

Report cards on officials draw criticism

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It's become a fixture in Texas Republican primaries.

A challenger accuses an incumbent of being disloyal to the party's platform and failing to vote a true conservative line, presenting low grades on report cards from conservative advocacy groups as proof.

The practice is especially popular in state House and Senate races, largely because many groups issue grades before each election season for every member of the Texas Legislature.

But incumbents with less than stellar scores this year are calling foul, saying the evaluations are the work of political operatives with an ax to grind.

"Opponents are falsifying my records with bogus voting ratings to be deliberately misleading," state Rep. Vicki Truitt, R-Keller, said at a candidates forum in Hurst this month.

Leaders with several groups that produce the ratings say their work is a fair analysis of votes that clarify where each lawmaker stands on the political spectrum.

"We're certainly not perfect, but we bend over backward trying to be fair," said Richard Ford of Dallas-based Heritage Alliance.

A Star-Telegram review of five report cards cited by campaigns this year shows that the definition of "conservative" varies depending on who is doing the grading.

The ratings have been a feature of hardball Republican primary politics for over a decade. Some groups base their scores on a lawmaker's record on several issues. Others focus on one issue such as abortion.

The ratings that quantify a lawmaker's commitment to conservative values or limited government tend to get the most attention. Three groups — Texas Eagle Forum, Heritage Alliance and the Young Conservatives of Texas — look at votes on a range of issues to tabulate their scores. Two other groups, Texans for Fiscal Responsibility and the Texas chapter of Americans for Prosperity, focus on fiscal policy.

The ratings can be powerful ammunition for challengers in Republican primaries across the state. Newly formed Tea Party groups have also circulated some ratings.

"It's easy to digest," said Paul Benson, an assistant professor of government at Tarrant County College and an active Republican.

"It makes a candidate or an elected official look good or bad because it's a simplistic take on a particular issue."

Voting with liberals?

Former Bedford Councilman Jeff Cason is challenging state Rep. Todd Smith of Euless in the GOP primary. At recent events, he's handed out a postcard listing Smith's poor ratings from conservative or pro-business groups.

"Smith claims to be a conservative: however he often votes with the liberals in Austin," the card reads.

Cason said he believes the ratings are done fairly. He noted that each group rates all 150 House members on the same votes.

"It's like a test in school. Everyone gets asked the same questions," Cason said.

Smith said that most of the ratings are based on an odd assortment of votes intended to make certain lawmakers look bad.

"In order to score 100 percent on some of these score cards, I would have to leave my brain at the door of the House of Representatives," Smith said.

Smith pointed to his 66 percent score from Texans for Fiscal Responsibility. The group calculated the grade based largely on 21 votes. Smith questioned the point of including a vote to put interactive water features under the same health regulations as public pools. Voting for the bill hurt a lawmaker's score. The bill sparked no debate, Smith said.

Michael Quinn Sullivan, head of Texans for Fiscal Responsibility, said the vote showed a lawmaker's stance on increasing regulations on businesses, which the group opposes.

"We try to pick votes that reflect our philosophy," Sullivan said.

Bryan Eppstein, Truitt's campaign spokesman, questioned why the Young Conservatives of Texas factored a vote to ban the sale of lighters that look like toys to children in a rating based on just 29 votes. The group favored a vote against the measure.

"It's not that big of an issue, but I think it's a really clear issue on . . . parental authority," said Tony McDonald, who oversaw the group's legislative ratings.

Defending the ratings

Representatives with each group said they selected a few dozen votes among the hundreds from the last session in which the conservative or small-government approach was clear.

Critics allege some groups cherry-pick or oversimplify a vote to get the ratings they want.

"It's a common complaint and frequently a fair complaint because a vote is characterized through the prism of a group's issues rather than what a vote may be about," said Harvey Kronberg, of the Austin-based Quorum Report, an online political newsletter.

Lawmakers stack up differently depending on the group doing the rating.

Some members receive failing marks in some conservative rankings and near 90 percent on others.

Among the six Republican state representatives from Tarrant County, no two groups ranked them in the same order. Three consider Arlington Rep. Diane Patrick the least conservative. Others say it's Rep. Charlie Geren of Fort Worth or Rep. Todd Smith. Truitt ranks at or near the top among Tarrant members in three rankings and near the bottom in two others.

Heritage Alliance's Conservative Report challenges Tarrant County's reputation as the most conservative of the large urban counties in Texas. Except for an 82 percent score earned by state Rep. Kelly Hancock, R-North Richland Hills, every other Tarrant member of the House rated 70 percent or less.

"I think Tarrant County is one of the most Republican areas, but it's not necessarily conservative Republican," Ford said.

The people behind some of the ratings have a long history of taking sides in contested Republican primaries.

Ford previously led FreePAC, which caught statewide attention in 2002 with aggressive campaigns against Republican incumbents that included fliers with images of same-sex couples kissing.

Sullivan also runs Empower Texans PAC, which regularly pours thousands into primary campaigns.

Recently, the group launched a Web site against Smith and posted videos on YouTube criticizing Truitt.

Eppstein singled out Texans for Fiscal Responsibility for the harshest criticism, describing the group's past actions as "demonic" and its ratings "manipulative." Sullivan said Eppstein was engaging in "conspiracy theories."

"Politicians who feel they are in trouble will swipe at anyone they can," Sullivan said. "We are very upfront with our rating system."

Fact Box: GOP report cards

The Star-Telegram examined report cards for Texas House members issued last year by Texas Eagle Forum, Heritage Alliance, the Young Conservatives of Texas, Texans for Fiscal Responsibility and the Texas chapter of Americans for Prosperity.

Every group posted on its Web site the votes it considered to come up with its ratings. Heritage Alliance considered the most votes: 66. The other four groups took into account fewer than 30 votes each. Some weighted their scores by factoring in the list of authors/co-authors of certain bills.

Collectively, the groups factored 101 votes out of more than 1,500 cast in 2009. Only one vote, to expand funding for pre-K programs, was included in all five ratings. Every group opposed the measure.

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