

HARVEY KRONBERG'S QUORUM REPORT

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With millions more on the way, runoffs come into focus after a mountain of money was poured into Texas House GOP primaries

As we reset and get ready for the next onslaught, QR's James Russell dives into Abbott, Paxton, and their billionaire class donors' war on the Texas House and Speaker Phelan's efforts to protect incumbents

A lot has been said, rightfully, about the bloody Republican March primary dominated by PACs and elected officeholders at every level.

There's the entitled (Gov. **Greg Abbott**, Sen. **Mayes Middleton** of River Oaks and the **Family Empowerment Coalition PAC**), vengeful and stingy (cheapskate Attorney General **Ken Paxton**), grifty (Agriculture Commissioner **Sid Miller** and whatever the new anti-everything Dunn-Wilks money gusher) and those on the supporting incumbents (namely **Texas House** Speaker **Dade Phelan**, the **Associated Republicans of Texas** and others in their orbit).

In 2024, all said, PACs supporting vouchers, opposing Paxton's impeachment, supporting and opposing Phelan as well as those who profit off chaos led by the **House Keyboard Warrior Caucus** spent \$16 million toward their goals.

It's easy to make the assessment that the race to the bottom cost a mountain of money and we're only a little past halfway down the sewer to the swamp.

First, a breakdown:

Those numbers include **AFC Victory Fund** (\$9.5 million), the Family Empowerment Coalition PAC (\$1.4 million), the Dunn-Wilks **Texans United for a Conservative Majority** (\$2 million) and Gov. **Greg Abbott** (\$5.8 million). Abbott, it should be noted, previously gave to members about as much as he talked to them.

Take those numbers versus Speaker Phelan, who spent \$3.3 million to support incumbents,

Texans for Lawsuit Reform, which spent \$6.5 million and ART coming in at \$2.6 million to help incumbents and boost rational challengers and those in open races.

AFC's largely backed by the national who's who of voucher supporters while FEC had a mix of state and local donors.

Nine incumbents lost outright:

Four opposed by Abbott and his voucher allies (Reps. **Steve Allison**, **Ernest Bailes**, **Glenn Rogers** and **Hugh Shine**, who accidentally received \$9,000 from FEC);

Members who support vouchers but dared cross Attorney General **Ken Paxton** (Reps. **Jacey Jetton** and **Kronda Thimesch**);

Elections Chair **Reggie Smith**, about whom Abbott was noncommittal and Paxton opposed;

Rep. **Travis Clardy**, whom Abbott and TLR opposed but was supported by Paxton;

Freshly minted Rep. **Jill Dutton** lost in a rematch of sorts against **Brent Money**.

The remaining incumbents are headed to runoffs, including Phelan, **Land & Resource Management** Chair **DeWayne Burns**, **Higher Education** Chair **John Kuempel**, **Public Health** Chair **Stephanie Klick**, Reps. **Gary VanDeaver**, **Justin Holland**, **Lynn Stucky** and **Frederick Frazier**.

Paxton and outside groups also shook up the judiciary and the State Board of Education.

Across the state:

All three **Criminal Court of Appeals** justices (**Sharon Keller**, **Barbara Parker Hervey** and **Michelle Slaughter**) targeted by Paxton lost.

Allied group **Texans for Responsible Judges** spent a little more than \$156,000. Top contributors were TUMC, which gave \$55,000 and a shell group run by the Wilks brothers and **Kenny Troutt**, who each gave \$50,000.

Pushing back was the TLR-backed **Judicial Fairness PAC**, formed in 2020, spending nearly \$1 million.

SBOE member **Pat Hardy** lost outright while incumbents **Tom Maynard** and **Pam Little** are heading into runoffs. The challengers were backed by **Texans for Educational Freedom**. The group spent \$427,000. Top contributors were Dallas hotelier **Monty Bennett**, who gave

\$235,000 and former **Texas Public Policy Foundation** trustee **Alex Cranberg**, who gave \$200,000.

Now to Abbott's offensive:

In January, the governor reported having raised \$14 million.

In terms of direct spending and in-kind donations, he gave \$4.6 million to challengers to 10 voucher opponents. That's versus \$1.2 million to shore up opponents who earned Paxton's ire and \$605,000 in open races to boost voucher supporters targeted for any myriad of reasons both self-imposed and inevitable in this cycle.

To unseat House incumbents, Abbott spent **Tiktok** money spread across 10 races:

*\$707,000 to **Janis Holt**, who defeated Bailes*

*\$698,000 to **Marc LaHood**, the former Democrat who defeated Allison*

*\$646,000 to former Rep. **Alan Schoolcraft**, Kuempel's runoff opponent*

*\$640,000 to **Stormy Bradley**, who lost to Rep. **Drew Darby***

*\$422,000 to **Helen Kerwin**, Burns's runoff opponent*

*\$405,000 to **Joanne Shofner**, who defeated Clardy*

*\$400,000 to **Hillary Hickland**, who defeated Shine*

*\$255,000 to **Chris Spencer**, VanDeaver's runoff opponent*

*\$253,000 to **Liz Case**, who lost to Rep. **Stan Lambert***

*\$200,000 to **Mike Olcott**, who defeated Rogers*

Meantime, Speaker Phelan was working to shore up his incumbent GOP members That's versus Phelan, who gave \$15,000 each in 2023, along with the following in 2024:

\$149,000 to Burns

\$106,000 to Allison

\$108,000 to Bailes

\$100,000 to Rogers

\$82,000 to VanDeaver

\$81,000 to Kuempel

\$73,000 to Lambert

\$32,000 to Shine

\$16,000 to Darby

ART, TLR, TREPAC and the **Charles Butt Education PAC** rounded out the major donors to those campaigns.

Ahead of the run-offs, Abbott tweeted his plans to defeat remaining incumbents who opposed his school voucher proposal.

Not long after, the **Club for Growth** – a group that one GOP consultant described as a “weigh station for top donors’ money regardless of what issue they care about” – announced it’ll be spending \$4 million to defeat incumbents like so-called “liberal” Speaker Phelan.

By James Russell

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