

A supporter of Texas state Rep. James Talarico, a Democratic candidate for the U.S. Senate, wears a Texas state flag in their hat during a primary election watch party March 3 in Austin, Texas. Talarico won the Democratic nomination. (AP/Eric Gay)



by Michael Sean Winters

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The Texas primaries March 3 were a kind of Rorschach test for the country's two political parties. The GOP faced a choice between a MAGA-extremist, scandal-ridden state Attorney General Ken Paxton and the incumbent conservative, Sen. John Cornyn, who supports President Donald Trump's policies but questioned whether time had passed him by in 2023. The Democratic contest pitted two rising stars against each other, the more well-known, and combative, Rep. Jasmine Crockett against state Senator and Presbyterian seminarian James Talarico.

Talarico won the Democratic nomination — and needs to send a thank you note to CBS news executives who warned Stephen Colbert about airing an interview with the young candidate. Colbert put it on YouTube and it racked up more than 85 million views.

The Republican candidates split the vote evenly and because neither candidate won 50% of the vote, the contest heads to a run-off in late May. The Texas primary is already the most expensive in history, and now the GOP must spend even more in the run-off and the race will continue to be very nasty.

I would be surprised if the Democrats pick up the Texas Senate seat in November. This is still Texas, and while Talarico's boyish sunniness may warm the hearts of many people, Talarico strikes many observers as Beto O'Rourke 2.0. O'Rourke was supposed to lead the Democratic charge to victory in Texas in 2018, when he came close, and in 2022, but he lost by a wide margin

Do the Texas results teach us wider lessons about the state of the two parties? Yes and no.

In the eyes of his critics, Cornyn represents the Republican Party of George W. Bush, not that of Donald Trump. The Bush administration was hardly an experiment in liberal government: The tax reforms of 2001 and 2003 did as much as anything to accelerate income inequality in the country. But Bush was civil, he surrounded himself with grown-ups, and he had reasons, albeit many of which proved faulty, for the decisions he made. He was no Trump.

That said, disgust with the establishment is the key to Trumpism and Cornyn is in his fourth term in the U.S. Senate.

Paxton is no political ingénue and his record should be problematic to most fair-minded voters. He was impeached by the GOP-dominated Texas House of Representatives on charges of bribery, obstruction of justice, conspiracy and abuse of the public's trust, but acquitted by the state Senate. He had a messy divorce from his wife, state Sen. Angela Paxton, who said she wanted out of the marriage on "biblical grounds" — that is, he cheated on her. Catholics have a special reason to detest Paxton: He tried to force a Catholic ministry to migrants, Annunciation House, to reveal personal information about their clients. His commitment to religious liberty does not extend to the works of mercy.

None of that may be disqualifying to Texas voters who supported Trump in the last three presidential elections. Scandals don't play the way they once did.

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Talarico's seminary formation shapes his speeches, but not his policies. On no culture war issue — not abortion, not transgender medical procedures for minors, not Christian nationalism — are his positions distinguishable from Crockett's. The subject of a host of kid glove profiles, like this one at Politico, demonstrate his appeal as a candidate. His tone is the opposite of Trump's, but unlike many Democratic politicians, he can quote Scripture chapter and verse. Literally.

Crockett is a fire-breather like Trump but could not be more different from the president on how she views the world or the policies she supports. She is a frequent guest on MS NOW, formerly MSNBC, the cable network somewhat viciously but accurately dubbed the "I could not agree more" network. Her appearances made her a household name and frequent target of MAGA wrath. Those who want a fighter were rallying to her candidacy even if it is widely assumed that Talarico would have a better shot at winning the general election contest.

And, Crockett did not cede the religious angle to Talarico. She is the daughter of a pastor and her current pastor is running for the congressional seat she is vacating. As is often the case, the Black church is the beating heart of Black politics. Her style of politics relies heavily on the jeremiad, which is the last thing our politics needs.

Still, I think I would have voted for Crockett over Talarico. I care more about the future of religion than I do about the future of politics, and pulling Christianity away

from those who abuse it for political ends is a necessity. I can't see a politician affecting that work. Besides, Presbyterianism lacks the mediating framework the Catholic Church has in natural law and its theological traditions. Cherry-picking Bible quotes that bolster one's politics is not what religion needs. Then again, maybe it is just my residual prejudice against Calvinism and Presbyterianism in particular. Nothing I have seen in my 64 years on this planet leads me to question the verdict on Presbyterianism's founder, John Knox, rendered by Samuel Johnson. Johnson's amanuensis, James Boswell, recorded an incident during their tour of Scotland. "I happened to ask where John Knox was buried. Dr. Johnson burst out, 'I hope in the high-way. I have been looking at his reformations.' "

Commentators on cable news mentioned the likelihood that the Republicans will have to spend money in Texas next November that could be better spent elsewhere, that if Texas is in play the GOP is in trouble. But there are no limits to the amount of money someone like Jeff Bezos or Elon Musk can spend on several races. I hope I'm wrong, but next November, I suspect the Democrats will again be asking what went wrong in Texas.

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