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# Abbott settles scores but the GOP could pay the price

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## Abbott settles scores but the GOP could pay the price

By [Lisa Falkenberg](#)

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*Gov. Greg Abbott, center, has supported state Rep. Sarah Davis' opponent in the March 6, 2018 Republican primary. Abbott is shown in a January 2018 photo with Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, left, and state Rep. Dennis Bonnen, right, in Houston. ( Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle ) less*

*Gov. Greg Abbott, center, has supported state Rep. Sarah Davis' opponent in the March 6, 2018 Republican primary. Abbott is shown*

*in a January 2018 photo with Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, left, and state Rep. Dennis ... more*

*Photo: Jon Shapley / Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle*

If Sarah Davis goes, Texas may not be far behind.

A bit dramatic, perhaps. But the thought has crossed my mind a few times as I follow the shenanigans in a primary bid to challenge Davis, a moderate old-school Republican, one of the last of her kind in the Texas House.

Many Texas political observers were in despair when fellow moderate House Speaker Joe Straus announced his exit after doing the Lord's work in blistering sessions of culture war politics, headlined by the bathroom bill. Many wondered: Who will stop the fringe now? Who will, at least some of the time, put the greatest good of the most Texans above the narrow considerations of partisan advantage?

Those questions remain unanswered, in terms of the speaker's gavel.

One of Straus' lieutenants wants to stay in the House and do what she can. Davis, a West University Place state representative, lawyer and breast cancer survivor elected in 2010, represents House District 134. She sits on the powerful appropriations committee and chairs the committee on general investigating and ethics. Her power and influence only go so far.

## **Translator**

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But she's one of the few moderates who hasn't given up on Texas politics, who is willing to fight the often-futile battle against motivated, moneyed ideologues who have hijacked the Republican Party.

And for that she has drawn the ire of one of the most powerful, moneyed ideologues of them all: Gov. Greg Abbott. The governor, in a rare move, has come after several moderate Republicans who aren't inclined to carry his water, but he seems to have reserved a special vintage of vengeance for Davis.

He has not only endorsed Davis' opponent, Susanna Dukupil, whose chief qualification seems to be that she once worked for Abbott at the attorney general's office. He has hit the campaign trail for the elusive Dukupil, who is also backed by anti-vaccine activists. He has poured money into her campaign, including \$161,000 into ads in January, the Texas Tribune reported.

The governor even misled Texans about Davis' actions on disaster relief funding, claiming she tried to remove it from Abbott's office, when there's video proof she did just the opposite. Over and over again, Abbott has depicted Davis as too liberal to be a Republican.

I've seen dirty campaigns, but this one reaches a special level of mudslinging.

[Read more: Abbott endorses Sarah Davis' GOP challenger](#)

One longtime Maplewood South resident Fred Sklar wrote me to say that in his 50 years in the precinct he'd never seen such an ugly daily bombardment of fancy fliers spewing untruths.

"It's crazy," the 83-year-old Realtor told me. "It's like World War III going on."

When he received one showing, as he put it, "a hooded Mideast figure with a rifle on his back," claiming Davis was aiding the terrorists, Sklar said he planted a Davis campaign sign in his front yard and did something he'd never done before: he staged a mini block walk, imploring his neighbors - even the Democrats - to vote for Davis. The fact that Abbott is supporting Dokupil adds to the offense, Sklar said.

"What a terrible misrepresentation and it's reprehensible that our governor would be behind this terrible campaign," he said.

Other campaign materials tout another false claim: that Davis supports late-term abortions.

In 2013, I sat down with Davis at the State Capitol, and asked why she was the only Republican out of 95 in the Texas House to vote against now-infamously restrictive abortion provisions.

She said the vote wasn't easy because she has a problem with abortions at 20 weeks, which the bill sought to ban. But

she believed other provisions in the bill requiring expensive, unnecessary upgrades that could close abortion clinics and mandating doctors performing abortions have local hospital privileges, are unconstitutional and would effectively ban abortion in Texas.

She was right. In 2016, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the most restrictive abortion law in the nation - but only after it had decimated women's access to abortion services and family planning in Texas.

I don't agree with Davis on every issue. But we need more lawmakers willing to stand for the U.S. Constitution over a party platform, not fewer.

Meanwhile, Abbott seems not to care if his efforts to defeat Davis end up giving the highly educated, moderate district to Democrats in the fall.

"Listen, the district is blue already," Abbott told reporters in Austin, according to the Tribune.

[Read more: Houston's Davis is sole GOP no vote on abortion bill](#)

Certainly, fired up Texas Democrats pouring into the polling places this primary season would be happy to have Davis' seat. And that might not be a bad outcome. We need two parties in this state, not one.

But where does that leave the Republican Party? If Abbott succeeds in his purification efforts, who will keep

conservatives from hurdling over the far-right cliff? If he fills the House with novice loyalists bound to his agenda and his talking points, who will speak for the people?

Republicans are not monolithic. Texans are not monolithic. Yes, we are a conservative state and in reality, there a few true liberals, as they are defined on the coasts.

Here, even many of the progressives are fiscally conservative. Yet the term liberal now lumps in those of us who want government to stay out of our bedrooms and our bathroom stalls. Who want government to help those in need with a hand up, not a hand out. Who believe in public investment in education. Who want government to be smart with taxpayer dollars, not stingy and short-sighted.

Apparently, it even encompasses those who want government to follow the Constitution.

Abbott isn't doing battle against some radical "liberal" fringe. He's assaulting a moderate who legislates in the old Texas style of bipartisanship, balance and common sense.

In targeting moderates like Davis, the governor risks destroying the last bridges across a deep divide. If they fall, we all do.

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