

Charles Kuffner

I'm speaking today with Tyler Smith, who is the Democratic candidate for state legislature in House District 138. Tyler, thank you very much for speaking with me today. Could you please tell me why you're running for this office?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, Charles, thanks for having me. Again, my name is Tyler Smith. I decided to run for state rep House District 138 because I believe we're in a critical time in the state of Texas and in the United States right now. I think if we look at the chaos happening out of Washington, Texas, we've been having those same chaotic problems for the past 30 years, from a governor and Greg Abbott, who has had the most non-bid pay-for-play scheme of any governor of the state of Texas, to a Texas state legislator who has done a bidding of people like Donald Trump and special interests.

I decided to jump out there and run because I think House District 138 is one of those seats, one of those districts that I've lived in for a while that deserves strong representation, but that also, with a strong candidate, can flip because I believe the residents of this district don't believe in the things that the incumbent has been spewing in Austin. So decided to jump in the race to kind of bring back sanity to politics, but more so sanity to Austin.

Charles Kuffner

Can you tell me a little bit more about your background and your past experience in politics? Looking at your website, you cite baseball as sort of one of your founding influences, and I certainly appreciate that, but tell me more about who you are and what you've done in politics to this point.

Tyler Smith

Yeah, no, baseball definitely grounded me and kind of taught me the life lessons that I kind of live by today, as well as with church and things of that nature. But I got my start in politics actually on the campus of Texas Southern University. I thought I was going to go there and be a marketing major, do college for four years, and then after that move to LA and do entertainment management and entertainment law, but met a man by the name of Beto O'Rourke, who changed my whole perspective on policy and politics.

I tell a funny story. Going to HBCU, I knew really not that much about politics, especially the politicians outside of like Obama, Hillary Clinton, but saw a photo of a flyer that Beto was coming to campus, and it was a picture of him and a guy standing next to each other, and I just immediately thought the black guy was Beto because I went to an HBCU, but got to meet him and immediately changed my major to political science.

From there, I had the opportunity to work on a number of different city council campaigns here in the city of Houston, from races like Ed Pollard and Chris Hollins and Christian Menefee, to then being on the

Biden for Harris campaign in 2020 as a student surrogate, as well as a field organizer here in Houston, and then from that, I took my talents to Washington, DC, where I got the chance to work for Senator John Ossoff from Georgia, one of the leading voices in politics and policy right now, but knew I wanted to come back and work here in Houston, so started my work working with Everytown, as well as becoming a fellow at the Obama Foundation.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, as someone who is a recent college attendee, I'm sure you've seen and heard plenty of discussion about Democrats' problems in recent years, especially in 2024, with younger men. That includes men of color, black men, Latino men, who voted much more for Trump in 2024 than they had in 2020. I think there's a lot of reasons for this, Biden's age, perhaps some sexism, the manosphere, podcasters from Joe Rogan to Theo Von and others.

I think a lot of that, the gains that Trump and the Republicans made in 2020 have eroded largely because of his incompetence and inability to get anything done, but that doesn't mean that Democrats are necessarily making up that ground themselves. So I'm curious to hear from the perspective of someone who's a lot closer to that age cohort than I am, what's your perspective on this, and how do you reach out to younger male potential supporters, and what message do you bring to them?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, I mean, I think that young men and young voters in general are tired of being told what to vote against and are looking for something to vote for. I think in 2024, we ran on a real message of Trump is a problem, Trump is going to bring chaos and fear to the White House, and newsflash, all of that came to fruition, all of that was true. I think Kamala Harris ran on a really strong message of why Donald Trump doesn't need to be in office.

I think sometimes, and I think she ran on a strong message of what Democrats plan to do, but I think that that message got lost in the sauce, as some young people would say. I think that Dems need to run on a message of, we told you what was going to happen, happen. But if you elect us and give us an opportunity in 2026, as well as in 2028, this is what we're going to deliver on.

In Texas, we rank eighth in the world, not the United States, but the world for largest economies, yet we rank 50th in the nation for access to healthcare. So many young people are without healthcare right now, because one, they can't even get jobs that provide healthcare. So Democrats need to run on a message that is, one, pushing back on the rhetoric that we see out of the White House, and in this case, in Texas, the message that we see coming out of the Governor's office.

But two, we really need to focus on a message that is bringing deliverable action items to young people, specifically in the space of healthcare, specifically in the space of housing. Young people today do not know when they will be able to purchase their first home. I think I saw an article a couple of weeks ago that said that the median age is raised by almost 10 years of first-time homebuyers, which is just ludicrous and insane.

And I think that that's things that's at the top of young people's mind. I think we need to run on a message, and I think Kamala Harris hit on it, but I think that we need to expand upon it and run on a message that resonates with people my age, younger, and maybe older.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Well, let's get into that, and I'd like to hear some specific things that you have in mind, because the legislature did pass a bill in the last regular session aimed at increasing the housing supply in Texas. It mostly was aimed at making permitting easier, limiting some things that cities could do that would restrict where housing can be built or how it can be built.

All reasonable, I think, but there's a lot more to this issue. Part of the problem now is that a lot of the people who are building houses are no longer in the U.S. because they've been deported by ICE. Another part of the problem is that a lot of the construction industry is focused on building data centers, and you've also got a demand problem in that between inflation and tariffs and other cost-of-living items, it's just difficult to afford a house. So what specific policy ideas do you have in mind to tackle any or all of these problems?

Tyler Smith

Yeah. I mean, I think one big thing that I commend both Democrats and Republicans, I mean, I talk about it in my campaign a lot about working across the aisle. It's really the only way you can get things done these days.

Out of Congress, we saw a bill, a housing bill that would remove our kind of weekend housing purchases from corporations. I think that that was something that we saw that really drove up housing prices here. I think one of the things that we can definitely work on here is expanding upon our first-time homebuyer loan programs and benefit programs. Also, while removing some of the red tape that we see that the legislature passed last year, expanding upon some of those grants and rolling back some of that red tape for cities to build more housing.

I think another thing that we need to really focus on is fully funding some of these programs that we have in the state right now. You hinted at some things around like health care, raising our property taxes and raising property value across the state, essentially because the state of Texas goes extremely underfunded. A lot of people brag about the \$32 billion budget surplus. That's easy to have when you don't fund essential programs.

I think one of the things that we can do and start by doing is, one, fully funding our public schools, fully funding our health care program, which will help lower our property taxes. That helps remove that red tape of a burden because a lot of people want to purchase homes and may be able to afford the price of the home, but they can't afford the property taxes. They can't afford the property insurance. All of that falls back on the state. I think the state has a really good opportunity in the next legislative session to do work around that.

Charles Kuffner

I mentioned data centers because that's a very hot button issue right now, so much so that even Governor Abbott is moving as fast as he can away from his previous full-throated support for them. A variety of things have been proposed, moratoriums, giving local governments more control over where data centers can be permitted, requiring them to provide their own electricity and not use up all the water, and also removing a sales tax exemption that Governor Abbott so generously gave them in previous years. What's your position on the proliferation of data centers, and what would you do as a legislator? What would you do about them as a legislator? I don't want to lead on anything.

Tyler Smith

I think the one big thing that we can do is one, start with the moratorium. I think the governor should call back the legislator now. I think if he's a fan of removing the sales tax exemption that him, people like my opponent, and Republicans, and the state legislator granted these data centers, that he can call a special session today. He has no fear of calling special sessions around other things like redistricting and things of that nature. I think one, we should call a special session to place a real moratorium on any new data centers.

I think another thing that we need to do is pass legislation that really hones in on making sure that data centers have to supply their own energy, supply their own water. In Corpus Christi, we see a city in the state of Texas that is on the brink of being without water, which is a problem that a state like Texas in the country, like the United States, should never have. I think that there's a lot of things that we can do here to rein in some of the data centers.

I'm not a fool. I don't think that we'll ever get rid of data centers. I think that that's the new world that we live in. But I do think that there's a lot of work that can be done to rein them in and make sure that one, they're supplying their own energy, supplying their own water.

Two, that cities and local municipalities have the right to control where these data centers are and making sure that they're not buying up some of our farm land and making sure that they're coming into communities that actually are okay with them being in those communities. I think that that's something that the legislator should do next year, but also something that the legislator can do right now if the governor has the guts to call a special session.

Charles Kuffner

We also talked about immigration relating to housing, but we have seen one thing that the Republicans, Greg Abbott, the legislature have been willing to spend money on has been a whole lot of border enforcement, Governor, and the Republicans have warmly embraced ICE and Border Patrol, although they seem to be a little bit squeamish about the wall at Big Bend. We've seen this play out with the way ICE has conducted its business in cities like Houston, Lorenzo Salgado Araujo and his murder at the hands of ICE. I know that this is more a federal issue, although obviously the state of Texas has done a lot in the realm of immigration and border enforcement. What would you support, advocate for, or fight against as a legislator when it comes to immigration, immigration enforcement, and border control?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, I mean, I think you hit the nail on the head when you said that this is a federal issue and the state of Texas should not be playing its hand in federal issues. We should leave this up to the federal government. But two, we also should make sure that we have some oversight into what ICE is doing in the state of Texas.

What happened to Lorenzo Salgado should never happen in a state like Texas. And Texas law enforcement should not be collaborating or working together with ICE agencies. I think that the first thing that we can do as a state legislator, of course, we'll need a governor that is on board.

That's why we need to elect people like Gina Hinojosa and a Senate as well. But I think that one of the things that we can definitely do is roll back on the integration of Texas DPS and Texas law enforcement with ICE agencies. But then also, I think that we should also roll back some of the laws that the state legislature passed around the border security.

I think that we should leave border security up to the federal government and have full faith in them to do it justifiably, mainly as well as placing some sort of oversight over agencies like ICE who have come into Houston specifically and caused chaos.

Charles Kuffner

I mean, another issue in Houston that the legislature has a lot of responsibility for is the takeover of HISD by the Texas Education Agency. We have seen some gains by HISD in the standardized testing realm, although some of those accountability gains appear to have been fudged a bit by appointed superintendent Mike Miles. I think it's fair to say that the HISD takeover is pretty unpopular, certainly among Democrats in Houston.

There is a law, although that was in fact written by a Democrat, Harold Dutton, that was the cause of this takeover. So, what would you advocate for as a legislator with regards to the way the state is now empowered to take over school districts?

Because Austin ISD is on the chopping block. Fort Worth ISD has been taken over. There's quite a few that have had this happen. It's early in the game. We don't really know what the results are going to look like. What do you want to see as an issue?

Tyler Smith

I think we should 100% roll back this law. Right now, what we're seeing is a governor who has really no metrics other than cities who defy him or cities that are more Democratic-leaning that he decides to take over. We see that here in Houston ISD. We see that in Austin. We'll probably see more of that in the DFW area. I think that we, on day one of the next 90th legislative session, need to roll back a lot of the school takeovers. We need to get rid of Mike Miles here in Houston and push back on the school takeovers across the state.

Charles Kuffner

Along those same lines, this is the first year that the voucher program that Governor Abbott fought for for a long time and had to knock off a bunch of rural Republicans in order to get done has been in effect. Early data shows, surprise, surprise, it's mostly families who never sent kids to public schools or the beneficiaries of this. While a significant number of the recipients are lower income, it's still the case that the absolute numbers of those getting that are small. They're not surprisingly in big urban areas, not in the rural areas that resisted this. What's your view of the voucher program and what would you want to do about it as a legislator?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, 72% of the people who will be receiving vouchers this year are people who already attended private schools, which is a direct conflict of what the governor and what the state legislators said would happen. Here in Houston, three of the private schools in my district alone aren't even accepting vouchers. So it's really interesting to see who this vouchers program is going to serve.

And not even interesting because we already are seeing who it's serving. It's serving the people who can donate and can already afford to go to these private schools. And in return, we're going to see our public schools who are already facing financial catastrophe, specifically here in my district in Spring Branch ISD, where we are already looking at a \$26 million budget deficit.

And then in Cypher ISD, where they're looking at over \$50 million budget deficit, we are going to see those numbers grow tremendously on the backs of giving Greg Abbott's donors what they asked for. Greg Abbott received a donation of over \$6 million from Jeff Yass. And in return, he went out and primary a number of Texas House Republicans who defied him on this issue.

And vouchers is so unpopular that he didn't go and unseat those Republicans because of their vote on vouchers. He wouldn't unseat them on the backs of they weren't tough enough on crime, or they weren't tough enough on the border. I think that Democrats and Republicans all agree, even the Republicans who voted for the voucher scam this cycle, or this last legislative session, I think we all are in agreement that this is a failure of a program.

We've seen it fail in places like Louisiana. We've seen it fail in places like Arizona, where 72% of the people in Arizona who are on the voucher scam programs are people who are already going to private schools. And I think that next legislative session during the 90th, Texas Democrats and Republicans need to come together to figure out how to put this can or put this back inside the can.

Charles Kuffner

And I don't often mention Republican opponent when I do these interviews, but the one thing that I know your opponent, Representative Lacey Hull, for is that she authored a bill or co-authored a bill that made it easier for parents of children, public school children, to request vaccine exemptions, you know, so they don't have to be vaccinated before they enroll in a public school or a school of any kind in Texas. You know, this is happening now as measles rates have skyrocketed.

We're going to lose our status of having eradicated measles in this country. An awful lot of those cases, you know, over 700 of them last year were right here in Texas. You know, what do you think about that?

You know, I think part of the issue is just that partly because of messages from Republicans, from Greg Abbott on down, from Donald Trump on down, Republican conservative voters have lost faith in the vaccination process. So, it's not, and that message has spread outwards as well. So, it's not just about, it's not just about lies. It's also about what people are hearing. So, what would you, you know, what message would you bring and what legislation would you support to improve vaccination rates in Texas?

Tyler Smith

I think that Lacey Hull's bill last year that kind of weakened the vaccine requirements was a tremendously awful bill. We saw Representative Donna Howard and others stand up to kind of poke holes in the faction of this bill. And Lacey Hull irresponsibly introduced this bill while we were in the middle of a measles outbreak.

And like you said, I mean, I'm on the younger side of life and I don't know anyone growing up who's ever had measles. And now we are bringing in a generation of people who will know what measles looks like and have it probably in their schools on the backs of a bill that my opponent introduced. I think that we need to get back to believing in science and people like RFK Jr., who is, my opponent is a big apologist for. She has welcomed RFK Jr. into the state capitol last year and welcomed him on the floor to talk about some of the things that he's improved. Yet we see right now, I just was looking on this earlier, over several hundred pieces of food items that are now being recalled because we have weakened standards around our food and safety regulations. We've seen eye drops be recalled because of weakening regulations.

And that's all on the backs of people like Lacey Hull and RFK Jr. I think next year, during the 90th session, Texas Democrats and Texas Republicans should work together to kind of bring back trust and belief in science. And that starts with maybe funding a program that talks more about the vaccination process and giving parents more insight into what's going on there to bring back that trust that people like Donald Trump, people like RFK Jr. and people like Lacey Hull have seemed to have broken in our science system. I have always trusted in science. And I hope that we can get back to a place here in the state of Texas where people will have faith in the vaccination process. That for years, years that exist past me.

Charles Kuffner

Okay. You are one of like a dozen, I think, statehouse candidates that are being supported by the Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee. Getting basically federal, state and national support, campaign support for your campaign has been identified as a as a top target in this cycle.

Tell me what that experience is like. And, you know, obviously, there are winnable races outside of just yours. And we want to win statewide and make sure we sweep the county as well. So what are you

doing? In addition, as you get this extra support, what are you doing to help your fellow Democrats win their races as well?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, I mean, one having the support of the National Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee has been phenomenal. They've helped with resources and plan to help with more resources to get our message out there. We were able to release our first campaign ad just this week here in August, which is unheard of for a race like this in House District 138.

Just last year, my opponent raised \$1.9 million for her race. The Democrat was only able to raise \$16,000. Because of the support that we've gotten from national groups, from in-state groups, we've been able to raise over \$200,000 for this race.

And all of that money, our majority of that money has come from in-state donors, more specifically people in the city of Houston who understand what's at stake this year. The DLCC saw what happened just last year when Texas Republicans came in and redrew five congressional seats. And everyone should know, if they don't already know, that if we don't flip the Texas state legislator this year, that the state house is up for grabs and up for redistricting next year because Republicans don't know how to play fair.

I think that this is the moment that Democrats need to meet. We are charged to flip 14 seats this year. And I think we have a pathway to doing that from seats like here in Houston, to my friend just across the street, Josh Wallenstein and Sarah McGee, to people like Kristen Carranza, who's running a phenomenal campaign down in San Antonio, with our friend Zach Dunn, up to the DFW area where you have people like Katie Duzan and people like Zach Herbert, who are running really phenomenal races, talking and bringing the message to Texans. We all have been working together.

We've all been on calls together trying to figure out how we can help not just us who are on the targeted list, but the people who aren't, who really have strong chances of winning. People like Stephanie Board here in Harris County, who I think can definitely beat a very unpopular Republican in Stan Stanart. We have a slate of Democrats who are running and delivering a message of unity, who are running and delivering the message of working together to solve the problems that matter to everyday Texans.

I'm excited to play my part from being on the targeted list, as well as helping candidates who aren't. That looks like knocking on doors. We're knocking doors in our district now. We're out phone banking in our district, but we're also working with the Coordinated Campaign, the first of its kind here in the state of Texas, to make sure that we're embedding our volunteers into the Coordinated to help everyone. I think that at the top of the ticket, we have a really strong base, and James Tallarico, Gina Hinojosa, Vikki Goodwin, and Jon Rosenthal, that's here from the Houston area. But we also have a really strong bottom of the ticket here in Harris County with our state rep candidates, as well as our Harris County Judge candidate, Letitia Plummer.

I'm excited about what we can do, and I think that we have been doing a lot of great work. And the DLCC and other groups like Leaders Who Deserve, who have endorsed our race, have played a really strong part in helping us get that message out there.

Charles Kuffner

All right, well then let's bring it home. Why should people vote for you in November and October early voting? On November 3rd, October early voting, why should people vote for you to be the next State Representative in House District 138 and not your opponent, the incumbent?

Tyler Smith

Yeah, I mean, I think that if you are looking for a state that works for everybody, if you're looking for a state that can deliver on the promises that LBJ once promised, that everyone deserves the right to Medicaid and healthcare in this country, if you believe in the fight for a better public education in a state of Texas that has the funds and means to deliver it, just refuse us to. If you believe in making sure that everyone is looked at and deemed the same, regardless of your background, regardless of your religion, regardless of your race, this is the campaign for you.

I'm not promising to be the state legislator who is right on everything. I'm promising to be the state legislator who delivers on the promises that we make during our campaign, who delivers on making sure that we're having the best outreach to the community and listening to the people who will elect us come November 3rd. You can find more information about where we stand on the issues at our website at tylerfortx.com. And I'm asking for people that if you believe in what we're preaching, if you believe in raising the minimum wage, making sure that this is a state that is perfect and great for business, but also perfect and great for people who are looking for better healthcare, people who are looking for better childcare to join our fight and jump on this bridge with us in this campaign.

Charles Kuffner

All right. Tyler Smith, thank you very much for speaking with me today.

Tyler Smith

Thank you, Charles. Thanks for having me.