

# SHINING LIGHT ON TEXAS HOUSE SPEAKER JOE STRAUS



by MICHAEL QUINN SULLIVAN (/COLUMNISTS/MICHAEL-QUINN-SULLIVAN) | 16 Feb 2014  
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Despite the national reputation as a reliably red state with a solidly conservative population, Texas' legislative leadership in Austin does not necessarily share that conservative perspective.

The *Wall Street Journal* recently noted that state government spending in Texas increased 25 percent from 2011 to 2013 (<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/sb10001424127887324299104578527193464764384>).

At the same time, bills generally viewed as conservative priorities, including constitutional amendments to cap spending, expanded school choice, bans on welfare for illegal aliens and on-campus carry, have languished in committee one session after another.

Frustrated with rising spending and inaction on conservative priorities, many tea partiers and other grassroots conservative activists have trained their political guns on the House and Senate leadership in recent election cycles, supporting challenges to the House Speaker in 2011 (<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/community-news/mckinney/headlines/20101111-mckinney-republican-ken-paxton-announces-bid-3989.ece>) and again in 2013 (<http://lubbockonline.com/filed-online/2012-12-10/tea-party-rep-simpson-running-texas-speaker#.Uuo9QD1dWS0>), and to the lieutenant governor this year. In response, certain business interests who rely heavily on the taxpayers for their bottom line have launched a 2014 election effort known as the "Texas Future Business Alliance" designed -- in the words of the *Dallas Morning News* (<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/headlines/20140104-business-coalition-taking-on-hard-right-groups-in-texas-primaries.ece>) -- to "counter" the state's movement conservatives and tea party activists.

Sitting at the center of all this is House Speaker [Joe Straus](#) ([http://ballotpedia.org/Joe\\_Straus](http://ballotpedia.org/Joe_Straus)) of San Antonio, who has done little to distance himself from political leanings generally perceived to be moderate-to-liberal.

First elected to the Texas House in a mid-legislative session special election in 2005, Straus' first full term in the legislature (2007) raised little attention. His ratings from conservative groups placed him at or below average. Straus' ratings included:

- Texas Right-to-Life – 50%
- Texans for Fiscal Responsibility – 71%
- Young Conservatives of Texas – 62%
- Texas Eagle Forum – 68%
- Heritage Alliance – 52%

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Pro-choicers were considerably more generous to Straus. In 2005, Straus [received a 100% rating from NARAL Pro-Choice Texas](http://votesmart.org/candidate/evaluations/49917/joe-straus#.Uulganm_dZ8) ([http://votesmart.org/candidate/evaluations/49917/joe-straus#.Uulganm\\_dZ8](http://votesmart.org/candidate/evaluations/49917/joe-straus#.Uulganm_dZ8)) for his work in the legislature.

Straus became the third-ranking constitutional officer in state government in 2009 -- the beneficiary of a "bloodless coup" that saw 11 Republicans join forces with 65 Democrats to oust Republican Tom Craddick of Midland from the speakership. Craddick had been the state's first Republican speaker since reconstruction, a post he earned in 2003 after engineering the GOP's take-over of the state house in the 2002 elections.

When a wave of tea party activism elected a Republican supermajority to the Texas House in 2010, some predicted Straus might lose the speakers' gavel, but Straus and his lieutenants have held on to power by maintaining a close alliance between Democrats and pro-Straus Republicans. This has ensured that control of prime committees, such as Appropriations and Ways and Means, has remained firmly in the hands of Democrats and establishment Republicans. In practice, it has meant that reform initiatives long favored by the state's conservative electorate have, with rare exceptions, died in committee.

This dynamic was on full display in 2013, when the regular session of the legislature came to a close without a single one of the many pro-life bills filed being allowed on the House floor by the leadership. Pro-life legislation ultimately did move in 2013, due to the efforts of [a tenacious group of pro-life legislators](http://www.lifenews.com/2013/05/30/64-texas-legislators-ask-perry-for-special-session-for-pro-life-bills/) (<http://www.lifenews.com/2013/05/30/64-texas-legislators-ask-perry-for-special-session-for-pro-life-bills/>) who petitioned Gov. Rick Perry to add life-related measures to the call for a series of special sessions.

While Straus has not explicitly embraced the 'pro-choice' label, he has generally rejected the 'pro-life' label, as well. Shortly after becoming speaker in 2009, Straus sat for an [interview with Evan Smith](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtehilcmnce) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dtehilcmnce>), now the editor of the Texas Tribune. In that video, Straus said he eschewed the pro-life and pro-choice "labels", saying he wished the debate would go away. (Critics note, however, that [Straus has embraced the 'pro-life' label](http://thscpac.org/2010/11/time-to-push-back-in-speakers-race/) (<http://thscpac.org/2010/11/time-to-push-back-in-speakers-race/>) when he felt it politically necessary, such as when his speakership was challenged by conservative House member Ken Paxton.)

According to Texas conservatives, legislation brought forward by Democrats has fared better than GOP measures in the Texas House under Straus. Hal Hawkins, who runs the analysis website [Hardhatters.com](http://www.hardhatters.com), [crunched the numbers and found](http://www.hardhatters.com/2013/10/texas-democrats-surprisingly-successful-austin/) (<http://www.hardhatters.com/2013/10/texas-democrats-surprisingly-successful-austin/>):

"51% of the laws sent to the governor's desk from the House were Democrat-written or co-written. This means the MINORITY party in the House, outnumbered by nearly 2-1, was the MAJORITY when it came to laws passed. How can this be? There is one probable answer: Speaker of the House Joe Straus."

Right-to-life groups have noted that not a single piece of pro-life legislation passed during the regular session of the Texas legislature in 2013. This prompted [64 House Republicans](http://www.lifenews.com/2013/05/30/64-texas-legislators-ask-perry-for-special-session-for-pro-life-bills/) (<http://www.lifenews.com/2013/05/30/64-texas-legislators-ask-perry-for-special-session-for-pro-life-bills/>) -- Straus and his leadership team did not sign the letter -- to ask Gov. Rick Perry to [add a bevy of pro-life bills](http://www.texasgopvote.com/issues/restore-families/governor-rick-perry-adds-big-pro-life-bills-texas-special-session-005560) (<http://www.texasgopvote.com/issues/restore-families/governor-rick-perry-adds-big-pro-life-bills-texas-special-session-005560>) to a special session.

Many budget reforms long-championed by conservatives -- including constitutionally defined spending limits and zero-based budgeting -- have been bottled up, session after session, in the Texas House by Straus and his committee chairs. Instead, the House leadership has often acted to [expand spending](http://www.apple.com) (<http://www.apple.com>) in stark contrast to the expressed wishes of Texas GOP voters.

For example, on the May 2012 Republican Primary ballot voters were presented with a non-binding question calling for constitutional spending limits. More than nine out of ten GOP voters [supported the measure](http://www.empowertexans.com/features/spending-cap-more-popular-than-ever/) (<http://www.empowertexans.com/features/spending-cap-more-popular-than-ever/>).

Despite this show of voter opposition to expanded spending, the state legislature went on what Bill Peacock of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-partisan think tank, has described as "a spending spree." [According to Peacock](http://www.texaspolicy.com/center/economic-freedom/blog/no-doubt-about-it-state-spending-increasing/), (<http://www.texaspolicy.com/center/economic-freedom/blog/no-doubt-about-it-state-spending-increasing/>) "The fact that state appropriations increased significantly from 2011 to 2013 is beyond dispute."

Following the "spending spree," the Texas Future Business Alliance was created and funded by interests in the Texas business establishment. [Groups supporting the effort](http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/headlines/20140104-texas-business-groups-) (<http://www.dallasnews.com/news/politics/headlines/20140104-texas-business-groups->

[ally-to-counter-tea-party-influence-in-gop-primaries.ece](#)) include the Texas Medical Association and Texas Hospital Association, both of which support ObamaCare. Other groups involved include Texans for Lawsuit Reform and the Texas Association of Realtors. Their mission has been described by news reports as pushing against conservative interests and supporting the allies of Straus.

In contrast to his support within the ranks of legislators and business lobbyists, Joe Straus is highly unpopular among the Republican faithful in the electorate. As [Texas Monthly reported in January 2013 \(http://www.texasmonthly.com/story/primary-targets\)](#), grassroots disapproval of Straus was on full display at the last state Republican convention.

The magazine reported that party officials, fearing that Speaker Straus would be booed or otherwise unwelcomed by delegates, reconfigured the event. According to Texas Monthly, “[Straus’] address to the delegates had to be carefully stage-managed to minimize heckling and booing.”

Republicans standing close to Joe Straus have found themselves in [hot political water at home \(http://www.empowertexans.com/features/texas-voters-repudiate-team-straus/\)](#).

Straus' political team has been busy fending off challenges to legislators viewed as establishment players and liberals within the GOP. More than a dozen Straus-friendly Republicans have either retired or are being challenged in the Republican primary. Of the eleven Republicans who aligned with the Democrats to install Straus as Speaker back in 2009, only three remain -- the rest being actively defeated or retiring in advance of a primary challenge.

Meanwhile, only three of the chamber's 30 most conservative Republicans have re-election fights on their hands and none have retired (though one, Van Taylor of Plano, is walking unopposed into a state senate seat).

Despite the thinning ranks of his original support base, Straus has managed to hang on to the speaker's gavel thanks, in part, to a new crop of GOP legislators who appear to be ideologically inclined to maintain their leadership alliance with Democrats.

The Republicans closest to Joe Straus tend to inhabit the lowest Republican rankings on a [scale developed by Rice University's Mark Jones \(http://www.texastribune.org/2013/10/15/guest-column-2013-texas-house-right-left/\)](#) in a non-partisan study of the legislature.

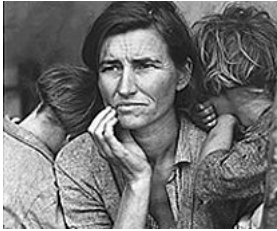
Freshman State Rep. J.D. Sheffield -- who was one of the few Republicans in the House calling explicitly for ObamaCare implementation in the state through Medicaid expansion - - was one of the [lowest-performing freshmen lawmakers \(http://www.netarrantteaparty.com/2013/12/j-d-sheffield-caught-in-a-rino-trap/\)](#) on conservative ratings (including from the NRA), but nonetheless has received big support from Straus and his allies. Sheffield's classmate, Jason Villalba represents an upscale district in Dallas County and has been one of the most [vocal promoters \(https://mobile.twitter.com/JasonVillalba/status/433090243407773696?screen\\_name=JasonVillalba\)](#) of Straus since escaping a primary challenge. While he has not been as openly pro-ObamaCare as Sheffield, [Villalba made waves last year with comments \(http://www.empowertexans.com/features/villalba-tx-should-pay-for-obamacare-exchanges/\)](#) expressing support for ObamaCare implementation and Medicaid expansion in Texas.

Leading up to the 2011 legislative session, it was [alleged by Rep. Bryan Hughes \(http://txvalues.org/2010/11/23/public-shut-out-of-hearing-rep-larry-phillips-named-as-alleged-house-member-who-talked-with-rep-hughes-in-texas-speaker-race/\)](#) that Straus' redistricting committee was planning to use the map-drawing process to punish conservative representatives Jim Landtroop, Wayne Christian and Erwin Cain. A House committee appointed by Straus ignored the issue, but when the maps were finally drawn in 2011, the districts of all three men were radically altered.

While Straus has managed to bring in reinforcements in recent cycles, the 2014 primaries aren't necessarily shaping up in favor of his team. Not only does Straus again face a re-election challenge in his own primary, conservative standout and former NFL star [Scott Turner \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q7gxitsscu\)](#) of Frisco announced his [candidacy for the speakership \(http://trailblazersblog.dallasnews.com/2014/01/scott-turner-of-frisco-running-for-texas-house-speaker.html/\)](#) in early January.

The vote for the next speaker of the House will not be until the first day of the next legislative session, in January 2015. Whether or not Straus and his allies retain power in 2015 remains to be seen, and will be determined in no small part by the electoral results of the March 2014 primaries.

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**BrianHumek** • 15 hours ago

I applaud Breitbart for beginning a new section dedicated Texas. It's a big state with some big liberal Republicans like Strauss who need to be exposed. Thanks for this article. I will be glued to this section.

18 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share >



**FreedomFighter** → BrianHumek • 15 hours ago

Agree. Too little coverage is received for most to understand who the corporatists and communists are for targeting. Clearly, Strauss needs to be at the top of the list.

9 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**FauxScienceSlayer** → BrianHumek • 12 hours ago

Unfortunately Texas has been home base for way too many ROTTEN RINOs, and primary season is the time to thin this herd.

Anybody BUT Cornyn...anybody BUT Dewhurst...

anybody BUT a Bush clansman....and KEN PAXTON for Attorney General.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**BrianHumek** → FauxScienceSlayer • 12 hours ago

Yep, I'm voting for Paxton.  
1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**bornfreeamerican** → BrianHumek • an hour ago

Paxton for Texas Attorney General  
^ | v • Reply • Share >



**Mickey Wasp** → FauxScienceSlayer • 11 hours ago

Vote for Patterson - Lt Governor  
Staples is a Bush "yes-man", this man has not had an original thought. Dewherst is a political establishment and will say anything to get elected. Patrick is another farce - remember when he castigated Ted Cruz and attempted to anger Cruz on behalf of the Dewherst and Cornyn supporters...  
2 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share >



**FauxScienceSlayer** → MickeyWasp • 11 hours ago

Heard Paxton's stump speech at a Tea Party meeting and favorably impressed, along with Col Reid Reasor for Senate. With eight candidates we MUST force Cornyn into a runoff, but even better to have two non-Cornyn candidates in the runoff. If you have not had your Bush epiphany yet then read "The Mafia, CIA & George Bush" by Pete Brewton on the \$500 billion Savings and Loan heist. I worked on dozens on those intentional bankruptcy projects and would state under oath the facts presented in that FRAUD were correct.  
  
DO NOT SUPPORT ANY BUSH FOR OFFICE.  
4 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**esgaroth** → MickeyWasp • 2 hours ago

Wow. Didnt know that...I figured Dan Patrick would have stood up more for TP candidates. Thats a disappointment, considering how he used to run such a conservative radio station...  
^ | v • Reply • Share >



**bornfreeamerican** → FauxScienceSlayer • an hour ago

[TEXANSforSTOVAL.com](http://TEXANSforSTOVAL.com)  
1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**bornfreeamerican** → FauxScienceSlayer • an hour ago

Dan Patrick for Lieutenant Governor.  
^ | v • Reply • Share >



**FauxScienceSlayer** → bornfreeamerican • an hour ago  
Patrick has been on the right side of many issues, however he has developed a RINO streak, and he supported Dewhurst over Cruz to open the Lt Gov spot for an easy win. Texas will be better with anybody BUT Dewhurst....anybody BUT Cornyn.  
1 ^ | v • Reply • Share >



**mike** • 15 hours ago  
Hold the line Texas. Get rid of the wolfs in sheep's clothing. God bless  
9 ^ | v • Reply • Share >




**Hardciderarrest** • 15 hours ago  
He will be toast soon !!!  
3 ^ | v • Reply • Share >




**esgaroth** • 14 hours ago  
Hit DAVID DEWHURST and JOHN CORNYN NEXT!!! Two people who definitely need to get the boot!  
11 ^ | 1 v • Reply • Share >



**HenryR** • 14 hours ago  
All the coverage we get of local politics is from a magazine that calls itself "Texas Monthly". It's a left wing rag run mostly people from TU. Thank you Bretbart for providing some balance to our news sources.  
10 ^ | v • Reply • Share >

 **kay2the2nd** → HenryR · 2 hours ago  
TU?  
^ | v · Reply · Share >

 **shaggyk** → kay2the2nd · an hour ago  
Henry must be an Aggie.  
^ | v · Reply · Share >



**JJTX** · 14 hours ago  
Looks like Straus needs to LOOSE his next election.

How does Matt Beebe look?

<http://www.votebeebe.com/>

Matt Beebe, is the true conservative running to represent District 121 in the Texas House of Representatives. Matt is running in the Republican Primary to defeat the incumbent, Joe Straus.

Matt has a passion for conservative values. He believes strongly in limited government, fiscal responsibility, the rule of law, and having a respect for life. For Matt these are more than just talking points they are a part of who he is in everyday life.

Tradition of Service

Matt is the third generation of his family to serve overseas in a time of conflict, and has always understood the importance of service. He and his family have repeatedly shown a willingness to answer the call.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**BrianHumek** · 13 hours ago  
After finishing the entire second season of House of Cards, I would add that Joe Straus IS the Texas version of Frank Underwood. Anyone agree?  
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Texas Patriot** → BrianHumek · 12 hours ago  
I strongly disagree. We have a healthy number of good people still willing to serve in Texas government. Joe Straus and Greg Abbott are two of them. I would recommend that all Breitbart, RedState, CPAC, and Heritage followers ignore the rants of Mr. Sullivan. He does not care about the future of Texas or Texans and is the puppet of one agenda-slinging individual. He is a cottage industry of perhaps four people. And, that cottage better have padded walls.  
^ | v · Reply · Share >



**TheUmpire** → Texas Patriot · 8 hours ago  
Joe Straus may be a good person, but he is no conservative and the facts are clearly available on that count for all to see. The GOP in Texas is primarily a conservative bunch and are rightfully disgusted at how Straus has governed hand in glove with the Democrats. My guess is that as part of the gerrymandering, he probably also redrew lines favorable to himself (if they weren't already) to protect him against his right flank. He does NOT represent Texas Republicans well and has no business serving in the speaker's chair. His "goodness" notwithstanding.  
6 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**Mickey Wasp** · 12 hours ago  
Vote for Patterson - Lt Governor  
Staples is a Bush shill and "yes-man", this man has not had an original thought. Dewherst is a political establishment class and will say anything to get elected. Patrick is another farce - remember when he castigated Ted Cruz and attempted to anger Cruz on behalf of the Dewherst and Cornyn supporters...  
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share > Show 1 new reply



**Mickey Wasp** · 12 hours ago  
Joe Straus, the Eric Cantor of Permanent Political Establishment Class in Texas. Check out Cantor's stances on issues and see that Straus's mirrors them.  
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**john q public** · 4 hours ago  
Excellent! Let's turn on the light so this cockroach will scurry away!  
4 ^ | v · Reply · Share >



**bornfreeamerican** · an hour ago  
Scott Turner for Texas Speaker of the House!  
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share >

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