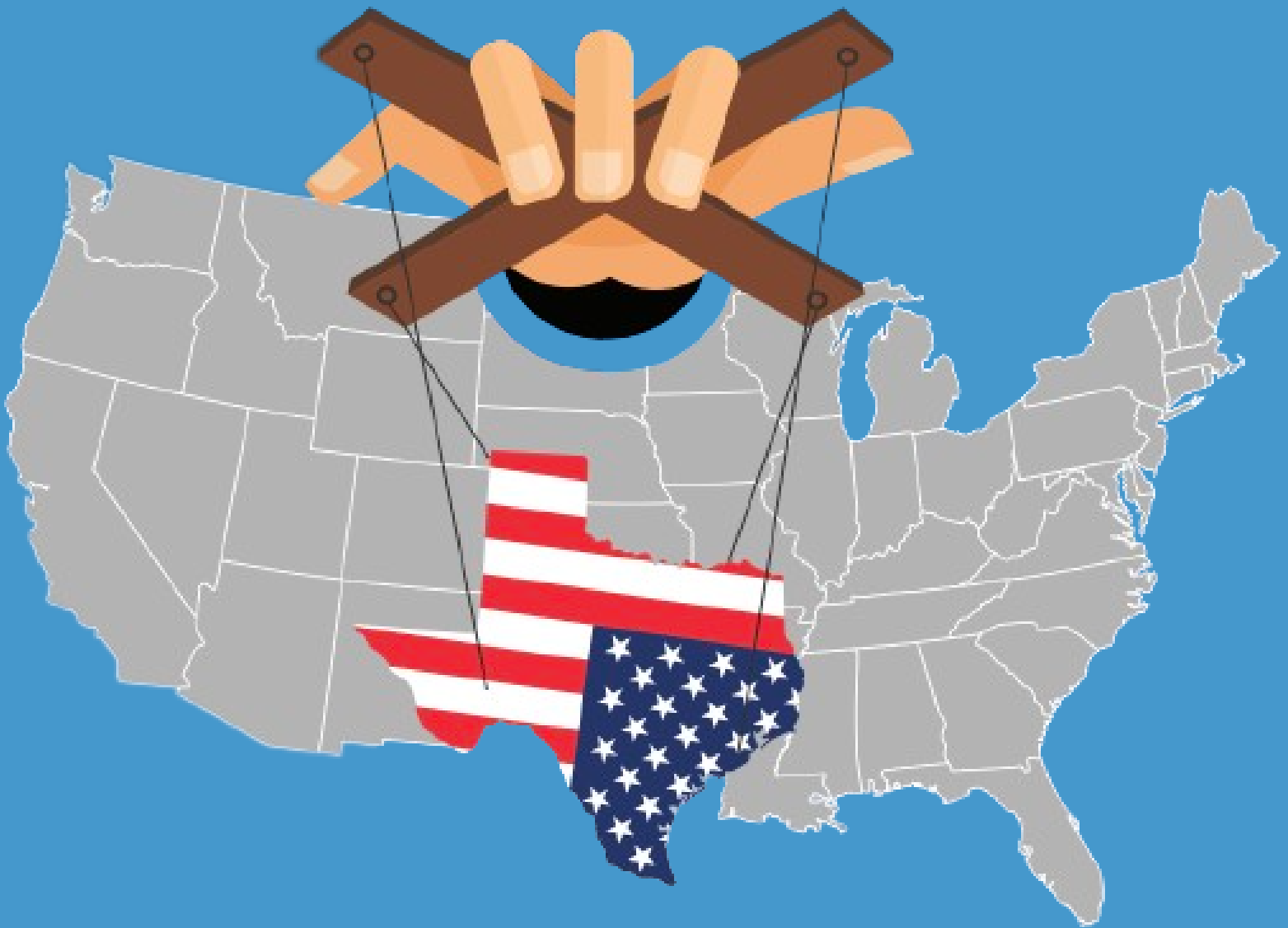


# ALEC-TIONEERING: UNMASKING MONEY & INFLUENCE IN TEXAS POLITICS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since the last millennium, Texans have been subjected to a vicious cycle of outsized money & influence dictating their political landscape. While many Texans are learning of West Texas billionaire brothers – Tim Dunn and Farris Wilks – who have together poured millions of dollars into nonprofits like Defend Texas Liberty and Empower Texans to push their ultraconservative social and political views, they are just the most recent iteration.<sup>1</sup>

Known as “Mr. Right” – in the 1996 and 1998 election cycles, Dr. James Leininger gave \$1.9 million to state Republicans who were then starting to flip the state from its longstanding Democratic leadership following the Ann Richards/Bob Bullock era.<sup>2</sup> From 1997 to 2006, the Leiningers gave or loaned \$10 million to candidates or political action committees in Texas, and brought the earliest focus to Texas’ State Board of Education – spending more than any other donor to elect culture warriors to the SBOE.<sup>3</sup> More importantly, and in a move that closely resembles what Wilks & Dunn’s PACs have focused on in recent years – buying a legislature that will support his top policy priority; private school vouchers. Between 2002 and 2006 Leininger sent nearly \$400,000 to pro-voucher groups, \$2.4 million to the Texas Republican Legislative Caucus, a combined \$1.5 million to Republican party of Texas & republican majority coordinated campaigns, and the rest to pro-voucher state candidates including challenging 5 republican house incumbents who were anti-voucher votes.

Despite almost single-handedly electing a house majority in 2005 – the voucher plan still failed leaving Leininger to then try to fund his own program at a cost of \$50 million only for it to be later shut down. While Leininger’s name has been absent from public conversation in the last decade – his money hasn’t been, with records from the Texas Ethics Commission indicating the James Leininger and his wife, Cecilia, donated nearly \$250,000 just in the 2020 and 2022 election cycles – with a majority going to pro-voucher PAC Texans for Educational Freedom, and Wilks & Dunn’s PAC Defend Texas Liberty.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Billionaire mega donors and corporate funded organizations increasingly own Texas politicians. While Leininger is more or less out of the game – billionaire brothers Wilks and Dunn are just the newest players. Reports indicate that over the past 20 years, the West Texas brothers have sunk nearly \$100 million into a sprawling mix of nonprofits, political campaigns, think tanks, fundraising committees and websites to advance their far-right religious, economic and anti-LGBTQ+ views.<sup>4</sup> The disproportionate influence of Dunn and Wilks is perhaps the most prominent, and newest example of how those with wealth are able to bend public policy to their will, but there are many other poisonous puppeteers undercutting the power of individual Texans in their representative government. Democracy dies in darkness. Our report shines light on the biggest actors using their wealth to corrupt Texas politics and shape the agenda of the Texas state legislature in 2023 on issues ranging from; public education, to immigration policy, to holding politicians accountable for unethical and criminal behavior by way of impeachment.

Common Cause Texas first reported on the weaponization of political influence in 2019, applying a magnifying glass to the role of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in the Texas Legislature. We tied the dark corporate influence group to dozens of Texas state legislators, many of whom still retain their office 4 years later.<sup>5</sup> In this report, we take a different approach — establishing the broader context of legalized corruption in Texas politics.

Bad actors may attempt to bend public policy toward the wealthy, but we will no longer allow them to do so in smoke-filled rooms. Common Cause Texas is committed to exposing the disproportionate influence of dark money in Texas politics so we can build the political will to reform our broken campaign finance system. Only then do we have a chance at a more representative democracy for the Lone Star State.



# FOREWORD

## STATE REP. JAMES TALARICO

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Texas' campaign finance system is broken. We are one of a handful of states with no contribution limits for political candidates. We have countless loopholes for dark money. And we have an enforcement system weakened by the very politicians it oversees.

Unlimited, unregulated money is a daily threat to our state's democracy. And there's no better example than two billionaire mega-donors from West Texas — Tim Dunn and Farris Wilks. They bought Paxton's acquittal for \$3 million. Now they're pushing a private school voucher scam. Their ultimate goal is even more ambitious: transforming Texas into an authoritarian, Christian Nationalist state. Dunn & Wilks are oil and gas oligarchs. They're also both Christian pastors. These two billionaire-pastors are spending their fortune enacting an extreme Christian nationalist worldview in the second-largest state in the country. And no one is talking about it. That's why this report is so important.

Dunn & Wilks have bought the top politicians in Texas with \$100+ million in contributions. But it's not just politicians — they fund a sprawling network of PACs, think tanks, and media outlets. Every right-wing policy that's come out of Texas lately goes back to them. How significant is their influence? Every Republican State Senator and over half of Republican House members in Texas have taken money from Dunn & Wilks. For some Republicans, nearly HALF of their total campaign contributions are from these billionaires. And our statewide officials are in their pockets too. Greg Abbott takes free trips on Wilks' private plane. Dan Patrick acquitted Ken Paxton after taking \$3 million from the Dunn & Wilks PAC fighting the impeachment.



# FOREWORD

## STATE REP. JAMES TALARICO

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And these billionaires have zero tolerance for opposition. Their PAC — Defend Texas Liberty — recruits far-right candidates to primary Republicans who don't do their bidding. For Dunn & Wilks, it's a win-win: they either beat the moderate incumbent or force them to take extreme positions. Dunn & Wilks also control influential legal, policy, & advocacy organizations. One of those orgs argued in court that pharmacies shouldn't sell birth control. The lawyer who argued that case later became a federal judge. He banned the abortion pill. They've even created their own right-wing media bubble. Dunn & Wilks fund Texas Scorecard, the top far-right publication in our state. Wilks owns the Daily Wire and bankrolls PragerU, a right-wing "education" platform they're trying to force into our schools.

Now they're taking on their most ambitious project: replacing public schools with Christian schools. Abbott just called a fourth special session to pass Dunn & Wilks' voucher scam. Republican Senator Bob Deuell said: "They want to destroy the public school system." Dunn & Wilks have a plan to dismantle public education: 1. Fund manufactured controversies to discredit public schools. 2. Pass private school voucher scam to defund public schools. 3. Close public schools and shift our entire system to private, Christian education.

There's been a lot of bad news for democracy out of Texas lately. Paxton's acquittal, private school vouchers, no-exceptions abortion bans, CRT hysteria, weakened gun laws, Christian nationalism — it's all connected to a couple billionaire mega-donors.

Texas is too big and too great to be sold to the highest bidder. We cannot let two billionaires turn our beloved state into a Christofacist theocracy. We cannot let unlimited money from countless other mega-donors make our state government work only for the wealthy few. We need to get serious about reforming our campaign finance system — and making our democracy work for ALL Texans.

# BACKGROUND

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Texas currently has a democracy that can be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Lagging behind the rest of the country, Texas has no individual contribution limits and no legislation to address the revolving door between lawmaking and lobbying. One of the biggest consequences of these antiquated policies can be seen in the stronghold between billionaire mega-donors funneling money into campaigns and political action committees, and the outsized influence those groups have compared to individual Texans.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) brings together corporate representatives and elected officials to create and lobby for passage of “model bills” that often benefit the corporations’ bottom lines. The bills typically are drafted and refined at ALEC meetings — which are closed to the public and press — then introduced in state legislatures, usually without any public acknowledgment of ALEC’s role in creating and advancing them. ALEC and ALEC member corporations often pay legislators’ travel expenses to attend ALEC conferences; in other cases, the expenses are often passed on to taxpayers.

ALEC lobbies on a variety of issues, including taxes and budgets, climate change and the environment, workers’ rights and collective bargaining, healthcare, telecommunications, and education. ALEC was founded in the 1970s but was unknown to most Americans until 2011, when watchdog groups, including the Center for Media and Democracy and Common Cause, publicized its lobbying to pass vote-suppressing voter ID legislation and “stand your ground” laws. Since then, ALEC’s attacks on workers’ rights, environmental safeguards, and implementation of the Affordable Care Act — along with other pieces of its policy agenda, like its work to force a call for an Article V convention that could rewrite the U.S. The Constitution — has been exposed.

# THE CORRUPTIVE POWER OF WEALTH IN TEXAS POLITICS

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## ASSURING ACQUITTAL: MONEY BEHIND PAXTON'S IMPEACHMENT TRIAL

This year, for the third time in Texas' 178-year history – a government official faced an impeachment trial. Attorney General Ken Paxton had 16 articles of impeachment brought against him by a bipartisan but Republican-led group of impeachment managers in the Texas House, ranging from bribery to dereliction of duty and office. It didn't take long for alt-right dark money groups to exert their influence in this process, led by Defend Texas Liberty – a Dunn & Wilks funded



SuperPAC – tweeting hours before the overwhelmingly bipartisan vote in the House that a decision to vote for impeachment was “a decision to have a primary”.

Before the Texas House's overwhelming impeachment

vote, no state politician had received more money from Dunn & Wilks' groups than Paxton, who has in turn used his office to push ultraconservative priorities in his litigation.<sup>6</sup> Paxton's loyalty to his financial contributors is well documented, and most clearly seen in his decision to decline representing the State's Ethics Commission against lawsuits filed by the now-disbanded Empower Texans, a major subsidiary of the Wilks and Dunn. A conflict of interest for Paxton that is only enabled by his ties to dark money & influence prevents him from defending a state agency for which it is his duty to serve.



However, once the impeachment process moved into the Texas Senate – Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, President of the Senate and the man who would oversee the impeachment trial – became Defend Texas Liberty’s record-holder for most financial contributions. Not only did Patrick receive \$3 million from the brothers’ group during the trial in addition to their large prior contributions, but he even issued a sweeping gag order, prohibiting any discussion related to the trial a day after financial reports became public. <sup>8</sup>

***When these reports of financial corruption in the impeachment trial came out, Common Cause Texas told the Houston Chronicle "The fact that the trial is taking place in the state Senate means there is going to be politics involved," but "any appearance of a conflict is probably more serious because [Patrick's] the one presumably presiding over this trial. You wouldn't want the judge in a trial to be someone who has a financial relationship with the defendant, and that seems to be the case here."*** <sup>9</sup>

While it was 50 years before Paxton’s trial since the last (and just the second ever) Texas state impeachment, and as it may be at least another 50 years until another impeachment trial takes place given the political acquittal– it does highlight the importance of limiting the flow of money during legislative sessions (including special actions like impeachment trials).



# PRIVATE PRISONS & PERSONAL PROFIT: MONEY IN POLITICS DRIVES MIGRANT DETENTION POLICIES

Big money is accelerating the privatization of immigration detention in Texas, in turn feeding the well-known cruelty of Texas' treatment of migrants at the Southern border.

The ACLU of Texas has documented the financial relationship between the federal government's immigration detention system and private prison corporations. In August 2023, the ACLU reported that "private prison corporations, like the GEO Group, CoreCivic, LaSalle Corrections, and the Management Training Corporation have pocketed **billions** from ICE detention contracts in the past two decades." <sup>10</sup> Indeed the reporting indicates that in 2022, the GEO

Group made \$1.05 billion in revenue from ICE contracts alone – another private

prison corporation, CoreCivic, similarly made \$552.2 million on ICE contracts. A majority of The Geo Group's political contributions

*The GEO group made*

**\$1.05 BILLION**

**IN REVENUE FROM ICE CONTRACTS**

*CoreCivic made*

**\$552.2 MILLION**

**ON ICE CONTRACTS**

were centered in the 2016 election cycle – right before Texas passed the radical anti-immigrant bill SB4. <sup>11</sup>

The Geo Group Inc., Texas' largest private prison contract recipient and contributor, contributed over \$67,000 from 2015 to 2022 to Texas state elected officials.

# HOUSE

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Rep. Ryan Guillen received \$1,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2018 and 2022.



Rep. Abel Herrero received \$1,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2016 and 2022.



Rep. Tracy King received \$1,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2015.



Rep. Richard Raymond received \$1,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2016 and 2022.

*\*All financial contribution records are sum totals compiled from public data available through the Texas Ethics Commission*

# SENATE

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Sen. Donna Campbell received \$3,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2016 and 2017.



Sen. Bryan Hughes received \$3,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2017 and 2022.



Sen. Angela Paxton received \$1,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2018.



Sen. Charles Perry received \$1,500 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2017.



Sen. Joan Huffman received \$1,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2018.



Sen. John Whitmire received \$10,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC between 2015 and 2016.



Sen. Judith Zaffirini received \$1,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2016.

*\*All financial contribution records are sum totals compiled from public data available through the Texas Ethics Commission*

# STATE LEADERS

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Gov. Greg Abbott received \$25,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in March 2022.



Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick received \$10,000 from The GEO Group Inc PAC between 2015 and October 2023



Attorney General Ken Paxton received \$5,000 from The Geo Group Inc PAC in 2018.

The families behind these major detention corporations join the infamous ranks of Wilks and Dunn. Texas-based corporation SLSCO, or Sullivan Land Services Co. was awarded \$1.8 billion by the Trump administration to build portions of the border wall.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, in January of 2023 the State of Texas approved a contract worth \$137 million for the Texas Border Infrastructure Project.

*\*All financial contribution records are sum totals compiled from public data available through the Texas Ethics Commission*

The Sullivan brothers' company, led by Todd, John, and William Sullivan alongside their dad Gerald who is listed as President, have won over \$300 million in services provided for the state's COVID-19 response and Operation Lone Star border mission, largely through no-bid emergency purchases enabled by Abbott's ongoing disaster declarations which ceases the state's typical competitive bidding process.<sup>13</sup> Campaign finance data indicates that these contracts may have been awarded thanks to the money & influence of the families behind these companies, to the tune of over \$1.1 million in campaign contributions to Texas' leading Republican state leaders.



**Gov. Greg Abbott received \$1,052,500 since 2015 from the Sullivan brothers, alongside their dad Gerald who contributed over half of the sum.**



**Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick received \$68,001 since 2015 from the Sullivan brothers.**

# THE PERSISTENT (AND UNPOPULAR) PUSH FOR PRIVATE SCHOOL VOUCHERS

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Perhaps the most glaring example of Texas' political corruption involves public education during Governor Abbott's not-so-special session in October 2023. While the Dunn & Wilks brothers, among other conservative donors and organizations, revived ALEC's 2014 Education Savings Account model legislation to push privatization efforts for the public school system in Texas – many rural Republican lawmakers join education advocates to say vouchers will rob our already underfunded public schools.<sup>14</sup>

A bipartisan group of lawmakers already declined the opportunity to pass Governor Abbott's voucher initiatives in the most recent legislation session. Since then, Texas billionaires and businesspeople with a financial take in voucher programs have dumped millions of dollars of campaign and advertising money into pro-voucher advocacy groups. More insidiously, Governor Abbott has hinted that lawmakers who block his school-voucher proposal could face challenges in the looming primary election.<sup>15</sup>

Campaign finance reports indicate that the Texas Federation for Children – the Texas spending arm of school choice advocacy group the American Federation for Children – raised more than \$900,000 and spent more than \$1 million since the last primary election in March 2022 and August 2023, heading into the Voucher special session.<sup>16</sup> Defend Texas Liberty, a conservative PAC primarily funded by the Dunn and Wilks brothers, gained almost \$4 million between October 2022 and July 2023, and spent more than \$3.3 million in the period which covered the November 2022 election and the 88th regular legislative session. While school vouchers are just one part of the PAC's agenda – it is a major priority of the brothers.

In their aired story *Deep in the Pockets of Texas*, CNN shares an interview of a close former advisor of the brother's putting it clearly; "They want to destroy the public school system as we know it." <sup>17</sup>

Between June 15 and June 30th, 2023 Tim Dunn escalated his contributions to Defend Texas Liberty PAC, exacerbating his force and efforts going into a special session – contributing \$1,991,000 in just 8 days to his political machine. Farris Wilks and his wife Jo Ann donated \$1,500,000 in one lump sum on the same day Dunn contributed the same amount – June 23rd.

The overwhelming power of big money in Texas politics has already pushed out anti-voucher Republicans from earlier sessions.. Former State Sen. Kel Seliger (R - district), who had received donations from Dunn, publicly came out against private school vouchers. The pair turned against him. Seliger spent the next several campaign cycles fending off primary challenges funded by Dunn and Wilks. <sup>18</sup>



**It is a Russian-style oligarchy. Pure and simple. Really, really wealthy people, who are willing to spend a lot of money to get policy made the way they wanted...and they get it.**

-Texas state Sen. Kel Seliger



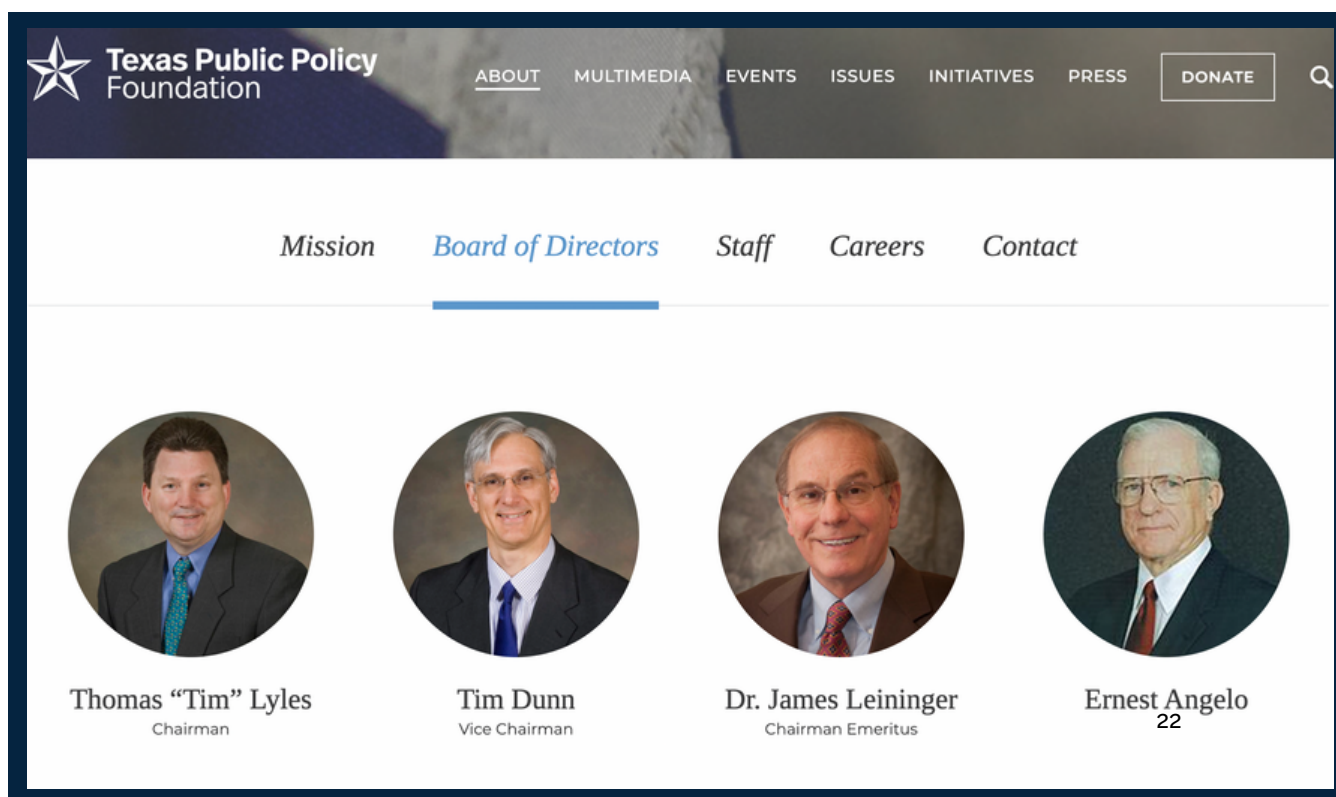
This isn't new -- between the 1990s until 2010, the doctor-turned-entrepreneur billionaire James Leininger invested more than **\$100 million** to transform Texas into a government that followed his ideologies. His money flipped Texas to the first Republican state leaders after years of Democratic rule – and he had a “religious conviction” to give money to people with the sole purpose of trying to pass vouchers. The strategy in 2007 was the same game Wilks & Dunn are playing in 2023; after years of bruising fights -- including a primary election in which Leininger spent millions trying to oust members of his own party who opposed vouchers -- the Texas House overwhelmingly passed a budget amendment that declared that the state would not fund vouchers for two years. The amendment was later stripped out, but the message was clear, and repeated again when a budget amendment passed with bipartisan support in 2023.<sup>19</sup>

ALEC’s “model policy” has long included pushes for school privatization, specifically supporting school vouchers. In 2014, ALEC met in Dallas, Texas to push their agenda of school privatization and voucher programs.<sup>20</sup> The group got a “school choice” voucher bill introduced in the legislature, with little support at the grassroots level from families and educators, but it saw massive support from extreme right-wing think tanks and lobbying groups. However – ALEC’s model legislation for school vouchers is not its most active arm within Texas’ school privatization movement.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) is a longtime member and founder of ALEC. TPPF is a Texas affiliate of the State Policy Network (SPN), a network of conservative think tanks and advocacy organizations throughout the country. SPN was founded, in part, by ALEC, and SPN organizational members have introduced, echoed, advanced, and reinforced ALEC policies across a swath of issues.

Over the years, TPPF has been a member of several of ALEC’s task forces, though their relationship extends well beyond that membership. TPPF holds an annual “policy orientation” at the beginning of each year. ALEC ideas are discussed, and ALEC politicians are featured speakers. TPPF has also been a top-tier sponsor at ALEC conferences and has defended ALEC in the media.<sup>21</sup>

**Tim Dunn currently serves as vice-chair of TPPF, alongside Chairman Emeritus – the biggest Texas conservative mega-donor of the 1990s and 2000s – Dr. James Leininger.**



# TEXAS LEGISLATORS FINANCED BY DEFEND TEXAS LIBERTY PAC

*This report documents current elected officials participating in the 2023 legislative sessions with ties to political finance vehicles from Texas mega-donors Wilks and Dunn.*

In early October 2023, reporters uncovered a 5-hour meeting between Defend Texas Liberty PAC President, former State Rep. Jonathan Stickland, and white supremacist Nick Fuentes. After that was uncovered – State Rep. Jared Patterson called on members who have taken money from Dunn & Wilks’ PAC to disavow and redirect those funds to charitable organizations; 60 House Republicans co-signed a letter supporting this, out of the 76-member caucus.<sup>23</sup>

Since the PAC’s first filing in January of 2020, Defend Texas Liberty PAC has spent more than \$9.6 million in direct contributions to candidates or expenditures on behalf of campaigns, with a majority occurring during the 2022 election cycle.

## House

Rep. Brian Harrison; the PAC contributed \$17,000

Rep. Mark Dorazio; the PAC contributed a total of \$14,000

Rep. Tony Tinderholt; the PAC contributed a total of \$123,000

Rep. Nate Schatzline; the PAC contributed a total of \$174,009, nearly \$125,000 being for polling & ad placements on behalf of the campaign.

(Now former) Rep. Bryan Slaton; the PAC contributed \$160,500

Rep. Carrie Isaac; the PAC contributed a total of \$7,500

Rep. Terri Leo Wilson; the PAC contributed a total of \$12,000

Rep. Stan Kitzman; the PAC contributed \$5,000

## Senate

Sen. Brandon Creighton; the PAC contributed a total of \$5,000

Sen. Lois Kolkhorst; the PAC contributed a total of \$5,000

Sen. Paul Bettencourt; the PAC contributed a total of \$7,500

Sen. Phil King; the PAC contributed once – \$10,000 on Dec. 9th 2022

Sen. Bob Hall; the PAC contributed a total of \$47,500 to Bob hall.

## State Leaders

Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick; During the Ken Paxton impeachment trial, which Patrick presided over, the PAC contributed \$3 million to Texans for Dan Patrick which he refused to return or disavow. Between January 1st, 2022 to June 30th 2023 Texans for Dan Patrick received \$3,100,000.

Attorney General Ken Paxton; From January 1 2022 to June 30th 2023 the PAC contributed \$1.3 Million to the Ken Paxton campaign, \$750,000 being a loan on October 28th 2022, a week before his November General Election.

Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller; From Jan. 1st 2022 to June 30th 2023 the PAC contributed a total of \$50,000 to the Sid Miller campaign.

Railroad Commissioner Wayne Christian; From Jan. 1st 2022 to June 30th 2023 the PAC contributed a total of \$10,000 to Wayne Christian for Texas.

Land Commissioner Dawn Buckingham; The former State Senator received \$10,000 from the PAC between Jan. 1st 2022 to June 30th 2023.

# EMPOWER TEXANS PAC

*This report documents current elected officials participating in the 2023 legislative sessions with ties to political finance vehicles from Texas mega-donors Wilks and Dunn.*

Multi-millionaire Tim Dunn is the chairman of the board for two conservative advocacy organizations: Empower Texans and Texans for Fiscal Responsibility. Below are the contributions from the PAC to current state elected officials, not including the contributions made to unsuccessful candidates, former elected officials, or different levels of government. Between contributions to campaigns and in-kind contributions made on behalf of candidates, the Empower Texans PAC contributed over \$9 million between its first filing report in 2008 until being deactivated in 2018.

## House

Rep. Dennis Bonnen; the PAC contributed \$100 in November 2012

Rep. Dustin Burrows; the PAC contributed \$27,000 between June and December 2015

Rep. Angie Chen Button; the PAC contributed \$10,000 once in October 2008

Rep. Briscoe Cain; the PAC contributed \$53,786.79 in from April 2016 to June 2017

Rep. Giovanni Capriglione; the PAC contributed \$5,157 between April 2012 and September 2014

Rep. Travis Clardy; the PAC contributed \$2,171.85 in in-kind contributions for the campaign between April and May 2012

Rep. Tom Craddick; the PAC contributed \$3,065.43 in an in-kind contribution to the campaign in October 2008

## House continued

Rep. Craig Goldman; the PAC contributed \$7,406.84, a majority being in-kind contributions, between October 2007 and July 2013

Rep. Cole Hefner; the PAC contributed \$51,405.34 between November 2015 and December 2017

Rep. Todd Hunter; the PAC contributed \$10,120 between September and October in 2008

Rep. Stephanie Klick; the PAC contributed \$19,633.75 between April 2012 and June 2015

Rep. Matt Krause; the PAC contributed \$42,600 between April 2012 and December 2017

Rep. Brooks Landgraf; the PAC contributed \$500 one time in September 2014

Rep. Jared Patterson; the PAC contributed \$40,000 to the campaign between December 2017 and February 2018 during the primary cycle

Rep. Jeff Leach; the PAC contributed \$21,241.50 between March 2012 to December 2017

Rep. Tom Oliverson; the PAC contributed \$5,000 to Friends of Tom Oliverson in December 2015

Rep. Jonathan Stickland; the PAC contributed \$431,477.77 in donations and in-kind contributions between April 2012 and July 2018

Rep. Matt Schaefer; the PAC contributed \$191,238 between donations and in-kind contributions between June 2013 and February 2018

Rep. Matt Shaheen; the PAC contributed \$87,180 between donations and in-kind contributions between February 2014 and October 2018

(Now-former) Rep. Bryan Slaton; the PAC contributed \$150,038 between October 2015 and February 2018

Rep. Valoree Swanson; the PAC contributed \$87.625 between February 2016 and December 2017

## House continued

Rep. Steve Toth; the PAC contributed \$50,161.65 to the campaign between April 2012 and February 2018

Rep. Tony Tinderholt; the PAC contributed \$184,275.39 between January 2014 and October 2018, plus over \$22,000 being when the PAC dissolved and emptied their cash on hand in 2020

Rep. Jared Patterson; the PAC contributed \$34,738 between January and February 2018

## Senate

Sen. Angela Paxton; the PAC contributed \$100,000 two days after she won her first primary in March 2018

Sen. Bob Hall; the PAC contributed \$482,242.50 between May 2014 and February 2018

Sen. Brian Birdwell; the PAC contributed \$25,234.79 between May 2010 and June 2015

Sen. Brandon Creighton; the PAC contributed \$2,000 to Friends of Brandon Creighton in June 2015

Sen. Bryan Hughes; the PAC contributed \$42,464.25 between October 2009 and May 2016 across donations and in-kind contributions

Sen. Charles Perry; the PAC contributed \$54,043.70 in donations and in-kind contributions between May 2012 and August 2014

Sen. Drew Springer; the PAC contributed \$4,380 in donations and in-kind contributions between July 2012 and September 2014

Sen. Kelly Hancock; the PAC contributed \$6,000 between December 2014 and September 2015



## State leaders

Railroad Commissioner Wayne Christian; the PAC contributed \$16,169.45 between April 2012 and May 2016

Comptroller of Public Accounts Glenn Hegar; the PAC contributed \$22,500 in donations and in-kind contributions between February and June in 2014

Attorney General Ken Paxton; the PAC contributed \$404,570 between October 2009 and March 2018

Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick; the PAC contributed \$607,075.50 in donations and in-kind contributions between December 2012 and October 2018

## TEXAS LEGISLATORS IN BED WITH ALEC

*This report documents current elected officials participating in the 2023 legislative sessions with ties to political finance vehicles from Texas mega-donors Wilks and Dunn.*

Out of the 181 members of the Texas Legislature, 50 are active members and have attended the Annual Meeting or issue-specific task forces in the last 3 years.<sup>24</sup>

### House

Rep. Alma Allen (D-131) - **Announced she would not be renewing her ALEC membership on April 13, 2012**

Rep. Steve Allison (R-121) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Education and Workforce Development Task Force

## House continued

Rep. Charles Anderson (R-56) joined ALEC in 2010; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings ; member of the Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force; registered member. Signed the ALEC Action "Confirm Judge Brett Kavanaugh" letter

Rep. Cecil Bell Jr. (R-3) joined ALEC in 2017; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Federalism & International Relations Task Force

Rep. Keith Bell (R-4) joined ALEC in 2019; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Education and Workforce Development Task Force

Rep. Brad Buckley (R-54) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force

Rep. Dustin Burrows (R-83) joined ALEC in 2018; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force

Rep. Briscoe Cain (R-128) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Criminal Justice Task Force

Rep. Giovanni S. Caprigilone (R-98)

Rep. Travis Clardy (R-11)

Rep. Tom Craddick (R-82) joined ALEC in 2014; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force; Immediate Past Chairman of ALEC Board of Directors, received \$878,000 in campaign contributions from ALEC corporate members from 2004-2011

Rep. Drew Darby (R-72)

Rep. Jay Dean (R-7), Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting

## House continued

Rep. Harold Dutton (D-Houston), paid for ALEC conference registration with his campaign account - **Announced he would not be renewing his ALEC membership in April 2012.** See [Legislators Who Have Cut Ties to ALEC](#) for more

Rep. James Frank (R-69) joined ALEC in 2014; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the [Health and Human Services Task Force](#)

Rep. Craig Goldman (R-97)

Rep. Ryan Guillen (D-31), ALEC [International Relations Task Force](#) Member **Announced he would not be renewing his ALEC membership** in April 2012. See [Legislators Who Have Cut Ties to ALEC](#) for more

Rep. Cole Hefner (R-5) joined ALEC in 2018; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the [Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force](#)

Rep. Justin Holland (R-33) joined ALEC in 2018; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the [Homeland Security Task Force](#)

Rep. Todd Hunter (R-32), ALEC [Civil Justice Task Force](#) Member

Rep. Tracy O. King (D-80), ALEC [International Relations Task Force](#) Member and [Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force](#) Alternate - **Announced he would not be renewing his ALEC membership in April 2012.** See [Legislators Who Have Cut Ties to ALEC](#) for more

Rep. Stephanie Klick (R-91) joined ALEC in 2013; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the [Health and Human Services Task Force](#)

Rep. John Kuempel (R-44)

## House continued

Rep. Stan Lambert (R-71) joined ALEC in 2018; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force

Rep. Jeff Leach (R-67) Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting

Rep. Armando Martinez (D-Weslaco), paid for ALEC membership from 2011 - 2013 with his campaign account - **Announced he would not be renewing his ALEC membership in April 2012.** See Legislators Who Have Cut Ties to ALEC for more.

Rep. Geanie Morrison (R-30) joined ALEC in 2011; attended ALEC's 2020 States and Nation Policy Summit where she participated in "Opening General Session", "Workshop: AB5/ABC/Prop-22... What's Happening, What's Next and What you Need to Know in the States and DC?", "Workshop: Post-Election Panel: The Future of Energy and Environmental Policy", "Rural Caucus Meeting", "Workshop: Growing Momentum for Personalize Health Care: Health Care Choices 2020", "General Session - Morning", "Thursday General Session - Afternoon", "Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force Meeting", "Friday General Session - Morning" and "Friday General Session - Afternoon", attended 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings, ALEC Education Task Force Alternate; member of the Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force

Rep. Candy Noble (R-89) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Health and Human Services Task Force

Rep. Tom Oliverson (R-130) joined ALEC in 2017; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Health and Human Services Task Force

## House continued

Rep. Dennis Paul (R-129) joined ALEC in 2015; public sector member as of December 2021; attended and participated in ALEC's Energy, Environment, and Agriculture Task Force meeting at the December 2021 States and Nation Policy Summit.; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force registered member. Signed the ALEC Action "Confirm Judge Brett Kavanaugh" letter

Rep. Four Price (R-87)

Rep. John Raney (R-14) joined ALEC in 2012; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Education and Workforce Development Task Force

Rep. Matt Schaefer (R-6)

Rep. Mike Schofield (R-132)

Rep. Matthew Shaheen (R-66) joined ALEC in 2014; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force

Rep. Reggie Smith (R-62) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Civil Justice Task Force

Rep. John Smithee (R-86), ALEC Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force Member

Rep. Lynn Stucky (R-64), Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting

Rep. Valoree Swanson (R-150), Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting

Rep. Ed Thompson (R-29), Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting, attended the 2017 ALEC Annual Meeting. Signed the ALEC Action "Confirm Judge Brett Kavanaugh" letter

## Senate continued

Sen. Paul Bettencourt (R-7), joined ALEC in 2019; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Health and Human Services Task Force

Sen. Brian Birdwell (R-22) disclosed expenses to attend ALEC 2012 annual meeting in Salt Lake City

Sen. Donna Campbell (R-25) joined ALEC in 2018; attended the 2020 ALEC Annual Meeting; member of the Health and Human Services Task Force

Sen. Brandon Creighton (R-4) joined ALEC in 2013; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Federalism & International Relations Task Force; was listed as an ALEC Energy, Environment and Agriculture Task Force Alternate during time as a state representative

Sen. Bob Hall (R-2), Attended 2019 ALEC Annual Meeting

Sen. Kelly Hancock (R-9) joined ALEC in 2013; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings, ALEC State Chair, ALEC Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force Alternate

Sen. Bryan Hughes (R-01) joined ALEC in 2011; Attended 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Communications and Technology Task Force; staffer Carolina Harris attended 2017 Annual Meeting

## Senate continued

Sen. Phil King (R-10) joined ALEC in 2013; attended ALEC's 2020 States and Nation Policy Summit where he participated in "Energy, Environment and Agriculture Subcommittee Meeting", "Opening General Session", "Process Working Group", "Workshop: AB5/ABC/Prop-22... What's Happening, What's Next and What you Need to Know in the States and DC?", "General Session - Morning", "Training: Let's Talk about Education and Opportunity with Frank Luntz", "Commerce, Insurance and Economic Development Task Force Meeting", "Federalism and International Relations Task Force Meeting", "Training: Let's Talk About Workforce Development with Frank Luntz", "Jefferson Awards Ceremony", "Friday General Session - Morning", "Friday General Session - Afternoon" and "Homeland Security Task Force Meeting", attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Homeland Security Task Force; ALEC National Chair for 2015, ALEC Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force Alternate, received \$163,000 in campaign contributions from ALEC corporate members from 2004-2011

Sen. Jose Menendez (D-22)

Sen. Mayes Middleton (R-11) joined ALEC in 2019; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force

Sen. Nathaniel "Tan" Parker (R-12) joined ALEC in 2018; State Chair; attended 2019 and 2020; member of the Federalism & International Relations Task Force ALEC Annual Meetings, ALEC State Chair, attended 2020 ALEC States and Nation Summit where he participated in Turning Point USA training.



## Senate continued

Sen. Charles Perry (R-28) **Told the Center for Media and Democracy that he is not a member of ALEC and did not attend the 2019 ALEC conference.**

Sen. Drew Springer (R-68) joined ALEC in 2013; Attended the 2019 and 2020 ALEC Annual Meetings; member of the Tax and Fiscal Policy Task Force

Sen. John Whitmire (D-15) - **Announced he would be leaving ALEC in August, 2012** See Legislators Who Have Cut Ties to ALEC for more

## Office Holders

Railroad Commissioner Wayne Christian<sup>5</sup>

Railroad Commissioner Christi Craddick, spoke at 2019 ALEC Conference.<sup>33</sup> Spoke at 2013 ALEC Conference<sup>34</sup>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Unlikely Texas leaders are demanding ethics reform amid the state's corruption crisis . After announcing Paxton's acquittal on all impeachment charges, Lt. Gov. Patrick, for instance, admonished future legislatures on how to proceed with impeachments and has since called for reforms to the Texas House's process of impeachment.

Flagrant corruption has been given the green flag by Texas legislators for too long – we need less money-in politics, deceptive donors, and outsized corporate influence in the Lone Star State. Thus, Common Cause Texas is calling for the following changes to stamp out the corruption and self-dealing.

**First, strengthen the Texas Ethics Commission.** There is a clear and present need for a stronger Texas Ethics Commission with more staff, more robust investigative powers, and the enforcement powers to hold officeholders accountable for unethical actions.

- Empower the Texas Ethics Commission (TEC) to investigate ethics issues without a complaint needed to trigger an investigation and expand the Commission to have robust audit authority and strong enforcement powers, including but not limited to the ability to collect fines via garnishment. For the past two and a half years, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has declined to sue hundreds of candidates and elected officials who altogether owe more than \$700,000 to the state in unpaid fines for campaign reporting violations - we must give the TEC more robust enforcement authority.

- Create a funding mechanism providing adequate revenue for the Texas Ethics Commission to aggressively investigate and enforce ethics statutes, and enshrine that funding mechanism in the constitution so no future legislature can defund without voter approval. Additionally ensure adequate funding for tech upgrades for the uploading and hosting of increasingly long campaign finance reports which crashed the Commission's server in 2022 triggering the request of one-off emergency funding.
- A stronger Texas Ethics Commission needs attention on the next legislature's budget to ensure adequate staff to fulfill the commission's investigative and enforcement authority.<sup>25</sup>

**Second, demand dark money disclosure.** Democracy dies in darkness and it is well past time that Texas lawmakers take a light to the evasive and eroding impact of dark money, especially demanding accountability alongside the increased transparency and disclosure.<sup>26</sup>

- Implement comprehensive and robust disclosure requirements for all types of political spending, including independent expenditures, electioneering communications, and issue advocacy.
- Create an alternative process for Open Records Requests and public disclosure pertaining to the Attorney General. The AG should not be determining on their own which, if any, records and/or communications are responsive to the request. A third party should be charged with making that determination and providing responsive records.

- Establish a harsher civil penalty for accepting contributions without reporting them, reporting them late, or reporting them incorrectly with a severely altered correction filed well after an election.
- Take disclosure a step further and limit the effect of dark money after it's transparent. For all Texas courts, but especially in trials such as this one in the Senate, Texas should have clear and fair conflict of interest standards that would require anyone who is to act as a judge or juror to recuse themselves if they have a close relationship with the defendant or have taken or given money to them.

**Campaign cash control, moderating money in politics.** Texas is one of just a handful of states to have no limits on the amount of money an individual can give to a candidate running for state office. This allows wealthy Texans to have far too much influence with legislators of both parties, while Texans of lesser means face obstacles in having their voices heard. Common Cause exists to ensure we have a democracy that works for everyone, not just the privileged few. A few of the reforms Common Cause Texas supports to begin reigning in the influence of the wealthy are:

- Limits on campaign contributions mirroring federal limits
- Harsher penalties for accepting contributions without reporting them.
- Prohibitions on contributions during or near any legislative session and special actions, like impeachment trials.

**Public Financing of Campaigns.** An overwhelming majority of Americans believe wealth plays too large a role in our political system. Perhaps the most effective reform our legislature could adopt to restore balance in politics and make it possible for everyone to have a more equal voice is public financing of campaigns. Further, candidates who are less reliant on special interest dollars and better able to act in the interests of the public interest. Among the types of public financing Common Cause Texas supports are:

- Small donor matching: Incentivize candidates to seek small-dollar contributors by multiplying the worth of a small contribution, like a 1:1 match rate provides one public dollar for every private dollar that is contributed up to a certain limit, for example \$200.<sup>27</sup>
- Democracy Dollars: Provide voters with financial vouchers to give to any eligible candidates that agree to non-voucher limits and have demonstrated a commitment to reaching small dollar donors. Prioritize diversifying donor pools and making elected officials responsive to more individuals and less mega-donors.

# CONCLUSION




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Whether Leininger in the 90s and early 2000s or Wilks & Dunn in the present – the merry go round will keep spinning until we break the cycle of billionaires and corporate interests buying candidates, and in turn having outsized influence in our government. Texas is in the dark ages when it comes to campaign finance but not without opportunities for reform. In order for ethics and campaign finance reform recommendations to be taken seriously, everyday Texans must get serious about demanding lawmakers cut ties with political puppeteers currently predominating our policies and political landscape.

This report aims to continue on the work started 4 years ago when Common Cause Texas and Center for Media & Democracy documented the ties between ALEC and Texas Lawmakers. Much like the Wizard of Oz being smaller and weaker when exposed behind the curtain, dark money and corporate fanciers lose their power when Texans see how their wealth is used to bend public policy away from the public interest.

Reforming the outsized influence of money in politics is critical to our ability to turn public outrage about issues like gun control and reproductive healthcare into public policy. For example:

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-  **Gun Control:** In 2007, Texas passed Senate Bill 378, better known as the “Castle Doctrine” or “Stand-Your-Ground” bill – which was a priority legislation of ALEC’s and played a role in the defense for the murder of Trayvon Martin. <sup>28</sup>
-  **Reproductive healthcare:** While ALEC members by-and-large share similar anti-choice views on reproductive freedom, the organization is less overt with its model legislation on the issue and works with spin-off groups to explicitly pursue contentious policies around it. In 2019, ALEC members created the National Association of Christian Lawmakers (NACL), which is self-described as “ALEC from a biblical worldview” and led the passage of SB 8 in Texas, the controversial abortion bounty-hunter bill, which ALEC then used as a success story to model legislation then introduced in a dozen other states. <sup>29</sup>
-  **Voting rights:** Texas’ voter ID bill was passed in 2011 and closely resembles ALEC’s “Voter ID Act.” The bill was sponsored by several ALEC-member legislators, and signed into law by Gov. Rick Perry, an ALEC alum and award winner. While The Department of Justice originally blocked the law in 2012, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott announced the voter ID bill would take effect “immediately” within 24 hours of the disastrous antidemocratic Supreme Court decision *Shelby County v. Holder* was announced in 2013. <sup>30</sup>





**ERCOT:** After nearly a thousand Texans died in the February 2021 winter storm, Texans on both sides of the aisle called for more stringent energy reform bills. However, after the power grid legislation that was passed seemed intended to let the energy off easy – it was discovered that just in the month after the 2021 session Texas ended, elected officials received over \$3.2 million from the oil industry leaders who demanded weaker regulations.<sup>31</sup>

We call on all Texans to join us in uplifting these calls for reform, and curb the corruptive influence of ALEC, mega-donors, and money in politics.

**IT'S TIME  
TO GET  
MONEY  
OUT OF  
TX POLITICS**



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