

Has Trump put the Senate in play?

By favouring a divisive candidate in Texas, the president has reduced the chances of his party retaining control of Congress in this year's midterm elections. Such a defeat would be a stunning rebuke.

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By James Politi, Lauren Fedor and Stephanie Findlay

Donald Trump was visibly satisfied when a long-serving Republican senator was ousted in a Texas primary this week. At a time when the president's national approval ratings are falling, the overwhelming defeat of Senator John Cornyn at the hands of a MAGA loyalist demonstrated Trump's tightening grip over his party.



But such successes may also contribute to bigger problems at a more consequential vote — the November 3 midterm elections, when the future of Trump's legislative agenda and much more will be at stake.

“Last night was incredible, not only Texas but so many other places,” Trump marvelled after Cornyn, a traditional Republican who has only barely been out of step with him, was beaten by Ken Paxton, the state's scandal-ridden attorney-general. “The numbers were fantastic,” Trump added during a televised cabinet meeting at the White House on Wednesday. “Last night was very, very powerful.”

In recent months surging petrol prices and the Iran war have cast clouds over his second term in office and triggered widespread anxiety among Republicans. Even so, Trump has mobilised his base to crush the political careers of Republican politicians who have stood in his way or have, like Cornyn, just sometimes failed to fall in line.

Despite holding the Texas Senate seat since 2002, Cornyn lost the primary by 28 points to Paxton, a sign of the president's sheer sway over his party's grassroots. Trump's loyalists in primary contests across the country have also ousted internal critics such as Thomas

Massie, a member of the House of Representatives from Kentucky, and Bill Cassidy, a Louisiana senator. Any whiff of dissent risks being fatal for Republican lawmakers. But the president's victories might yet prove pyrrhic — particularly in Texas, the state that could decide control of the US Senate.

A few months ago, the idea that the Republicans could lose either Texas or the Senate as a whole would have seemed far-fetched. But, with Paxton's detractors denouncing him as a flawed, extreme candidate, the Democrats now see an opening to win a Texas Senate seat for the first time in nearly 40 years.

Trump's unpopularity is already expected to help the Democrats take control of the House, according to nonpartisan analysts, such as the Cook Political Report. The prediction market Kalshi attributes a roughly three-quarters probability to a Democratic majority in the lower chamber.

The loss of the Senate would be far more humbling for the president and a greater blow to the rest of his White House tenure, making it much more difficult for him to pass legislation and confirm nominees to top jobs. Such a defeat would be a stunning rebuke for a president who has sought to remake the US government in his mould and has greatly expanded his executive powers in the first year after his return to office.

"I would not put a lot of money on the president having a successful midterm election at this point," says Jeffrey Engel, director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University near Dallas, Texas.

"I'm sure [Trump] woke up this week thinking 'I won', in the same way that Napoleon woke up on the first day of the Russian invasion," Engel adds, in a reference to the 19th-century French leader's ill-fated campaign against Moscow.

The White House and Republicans close to Trump still project confidence that they can limit the damage in November, retaining their majorities on Capitol Hill. They dismiss the chances that Paxton will be defeated in November by James Talarico, his 37-year-old Democratic rival.

"Are Republicans going to have to spend more money to get Paxton elected? Yes," adds David Urban, a Republican consultant at Washingtonbased lobbying group BGR. "But is Texas going to continue to have a Republican senator? I'm sure of that."

Top White House officials including chief of staff Susie Wiles maintain that Trump's involvement in the midterms will drive turnout in an election in which Republican enthusiasm might otherwise be subdued. "President Trump is the unquestioned leader of the Republican Party and his endorsement is the most powerful endorsement in the history of American politics," the White House said this week.

In any case, Trump's moves to punish his Republican critics and back more divisive candidates in their place have reinforced the notion that the midterm elections will be a refer-

endum on the president himself. “The more that he makes himself and his impulses the animating theme of the election, the harder it is for the focus to be anything other than Trump,” Amy Walter, the editor-in-chief of the Cook Political Report, wrote this month.

At a rally in Houston on Wednesday night, Democrats were buoyant about their prospects in Texas.

“Ken Paxton is the most corrupt politician in America and he belongs nowhere close to the United States Senate,” said Talarico, a former teacher who is studying to become a Presbyterian minister.

Paxton, one of the loudest supporters of Trump’s bid to overturn the 2020 presidential election, was impeached in 2023 by the Republican-controlled Texas state legislature on charges of bribery, abuse of office and corruption.

He is also about to be embroiled in a divorce trial after his estranged wife announced she was filing to end their marriage “on biblical grounds”.

Paxton has denied wrongdoing and said last year that he was the victim of a “bogus witch-hunt” after the Department of Justice dropped a probe into abuse of office and bribery allegations.

The controversies around his Republican opponent have helped Talarico to a narrow polling lead — 1.5 percentage points, according to the RealClearPolitics polling average.

“My biggest thing is having a decent human being to represent Texas,” said Laura Hiers, a 55-year-old physical therapist at Wednesday’s rally, who added that she has known Talarico since he spoke in her church two years ago.

But Democrats’ hopes have long fallen short in Texas, which Trump won by a 14-point margin over Kamala Harris in 2024. As soon as Paxton won Tuesday’s primary, he and his allies rushed to attack Talarico as too far to the left for Texas. Buoyed by the margin of their victory over Cornyn, they maintain they will overcome any doubts once their campaign against the Democrat cranks up in the conservative state.

This week the Paxton campaign released an advert with clips of past comments by Talarico, including claims that there were six “biological sexes”, that the American flag is a “complicated symbol” and that the US-Mexico border “should [have] a giant welcome mat out front”.

“There is absolutely no way Texas will elect James Talarico, a BBQ-hating vegan who believes God is non-binary,” Joe Gruters, chair of the Republican National Committee, wrote on X. “Full stop.”

In Washington, Senate majority leader John Thune spent months trying to convince Trump to back Cornyn. He warned that Paxton’s candidacy would jeopardise Republicans’ hold of the Texas seat and the Senate itself.

Instead, Trump made an eleventh-hour endorsement of Paxton last week. “None of us control what the president does,” Thune said afterwards.

Thune nevertheless rallied round after this week’s primary, appealing to donors to write big cheques for Paxton and other candidates to keep control of the upper house. “Losing is not an option when it comes to the state of Texas,” he said.

Until now, Paxton has struggled to raise funds in support of his candidacy. Federal Electoral Commission filings and advertising spending data show that he was vastly outspent by Cornyn in the primary. That contrasts with Trump’s claims of a political war chest of as much as \$1.4bn. Maga Inc, the president’s Super Pac — a fundraising vehicle that can raise unlimited amounts of money — has nearly \$350mn cash on hand, according to the FEC filings.

But it remains unclear how much Maga Inc — or any other part of the president’s political apparatus — will be willing to spend in support of Republican candidates heading into November.

“I think he will spend some money. He will never spend all of that money,” says one Republican senator. “The president is a personal guy. Personal affection means a lot to him. I think it determines how he spends money as well.”

Republicans currently control the US Senate, 53-47, meaning they cannot afford a net loss of more than three seats in November if they are to maintain control of the chamber. If the Democrats took Maine, North Carolina, Alaska and Ohio, all seemingly competitive seats, they would gain control of the Senate; if they faltered in one, Texas could put them over the edge.

In the meantime, according to Kalshi, the Republicans have fallen since the beginning of the year from a roughly two-thirds chance of retaining the chamber to around 55:45.

During Wednesday’s cabinet meeting Trump insisted he would not seek a quick peace deal with Iran just to help his party domestically. “I don’t care about the midterms,” the president said,

Some Republicans fear Trump has been engaging in political malpractice against his own party’s prospects. But in many ways his emphasis on his movement, rather than his party, has been a constant feature of his approach.

“He looks at each individual case through his own personal lens,” says Engel at the Center for Presidential History, adding: “Trump is much more popular as a critic than a president.”