have recently reported these facts, pressure from conservatives has been generated against the Speaker. As a result, Straus has begun to reach out to true conservatives such as Larry Taylor and Brian Hughes, giving them favorable assignments in an attempt to create an image of balance.

ACTION ITEMS

There are several things that you can do to help ensure that we elect more Republicans and conservatives to the Texas House in 2010:

1. Call your own State Representative and let him or her know that you want them to do everything they can to help elect more conservative Republicans to the House, and nothing to help elect Democrats.
2. Ask your Representative to tell the Speaker to use his resources to help elect Republicans, not Democrats – tell him to stop working against us and to turn loose money for Republican groups.
3. Tell your Representative that you want the next Republican Speaker to be chosen by Republicans in the Republican caucus, not chosen by 65 Democrats and 11 Republicans. For years, Republican grassroots have worked hard, raised money, and expended time and resources to win a Republican majority in the House; they did not do so in order to allow Democrats to choose the House Speaker. (If our Republican State Representatives choose

Joe Straus as their Speaker in caucus, that is fine – just so long as he is the choice of the Republicans in the House.)

4. Call the Speaker's office and insist that he stop working against Republican candidates, and tell him that you expect him to appoint mainstream conservative Republicans as committee chairs, especially over the redistricting committee.

We have great opportunities ahead of us; Texans – especially Texas Republicans – are conservative, so let's not allow a few out-of-the-mainstream leaders to impede our progress. Clearly, 90% of our Republican elected officials and candidates are solid conservatives who listen to the people, so let's work our tails off for them and help increase their numbers in the 2010 elections!

Ronald Reagan's words from March 8, 1985, are perfect for today:

Once . . . I said, "This is a wonderful time to be alive," and I meant that. I meant that we're lucky not to live in pale and timid times. We've been blessed with the opportunity to stand for something – for liberty and freedom and fairness. And these are things worth fighting for – worth devoting our lives to. And we have good reason to be hopeful and optimistic. We've made much progress already! So, let us go forth with good cheer and stout hearts – happy warriors out to seize back a country and a world to freedom!

Thanks for all of your hard work on behalf of the principles of liberty, the Constitution, and the Republican Party! May God prosper your endeavors! God bless!



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¹ Gallup, "Conservatives Maintain Edge as Top Ideological Group," October 26, 2009 (at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/123854/Conservatives-Maintain-Edge-Top-Ideological-Group.aspx>).

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³ Gallup, "Political Ideology: "Conservative" Label Prevails in the South," August 14, 2009 (at: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/122333/Political-Ideology-Conservative-Label-Prevails-South.aspx#2>).

⁴ Matt Angle, "Texas Speaker Straus May Be Caught in Political Squeeze; Speaker must thread a political needle to stay in power," The Lone Star Report, April 22, 2010, 4:27PM, citing *Austin American-Statesman*, January 4, 2009.

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