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## The 'Obamacare' Scare

### *GOP employs national playbook in local House races*

By Richard Whittaker

Did anyone mention to the Republican Party of Texas that President Barack Obama isn't running for re-election this year?

Even though the Texas GOP holds all statewide elected offices and both chambers of the Legislature, the tenor of this election season has been to portray themselves as the underdog. Their campaign strategy has been to connect every Democrat directly to the Obama administration and present Texas Republicans as the only defense against federal policies gone mad. First Gov. Rick Perry mused publicly about secession, now Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst is running a Repeal Obamacare website – encouraging donors to make a contribution to Dewhurst's re-election campaign. That anti-D.C., anti-Obama rhetoric has reached on down to the state House races.

This is arguably a watershed election year in Travis County, because it's probably the last November that its voters will return six state representatives to the House. The first order of business next session will be the regularly scheduled redrawing of district maps, and as Travis' population increases, it's likely the county delegation will gain at least one more member in the 2012 election. For now, the Republicans are continuing the same strategy they've followed for the last decade: Target the three seats on the west side of the county. Austin's reputation as the blue dot in a sea of red makes it easy to forget that, as recently as 2002, that was Republican country. Mark Strama broke that stranglehold by taking House District 50 from GOP incumbent Jack Stick in 2004, then Donna Howard took neighboring HD 48 in a special election in 2006, the same year Valinda Bolton picked up HD 47 in the Southwest. The only GOP push in East Austin is a minor challenge in HD 51 to four-term incumbent Eddie Rodriguez from Marilyn Jackson, running on a platform that would end property taxes and the business franchise tax while expanding sales taxes.

Bolton, as the holder of the last seat to flip and the one held by the smallest margins (4.7% in 2006 and 2.4% in 2008), remains the GOP's No. 1 target in Travis. Republican challenger Paul Workman, a former Real Estate Council of Austin board member, has tried to paint her as a liberal with a direct line to Obama, even resorting to Photoshopping the president into a picture of her. Workman's campaign website featured a photo of Bolton speaking at the Texas AFL-CIO offices in Austin with U.S. Rep. Lloyd Doggett in the audience. If that wasn't filled with enough dog whistles for tea party voters, the Workman campaign digitally replaced a framed photo of Texas AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer John Patrick with one of Obama, explaining that because the two Democrats "are so closely aligned, we have taken the liberty to add Obama's picture in this photograph."

Bolton accepted that this attack – strange as it may be – was part of a broader strategy of Obama-baiting, but, she said: "It's odd to me that whether it's a candidate for [justice of the peace] or a candidate for Congress, the talking points are all the same. So I don't know what that says about what they plan to do about issues here."

She also argued that the Workman rhetoric underestimated the political savvy of local voters, for whom the Legislature is an everyday reality. She said: "Thanks to the Capitol view corridors, they see the Capitol. It's not this invisible or remote thing to them. In this district, we have a lot of people who work at the Capitol or for state government, or they're retired state employees, so they're very aware of what state government means."

Workman's campaign did not respond to a request for comment, but Texas AFL-CIO spokesman Ed Sills called the Photoshop incident ridiculous and said: "You might as well paint bunny ears on her. What's the point, exactly?" He said the incident validated the union's decision to endorse Bolton over Workman: "If they want to play with the truth like that, what does that say about all the other statements they're making in this campaign?"

No. 2 on the GOP hit list is Howard, who faces a challenge from local ESPN host Dan Neil. For a while it looked like Neil was going to be given the big push: As the only executive board member for GOP fundraising body GOPAC-TX to not have held elected office, the former Denver Bronco was expected to wash the incumbent away with cash. That never happened, but Howard is still getting hit with the Obama connection. Along with Bolton, she's been slammed as an "ObamaCare Fanatic" by anti-tax activists Texans for Fiscal Responsibility. Because of widespread concerns about the economy, she said, "That's resonating, even though it has nothing to do with us or the critical state issues." But while the anti-Obama rhetoric may be red meat to the GOP base, she argued that it isn't playing as well with potential voters looking for pragmatic and practical solutions to local issues like education and water quality. Howard said, "What I hear most often from people is that they're worried about partisan dialogue rhetoric rising above good public policy."

It's the same playbook in HD 50, where Republican Patrick McGuinness is challenging Strama, who chairs the House Technology, Economic Development & Workforce Committee. In a 30-second spot called "Patrick McGuinness: A New Way for Texas," Strama's face is juxtaposed with the famous Obama *Hope* image created by graffiti artist Shepard Fairey, while an endless cadre of identical suit-wearing figures march in front of the U.S. Capitol. Strama says McGuinness has misjudged the district. In 2008, 58% of HD 50 voters backed Obama, but Strama beat Republican Jerry Mikus with 63% of the vote. Strama said: "Five percent of my district that voted against Obama voted for me because they looked at me on the issues. To think that the voters in my district vote on such vague generalities that are nonspecific to me and my representation is to underestimate them."

The reality is that, no matter who wins in November, what they face in 2011 has the makings of a nightmare session. The most recent estimate from the Legislative Budget Board leaves lawmakers with a \$20.6 billion deficit, and there's already discussion of a complete overhaul of education funding to fill an additional potential \$3 billion drop in property taxes. Add in the once-a-decade agony of redistricting, and the common prediction is for multiple special sessions deep into the summer of 2011. Strama said: "There's no good light to shine on it. It's going to be a very painful session, but the question is, are we going to be thoughtful and deliberative and strategic, or are we just going to be ideological and demagogic?"

Even in its run to the right, the local GOP still faces its traditional threat from the Libertarian Party of Texas. While George Emery is the sole challenger to Rep. Dawnna Dukes in HD 46, and Nathan Kleffman takes on Rep. Elliott Naishtat in HD 49, the contested seats are where they may have the biggest impact. Kris Bailey is aiming for Bolton's seat, and Libertarian activists are targeting Workman as a "corporate cronyist." Ben Easton is back for a second swing in HD 48 after pulling in 4% in 2008 against Howard when she handily beat Republican Pamela Waggoner 54% to 42%. Similarly, former Libertarian Party of Texas Operations Manager Arthur DiBianca, who pulled in 10.5% against Rodriguez in 2008, could split any conservative protest vote with Jackson, while former Cato Institute Intern Program Director Emily Cowan provides a third party option in the Strama/McGuinness race.

In an attempt to lock down the fiscal conservative vote, all three West Travis Republicans have adopted the

dogmatic "no new taxes" stance, and all three signed the Taxpayer Protection Pledge issued by conservative think tank Empower Texans – another offshoot of Texans for Fiscal Responsibility – to "oppose and vote against any and all efforts to increase taxes." With the number of House Republicans taking the same position, the pressure will be on to slash state spending. When the budget debate starts, Strama said, "It's going to be about minimizing the harm." However, like Bolton, he isn't convinced that Republicans will gain traction among Austin voters by blithely portraying the state government as the enemy. He said, "You have a lot of state employees and people that do business with the state, so there's a lot of concern about the projected budget shortfall."

Bolton described the blanket conservative approach of "cut, cut, cut, cut, and to the extent that there's fallout, we'll deal with it later," as being "really shortsighted." She argued that's why the electoral concentration on Obama misses the real mission of the Legislature next year. "We have huge issues facing us, and no one else is going to do that for us," she said. "They're not going to come down from the federal level. They're not going to come up from the municipal level. We have to do it at the state level."

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