News



Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican candidate for the U.S. Senate, speaks during a primary runoff election night event after winning the Republican party's nomination Tuesday, May 26, 2026, in Plano, Texas. (AP photo/Tony Gutierrez)



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A crucial race for the U.S. Senate in Texas features a Presbyterian seminarian who speaks in religious terms to bolster his progressive politics and a scandal-plagued state attorney general who has targeted Catholic nonprofits that serve migrants in border communities.

Democrats in recent weeks have attacked Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton as one of the most unethical politicians in the United States. Paxton, a Republican, has faced numerous allegations of corruption, financial malfeasance and infidelity.

Paxton, 63, was indicted on felony securities fraud charges in 2015. In 2023, the Texas House of Representatives impeached him on charges that included bribery, dereliction of duty and abuse of public trust. The Texas Senate subsequently acquitted him of the charges.

"He has failed the character test. He has put his own interests above the laws of Texas," James Talarico, a Democrat, said of his opponent in the high-profile race to succeed U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, who was defeated by Paxton in the state's Republican primary held May 26.

Conservative commentators and other Republicans in turn have taken to social media to portray Talarico, a 37-year-old state lawmaker from Austin, as a "heretic" whose liberal stances on hot-button issues such as abortion and transgender rights make him unsuitable for Texas.



Texas Rep. James Talarico speaks at a rally Aug. 16, 2025, at Wrigley Square in Millennium Park in Chicago. (AP photo/Talia Sprague)

"A couple of well-rehearsed lines won't trick Texans into voting for a dangerous radical leftist for the U.S. Senate," U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz, a Republican, wrote May 31 on X.

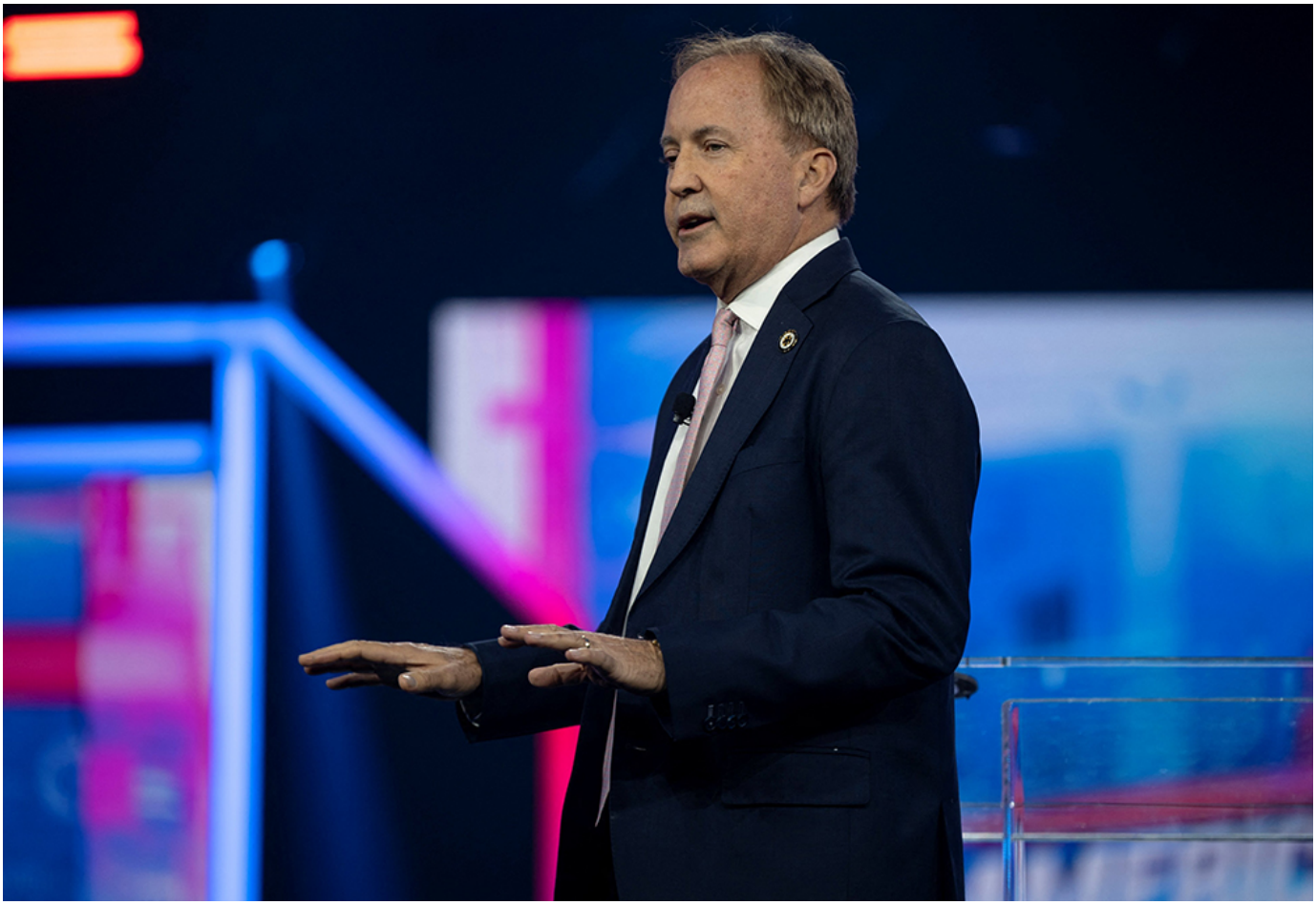
Like most typical midterm elections, political analysts see the contest between Talarico and Paxton in part as a referendum on President Donald Trump, whose job approval rating has fallen below 40%, according to a recent Emerson College poll.

"Trump's coattails are going to be very small here," said Arturo Vega, the interim chairman of political science at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. Inflation, the war in Iran and Trump's controversial political style, Vega said, could boost Talarico.

"I think with Paxton's baggage, it's going to be a very close race here," Vega told National Catholic Reporter. "Talarico is going to have a chance to do something Democrats haven't done here in the state since the 1990s."

Geoffrey Layman, chairman of political science at the University of Notre Dame, said Talarico "had to be thrilled" with the outcome of the Texas Republican primary that saw Paxton defeat Cornyn in a May 26 runoff election.

"It certainly puts Texas in play for the Democrats," Layman told NCR. "We've been talking about Texas turning blue for a while now. It's never happened and honestly it hasn't come all that close, but Trump is wildly unpopular and Paxton is a very controversial candidate."



Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton speaks during the AmericaFest 2024 conference sponsored by Turning Point in Phoenix Dec. 21, 2024. (OSV News/Reuters/Cheney Orr)

While Trump's favorability is near an all-time low with most voters, recent primary results show he still wields clout with his base. In May, Trump-endorsed candidates defeated Republican incumbents such as U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy in Louisiana and U.S. Rep. Thomas Massie in Kentucky.

"Trump seems to dominate intraparty Republican politics," Layman said.

In Texas, Trump endorsed Paxton one week before the runoff against Cornyn, who had held his Senate seat since 2002. Paxton defeated the four-term incumbent by 28 percentage points.

"I think everybody was pretty shocked by the outcome of the primary, mostly because John Cornyn had been a strong supporter of the president," Vega said. "To have the president at the last minute come in to endorse Paxton, I think that was very surprising."

But noting that "primary voters are different than general election voters," Vega said he expects a close election in November where Talarico could be "well-poised" to become the first Democrat to win a statewide election in Texas since 1994.

"If he's going to have a chance, he's going to have to mobilize the whole state," Vega said.

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To appeal to Texas voters, Talarico has cultivated the image of a moderate Democrat who is comfortable quoting Scripture to frame his social justice-oriented platform. He recently enrolled at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, where he is studying for a Master of Divinity degree.

"My faith in Jesus leads me to reject Christian Nationalism and commit myself to the project of democracy," Talarico says on his campaign website.

"In some ways, Talarico is a pretty formidable candidate," Layman said. "He's a seminarian. He can talk about religion and he can quote the Bible. In that way he was always a pretty attractive candidate for the Texas Democrats."

Republican and conservative leaders have been looking to blunt Talarico's faith-infused rhetoric by highlighting his statements on social issues, such as his description of God as "non-binary" and his support of abortion rights. The Rev. Franklin Graham posted on X that Talarico "couldn't be more wrong" in arguing that the Bible is silent on abortion. "Don't be deceived by wicked politicians spouting lies like this," Graham wrote.

Whether Graham's warning resonates with Texas voters remains to be seen. A poll taken in late May showed Talarico with a three percentage point lead over Paxton, which was within the margin of error. Political analysts said the election will likely be decided at the margins.

For Paxton, his aggressive campaign in recent years against nonprofits in Texas that serve migrants could hurt him with some Latino and Catholic voters, analysts said.

In December 2022, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott called for the state to investigate whether nongovernmental organizations were involved in "planning and assisting illegal border crossings into Texas." In a letter to Paxton, Abbott claimed without providing evidence that nongovernmental organizations were engaged in "unlawfully orchestrating" border crossings "through activities on both sides of the border."



Sr. Norma Pimentel, a Missionary of Jesus, greets Esther Chicas, a recently arrived migrant from El Salvador, and her child, Andrea, at the Humanitarian Respite Center in McAllen, Texas on Nov. 11, 2023. (OSV News/David Agren)

Paxton later sought to depose Missionary Sr. Norma Pimentel, the executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, which operates a respite center for migrants in McAllen, Texas., A Texas appeals court denied his request in 2025.

In 2024, Paxton sued to close down Annunciation House, calling the El Paso-based Catholic migrant shelter a "stash house." A district court judge ruled against Paxton, but the Texas Supreme Court overturned that decision in 2025. A trial date is scheduled for March 2027.

Paxton did not respond to messages seeking comment left with his campaign and the Texas Attorney General's Office.

Vega said Paxton's legal efforts against the nonprofits are more "splash than substance," adding that they are intended to signal to Texans that he is attacking illegal immigration on their behalf. Vega said he expects Republicans to emphasize immigration to associate Talarico with open borders.

"It's a card that plays well here," Vega said.

However, Layman said that strategy could be undermined by the unpopularity of the Trump administration's mass deportation campaign, especially among Latino Catholics. He also noted the U.S. Catholic bishops' criticisms of the administration's immigration policies and Trump's social media criticisms of Pope Leo XIV.

"I don't expect that white Catholics are going to come running en masse back to the Democrats, but these elections are decided at the margins, especially these days," Layman said. "And in a state like Texas, where Republicans should win, even if conditions are great they're not going to win like they used to. One or two percent of the vote could make the difference."

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