

**Republican legislators in various states including Texas, Tennessee, and Ohio who stand tall for public schools and resist vouchers are being targeted in primary elections.**

It is no secret that groups such as Betsy DeVos' Federation for Children and Americans for Prosperity, along with their benefactors and their subsidiaries, are targeting Republican lawmakers in primary elections for their single transgression--supporting public education in opposition to the unconstitutional private school voucher scheme. This is happening in Ohio!

**Tennessee: Lobbyist Warned Anti-Voucher Republicans of “Public Hangings” if They Don’t Support Vouchers**

By [dianeravitch](#)

[March 5, 2024](#) //

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A secret recording of a lobbyist's meeting in 2016 [showed the true face of the voucher movement in Tennessee and elsewhere.](#)

The lobbyist, an official with Betsy DeVos's Tennessee Federation for Children, made clear that Republican legislators who opposed vouchers would face harsh retribution. He pledged that anti-voucher Republican legislators would be challenged in a primary by well-funded opponents committed to pass vouchers. Money would come in from out-of-state billionaires and millionaires to knock off Republicans who voted against vouchers.

The story came from NewsChannel 5 in Nashville.

*NASHVILLE, Tenn. (WTVF) — A secret recording reveals how ultra-wealthy forces have laid the groundwork for the current debate in the Tennessee legislature over school vouchers by using their money to intimidate, even eliminate, those who dared to disagree.*

*In the recording obtained by **NewsChannel 5 Investigates** from a 2016 strategy session, Nashville investment banker Mark Gill discusses targeting certain anti-voucher lawmakers for defeat as a form of “public hangings.” At the time, Gill was a member of the board of directors for the pro-voucher group Tennessee Federation for Children.*

*Using their vast resources to defeat key incumbents, Gill argues, would send a signal to other lawmakers in the next legislative session...*

*Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee has teed up the issue this year with a plan for school vouchers that would send hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars to private schools.*

*It follows a years-long effort by school privatization forces to elect lawmakers who would vote their way and to destroy those who would not.*

*In the 2016 recording, Mark Gill discusses the prospect of turning against Republican Rep. Eddie Smith from Knoxville because Smith had voted against a bill designed to cripple the ability of teacher groups to have dues deducted from teachers' paychecks.*

*Gill has served on the Tennessee Board of Regents overseeing the state's community and technical colleges since 2019.*

*"Think about it," Gill says.*

*"What better way to say to people, OK, you want us to fall on our sword for you, to spend thousands of dollars — which I did personally — to get you elected, and you come up here and do this sh\*t. Let me just show you what the consequences of that are," Gill says...*

*At the time, Gill was also considering targeting Republican Judd Matheny from Tullahoma because Matheny was viewed as being too close to Tennessee teachers and would be a good "scalp" to hang on the school privatizers' efforts.*

*"He also has, I think, put himself in a position where his scalp could be very valuable to all school reformers," Gill says, noting Matheny's relationship with the Tennessee Education Association. "He is one of the people who has bought the TEA line that you need to side with the TEA because of the teachers and that's your safest route."*

The reporter for NewsChannel 5 played the recording for J.C. Bowman, leader of the Professional Educators of Tennessee.

*Bowman was stunned.*

*"Judd Matheny was a conservative — a big Second Amendment guy. Some of the names they mention in there — conservative all the way through. So you are going to eat your own..."*

**NewsChannel 5 Investigates** noted to Bowman that Gill was not talking about convincing lawmakers that the Tennessee Federation for Children was right on the issue of school vouchers.

*"No, they are not even making that comparison," the teacher lobbyist agreed.*

*"If you put this issue on the ballot — and that's what I would say, put it on the ballot — vouchers would lose."*

A March 2022 **NewsChannel 5** investigation revealed how [the battle over education in Tennessee is largely financed](#) by out-of-state billionaires and millionaires.

Last fall, **NewsChannel 5 Investigates** obtained a proposal — [submitted to a foundation controlled by the billionaire Walton family of Walmart fame](#) — detailing a plan by school privatization forces to spend \$3.7 million in 2016 on legislative races in Tennessee.

That same year, **The Tennessean** reported on an Alabama trip where [Gill had hosted five pro-voucher lawmakers](#) for a three-day weekend at his Gulf Shores condo.

*"I don't think anybody is going to get unseated without some substantial independent expenditures coming in there," Gill says, acknowledging that wealthy special interests would need to spend a lot of money to knock off lawmakers who did not vote their way.*

That strategy was apparent in 2022 when Republicans Bob Ramsey and Terri Lynn Weaver were targeted and defeated.

*Weaver was among those Republicans who in 2019 refused to bow to pressure to vote for school vouchers.*

*And like these ads taken out against Bob Ramsey, Weaver also faced attacks from school privatization forces for supposedly being a corrupt career politician — attacks funded by so-called dark money.*

*“Tremendous amounts of money, much of which is outside money, [the] money was not from my district,” Weaver said. “They slander you. They want to win — and they’ll do anything to do it.”*

*Bowman said Gill’s strategy represents “the absolute destruction of people.”*

*We wanted to know, “Is there anyone on the public education side of the debate playing this sort of hardball politics?”*

*“None that I know of,” Bowman said. “I know of nobody playing that.”*

To read the complete article and to listen to the recording, open the link.

### **[Texas: Evangelical Billionaires Score Big Wins in State Elections](#)**

[By dianeravitch](#)

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The oil-and-gas Christian nationalists swamped a number of Republican primary races in Texas with millions of dollars. One big issue was vouchers; the other was payback for trying to oust the state’s corrupt Attorney General, Ken Paxton.. They managed to defeat rural Republicans who are conservative but voted against vouchers for religious schools and/or voted to impeach the state’s corrupt Stste Attorney General. And of course, Pennsylvania billionaire Jeff Yass and Michigan billionaire Betsy DeVos tossed in more millions.

Having Trump’s name at the top of the ticket made have made a difference too.

The Texas Tribune [reported that the billionaires won 11 of the 28 races they paid for](#):

*West Texas oil billionaires Tim Dunn and Farris Wilks entered the 2024 primary election cycle wounded.*

*Their political network was in the [middle of a scandal over](#) its ties to white supremacists. Republicans were calling on each other to [reject](#) the billionaires’ campaign money. And their enemies believed they were vulnerable — one bad election day from losing their grip on the state.*

*Instead, Dunn and Wilks emerged from Tuesday perhaps stronger than ever — vanquishing old political foes, positioning their allies for a November takeover of the state Legislature, and leaving little doubt as to who is winning a [vicious civil war](#) to control the state party.*

*In race after race, more moderate conservative incumbents were trounced by candidates backed by Dunn and Wilks. Their political network made good on its vows for vengeance against House Republicans who voted to impeach [their key state ally](#), Attorney General Ken Paxton, advancing*

more firebrands who campaigned against bipartisanship and backed anti-LGBTQ+ policies. Tuesday's election also paved the way for the likely passage of legislation that would allow taxpayer money to fund private and religious schools — a key policy goal for a movement that seeks to [infuse more Christianity](#) into public life.

All told, 11 of the 28 House candidates supported by the two billionaires won their primaries outright, and another eight are headed to runoffs this May. And, in a sign of how much the state party has moved rightward, five of their candidates beat incumbents in rematches from 2022 or 2020 — with some House districts swinging by double-digits in their favor. Of the candidates they backed, they donated \$75,000 or more to 11 of them — six who won, and four who went to runoffs.

Tuesday was a stark contrast from just two years ago, when Dunn and Wilks' top political fundraising group poured \$5.2 million into a host of longshot candidates — much more than what they spent in the current election cycle. They lost badly that year — 18 of the 19 challengers to Texas House members they backed were defeated. Their only successful House candidate that year was Stan Kitzman of Pattison, who toppled former Rep. Phil Stephenson of Wharton in a runoff.

Among the triumphant on Tuesday was Mitch Little, aided by at least \$153,000 in Dunn and Wilks cash, who defeated Rep. Krona Thimesch in a campaign that focused on Little's defense of Paxton from impeachment charges in the Senate trial last summer. Three days before he won, Little [appeared at an event](#) in Denton County with Paxton and, among others, Steve Bannon, the political operative who helped rally the far right behind then-candidate Donald Trump in 2016.

And another Dunn and Wilks candidate, David Covey, stunned the state by winning more votes than House Speaker Dade Phelan — the No. 1 target of the state's far-right in part because of his [role in the Paxton impeachment](#) and refusal to ban Democrats from House leadership positions. Phelan now faces a runoff from Covey and the [prospect](#) of being the first Texas Speaker since 1972 to lose his primary.

Certainly, Tuesday's dark-red wave can't be attributed solely to Dunn and Wilks. Texas GOP primaries have historically been decided by small shares of voters, many of them further to the right of even the party's mainstream. This election cycle, the billionaires' targets also overlapped with an unlikely ally, Gov. Greg Abbott, who [poured more than \\$6 million](#) into his quest to rid the Texas House of Republicans who defied his calls for school voucher legislation last year. (Dunn and Wilks' political groups supported Abbott's opponent in his 2022 gubernatorial primary.)

Meanwhile, Paxton barnstormed the state as he sought retribution against incumbents who supported his impeachment. And, perhaps most importantly, former President Donald Trump was active in many contests — following the lead of Paxton and his other ally, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, and offering late endorsements that bolstered right-wing candidates.

Even so, the billionaires' fingerprints appear all over the outcomes. Since January, they spent more than \$3 million to support candidates through a new political action committee, Texans United For a Conservative Majority. That PAC is a rebrand of Defend Texas Liberty PAC, which has been at the center of a [political maelstrom](#) since early October...

*Jonathan Stickland*, then the president of Defend Texas Liberty, was *caught* hosting *Nick Fuentes*, a prominent antisemite and white supremacist, *prompting Dunn to issue a rare public statement* through the lieutenant governor. Stickland was quietly removed from his position with the PAC.

*Subsequent reporting* by The Texas Tribune revealed *other ties* between white supremacists and groups funded by Dunn and Wilks, prompting outcry from some Republicans and calls for the Texas GOP to distance itself from Stickland's groups.

As votes continued to tally in the far right's favor this week, Stickland returned from a post-scandal social media sabbatical to gloat.

"We warned them," Stickland wrote Wednesday on X, one of the handful of posts he's made since shrinking from the public eye after the Fuentes meeting. "They chose not to listen. Now many are gone."

Dunn and Wilks both made their fortunes in West Texas oil and, in the last 15 years, have poured more than \$100 million into a *constellation* of political action committees, dark money groups, nonprofits and media websites that they have used to push the state GOP further to the right.

Their strategy has been to incrementally move the party toward their hardline views by painting fellow conservatives as weak and ineffectual — as "RINOs," or Republicans in name only — and promising well-funded primary challengers to lawmakers who defy their network and its aims. With almost endless wealth, they have poured millions of dollars into inexperienced candidates who often lose but advance the far right's long-term goals by slowly normalizing once-fringe positions, bruising incumbents, depleting their campaign coffers and making them more vulnerable in the next election cycle.

For years, many Republicans have denounced the strategy, noting that the state Legislature is routinely ranked as the most conservative in the country and warning that Dunn and Wilks' no-enemies-to-our-right approach to politics would eventually cost the party elections and open the doors to *outright extremists*.

This year's elections show just how successful the billionaires have been in pulling the party toward their hardline views.

Open the link to finish the story and read about the extremists installed by the billionaires to promote "Christian values," like no gun control.

Did Jesus advocate for open carry?