

## Texas politics

# The resurgent right

## And an unlikely possible ally for moderates

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Getting redder

ONE of the first plays by America's tea-party tendency came in April 2009 in Austin, the capital of Texas. After speaking at an anti-tax rally, Rick Perry, the governor, intimated that Texas might think about secession "if Washington continues to thumb their nose at the American people". Grandstanding like this is normal in Texas. What is more surprising is that, as the tea-party movement surged through the 2010 election cycle, Texas actually turned out to be one of the less incendiary states.

And Mr Perry is now sounding less fiery than some had feared. Earlier this month he easily won re-election to his third full term. He then set off on a short national tour to promote his new book, "Fed Up!" Fighting words, but his prescriptions—"repeal Obamacare", "adopt certain important structural reforms"—are common enough. Some wonder whether Mr Perry has presidential ambitions for 2012. He says no, and may mean it: last week, in San Diego, he accepted a post as head of the Republican Governors Association.

Still, the state legislature has provided plenty of drama. After the 2008 elections the Texas House of Representatives had the narrowest possible Republican majority, 76-74. This prompted attempts at bipartisanship. A coalition of centrists backed Joe Straus, a moderate Republican from San Antonio, for speaker. He fairly apportioned coveted spots on the powerful committees. Democrats anticipated a new age of tranquillity, bolstered by the hope that they might take the majority in 2010, or even win a statewide office.

In retrospect, Democrats were too optimistic. The party won none of the seven big statewide offices. It failed even to rustle up a candidate for comptroller. And Republicans hugely expanded their majority in the House. They now hold 99 seats to the Democrats' 51.

The need for bipartisanship has been obviated. And conservative Republicans have big plans. The state legislature meets only in odd-numbered years, and the session runs for five months or less. So legislators are already shuffling their bills before they convene in January. Measures concerning guns, abortion and voter identification are in the queue.

Redistricting will be a big issue, as will the budget: the state's shortfall could exceed \$20 billion in the 2012-2013 biennium, although the comptroller's official assessment is not due until the new year. That would be at least 10% of the state's spending. Some House Republicans have even

suggested that the state should drop out of the federal Medicaid programme. The idea, however, is not that Texas would stop providing health care to the poor. Arlene Wohlgemuth, the executive director of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation, explains that Texas would still expect its share of federal funding, but in the form of a block grant for a state-designed programme. A similar proposal has been aired by members of the president's deficit commission in Washington, DC.

Texas might also feel the force of a resurgent right over immigration. The state takes a fairly balanced view of border issues in general and, for cultural and economic reasons, tends to support immigration more than the country as a whole. When Arizona passed its draconian anti-immigration law, for example, Mr Perry said this was "not the right direction for Texas". Some legislators, however, disagree, and one has already filed a bill modelled on Arizona's.

The governor's view is the more popular. But Democrats are worried that an Arizona-style bill might nonetheless make its way to his desk. In that case, 2011 may be the year that Mr Perry becomes the moderating influence on Texas politics. Stranger things have happened.

United States

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