

Cornyn, Paxton have been trading jobs

A potential primary showdown looms

By **Gromer Jeffers Jr.**
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DALLAS — After enduring this year's brutal primary season, Texas Republicans are bracing for another bruising primary pitting Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton against U.S. Sen. John Cornyn in 2026.

The two politicians, titans in Texas Republican politics, have been circling each other for more than a year, setting up a potential clash that would test the power of Paxton's appeal to hard-right conservatives and Cornyn's strength as a well-funded incumbent and prolific vote-getter.

A Paxton-Cornyn showdown would be the next step in a continuing power struggle within the GOP.

"If Paxton gets in, expect another real donnybrook in the primary," said Republican political consultant Vinny Minchillo, who worked on the presidential campaigns of U.S. Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah.

Minchillo said Texas politics is defined by a "three-party system," with most of the action between conservatives with dueling agendas.

"We have the Democratic Party and we have the two halves of the Republican Party," he said. "This would be the real throw-down between the two halves of the Republican Party."

Cornyn and Paxton have strengths and weaknesses with Republican voters.

Paxton has cast Cornyn as not conservative enough to represent Texas in the Senate, and some conservative activists have criticized Cornyn's efforts to find bipartisan solutions on issues like curbing gun violence and immigration reform.

Cornyn has cast Paxton as too shady to be a U.S. senator, an argument that could appeal to Republicans who worry about Paxton's legal entanglements and past controversies, including his 2023 impeachment on charges of bribery and misuse of office.

The biggest wild card could involve the influence of President-elect Donald

Trump, who endorsed Paxton in prior elections, criticized last year's impeachment proceedings and praised Paxton as a patriot fighting "Radical Left Democrats."

Paxton has had Trump's back as well, filing legal briefs in support of Trump policies under attack by Democratic states during his first White House term and asking the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn Trump defeats in four states in the 2020 election.

"You have to ask yourself, will Trump weigh in on this race?" Minchillo said.

Cornyn was a finalist to become Senate majority leader but lost by five votes to Sen. John Thune of South Dakota.

After his mid-November defeat, Cornyn said he would run for reelection in 2026.

"I think about somebody like Phil Gramm, who's my predecessor, who, even though he wasn't elected leadership, was always in the middle of some of the hardest issues that confronted the Congress and was a warrior," Cornyn said. "And I think it's a pretty good role model."

Some Republicans say Cornyn is still examining how he'll approach his political future. He's taken a spiritual approach, one Republican said.

"I texted him that I was disappointed that his colleagues did not recognize the value of his experience and leadership and his integrity, and said I know God's got a plan for you," said Denton County Commissioner Dianne Edmondson, a Republican. "He sent me back and said, 'Yes, I'm waiting for the signals on that now.'"

Paxton has said he's considering challenging Cornyn in the 2026 primary, but Texas Republican Party Chairman Abraham George said he doesn't expect to see a Cornyn-Paxton matchup.

"I doubt that's what's going to happen. I don't think General Paxton is going to challenge John Cornyn," George said. "That's just my gut feeling."

Paxton's office did not

respond to a telephone call and an email request for comment.

Mark Davis, a conservative radio talk show host based in Dallas, said Cornyn's prospects for reelection revolve around how he handles Trump's agenda and political appointments.

"If he is a good soldier, not an obstructionist, not an annoyance to the Trump agenda, then he'll be very hard to beat, even by someone as popular as Ken Paxton," Davis said.

"If Cornyn obstructs Trump's nominees and then proceeds to do other things that reveal a certain distance between him and Trump, that will be all Paxton needs to be motivated to take him on. There's still no guarantee that it'll be successful, but it'll be a battle of the titans that'll show where we are in 2026," he said.

On a collision course?

Cornyn, first elected in 2002, is a former Texas Supreme Court justice and state attorney general.

Paxton, a former member of the Texas House and state Senate, has been attorney general since 2015. In 2023, Republican House members led an effort to impeach him. He was acquitted by the Senate after a high-profile trial.

In recent years, Cornyn has clashed with Paxton. He was one of the few statewide leaders to criticize Paxton amid allegations of corruption that led to the impeachment trial and has called the attorney general an embarrassment.

When Cornyn announced he would run to replace Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell as Republican leader of the Senate, Paxton lashed out in a post on X, saying, "Republicans deserve better in their next leader and Texans deserve another conservative senator."

Paxton added that Cornyn would have a tough time being "an effective leader since he is anti-Trump, anti-gun, and will be focused on his highly competitive primary campaign in 2026."

Cornyn replied: "Hard to run from prison, Ken."

Asked in June about a



Smiley N. Pool/TNS

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton addresses Collin County Republicans during a rally Feb. 7, in Wylie.

potential Paxton challenge, Cornyn said: "I don't know. I don't stay awake at night worrying about it."

Other Texas leaders appear to be expecting a Cornyn-Paxton showdown. At an election eve rally for U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz in Houston, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick said Paxton's legal cases would not affect his political options.

"I wouldn't be surprised to see Ken Paxton join the Trump administration," Patrick said. "I wouldn't be surprised to see Ken Paxton running for U.S. senator against John Cornyn."

After the crowd cheered, Patrick said, "I like John."

"He's a nice man," Patrick continued. "I'm saying Ken Paxton would be a really strong candidate for U.S. Senate."

How they match up

Cornyn has not faced a serious challenge in the GOP primaries, and in 2020 he received more votes than any non-judicial candidate in the history of Texas.

The 2026 primary could expose his Achilles' heel.

At various points in his career, Cornyn has been booed at state GOP conventions, where the party's most strident activists are the most vocal. In 2022, delegates at the Houston convention booed him because of his role in a bipartisan Senate compromise on gun safety. At this year's convention, Cornyn didn't address the general session but mingled with delegates at the convention center

and dropped in on some caucus meetings.

Paxton, an incumbent statewide office holder and hero to grassroots Republicans for filing 100 lawsuits challenging Biden administration policies, would be a formidable challenger.

Still, he would have to overcome Cornyn's stout fundraising machine. At the end of September the senator had \$3.5 million in his campaign fund. He's raised vast amounts for Republican candidates and incumbents — more than \$400 million since 2002, according to his pitch to become Senate majority leader.

Paxton also has legal troubles. He has been under federal investigation after former staffers accused him of bribery and corruption. The state bar has brought an ethics lawsuit against Paxton, accusing him of lying when he told the Supreme Court that Texas had proof fraud undermined the 2020 election results in four swing states.

Three GOP office holders challenged Paxton in the 2022 primary, assuming he was politically damaged when eight top deputies accused the attorney general of accepting bribes to use his powerful office to help a friend and political donor.

Paxton emerged victorious, defeating U.S. Rep. Louie Gohmert and former Texas Supreme Court Justice Eva Guzman in the primary, and Land Commissioner George P. Bush in the runoff.

A key question will be if Trump gets involved in the contest. Paxton and Bush sought Trump's support, which went to Paxton, who handily defeated the nephew of former President George W. Bush.

Paxton attended the Jan. 6, 2021, rally that preceded the Capitol riot and has stronger ties to Trump. In January 2024, Cornyn endorsed Trump for president well before he wrapped up the GOP nomination. Paxton also endorsed Trump.

"Cornyn has to decide whether he wants to be an important Senate figure in what is now undeniably Trump's party," said Davis, the conservative radio host. "Trump has never been Cornyn's favorite flavor, and this may be an occasion where he looks at this and says, 'I've had a great run. I'm going to go ahead and retire,' and then let a host of people try to be his successor."

Other names could surface before candidates begin filing for the 2026 primary elections next year.

If Cornyn, 72, changes his mind and retires, contenders for the open seat could include Paxton, Texas Land Commissioner Dawn Buckingham and numerous Republican members of Congress, including U.S. Rep. Beth Van Duyne, R-Irving.

Buckingham is considered by many Republicans as a rising star and part of the next crop of Republicans to move into higher office.

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