

NBC's *Today*

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7:00:12 a.m. [TEASE]

48 seconds

CRAIG MELVIN: A major political upset in Texas overnight.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Power of the President]

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE: President Trump flexing his muscle in a critical race once again. It's May 27th. This is *Today*. Power of the President. Yet another Trump-backed candidate pulls off major victory, this time over the senior sitting Republican center in the Lone Star State.

TEXAS ATTORNEY GENERAL KEN PAXTON (R): We just sent a Texas-sized message to Washington.

SENATOR JOHN CORNYN (R-TX): They made their decision and I must respect it.

GUTHRIE: Four-term Senator John Cornyn soundly defeated by the state's attorney general, boosted by a last-minute endorsement by Trump himself. We'll break down the results, what they say about the President's grip on his party, and why Democrats now see an opportunity in deep-red Texas.

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7:03:25 a.m.

6 minutes and 1 second

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Decision 2026]

MELVIN: First to our top story this morning: that stunning political upset in Texas overnight.

GUTHRIE: Yeah, the state's attorney general Ken Paxton pulled off a surprise win and secured the Republican Senate nomination. His campaign was lifted by an endorsement from President Trump in the final days of the race. Take a look here. Paxton defeated long-time incumbent Senator John Cornyn by more than 25 points. That blowout cementing the President's grip on the Republican base heading into those critical midterm elections.

GUTHRIE: We're going to have the latest reaction from the White House in a moment. But let's get started with NBC's Ryan Chandler in the state capital of Austin this morning. Ryan, good morning to you.

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Breaking Overnight; Surprise Upset in TX GOP Primary]

RYAN CHANDLER: Savannah, good morning to you. This primary alone costs some \$130 million. Most of that went toward supporting Senator John Cornyn, but Ken Paxton proved once again

last night that the most valuable currency in Republican politics is the support of President Trump. Yesterday, we sat down with Senator Cornyn here in Austin as he reflected on what his loss means for a party he's helped to build for the last 40 years. Overnight, President Trump's pick toppling another sitting Republican Senator, setting the table for a record-setting duel in Texas.

PAXTON: Tonight, we just sent a Texas-sized message to Washington.

CHANDLER: State Attorney General Ken Paxton's resounding win in the Texas Republican Senate primary, ending the four-decade career of senior Senator John Cornyn.

CORNYN: I've said throughout this race that I trust the voters of Texas and they've made their decision, and I must respect it.

CHANDLER: Paxton calling the President's backing critical to his victory.

PAXTON: When everyone in Washington told him to abandon me and abandon the people of Texas, he didn't listen. [SCREEN WIPE] His endorsement in this most – is the most powerful force in politics.

CHANDLER: Trump had called Paxton a "true MAGA warrior" and said Cornyn was "not supportive of me when times were tough." Cornyn is now the second incumbent GOP Senator to fall to a Trump-endorsed challenger, setting up a bruising battle between Paxton and Democratic nominee James Talarico this fall, with the two trading attacks overnight.

PAXTON: My opponent is the most extreme radical that Democrats have ever nominated.

TEXAS STATE REPRESENTATIVE JAMES TALARICO (D): The most corrupt politician in America just became the Republican nominee for the United States Senate.

CHANDLER: Paxton has fought legal and ethical challenges for years, impeached on charges of corruption and bribery in 2023, but later acquitted in the state Senate. He's also facing a high-profile divorce from state Senator Angela Paxton on what she called "biblical grounds." Democrats now see a real chance to win a statewide Texas seat for the first time this century in what could be the most expensive Senate race ever. We sat down with Cornyn before his defeat with the Senator warning Paxton could jeopardize the GOP's grip on the state.

CORNYN: I've spent most of my adult career trying to build the Republican Party in Texas to what it is today, but a scandal-ridden candidate like Ken Paxton with all the baggage that he brings puts all that at risk.

CHANDLER: Now still, Senator Cornyn reiterated he does intend to support the Republican nominee, telling us that this is going to be a bruising fight ahead, and he expects his party to unify ahead of November, Savannah.

GUTHRIE: All right, Ryan, thank you.

MELVIN: All right, for more on those results and the President's reaction, let's bring in NBC's chief White House correspondent, Garrett Haake. Garrett, good morning to you. Walk us through how such a senior Republican Senator – he'd been in the upper chamber since 2003. Four-term Senator, he loses this race, not by a close margin. What does that tell you about President Trump's grip on the party at large?

GARRETT HAAKE: Yeah, Craig, for Texans, this would have once been unthinkable. I mean, John Cornyn has been an institution in Texas politics. He was elected to his first office in the Lone Star State before I was even born. But last night's results proved once again that this is Donald Trump's party right now. His candidates went 4-0 in contested runoffs last night. But I think what's interesting here is that the trend we've been seeing the last couple of weeks here is that the President's hold on the base of the party may actually be making his grip on the Senate here in Washington, weaker. From now till next January, he now has to deal with an upper chamber that has three members now that he either endorsed against or helped push out and others who were openly frustrated with his heavy-handed tactics against their colleagues. The bottom line here is I think it's going to be much harder to get much of anything passed in the Republican-controlled Senate the rest of this year.

GUTHRIE: Well, Garrett, now I have two questions. Number one, how old are you? [LAUGHTER] We got to get into that in a second. But let's talk about the political issue. Democrats, of course, now see an opportunity. Potentially, they've got James Talarico, who will be running against Paxton. What are the realistic chances in the general election? We have seen Democrats fall in love before and think that possibly they could turn this red Senate seat blue.

HAAKE: I'm older than James Talarico. I'll say that. Look, Democrats see him as their best chance to win in decades. But that's not saying much. No Democrat has won statewide in Texas since the early 1990s. And Talarico will still have a very steep hill to climb if he's going to reverse that. But there has been some polling. There was an April University of Texas poll that shows Talarico actually leading Paxton by eight points. But there are a lot of undecideds left in that race. And I think the key here is where does moderate, Republican, Cornyn-style voters end up? Do they hold their noses on all those Paxton personal issues that Ryan laid out and vote for him because he's a Republican? Or do they roll the dice on Talarico, who's been talking and posting about the idea that Cornyn supporters are welcome in his campaign and highlighting issues on which he's breaking for national Democrats, things like the border. I won't make any predictions, except that this will be expensive. Both parties are going to plow money into Texas, probably make this the most expensive Senate race in history.

GUTHRIE: Well, a lot on the line there. Garrett, thank you.

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8:00:14 a.m. [TEASE]

16 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Stunning Victory]

GUTHRIE: Coming up, stunning victory. Another one of President Trump's picks securing a major win in the closely-watched Republican Senate primary runoff in Texas.

PAXTON: We just sent a Texas-sized message to Washington. [CHEERS]

GUTHRIE: We're live with the very latest.

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8:02:39 a.m.

1 minute and 22 seconds

[ON-SCREEN HEADLINE: Breaking Overnight; Surprise Upset in TX GOP Primary]

GUTHRIE: [A]nd we'll start with that stunning political upset in Texas overnight. Four-term Senator John Cornyn soundly defeated by the state's attorney general, Ken Paxton, who was boosted by a last-minute endorsement from President Trump. NBC's Garrett Haake at the White House this morning with a closer look at the implications of this race. Garrett Good morning.

HAAKE Hey, Savannah. Good morning. Yeah, the big story of the runoff last night is that Ken Paxton upset win over incumbent Senator John Cornyn, who had really been an institution in Texas politics for decades. But Paxton, who had been dogged by an impeachment and indictment and a messy divorce, overcame GOP concerns about his candidacy with the help of that late endorsement from President Trump. The President congratulating Paxton in a post this morning and vowing he'll host rallies for him in the fall. Now Paxton's win sets up what will be a massively expensive and perhaps pivotal Senate race this fall against Democrat James Talarico. Early polling shows this could be Democrats' best chance to win a statewide race in Texas in decades. Also, last night, we saw the impact of redistricting with two sitting Democratic lawmakers forced into a runoff against each other – a changing of the guard moment in the Houston area, longtime Democratic lawmaker Al Green lost his runoff with Christian Menefee, nearly 40 years his junior, Savannah.

GUTHRIE: All right. Garrett, thank you very much.