



The REDDDEST STATE

Is “the Texas miracle” a sustainable economic template for the future, or just a convenient cover for legislating the most conservative social and other policies in the United States? **David Hay** reports from the Lone Star state.

EVERYTHING STILL FEELS BIGGER in Texas. The twelve-lane freeways, the trucks and SUVs in the lane next to you and a sense of state pride that remains as unabashed as ever. Who can forget the scene in the film *Boyhood*, where immediately after pledging allegiance to the United States, the school kids then loudly assert their fealty to Texas?

Now another loud boast can be heard coming

from America’s second largest state: Texas is where America’s conservatives are having their greatest success. If other states are red, Texas is even redder—and they’re proud of it.

A wide swathe of states across the middle and south of the United States are “Red States” with an increasingly right-wing Republican party in power. At the November 2014 elections, the party [took control of both the governor’s office and the legislature in 24 states](#). They are in the majority in



66 of 99 state legislative chambers nationwide. And the number of states under total Democratic control, 14 before last November, is now only seven, the lowest number since the Civil War.

But nowhere in Red State USA is their grasp on power as strong or as entrenched as in Texas, a state whose population is now 26.5 million. In Kansas, for instance, far right Governor Sam Brownback only narrowly won re-election in November 2014, and because his state is nearly bankrupt, he faces stiff opposition to his budget-cutting policies.

In Wisconsin, presidential contender Governor Scott Walker had to fight off opponents in both a recall election and a close-fought re-election to remain in power. In Ohio, the Republican Governor John Kasich confronts continual opposition from Democrats, including one of the most liberal members of the Senate, Sherrod Brown.

In Texas, however, such voices of opposition are few and far between. The last Democrat to hold major office was Ann Richards, who left the Governor's office twenty years ago, beaten by then neophyte politician, George W. Bush. Until November last year, the state was governed by perennial presidential hopeful Rick Perry, aided by Republican majorities in both state houses.

Their grip on state government has been aided by

Texas is the biggest US state and its gross domestic product—over \$1.3 trillion—rivals that of Australia.

a buoyant economy Republicans have dubbed “the Texas Miracle”. Between the onset of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the beginning of 2015, Texas added 1.45 million jobs, a 13.3 per cent increase, a performance that [outstripped all other states](#) except energy-rich North Dakota.

Furthermore the state's population has been growing at a phenomenal pace. Since 2001, it has increased a whopping 24 per cent, double that of the country as a whole.

Given their stranglehold on power and the economic benefits they claim as the result of their policies, Republicans argue that if anywhere in the US can be seen as the model for what conservatives want for America, it is Texas.

BUT WHILE THE TEXAS MIRACLE has been responsible for an extraordinary jobs explosion, the state is falling behind in many other respects. According to [a 2013 report](#) published by the [Texas Legislative Study Group](#), an official caucus of the state legislature in Austin that advises liberal-leaning members, the state “ranks 50th in percentage of high school graduates among its populace, first in amount of carbon emissions, first in hazardous waste produced, last in voter turnout, first in percentage of people without



Rick Perry promoted Texas in a series of ads called “New Jobs” in 2010.

health insurance, and second in percentage of uninsured kids”.

Over 22 per cent or [5.8 million Texans have no health insurance](#), the highest proportion of uninsured citizens of any American state. (Unsurprisingly, the Republican administration in Austin refused to sign on to the section of the Affordable Care Act that allows the federal government to offer Medicaid, or free health insurance, to poorer citizens. In this case, nearly 2 million Texans.)

And for critics, this is only the beginning of what’s wrong with the “Miracle” in Texas.

Texas’s Republican leadership continually points to an array of statistics as proof of the effectiveness of their low tax and regulation approach to the economy. In March 2015 new [Republican Governor Greg Abbott wrote a guest post](#) for *Forbes* magazine, bragging that Texas is “the best state for job growth” in the country, and predicting jobs would increase by 2.7 per cent, and unemployment could fall below its current 5.2 per cent.

“Texas attracted more capital investment than

any other state, 689 new capital projects alone in 2014,” wrote Abbott.

Former Governor Rick Perry was similarly fond of tossing off numbers claiming, for instance, that “Texas was named the best state to do business for nine years in a row in a survey of more than 700 CEOs conducted by *Chief Executive* magazine”.

Perry was famous for [promoting the benefits of the “Texas Miracle”](#) in other states, telling them and their governors—often Democrats—they were falling behind Texas, and boasting how many Americans were moving there.

Indeed 21 per cent of the population growth has come from other states, although almost none from blue states in the northeast.

Critics accuse Abbott and Perry of [exaggerating their figures](#), but there is no denying job growth has been exceptional. What is less often highlighted is that most new jobs are at the low end of the pay scale—Texas has more minimum-wage jobs than any other state in the nation, with only Mississippi ahead in the number of low-wage jobs per capita.

Republicans attribute the growth to Texas’s low-



Voters in Denton, a town of 123,000 northwest of Dallas, banned horizontal, hydraulic oil and gas fracking.

tax provisions: there is no state income tax, only sales and property taxes, and in his inauguration speech last January, Governor Abbott [called for business taxes to be lowered](#) even further.

“If you’re not rich, Texas is not actually a low-tax state,” points out Alex Pareene, one of many reporters investigating the [myths behind the “Texas Miracle”](#) in *Salon*. “Texans in the bottom 60 per cent of income distribution all pay higher effective tax rates than their Californian counterparts. Texas’s top one-per cent are the ones enjoying the supposed low-tax utopia, paying an effective rate of 3.2 per cent. The rate for the lowest 20 per cent is 12.6 per cent.”

The real stimuli behind Texas’s startling growth came from the massive jump in oil and natural gas production, since the mid-2000s, especially from fracking, combined with the unprecedented population growth. But with oil prices cratering, layoffs in the petrochemical industries are now [threatening the miracle](#).

Texas Republicans love to tout their efforts to “free” businesses from economic regulation. A case in point is the state’s booming hydro-fracking industry, by far the largest in the US. Currently over 6000 of these wells are in operation and the industry produced upwards of 60,000 [new jobs in the boom years](#) of 2007 to 2012. This growth has

If you’re not rich, Texas is not actually a low-tax state ...

transformed many small towns into boomtowns.

But questions remain about the [environmental and health consequences of fracking](#). Many wells have been placed inside town and city limits, potentially exposing residents to leaking methane gas, which is ten times more harmful than carbon dioxide.

According to a study of the [Eagle Ford shale formation](#), one of the largest fracking sites in Texas, commissioned by the Center of Public Integrity and the Weather Channel, “Texas’s air-monitoring system is so flawed that the state knows almost nothing about the extent of its pollution. Only five permanent air monitors are installed in the 20,000-square-mile region, and all are at the fringes of the shale play, far from the heavy drilling areas where emissions are highest.”

Another concern is fracking’s need for enormous

amounts of water in a state beset by drought. Nearly 50 billion gallons have so far been devoured to support the industry, and The Guardian's Suzanne Goldberg reported "a number of small communities in Texas oil and gas country have [already run out of water](#) or are in danger of running out of water in days, pushed to the brink by a combination of drought and high demand for water for fracking. Many reservoirs in west Texas are at only 25 per cent capacity".

Of further concern are [frackquakes](#), which occur as a result of waste water produced by the drilling being pushed back underground. While in Texas their occurrence has now begun to be documented, in neighbouring Oklahoma, incidents of these [major geological disturbances](#) are rising at [a dramatic rate](#).

Some Texan cities are taking on the industry. Late in 2013, Dallas voted to ban fracking within 1500 feet (457 metres) of a home, church or school. Last year the small college town of Denton (population 160,000) voted to ban fracking within city limits. Republican legislators in Austin recently overturned this ban, and in doing so took away the power of any city in Texas to regulate the oil and gas industry.

TEXAN REPUBLICANISM IS NOT JUST a libertarian economic philosophy. It is also beholden to the beliefs of Evangelical Christianity; most offices within the Texas party are occupied by [Evangelical Christians](#). In July 2011 Governor Rick Perry conducted a giant "prayer rally" for the nation in Houston's football stadium. The new lieutenant Governor, Dan Patrick, authored a book urging people to buy and read the Bible.

Showing off your Christian credentials is also good politics in a state where [religious affiliation is higher than in the rest of America](#). There are twice as many Baptists, for instance.

This power wielded by Evangelical Republicans has led the government in Austin to adopt some radical social, education and environmental policies. The US constitutional requirement that there be separation between church and state does not exist in Texas, where textbooks now have to champion the [Christian influences of the Founding Fathers](#).



The University of Texas in Austin parades what is known as "The World's Largest Texas Flag" before football games.

But the ascendance of Evangelicals has been most critical in the party's policies towards women. Once, the Republican Party might have railed against abortion to appease the conservative wing but, as with Presidents Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, took few policy steps to stop it in practice.

Not so today's Texan Republicans, where such pure libertarianism is scorned. For these politicians, limiting the freedom of women by severely reducing access to abortion is every bit as important a part of the Texas Miracle as reducing taxes and getting rid of government regulations.

They have been very successful.

In July 2013, Rick Perry signed into law House Bill 2 (HB2), which bans abortions after 20 weeks of pregnancy, and also requires abortion clinics to have the same standards as hospitals. Further, doctors must have admitting privileges at a hospital within 30 miles (48 km) of the facility where he or she performs abortions. Many hospitals in Texas often refuse to grant these privileges because hospitals have a religious affiliation or rules that require doctors to admit many more patients per year than an abortion provider would normally see.

Although this law is currently being appealed in the Federal Court, Texas has begun enforcing it. The [number of facilities offering abortions](#) to Texas's 12.5 million women decreased from 36 to eight, and the abortion rate has declined by 13 per cent, [according to research](#) conducted by the Texas Policy



The case for the Ten Commandments monument outside the Texas State Capitol in Austin was argued by Governor Greg Abbott, when he was Attorney-General.

Evaluation Project, a research group that evaluates the impact of reproductive health law changes.

Melaney Linton, President of the Planned Parenthood’s Gulf Coast branch in Houston, told ASR of a young girl who drove 150 miles (240 km) to their clinic. (Planned Parenthood is a privately funded national women’s health services organization that offers sex education and cancer screening as well as performs abortions.)

“It turned out she could not get more than a day off work”, Linton said, “so we ended up not being able to give her the procedure.”

Texas Republicans, emboldened by what they perceive as the success of HB2, now intend to impose even further restrictions on women’s reproductive rights.

“We must govern with the purpose to defend life,” said incoming party president Tom Melcher in March, and he promised to stand up to the federal government to “protect our state’s sovereignty”. When visiting the state legislature, representatives from Planned Parenthood were confronted with a “ ” sign above the name on the door of a Republican member.

Such efforts are part of an ongoing strategy to move Texas still further to the right, with new Governor Greg Abbott leading this charge. Back when he was Attorney-General, Abbott, a strident

opponent of President Obama’s healthcare reforms, famously described his job as “I go into the office in the morning, I sue Barack Obama, and then I go home”. In June 2005 he took a case to the Supreme Court arguing that Texas be allowed to erect a monument to the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the State Capitol. (He won.)

So when Abbott pledged further cuts in women’s health programs, including cancer screening, targeting providers such as Planned Parenthood, he was simply offering Texans more of the same Texas Miracle. The new Governor also signalled he would further reduce business taxes and government regulations. Given the absence of an effective opposition, he has no reason to fail.

The Democratic Party has failed to mount anything resembling a credible state-wide campaign for more than two decades, and their lack of pushback has meant a free ride for the Texas Miracle. (The Democrats have had more success in the state’s three largest cities, Dallas, Houston and San Antonio, which have Democratic mayors.)

Their most recent gubernatorial candidate was Wendy Davis, the state senator who won international attention in 2013 for her dramatic eleven-hour filibuster that stalled the passage of HB2. Despite her initial popularity, her campaign was a disaster: Davis lost the race by the widest margin in sixteen years. Her [campaign’s lack of Latino outreach](#) was seen as one major reason for the loss.

FOR YEARS LIBERALS AND DEMOCRATS in Texas have argued that the natural affinity of the rapidly growing Latino population for the Democratic party would see Texas turn Blue.

It was this theory that inspired a small group of former Obama campaign staffers to set themselves up in Fort Worth in 2013. “Battleground Texas” aimed to register new, especially Latino, voters. But despite raising US\$9 million and enlisting 34,000 volunteers for the November 2014 election, they failed—badly.

“They were not able to move the needle far on Latino voters, who made up 17 per cent of the voter



Greg Abbott campaigns with his wife Cecilia, the granddaughter of Mexican immigrants, and daughter Audrey.

turnout, about the same as in 2010,” [reported the Houston Chronicle](#).

Texas Republicans have adopted a two-part strategy to deal with the rising Latino voter population. First, they reached out to them with former Governor Rick Perry signing a version of the “Dream Act”, which allows the children of illegal immigrants, previously prohibited from attending state-run universities to now enrol—as long as they paid US\$15,000 in tuition fees. For anyone else born in Texas, attendance at the University of Texas costs a third of this. But US\$15,000 a year is cheap for college, where US\$35,000 for just tuition is the norm at other nationally recognized schools. And a degree from the prestigious University of Texas confers a sense of legitimacy and pride to teenagers whose parents live under the daily threat of deportation.

Abbott campaigned hard in the Latino parts of the state, playing up his marriage to a Latina, Cecilia, during the 2014 gubernatorial campaign. He beat Davis, receiving 44 per cent of the Hispanic vote, as well as 54 per cent of the women’s vote. (Women here are conservative and religious, too.

For them the single issue of abortion was not enough to turn a majority of them away from the Republican Party. Many were further turned off by Davis’s own admission of having had an abortion, personalizing the issue in a way many Texans were uncomfortable with.)

But Texas Republicans have also pursued a counter-strategy, by making it as hard as possible for Latinos, already markedly underrepresented in voter turnout in Texas, to vote.

Since the federal Voting Rights Act in 1975, Texas has initiated over 200 pieces of legislation to restrict these rights, all of which were deemed illegal by the Federal Court. But in June 2013 in the case of *Shelby County vs. Holder*, the current Roberts court severely diluted the original statute.

Within two hours, then Attorney General Abbott announced SB14, a law requiring potential voters present an ID card, effective immediately. Among the seven approved forms of ID is a birth certificate, which many immigrant citizens may not have or can easily obtain from their country of origin. For the Texan-born the \$50 cost to obtain one is a hurdle

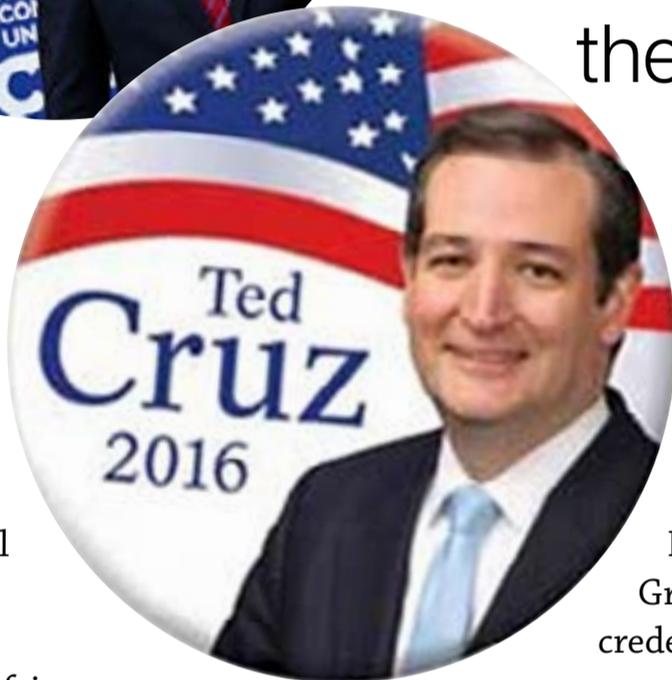


comparable to [a modern day “poll tax”](#). It was estimated that as many as 1.2 million out of 13.6 million eligible voters could be turned away, including up to 555,000 Latino voters.

Republicans have further helped ensure their electoral success by gerrymandering the state’s electoral map, ensuring that Latinos and African-Americans fall into the same districts, and thus pitting them against each other for the seat. The new electoral maps kept white voters, nearly 70 per cent of whom vote Republican, apart from other groups. (These same Texans also vote; their turnout, in a state where only 33 per cent of those eligible actually voted in the 2014 state election, was double that of minority Texans.)

Their extraordinary electoral success not only emboldened Republicans in Texas, it has spurred them to export the Texas Miracle to the rest of the country. In August 2011, Governor Rick Perry, fresh from his starring role in the “Miracle commercials”, announced he would run for President. He briefly became the Republican Party’s favorite for the nomination in August, ahead of Mitt Romney. But he proved to be an ineffectual debater, and withdrew from the race after four months.

Texas Republicans are now pinning their hopes on another standard-bearer for the “Texas Miracle”: [first-term senator, Ted Cruz](#). Born to a Cuban father, this Harvard-educated, Tea Party-loving



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lawyer from Houston was the first to officially declare his candidacy for the Republican nomination.

A far cry from such Texas old boys as Lyndon Johnson, former Senator Lloyd Bentsen, or even Rick Perry, Cruz, like current Governor Greg Abbott, boasts of his evangelical credentials and his unwillingness to compromise his conservative principles.

At the time the 44-year-old declared his candidacy at Liberty University in March, both he and the Texas state party were regarded very much as outliers on the national political scene. When Republicans thought of Texas, they thought only of the two former Bush Presidents, the emerging candidacy of the Texas-born and educated Jeb Bush and perhaps even Jeb’s son, George P. Bush, now Texas Land Commissioner. Texas was the Republican establishment and it was owned by the Bush family.

But two weeks into his campaign, Cruz shocked the political world by declaring that he had already raised US\$31 million, a strong signal that neither the Texas Republicans’ philosophy nor their mouthpiece will be so easily silenced this time around. Rick Perry may have failed, but the Cruz campaign seems likely to be a serious and well-financed effort to get the rest of the country to embrace the philosophy behind the “Texas Miracle”. ❖

