

CBS News
05/27/26
Time N/A
15 minutes and 14 seconds

ED O'KEEFE: State Representative Talarico, thank you for taking the time.

STATE REPRESENTATIVE JAMES TALARICO (D-TX): Thanks for having me.

O'KEEFE: Why are Republicans so worried about this race?

TALARICO: Well, I think they're worried about the movement that we're building here in Texas. You know, I've gone to every corner of this state over the course of this campaign from Beaumont to El Paso from Amarillo to Brownsville and everywhere in between, and we have had tens of thousands of Texans showing up to rally with us. And I can't tell you the number of people who come up to me at the end of these events and whisper, I'm not a Democrat, like they're in the witness protection program. I think we're reaching people who don't normally vote for Democratic candidates. We're also reaching a lot of first-time voters, the number of young people who have been shown up at our events have been signing up to volunteer and donate its unprecedented. And we saw that in the primary results when we had historic turnout in the Democratic primary, particularly among young people in first-time voters and crossover voters, so I think national Republicans see the momentum behind this movement and they're worried we're gonna win Texas in November.

O'KEEFE: But no Democrat has won a Senate seat from Texas since before you were born.

TALARICO: That's right.

O'KEEFE: What is it about you that's different from all those other Democrats? What do you got that they didn't?

TALARICO: Well, the first words out of my mouth when I launched this campaign were that the real fight in this country is not left versus right, it's top versus bottom. I don't think it matters whether you're a little more progressive, a little more conservative, whether you're a Democrat and independent or Republican, whether you're urban, suburban, rural, black, white, brown, we're all getting screwed. None of us can't afford anything. None of us can get ahead no matter how hard we work. And that's because this system, this political system and economic system are rigged against us. It's been rigged for 50 years by billionaire mega donors and their puppet politicians like Ken Paxton. And so we're bringing people together across all those divisions, party, race, gender, religion, culture, all those things that divide us we're uniting Texans to take on that broken corrupt system so we can take power back for our communities.

O'KEEFE: They're gonna be able to play drinking games during your speeches and your interviews. How many times you use the word corruption?

TALARICO: Yeah.

O'KEEFE: But it does sound like a key word and a key argument you're making here.

TALRICO: Well, I think it's the central problem in our country right now. I think we're living in an era of corruption. And I don't just mean illegal activity, although we're certainly gonna hear a lot about that given that Ken Paxton is the nominee. But I'm talking about corruption in the deeper sense, the rotting of our systems from the inside out, the decaying of long-held values and institutions. And we see it everywhere, we see it in our, obviously in our political system with the influence of big money and billion in our mega donors, we see it in our economy where the top one percent now owns more wealth than the entire middle class. And we see it in our communities where these algorithms for profit are pitting us against each other, dividing neighbor against neighbor. It's tearing at the very fabric of our communities. And so, this campaign is really about taking on that corruption head-on. And I think it's why so many people are flocking to this movement across the state, across the political spectrum.

O'KEEFE: And it's also why the Republicans are on the attack. This morning, the President calls you the — maybe the worst Texas candidate he's ever seen. And Ken Paxton, your opponent, has taken to calling you Talafreakco.

TALARICO: Well, I think if Ken Paxton is worried about freaks, he should stop giving Epstein-style sweetheart deals to pedophiles. You know, this is the guy who just released Adam Hoffman from jail and admitted child rapist after one of Ken Paxton's wealthy lawyer friends got involved in the case. Ken Paxton even kept him off the sex offender registry. Adam Hoffman was supposed to serve 25 years to life, but instead he served less than a month. As of this week, he's now back on our streets because of Ken Paxton's corruption. Ken Paxton is the most corrupt politician in America and it is costing Texans. It's endangering our children. And it must end. I think the Epstein class has no place in Texas. And this November, we're gonna come together to defeat Ken Paxton and take back our state for the people.

O'KEEFE: So, they're running a handful of highlights of things you've said in the past and I wanted to give you an opportunity to respond or clarify. In 2021, in a speech during debate over transgender issues, you said, "God is non-binary." What did you mean by that?

TALARICO: Well, you know, I think I was being intentionally provocative with that statement. But what it means is that God can't be defined by human categories. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, says that in Christ there is neither male nor female. I'm always gonna stand up for Texans who are being picked on by the most powerful, most corrupt politicians in the country and I'm gonna continue doing that in this race and hopefully in the U.S. Senate.

O'KEEFE: You call it intentionally provocative. You regret describing it that way or talking about God that way?

TALARICO: I — there are some statements that I've made that I certainly regret. There are statements that I've made where I've missed the mark. I'll be the first to admit that. But Ken

Paxton is intentionally clipping my cringy comments to distract from his career of corruption. Ken Paxton has a criminal record. I have a legislative record. I've served for four terms in the Texas House of Representatives where I brought Democrats and independents together to actually make progress for people. I've brought Republican legislators and Democratic legislators together to cut property taxes, to raise teacher pay, to lower the cost of housing and childcare and prescription drugs. I've passed more than 60 bipartisan bills as a legislator. I've also called out the extremes in both parties on the left and the right. I have called out Ken Paxton for his blatant corruption, but I also called out President Biden for failing to secure our Southern border, so —

O'KEEFE: And I wanna get to the border in a second — let me run one more by you —

TALARICO: Yeah.

O'KEEFE: — cause again, the President and other Republicans —

TALARICO: Sure.

O'KEEFE: — are arguing it up. Again, in 2021, while debating a bill that restricted transgender student athletes, you said “modern science acknowledges six biological variations based on chromosomes” to argue that sex is a nuanced spectrum, not a strict binary. Do you still believe there are six biological sexes?

TALARICO: I know there are two sexes, men and women. I also know there's a very small percentage of people who have these chromosomal abnormalities, and I believe they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect.

O'KEEFE: The other one they keep harping on, and it's perhaps the most curious of all, they say you're a vegan.

TALARICO: I'm not a vegan. I'm an eighth generation Texan. I've been eating barbecue since before, Kem Paxton's first indictment, and this campaign basically runs on Texas barbecue. If all they have is lying about me being a vegan, I feel pretty good about our chances this November.

O'KEEFE: You know — and this is part of where I think we are in politics in this country, whether you agree or disagree with their focus on those statements on that issue of transgender rights and things like whether you're a vegan, it is an effective argument that Republicans have made against candidates for years. It works for them, and you're gonna have to spend time and money explaining it away.

TALARICO: I think the reason that we are leading in every public and private poll against Ken Paxton is because Texans are hungry for a different kind of politics. Texans are drowning. We can't afford the basics. We can't afford groceries or gas or insurance or housing or childcare or our prescription drugs, and Ken Paxton clearly has no solutions to offer us. So, while he divides us with these same tired culture war fights, I'm gonna keep bringing Texans together to take on his corruption and lower our costs.

O'KEEFE: And that's why I wanted to go next, because that is the issue voters tell us just a number one of them, the economy. What is an affirmative thing a Senator Telerico would propose to do to cut costs?

TALARICO: Well, I've got a long list. Let's start with grocery prices, because this is something I hear about in every corner of the state. The first thing I think we should do is repeal these crazy tariffs that are driving up costs and grocery stores across the state of Texas. I also hear a lot about the pain of the pump, and I feel it too. You know, I drive a mid-size Chevy Colorado, and I had to pay more than \$80, just over Memorial Day weekend for a full tank of gas. I'm proposing that we suspend the federal gas tax, which would immediately drop the price of gas by 18 cents a gallon. I'm also proposing that we suspend the federal diesel tax because everything you buy is shipped by diesel, right?

O'KEEFE: Right.

TALARICO: And so because of this disastrous new war in Iran, diesel prices have shot for the roof, increasing the price of everything. And then, you know, I've done a lot of work in Texas around prescription drugs. I'm a type one diabetic who has struggled to afford my own insulin. The first time I was diagnosed when I was 28 years old, I paid \$684 for my first 30-day supply of insulin, and a lot of Texans are struggling to afford the medicine that they need to live, and so, I'm proposing that we cap the cost of more life-saving drugs, and we start a wholesale drug importation program from Canada where they pay half what we pay for the same prescription drugs. So those are three of some of the most pressing priorities, but we could talk about the cost of housing, the cost of childcare, the cost of insurance. All of these things are conspiring to hold Texas back, and it is 50 years in the making. It's been 50 years of trickle-down economics, of billionaires and their puppet politicians, like Ken Paxton, rigging this economy against all of us, whether you're on the left or the right, and so it's why I say that the real fight is top versus bottom, because it's all of us who are getting screwed, who have to come together to defeat this corrupt system.

O'KEEFE: One of the reasons prices have spiked is because of the war with Iran —

TALARICO: Yes.

O'KEEFE: — which began literally the night before we last spoke to you —

TALARICO: Yep.

O'KEEFE: — back in early March. The Republican and the President's argument essentially boils down to it was worth it in the long term. So, I ask you, because this is something senators are considering are gonna have to continue to consider, was it worth killing the Ayatollah if it means Iran doesn't get a nuclear weapon?

TALARICO: You know, I'm a millennial. I was 12 years old when 9/11 happened, so I understand the importance of keeping this nation safe. As a millennial, I also saw how military

disasters like the Iraq War robbed this nation of young lives, of billions of dollars, and of our moral standing around the world. I worry that this administration is making the exact same mistakes with this new war in Iran, and I think not only has it driven up gas prices, not only has it driven up the price of everything else because of diesel, but it has also made us less safe in the region and around the world, so this kind of reckless foreign policy, I think, has to end. We can support the democracy movement in Iran. We can prevent Iran from getting a nuclear weapon. Those should be top priorities for our foreign policy, but the way the administration has gone about conducting this war, I think it's been a disaster from top to bottom.

O'KEEFE: One element of potentially stopping Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, is the current U.S. military aid to Israel. Growing number of Democrats in the Senate, though, continue to vote against providing more military equipment to Israel. What would a Senator Talarico do: vote for against more military equipment to Israel?

TALARICO: You know, October 7 was the deadliest day for the Jewish people since the Holocaust. And Israel has a right to defend its people, but Benjamin Netanyahu does not have the right to wage war against civilians. He doesn't have the right to restrict aid, bomb civilian neighborhoods, or use collective punishment as tactics in that effort. And so it's why I've said that I would vote against offensive weapons to Israel. I do support funding for the Iron Dome, because I don't wanna punish Israelis for the decisions that their leaders make. But I think this death and destruction in Gaza requires a response from our government, given that it's our taxpayer dollars, funding the bombs that are being used to kill civilians.

O'KEEFE: There are some Democrats who call what the Israeli government has done in Gaza genocide. You can go that far?

TALARICO: I'm focused on how we end this death and this destruction. You know, there are charges being brought in the international legal system, and that process should play itself out, and I'm not gonna play lawyer here on TV. But as a senator, my job is to take action. It's to save lives, especially when our taxpayer dollars are being used to take the lives of innocent civilians on the other world.

O'KEEFE: The other unique and acute issue in this state is immigration. It's gonna be the topic of debate among at least Senate Republicans in the next few months. Senator Cornyn goes back to an argument over whether or not to fully fund an increased funding for immigration and customs enforcement, customs and border protection. I imagine you oppose what Republicans are proposing to do?

TALARICO: I think we have to stop this secret police force of masked men in unmarked vehicles, kidnapping our neighbors off our streets — killing American civilians and American citizens. I think we need to rebuild this agency, so that it actually focuses on immigration and customs enforcement. I'm a border security Democrat. I understand the need to keep our border communities safe and to ensure we have a sane, orderly, comprehensively reformed immigration system. And that's exactly what I'm gonna fight for in the U.S. Senate. We can secure our border, and we can make it easier for immigrants who wanna live the American dream and make

us richer and stronger to come here and contribute to our economy.

O'KEEFE: Yeah, you talk about the idea that it's a front porch down there on the southern border, that there's a welcome mat out, but there's a lock on the door —

TALARICO: Well —

O'KEEFE: — and an comprehensive approach.

TALARICO: — that's right, and you know we were talking earlier about Ken Paxton clipping comments that I've made, and he intentionally clips that comment to take out the part where I say we need a lock on the door. And that's because he doesn't want Texans to know that we can both secure our border and welcome hardworking immigrants who wanna contribute to our communities and our economy. We can and must do both of those things. I'm tired of the false choices being presented in our politics. I'm tired of using these really and critical important issues as political weapons to beat up on each other. I wanna solve problems. That's what I've done in the legislature. I brought Democrats and Republicans together to actually make real progress for Texans to deliver for my constituents, and I think people are hungry for a senator who's gonna do the same.