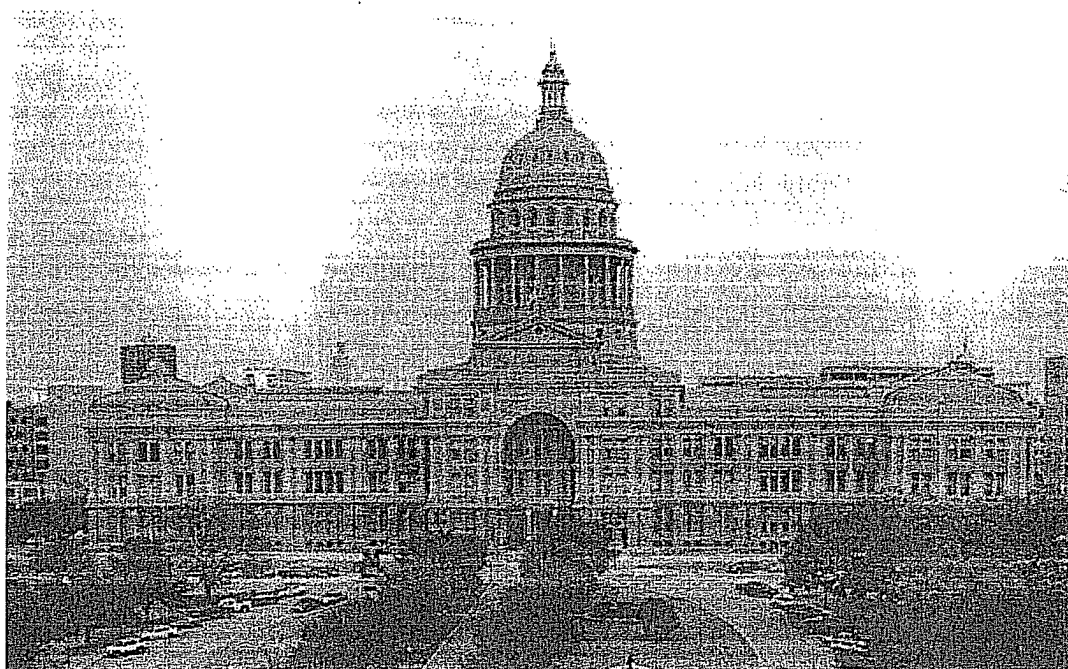


Analysis by The News finds Dallas area's clout in Legislature has slipped



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AUSTIN — The Dallas area's legislative clout has slipped slightly since the last session two years ago, a *Dallas Morning News* analysis has found, driven by key retirements and an infusion of tea party-supported House members who unsuccessfully pushed for a new speaker.

Seniority and the pivotal committee assignments of eight local lawmakers, five of them senators, helped offset some of the lost influence.

If you think of the Legislature as a map, North Texas still has a lot of the big dots, said Bill Miller, cofounder of HillCo Partners, a top lobbying firm in Austin.

"They're major stops on the interstate," he said. "You've got a lot of big players there."

To gauge the area's clout, the newspaper created The Dallas Morning News Power Index, assigning scores to lawmakers based on factors such as seniority, committee positions and leadership roles. The newspaper focused in particular on lawmakers in six North Texas counties: Collin, Dallas, Denton, Ellis, Kaufman and Rockwall.

Gauging the delegation's clout helps illustrate how the Dallas delegation performs as the area competes with other Texas regions on issues ranging from highway dollars and water rights to health science centers' funding.

Rep. Jim Pitts, R-Waxahachie, remains the region's most powerful lawmaker; indeed, as the chamber's chief budget writer, he is second only to Speaker Joe Straus. Pitts is the only key GOP legislative leader from North Texas — Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst hails from Houston; Straus represents San Antonio; and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Steve Ogden's district is centered on Bryan-College Station.

Collin County's influence fell, the Power Index shows. Newcomer Rep. Van Taylor, R-Plano, replaced influential longtime Plano Rep. Brian McCall. And the failed bid of Rep. Ken Paxton, R-McKinney, to topple Straus kept Paxton and many of his local allies from advancing into more coveted positions.

The scoring system does not take into account intangibles, such as a lawmaker's ability to network. Nor does it factor in a member's name recognition, campaign treasury or non-legislative causes — all measuring sticks for influence.

Rather, the system aims to assess the building blocks of government. While this is not a full evaluation, those forces often dictate whether a lawmaker can stir the legislative waters, particularly on the budget — the focus of overwhelming attention this year.

Budget sway

Pitts and several influential Dallas-area senators will help decide how the Legislature dishes out as much as \$27 billion in cuts.

The North Texas region's sway on House Appropriations and Senate Finance is slightly strengthened from 2009, according to the Power Index. And retaining budget clout is of particular importance for North Texas, several key lawmakers, lobbyists and local elected officials said.

They noted that Dallas has a dearth of longstanding state institutions like medical schools and, therefore, often gets the short end of the state budget stick.

"Our hands are going to be full playing defense on the budget this year," said Larry Casto, legislative director for the city of Dallas.

The delegation, like the city and its sports fans and arts patrons, often measures itself against Houston. Local lawmakers felt embarrassed when the Texas Transportation Commission last month tentatively decided to spend \$340 million on a grand toll road loop around Houston. The move surprised many North Texas leaders — and there wasn't much they could do about it.

"Hello! What about North Texas?" said Rep. Dan Branch, co-chairman of the Dallas-area legislative delegation.

Funding disparities

Branch, R-Dallas, noted that data provided to his Higher Education Committee show the state's current two-year budget spends just \$35 per capita on academic medical centers in North and Northeast Texas, compared with \$92 a person in Houston and Southeast Texas.

"Whether it's transportation or health care ... Dallas-Fort Worth is the state's biggest economic engine [and] puts the most revenue into Austin. It ought to at least be getting an equitable return," Branch said.

Two parts of North Texas clearly went backward in statehouse dominion, the newspaper's analysis found.

Collin County became a focal point for January's failed tea party effort to oust Straus, and as a result, the county's legislators have a hard time wielding influence, at least under the current regime. Firebrand conservatives tried to topple the speaker and now find themselves on the outside of House power posts, though as Miller noted, "picking up a lot of new Republicans doesn't hurt you in that environment in the House. Those new Republicans, it's a group people are respectful of."

Five area House Republicans, all affiliated with the tea party, voted against Straus for speaker. Three of them, Paxton, Taylor, and Jodie Laubenberg of Parker, represent Collin County. That has put more focus on two Plano Republicans: Sen. Florence Shapiro, who is the leading education policymaker in the Legislature, and Rep. Jerry Madden, who now chairs House Corrections.

Paxton says his bid to unseat Straus — like McCall's repeated challenges to former Speaker Tom Craddick, R-Midland — hasn't hurt Collin County. Paxton conceded that he, Taylor and Laubenberg didn't fare well in committee assignments. But he said "most of the issues that they care about are not directly related to their district," and the county's House members "still have their vote ... their ability to work hard."

"I got my message out," Paxton said, to a statewide audience of GOP activists, not just tea party adherents. "I don't feel that hurts me in the future. It can only help."

Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said he believes that the changes in Collin County's delegation will have little effect on the delegation's clout, at least on transportation issues.

"What's good for Dallas County is good for Collin County and vice versa," Morris said. "It speaks to the regionwide approach that we take."

Also taking a hit this session, according to the newspaper's point system, was the city of Dallas — mainly because its Democratic House members are hard pressed to make waves in a body in which 101 of 150 members are Republicans.

Moreover, the area delegation's stature slipped further with the exit of McCall, who headed the influential House Calendars committee, which helps control whether legislation gets a chance in the full House. Also damaging was the retirement of Sen. Kip Averitt of Waco, who represented Ellis County and sat on key committees. Their replacements, while Republicans, start at the bottom of the ladder in their chambers.

Some lawmakers disagreed with the results of the scoring system, saying they believe that North Texas has not lost any influence in Austin.

"I don't see any loss of anything. Everybody's working pretty hard and ... working together," said Rep. Burt Solomons of Carrollton, a key Straus lieutenant who this year won the chairmanship of the Redistricting Committee. The post makes him the chamber's lead mapmaker as lawmakers redraw political districts of all sorts.

"If North Texas has a regional issue, it doesn't hurt for me to be Redistricting chair — in the sense that I actually know something about the area I grew up in," Solomons said.

North Texas remains buoyed by a powerful senior Republican contingent, particularly in the Senate, where members representing suburban or exurban areas, such as Sens. Craig Estes, Bob Deuell and Jane Nelson, racked up more points. And some lawmakers just outside the six-county area are key regional allies. An important example is Republican Rep. Larry Phillips of Sherman, who chairs the House Transportation Committee.

In Dallas' hub, Branch and Democratic Sen. Royce West, both of whom sit on influential committees, are becoming statewide power players.

Tricky to measure

Measuring influence in a legislative body is tricky because nothing is static when 181 strong-willed people are working on their priorities.

Branch, the Higher Education chief who also sits on the Redistricting and Calendars panels, said "individuals' credibility and trustworthiness matter, and their relationships matter."

He should know. He and Straus were childhood friends, growing up in Alamo Heights, a San Antonio suburb. Branch has vaulted to third most-powerful House member.

"Paying attention and hard work can overcome committee assignments — and also experience, people who've been around," Branch said. "They can work for leverage points."

Reps. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas, and Will Hartnett, R-Dallas, are examples of local members whose expertise is recognized and tapped by House leadership, Branch said.

Hartnett is a special master in a contested House race in Travis County, and Anchia said he is working on the budget from outside the Appropriations Committee, trying to help shape a better "moral document" for setting state priorities.

"Eighty to 90 percent of what we do in the House is not Democrat vs. Republican," Anchia said. "It's urban vs. rural, urban vs. suburban, water rich vs. water poor, air quality vs. non-air quality."

Democrats have a tougher time getting bills passed but, said Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, "it's a challenge that can be met."

"It's really a personal work ethic that factors in," said Zaffirini, who was first elected to the Senate in 1986. "There are no limitations."

Also important is personality, she said, citing Dallas Republican Sen. John Carona as an example.

"Where Carona is, there is power," Zaffirini said. "It's simply because of who he is [and] how admired, how liked he is by members of both parties."